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*The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans - Galatians*

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# Text and Exposition

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## I. INTRODUCTION (1:1–15)

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### A. Salutation (1:1–7)

#### OVERVIEW

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The opening lines of Romans follow the basic ancient letter form: A to B, greeting. In a way that he is particularly fond of, Paul expands the elements of this form with material that sets the tone

and anticipates what follows. In vv.1–6, allowing himself unusual length, he describes both his calling and the gospel he proclaims.

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—<sup>2</sup>the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures <sup>3</sup>regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, <sup>4</sup>and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. <sup>5</sup>Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. <sup>6</sup>And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### COMMENTARY

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**1** As in all of his letters, Paul uses his Roman name, *Paulos*. The shift from “Saul” occurs in the biblical context where he came in contact with a Roman official (Ac 13:6–12). Paul’s relation to Christ is primary, so to express his attachment to his Lord he uses the term “servant” (*doulos*, GK 1528; lit., “slave,” suggesting full, but not unwilling, obedience). By beginning in this fashion, Paul initially puts himself on the same plane as his readers. But Paul is more than a “servant” of Jesus Christ. He is

an “apostle” by *divine* calling (the sense of “called” here; cf. 1Co 1:1) and accordingly possesses a special authority as Christ’s appointee. This would include not only his right to preach the gospel (believers in general could do that) but to found and supervise churches and, if necessary, to discipline them.

Paul has been “set apart” (*aphōrismenos*, GK 928) in order to proclaim “the gospel of God” (*euangelion theou*; cf. 15:16). As a Pharisee he had been set apart to a life of strict observance of Jewish law

and custom. Now his life's work has become the proclamation of the gospel, the good news God has for humanity—something this epistle will focus on powerfully. Possibly Paul locates the time of this “setting apart” at the Damascus Road commission (cf. Ac 9:15; 26:16), but more probably he thought of it as occurring already at his birth. Thus in Galatians 1:15–16 he refers to being “set apart” (using the same verb as in Romans) before he was born (perhaps an allusion to Jer 1:5) and being called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

The word “gospel” (*euangelion*, GK 2295) in its verbal form (*euangelizomai*) has a rich background in the LXX. The “proclamation of good news” in Isaiah (40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1) comes readily in the NT to indicate good news referring to Jesus Christ (cf. Jesus' citation of Isa 61:1 in Lk 4:18). “The gospel of God” is what Romans is all about.

**2** Before the historic events providing the basis for the gospel message unfolded, God “promised” the good news in the prophetic Scriptures (16:26). Promise means more than prophecy, because it commits the Almighty to make good his word, whereas a prophecy could be just an advance announcement of something that would happen. The concept of promise and the associated idea of God's faithfulness permeate Romans (see, e.g., 4:13–25; 9:4; 15:8). God did not invent the gospel to cover up disappointment over Israel's failure to receive Christ. The gospel was God's purpose from the beginning (cf. 1Pe 1:20). Nor did Paul create the gospel, which was “his” (Ro 2:16; 16:25) in an entirely different sense (cf. Gal 1:10). The reference to “the Holy Scriptures” prepares the reader for the rather copious use of the OT in Romans, beginning with 1:17. For Paul, as for the early church, the gospel is the fulfillment of the OT expectation.

**3–4** The gospel above all centers in God's “Son,” who at the end of v.4 is referred to as “our Lord.”

These two verses appear to enshrine and adapt an early liturgical confession. This seems evident not only from the weighty content of the material but especially from the balanced, antithetical form: (lit.) “born of the seed of David according to the flesh”; “appointed Son of God according to the Spirit [or, possibly, his spirit] of holiness.” In the original manuscripts all the letters were capitals, and hence it is not clear whether the word “Spirit” here should be capitalized—i.e., whether this is a reference to the human spirit of Jesus or a reference to the Holy Spirit. The balanced construction of *kata pneuma* (GK 4460) over against *kata sarka* (GK 4922), may suggest “spirit” in contrast to “flesh,” perhaps making the point that the human nature of Jesus was so holy, so absolutely free of sin, that death could not hold him (cf. Ac 2:24). If one takes this statement as a flesh-spirit antithesis, this would be a reference to the twofold nature of Jesus Christ: as to his humanity a descendant of David; as to the holiness of his spirit, his deity, the Son of God. More probably, however, “Spirit of holiness” is a Hebraic way of referring to the Holy Spirit rather than to Jesus' spirit, and these two clauses are to be understood as sequential. That is, in the humility of the incarnation Jesus was born a descendant of David, but now through “his resurrection from the dead” he has been appointed Son of God in power by means of the Spirit.

There may be a suggestion here that Jesus, anointed and sustained by the Holy Spirit in the days of his flesh, was acknowledged by the fact of the resurrection to have successfully endured the tests and trials of his earthly life, having been obedient even to death. By resurrection he has become a life-giving spirit (1Co 15:45). His rising was indeed “from the dead.” But Paul says more: “of the dead” (the simple genitive *nekrōn*, GK 3738), suggesting that Christ is the forerunner of others in this transformation (cf. 15:20–21).

“As to his human nature;” i.e., becoming a man, he became not only an Israelite (9:5) but a son of David (Mt 1:1; Lk 1:32; Ac 13:22–23; 2Ti 2:8), a qualification he needed as Messiah (Isa 11:1). With the affirmation of the divine sonship of Jesus at the beginning of v.3, Paul guards his whole statement from doing service for a heretical, adoptionist Christology. We have here a three-stage Christology (cf. Php 2:6–11). The period of Christ’s earthly life and ministry was followed by another phase—that which resulted from his resurrection. The point of “declared” or “appointed” (*horisthentos*, GK 3988) is not that Jesus here became the “Son of God” for the first time but rather that his sonship, veiled by the incarnation, is made unmistakably plain by the resurrection. “With power” (*en dynamei*, GK 1539) may belong with “declared,” but it may with greater warrant be joined with “Son of God,” indicating the new quality of life Jesus had after his resurrection (Php 3:10; Col 1:29).

