

A ‘Hermeneutical Square’-Based Analysis of Paul’s writing on God’s Plan for Jews and Gentiles and their Relevance for Today

Olusola Olarinre Ayo-Obiremi

PhD, Lecturer at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary
Ogbomoso Oyo State, Nigeria

Abstract: *Using the hermeneutical square, the writer provides a hermeneutical analysis of Paul’s writing on God’s plan to Jews and Gentiles in the light of tensions among Christian denominations (Romans 9 - 16).*

1. INTRODUCTION

A cursory reading of the Bible may make it seem like a simple book to read and interpret but the end product of a shoddy job will be half-baked Christians, people who still drink milk when they should be cracking bones. Bible interpretation is a very important task that requires discipline and diligence. It consists of understanding the Bible passage and making sense of that meaning enough to impact others with that meaning. Just as the Greek god Hermes was believed to relate messages from the gods and make them clear to humans;¹ the interpreter of the Bible is expected to make God’s word clear to whoever his audience may be. The understanding starts however with the individual. This discipline and process of understanding, interpreting and conveying information from the Bible is called hermeneutics. A real ‘digging deep’ makes the past events of the Bible come alive and enables the readers relive and learn from the experiences of the past. This ‘good job’ is done by means of finding out about the author of a chosen portion of Scripture, the world of the original recipients, the text and the subject matter. This paper makes use of the hermeneutical square to analyze Paul’s letter to the Romans and to apply the Jewish-Gentile situation presented in the text by Paul to relate to tensions among Christian denominations. The hermeneutical square is that process of hermeneutics. It is also referred to as the hermeneutical spiral and has different versions and renderings.² The diagram and content chosen is the first of the two given by Oeming.³ The Book of Romans, being ‘the theological cornerstone of the New Testament, the greatest of Paul’s epistles’ is therefore portrayed as a good book to study and understand for better Christian living among denominations today.⁴

2. THE HERMENEUTICAL SQUARE

The ‘hermeneutical square’ consists of the four indispensable factors in hermeneutics. The four factors are the author, the reader, the text and the subject matter. Each of these factors interrelates

¹ Manfred Oeming *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), p. ix

² Grant R. Osborne. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991; Osborne draws a spiral which is like increasing circles and he has seven rings in all and an outer labeling not within any ring. This diagram is for inductive study and is called the ‘logical

³ Please see appendix for the diagram.

⁴ Lawrence O. Richards. *Bible Reader’s Companion*. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries p. 734.

with the others. They interact and so, deepen meaning. The author's objective is to communicate a message which may be 'an insight or experience from his world'⁵; the text contains 'at least partially' what the author intends to communicate.⁶ The reader is said to initiate the contact with the author and his world as he deals with 'the text and its world.' The subject matter connects the author, the text and the reader in their separate worlds. Though in diagram, it looks more like a kite, it is called 'the Hermeneutical Square,' because of its four sides and four corners which are equal. Some writers, however tend to elevate one aspect above the other; but for good interpretation, one cannot do without any of them.

An addition to the hermeneutical square which Oeming writes a whole chapter⁷ on is the philosophical aspect. Each writer of texts, each reader and interpreter has a personal philosophy which is not very visible of its own accord but is an underlying factor in what the person does. It is the hub that makes the wheel go round.⁸ While the author, the text, the subject matter and the reader and their worlds are tangible and visible (at least in their days), the philosophy in each instance only shows through the output of the individuals. Hence, in the diagram of the hermeneutical square,⁹ Oeming does not include the philosophy. It is present but not visibly so. Hence, this writer has made it fainter than other items in the H-square to represent this explanation of its being 'invisibly visible.'

