

Clarity and Grace: Gospel mission, the Church of God, and ministry in a messy world

Talk 2. The Gospel and One People of God: Paul and mission in Rome

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This talk sets itself a challenging brief – to explore the purpose, tone and argument of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, as it informs our understanding between the gospel as the power of God for salvation, and the place of the one people of God, the one church of God, within the missional purposes of God. More specifically, I want to explore how Paul’s exhortations in Romans 12-15 relate to his magisterial description of the gospel in Romans 1-9. Clearly this will not be a verse by verse exegesis! What I offer is very much a sketch, and much more nuance might of course be added.

Firstly, a very quick overview of the shape of Romans.

1:1-7	Greetings 'concerning this Son'
1:8-15	Thanksgiving and wish-prayer' 'that we may be mutually encouraged'
1:16-17	Main proposition 'the gospel... the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes'
1:18- 3:20	Diagnosis of the human condition The right and just judgement of God is revealed 'for... all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin'
3:21-31	A righteousness from God—redemption in Christ Salvation is available to all— Jews and Gentiles, through the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross

1:1-15	Greetings and Thanksgiving
1:16-17	Main proposition: Gospel power to salvation
1:18-3:20	Diagnosis of the human condition: All have sinned
3:21-31	A righteousness from God in Christ Jesus
Ch 4	The Gospel roots in Abraham – for all!
Ch 5	Peace and reconciliation with God
Ch 6	Life united with Christ
Ch 7	Perspectives on the Law
Ch 8	Life in the Spirit & the unsurpassed glory of God
Ch's 9-11	The place of Israel in God's covenantal purposes
Ch's 12-15	Living out the Gospel in Rome
Ch 16	Final greetings and doxology

Now, having the overall shape of Romans in view, the next key observation concerns the tone of Romans, and for this, I need to provide some very brief background to what is known as classical rhetoric – again, just the briefest of sketches. Romans was prepared as a text to be performed. That is to say, the delivery of the letter from the apostle Paul would have been read by his representative (most likely Phoebe), and performed in such a way as if Paul was there in person, speaking in the form of a public address.

When it came to public addresses in the time of Paul, there were three main types of speech, and those listening would readily recognise the form the address was taking. The three main forms of address were:

1. Forensic speech – seeking to argue a case, to win over the opinion and approval of the on-looking crowd, or possibly a jury. The key point is that the speaker doesn't assume agreement, and knows the task is to convince the audience.
2. Deliberative speech – in this case, the speaker assumes significant agreement on the part of the audience. It builds on that common outlook or perspective – such as a shared worldview – and draws the hearers towards considerations that follow as a consequence of those agreed understandings. The speaker is not seeking to win over the audience to a point of view, but explores where that leads them.
3. Epideictic speech – this speaks at a more emotive level. It is characteristically used to eulogise somebody, or something. It displays a more flamboyant and evocative tone and vocabulary.

Now my point in outlining this is that Paul's speech-form in Romans is essentially '*deliberative*.' He is not trying to bring the hearers to faith, but assumes faith throughout. Similarly, he does not try to convince them of the sexual ethics outlined in Romans 1. He appeals to that because he knows that is commonly agreed among them. Much of Romans 1-11 is an expansion, elaboration, and extension of their existing beliefs. The focus of Paul's exhortations, and his more specific and context-related purpose in communicating with them, becomes much clearer in the latter part of the letter. Paul knows that there are a number of Christian faith communities in Rome – essentially house churches – and they we

seriously divided and dismissive of one another. A significant part of Paul's purpose is to exhort the Roman believers to recognise themselves, and each other, within the primary gospel work of God in establishing one people of God, and working in and through the one people of God as the outworking and instrument of the gospel. The failure to be united and deal with their differences compromised the gospel, and hindered fellowship in gospel ministry.

The non-negotiable theology becomes very clear towards the conclusion of Paul's articulation of the gospel as the power of God for salvation:

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom 10:9–13).

It is this basis that Paul moves to the imagery of the olive tree. There is only one tree, grounded in the one root system:

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. (Rom 11:16).

The immediate context is obviously the relationship between Israel and gentile believers in Christ, but Paul's point is no less applicable more broadly, as becomes explicit in Romans 12, and our calling into one body in Christ:

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Ro 12:4–5).