Appropriately, Jesus Christ is now described as “our Lord” (*tou kyriou* [GK 3261] *hēmōn*). Though the title was fitting during his earthly ministry, it attained more frequent use and greater meaning following the resurrection (Ac 2:36; 10:36). Notable is the fact that in this initial statement about the gospel nothing is said concerning the redeeming work of Christ, which is reserved for later consideration (Ro 3:21–26; 4:25; 5:6–21). It was the infinite worth of the Son that made his saving work possible.

5 Now the apostle returns to his responsibility to proclaim the good news (cf. v.1). Two problems present themselves in v.5, and they are somewhat related. Who is indicated by “we,” and how should one understand the phrase “all the Gentiles”? Clearly, in using “we” Paul cannot be including his readers, because they did not possess apostleship. He could be referring to other apostles, of whom the Roman believers must have heard, but this

would be unexpected, and it is not amplified. Mention of the intended sphere of labor—“among all the Gentiles”—makes the limitation of the “we” to Paul (as a literary plural) natural, since the Gentiles constituted his special field of labor (cf. 15:16, 18, where the word “obey” corresponds to the word “obedience” in this passage). On the other hand, “all the Gentiles” (*pasin tois ethnesin*) can equally well be rendered “all the nations” or “all peoples” (cf. Mt 28:19). This would favor the wider reference of “we” to all the apostles, since Israel would be included as one of the peoples. It is difficult finally to decide this question. The mission of Paul in preaching the gospel is “for his name’s sake,” i.e., for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Paul’s apostleship is by the calling (cf. v.1), and hence the grace, of God. “Grace and apostleship” are probably to be understood in the sense of “the gift of apostleship” (a hendiadys, the two words referring to one thing). “Grace” (*charis*, GK 5921), the unmerited favor of God, is a word of key importance to Paul since it captures the essence of the gospel.

The desired response to the gospel message is “the obedience of faith” (*hypakoēn pisteōs*, GK 5633, 4411), which probably means “the obedience that comes from faith.” It would be equally possible, however, to understand these words as an apposite genitive: “the obedience that is faith.” After all, Paul’s gospel calls preeminently for faith (cf., e.g., 10:9–11). Of course, it also calls for obedience, and for Paul the two are ultimately inseparable. (On obedience, see 15:18; 16:26; on faith, see 1:16–17; 10:17.)

6–7a Just as Paul was “called” to apostleship (v.1), the readers too are “called to belong to Jesus Christ” and “called to be saints.” The idea here is the divine initiative that is responsible for their conversion (cf. 2Ti 1:9–10). The readers are “loved by God”; they are the recipients of unmerited love

(*agapē*, GK 27) that makes grace possible. The word “saint” (*hagios*, GK 41), the common term designating believers, has almost the same force as the expression Paul uses for himself when he says he was “set apart” (v.1). While it does not indicate actual condition (as opposed to position) of righteousness, the designation implies the holiness to which every child of God is called (Ro 6:19, 22). On the words “in Rome,” see Introduction, p. 23).

**7b** At length the apostle is ready to extend a greeting to his readers—“grace to you and peace.” Ordinary letters of that period usually contained a single word meaning “greeting” (as in Jas 1:1). Paul,

however, is partial to terms with theological import. He desires for his readers a continuing and deepening experience of spiritual blessing that only God can bestow. “Grace” (*charis*) is above all the word that captures the essence of God’s favor toward sinners; “peace” (*eirēnē*, GK 1645) refers to the fruit of grace, a *šālôm* (GK 8934) that connotes ultimate well-being in every regard. It is important to note that the Father and the Son are the joint benefactors. While the NT contains several explicit statements of the deity of our Lord, in addition it has many that imply this deity, as here in the formulaic linking of God and Jesus.

## NOTES

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**3–4** Paul probably makes use of a Christological formula not original with him but presumably known to the Roman church. This judgment is based on the absence of mention of the Davidic descent in the Pauline Epistles (2Ti 2:8 being widely regarded as deutero-Pauline), the unparalleled use of “the Spirit of holiness,” and likewise the use of *ὀρίζω*, *horizō* (“declare”)—a word attributed to Paul in Acts 17:31 (“appoint”) but not appearing in his writings—and the absence of any reference to the death of Christ. There are other examples of brief creedal statements in Paul (e.g., 1Co 8:6), and there is probably enough reason to warrant the conclusion in this case that the passage is pre-Pauline. But we cannot be certain. It is worth noting that in Acts 13:33–35 Paul is credited with emphasizing, in close connection with each other, three items found in Romans 1:3–4, namely, the sonship of the Messiah, his relation to David, and his resurrection from the dead. On these verses, see P. Beasley-Murray, “Romans 1:3f: An Early Confession of Faith in the Lordship of Jesus,” *TynBul* 31 (1980): 147–54.

**5** See Don B. Garlington, “*The Obedience of Faith*”: A Pauline Phrase in Historical Context (WUNT 2.38; Tübingen: Mohr, 1991).

## B. Paul and the Church at Rome (1:8–15)

### OVERVIEW

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Still following the general format of the Greek letter, Paul proceeds to a proper introduction that includes thanksgiving and intercession in behalf of

the readers, as well as indicating his hope of visiting them in the near future.