Without all the identified factors, it is not practicable to do proper hermeneutics. It is impracticable to have direct contact between the author and the reader but a connection is made through language (whether verbal or non verbal) as a medium.¹⁰ The arrows on the outside of the square show the continuum of movement and deepen understanding of the exegete on hermeneutics and hermeneutical practice. These are represented clearly in the diagram of the hermeneutical square in the appendix. The hermeneutical square has been identified by Bible scholars to lean towards the Historical-critical approach¹¹ of Bible interpretation. The hermeneutical square (hereafter referred to as H-Square) also falls in line with the historical context in the two areas which Osborne states must be considered in Bible study –the other being the logical context.¹² The historical context of a text includes the authorship, the date of writing, the group to which the work is addressed and the purpose and themes.¹³ Osborne sees the 'purpose and themes as probably the most important of the four areas to ... interpretation,'¹⁴

3. USING THE H-SQUARE TO INTERPRET PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS (CHAPTERS 9 – 16)

In using the hermeneutical square to interpret the Bible today, an attempt to do inductive study alone may not work as some of the information needed can only be gotten from other sources.¹⁵ Hence, this section is a combination of this researcher's inductive and deductive study of Romans. This section reveals the textual meaning discovered while the next section contains the contextual meaning.¹⁶ Each of the four points of the hermeneutical square is taken individually and related to Paul's writing to the Romans (especially chapters 9 - 16). However, the section on the subject matter – i.e. the issues on tension among the Gentiles and Jews from the text take a lion share of

⁵Oeming, p. xi

⁶ Oeming, p. 7

⁷ Oeming, pp. 9 - 27

⁸ Brandford Yaboah, class discussions, SREL 610: Theology of Saint Paul, M. A. Study of Religions Sandwich programme, (University of Ghana, Legon). 18 July, 2011

⁹ Oeming, p. 7. See appendix for the diagram.

¹⁰ Oeming, p. 8

¹¹ Oeming, p. 145

¹² Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* p. 19. Osborn drew a spiral to represent the logical approach.

¹³ Osborne, p. 20

¹⁴ Osborne, p. 20

¹⁵ Osborne divides exegetical research into inductive and deductive study where deductive includes looking at what others say while inductive looks at only the text itself. p. 12

¹⁶ Osborne states that textual meaning is what the Bible meant while contextual meaning is what it means to us today (Osborne, pp. 12 & 14).

space due to the extra importance of the text. As Osborne's wrote, we should not study any passage without basic knowledge of the problems and situation addressed in the book and the themes with which the writer addressed those problems ...The information we glean from the sources becomes a filter through which the individual passages may be passed. All this data however is secondary knowledge while the primary knowledge is the text itself.¹⁷

4. AUTHOR

The author of the book of Romans is clear. 'From the post-apostolic church to the present, with almost no exception,' the authorship of Romans has been credited to Paul.¹⁸ Paul was from Tarsus. He trained under Gamaliel¹⁹ and was also a Roman citizen. By virtue of his training under Gamaliel and as a 'Pharisee of Pharisees,'²⁰ Paul knew the Jewish law as well as its various interpretations very well. He was a scholar in Jewish law and Judaism in his own right. Paul could 'boast' of being everything required by the Jewish law²¹ (except that he murdered but that was seen by him at a time as being done because he hated those he thought God hated!)²² He was so zealous and committed to Judaism that he went about persecuting those belonging to 'The Way.'²³ It was on one of such missions, on the way to Damascus that The Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him and spoke to him.²⁴ Thereafter, God told him through Ananias of his God-given mandate 'to be His chosen instrument ... to turn the Gentiles from darkness into light.'²⁵ Hence, Paul was both a patriotic Jew as well as one specially commissioned to the Gentiles and hence, in a unique position to be an agent of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles.²⁶ He had realized how it was futile to seek salvation through the law. He had tasted both worlds, and so, could speak authoritatively on which was right and better. Thus, his former philosophy and theology changed and he wrote that salvation is through grace by faith in Christ Jesus and not by fulfilling the law. Some scholars even explain that by the time he wrote Romans, Paul's theology had matured; thus, some of the differences in his positions from some earlier letters.²⁷