In what follows, the exhortation to demonstrate love is emphatic: it must be genuine, the real thing (12:9); it is the love that is expected of members of one family, a love characterised by mutual affection (12:10); it is a love expressed in hospitality, in living in harmony, in seeking peace wherever possible; it is a love where motives of revenge are to be set aside. In short: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Ro 12:21).

I am increasingly drawn back to these chapters. They challenge me, and guide me. Let a selection speak for themselves:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, *not in dissension and jealousy*. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh (Rom 13:13–14).

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters... (14:1)
Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. (Ro 14:5).

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

“ ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
 ‘every knee will bow before me;
 every tongue will acknowledge God.’ ”

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. (Ro 14:10–13).

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Ro 14:19–20).

And finally (although the whole section is well-worth consideration):

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Ro 15:5–7).

Now, how do I see these exhortations as relevant to our present context? As I made clear in my first talk, I am not arguing the case for revised sexual ethics, and nor am I suggesting we shouldn’t continue to voice our concerns clearly and passionately. However, I am saying being faithful to God doesn’t end there.

This is where ‘clarity and grace’ come into play. Paul is clear in his own view on these matters (14:14), but that doesn’t end matters. Paul carves out space for others to see things differently, in good conscience, over matters that are not essential to salvation.

How we recognise one another, and relate within the body of Christ, is an integral expression of the gospel, and matters to the missional purposes of God. What types of differences between us do I have in mind? Well, two specifically.

1. There will be a range of responses at a pastoral level that we will pursue in good faith, and I believe we need to allow each to exercise our pastoral judgement in that. Our public rhetoric concerning questions of sexuality has been in ‘forensic’ mode (necessarily so). We are prosecuting a case, looking to win over those of different views, both within the wider community, and in the church. However, many of us – and I count myself in this – want to move to ‘deliberative’ mode. Recognising key areas of agreement, let us open up safer space for discussions over a range of pastoral responses, without seeing everything as ‘going soft’ or failing to hold the line (wherever that is drawn’)

I have included a most helpful sheet produced by the Centre for Public Christianity in Australia. It summarises a range of possible responses to the question of same sex marriage. They are not all mutually acceptable, and a number I would firmly reject. However, I suspect

between us, and certainly in my own thinking, two or three reflect how we personally believe we are called to respond.

Setting aside the options we need to reject, can we recognise and respect that there are two, three or four valid ways to respond and engage with this issue?

2. Another major difference where I believe it is imperative we give one another space to determine our own response – both personally, and potentially as church communities – and that is whether we choose to stay within the Anglican Church as recognised within the Anglican Communion, or to leave. My own view, for what it is worth, is that I believe I am called to remain within the Church unless I am kicked out. I believe a voice and presence is needed within the Church, to continue to advocate, instruct, and pastor the flock entrusted to us—with all its messiness.

However, I recognise, and respect, that others will come to a different decision, in good conscience. It would sadden me greatly, and I believe dishonour the gospel, if we allow this particular response to be something that creates a parting of the ways between those who choose to stay, and those who feel compelled to leave. I believe Romans 14 and 15 speaks very much into this question.

Within the spirit outlined above, let me offer my thoughts on a few matters that have exercised my mind, and I offer them as possible discussion points. I believe they are worthy of discussion:

1. A possible distinction between the term and understanding of ‘marriage’ as determined by the community and State (which has always been the case), and our understanding of ‘holy Matrimony’ as a distinctive Judeo-Christian notion, in which God brings about a union between a man and a woman.
2. The nature of Paul’s approach in 1 Cor. 7 with regard to remarriage after divorce. In essence, Paul adopts an “I wish it was this, but the reality is messier, and that being the case, this option is better than that” type of argument. This has become the default approach to divorce and remarriage for many years. Where we have criticised same sex relationships in the past as characterised by prolific promiscuity, the case can be made that a committed same sex relationship with one person is better than multiple partners. However, I note the argument only, and hasten to add I don’t believe any such relationship should be termed holy Matrimony. However, for those expressing enduring love for family members or close friends who have chosen to enter a same sex partnership or marriage for themselves, very often adopt a ‘better this than that’ approach.
3. I suspect we may have a range of views regarding the possibility of covenanted and recognised same sex friendships, including emotional intimacy and commitment, understood on a non-sexual basis. Wesley Hill speaks powerfully about the value of honouring committed friendship in non-sexually expressed contexts.

Now there is much more that could be said, but my point is that we need to make space for a diversity of views at a pastoral and strategic level, while respecting our convictions that holy Matrimony is explicitly named in Scripture as between a man and a woman.