

Interview with Douglas J. Moo

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Zondervan: Why do we hear so little these days about Paul's letter to the Romans? Why should we hear more?

DM: As most Christians know, Romans is "doctrinal." That description scares many off, who are afraid that Romans will be both dry and difficult. It is certainly difficult at times. And preachers and teachers—to our shame—can sometimes make it pretty dry, too. But think about what Romans teaches us: what human beings are really like and what they need, what God has done to provide a way of escape from our estrangement and mortality, and what a lifestyle that grows out of a Christian worldview looks like. Such topics should certainly not be dry or boring.

Zondervan: Why do we need to be concerned with the historical and cultural setting of Romans?

DM: We have always understood Romans to be a great doctrinal treatise, which it is. But we will badly misunderstand that doctrine unless we root it in the specific setting of the first-century church. Paul did not sit down one day and decide to write a textbook on doctrine. He wrote a *letter*. He wrote it to a specific church to handle some problems the church was facing. Those circumstances combined to turn Romans into a book that tackles the basic issues of the Christian worldview. But only by recognizing the cultural setting for this statement of the Christian worldview will we be able rightly to understand and apply it.

Zondervan: At what point in his ministry did Paul write this letter?

DM: What is most significant for our understanding of Romans is the sense Paul gives us of having reached an important transition point in his missionary career. He has been preaching the gospel for almost twenty-five years, he has planted thriving churches over much of the northeastern Mediterranean part of the Roman empire, he has hammered out his theology on the anvil of pastoral problems and debates with opposing factions. He thus writes Romans during a lull in his ministry, at a time when he can reflect on what he has come to believe and what it can mean for the church. These circumstances help explain why we find so much general doctrinal discussion in Romans.

Zondervan: What may have sparked the problem the Church of Rome was having at this time?

DM: In A.D. 49 Emperor Claudius, out of exasperation with squabbles among the Jews about *Chrestus*—probably a reference to Jesus' claims to be the "Christ"—issued an edict that required all Jews to leave Rome. Jewish-Christians would have been included. Overnight, therefore, the church in Rome became virtually 100 percent Gentile.

By the time Paul writes, Jews were allowed back into Rome. But they came back to a church dominated by Gentiles. You can imagine the the kind of social tension that such a situation would create. Jews, who stand in the heritage from which Christianity sprung up and who were at one time leaders of the community, now find themselves in a minority. Several key emphases of Romans make good sense against this background: Jewish law and its place in the life of

Christians, Paul's scolding of the Gentiles for their arrogance, and, most of all, his admonitions to the strong and the weak.