5. THE RECIPIENTS AND THEIR WORLD

Those to whom Paul wrote were the immediate recipients of the letter. While they were a part of the Author (Paul)'s world; there are some particular things worthy of note about them also. Immediate recipients of Paul's letter were the people in the (big) Church at Rome (Rom 1:8).²⁸ It is necessary to examine some information about the city of Rome at that time in order to appreciate more the context and world of the recipients of Paul's letter. The city of Rome was the largest city in the world, the capital of the largest and greatest Empire, the world had ever seen. Rome was at the centre of Mediterranean world. Rome was a tourist attraction, which any imperialist would like to visit. Hence Paul's yearning to visit Rome far before his writing is not a far-fetched assertion (Romans 1:13).²⁹

¹⁷ Osborne, pp. 20 - 21

¹⁸ Everett F. Harrison, 'Romans' in Gaebelin, Frank E. (Gen. Ed) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1976, p. 3.

¹⁹ Acts 22: 3

²⁰ Philippians 3: 4 - 6

²¹ Philippians 3: 4 - 6

²² Psalms 139: 21

²³ Acts 8: 1; 22: 4; 26: 10 & *New International Version Study Bible*, (Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1979), text notes.

²⁴ Acts 9: 1 - 19

²⁵ Acts 9: 15; 26: 18

²⁶ Stott p. 35

²⁷ Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) pp. 79 - 82

²⁸ Some sources do not have the verse/ phrase to the church at Rome and some scholars state that it was copied to Ephesus and thus, the missing statement. General agreements, however is that it was to the church at Rome. Harrison, 'Romans,' pp. 4 - 5.

²⁹ J.D.G. Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* ed. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and others. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 838.

The church in Rome was not one of the churches Paul had planted. Paul stated in Romans 1:10-15 and 15:20-22 that the fellowship in Rome was not his making.

According to Richards and Stott, though the exact name of the missionary founder(s) is not known; the church had been planted in Rome by early Christian converts³⁰ who had returned from Jerusalem after Pentecost (Acts 2: 10).³¹ Davidson and Martins also submit that the fellowship in Rome may have been founded by the labours of Christians who were leading citizens of the Empire to this church. So the church may have originated through the witness of the itinerant travellers to and from the metropolis - both Jews and proselytes alike (Acts 2:10).³² Whoever founded the church was not Paul but a Christian/group of Christians and the church was characterized with strong faith.

The city of Rome had a population of about one million people from all sections of the Roman Empire, and beyond. While some sources have no cause to hesitate to state that the church consisted of the Gentiles to whom Paul preached mainly with a few Jews; others are of the opinion that there is the need to be more cautious in making blanket statements. Paul himself referred to Gentile readers in 1: 13. However, in 4: 1, he writes on Abraham as 'our forefather' and refers to the Mosaic law as known to his readers in 7:1. Based on these two passages; some argue that this shows there were a quite a number of Jews in the church at Rome while others see this as 'not compelling evidence.'³³

Other sources state that Christianity began in Rome, and as that time, there were large number of Jews in Roman Empire estimated to be in the neighbourhood of 40 to 50,00 population. So the presence of the Jews, in a Gentile environment no doubt may have provided a virile ground in that social context for Christianity, which had given a good occasion for Paul to put the Church on apostolic writing.

However, there were more Gentiles than Jews in Rome (1: 5f, 13; 11: 13).³⁴ Rome was largely composed of Gentiles. Hence the city became pivotal in the itinerary of Paul as a commissioned 'apostle to the Gentiles.'³⁵ 'Even the most casual reading of Romans betrays the fact that the church in Rome was a mixed community consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, with Gentiles in the majority (1: 5f, 13; 11: 13)...'³⁶

As at the time of Augustus's reign (27 BC - AD 14), the city of Rome had institutionalized an urban police force and fire prevention units known as *cohorts urbanae* and the *vigils*³⁷ respectively. The purpose of these groups was simply to keep order as in any growing city. Just as these groups were meant to prevent problems in the growing city, Burton refers to Paul's writing to the Romans as prophylactic.

According to Barclay, 'prophylactic' is something put in place to guard against infection. Thus, with Paul's background, having dealt with some other churches where he had fought against many erroneous/wrong ideas which are detrimental to the health of the church; he sensed the need to send a letter to the city-church at the center of the world in order to build up the church which was already famous for her faith³⁸ so that peradventure, this infection comes to the church, they

³⁰ Richards, Lawrence O. *Bible Reader's Companion*. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries p. 734.

³¹ John Stott (series ed.) *The Message of Romans* (Leicester, England: Intervarsity press 1994), pp. 33 -34

³² F.Davidson, and Ralph P. Martin "Romans," *New Bible Commentary* 3rd ed D. Guthrie and others (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Intervarsity Press, 1988.

³³ Harrison, p. 9

³⁴ Emmanuel Oyemomi , 'Pauline Writings' Lecture notes for RCT 530, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho. August 2011 - from a combination of sources, p. 107

³⁵ Oyemomi, Emmanuel, 'Pauline Writings.' p. 102

³⁶ Stott, John (series ed.) *The Message of Romans*, p. 34

³⁷ Oyemomi, 107

³⁸ Harrison, p. 3

might have enough spiritual immunity in terms of Christian doctrine as a powerful and effective defense.³⁹

6. OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Different reasons have been advanced for why Paul wrote to the Roman Church since he himself did not 'spell out his reasons in detail.'⁴⁰ The reason he gave himself in Romans 1: 13 was so as to preach the gospel among them and 'have a harvest among them' as among other Gentiles. He had been yearning for long to go to Rome. Harrison suggests that Paul wrote so that the church may know details of the gospel he had been preaching for over twenty years and therefore be ready to become a missionary base from which ministry would spread to the West through him just as he had succeeded with Antioch as his missionary base in the East.⁴¹ For the missionary purpose, Paul as an apostle to the Gentile (Romans 15:18-24, 28) was seeking an occasion with the capital of the Empire, so he might be able to bring in "the full number of Gentiles" (Romans 11:13-15, 25-26), and also to evangelize the city (Romans 1:13-15). Moreover, Paul was preparing himself for mission visit to Spain via Rome, and it appears, like Philippians, Romans may have given some support for his mission activities to Spain.⁴² Paul was intending to embark on a journey to Spain⁴³ and wanted to go through Rome and on the same trip, intending to deliver some contributions in Jerusalem. He needed the prayers, support and hospitality of the church in Rome.

This letter was written at a time when Paul thought he had completed a major task of the phase of his evangelistic assignment in the north-eastern quadrant of the Mediterranean (Romans 15:19, 23).⁴⁴ The idea that he would soon embark on a journey to Jerusalem (Romans 15:25) tallies with the larger picture in Acts of a final visit to Jerusalem at about the close of his work in Asia Minor and Greece according to Acts chapter 20. This is an indicator that the book may have been written in the middle of the 50's. Paul possibly wrote the letter in late 56 or early 57 while at Corinth (Romans 15:25; and Acts 20). The evidence includes: the extent to which the contributions for the church in Jerusalem had gone (15:26); Acts 20:3 refers to the three months⁴⁵ Paul spent in Greece at the beginning of his last journey to Jerusalem. That will suggest that the place of writing should be Corinth, Paul's headquarters in Greece. This is in line with the findings in chapter 16 of Romans; namely the coming of Phoebe from Cenchreae, a port in Corinth (Romans 16:1-2, Gaius, his host, and Erastus in Romans 16:23 point to the 3 months centred around this location would also reinforce the point that Paul settled down to compose his letter within this period.⁴⁶ Therefore a good educational guess is that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans in a house in Corinth around 56-57 AD around the time he was winding up his third missionary journey.⁴⁷ The bearer of the letter (Phoebe of nearby Cenchrea) and Gaius mentioned as Paul's host (16: 1 – 2 & 23) are inclusive among other evidence.⁴⁸

The import of the entry in Romans 13:6-7 however gives an impression that Paul felt a necessity to provide a theological rationale for paying taxes to civil authority. This may be a reflection that there was some theological or ecclesiastical unrest in Rome around the early reign of Nero. Hence the issue of date becomes a trivial issue on the ground that the letter to the Romans marks a significant climax in Paul's missionary work.⁴⁹ The letter to the Roman Christians serves the self apology from Paul in that his message and the understanding of his gospel appears to have been

³⁹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Letter to the Romans*. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978), 1-2.

⁴⁰ Stott, John p.32.

⁴¹ Harrison, p. 5

⁴² J.D.G. Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* ed. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and others. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 841.

⁴³ M. Reasoner, "Rome and Roman Christianity," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* ed G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and others. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 850-851.

⁴⁴ Oyemomi, p. 100

⁴⁵ Oyemomi, 107 & Stott, p. 32

⁴⁶ Dunn, "Letter to the Romans," 838

⁴⁷ Oyemomi, p. 107

⁴⁸ Harrison, p. 4

⁴⁹ Dunn, "Letter to the Romans," 838.

under attack and thus, needed to be justified. Reminiscences can be drawn from assertions in Romans 1:16; 3:8, and 9:1-2. The apology was directed to Rome through an expanded introduction in 1:2-6 including the creedal formula in 1:3-4, with his call identity and his locus standing all serving the purpose of his defense in Jerusalem.⁵⁰

Another reason given was so as to give systematic and full explanation of the gospel for ministry to continue after him (Paul) – as a gift to the church. Harrison suggested that Paul may have had omens as intimated by the Holy Spirit of the impending trials ahead of him such that he⁵¹ may die and never make it to Rome and from there to Spain and the West as intended.⁵² The social context that gave occasion to this letter is found in the truth that Jewish community was highly influential in Rome, but deeply hated perhaps being the most influential voices among the Roman intelligentsia, yet of a very small size in that community. They enjoyed preferential treatment from Julius Caesar and Augustus. In addition, there was the presence of the Gentile proselyte who had been attracted to Judaism. The coming together of these religious opposites will no doubt have provided a fertile ground for the pen of Paul as evident in Romans 1:16; 12:14-13:7.

It should be noted also that as influential as the Jews were in ancient Rome, they had no central authority like they had in Alexandria. So, that will indicate a more fragmented and diversified synagogians, who were yet to be homogeneously organized as a believing community. Hence, when Paul spoke, he was not addressing an organized church, but the house church or making reference to synagogues. Five of such house churches could be implied from Romans 16:5, 10-11, 14-15.⁵³ Stott notes that some scholars submit that each of these separate house churches represented the different doctrinal positions in the city of Rome.⁵⁴

The central pastoral significance of the letter to the Romans was to “heal potential division among the churches in Rome. That is the import of the entry in Romans 14:1-15:6. This point is not far-fetched when we consider a gathering where both Gentile and Jews are fellowshiping together, and that will also justify phrases like the weak and the strong; Jews and Christian, and God – fearers, Gentiles and Christian that will no doubt breed diverse Christian groupings and factions. That will explain why Paul set out to explain to all and sundry, the character of the gospel, having room for both Jews and Gentile without discrimination. Romans 15:7-13 will therefore serve as a concluding matter to the theme he started in contrast to the generalized paraenesis as against Pauline experience with the Corinthians. Chapter 16 however shows an indication that Paul actually had close contact with some people in the church will lend credence to the fact that Paul had purposes for the writing he did to the Romans.⁵⁵ In essence, likely issues that precipitated the purpose of the letter range primarily from missionary purpose, apologetic purpose, pastoral purpose to the purpose of the Roman situation.

Whether the letter was to prepare grounds for ministry expansion, a mission base for the East, a written document to guide Christianity, a legacy for the Christian Church or to even pave a way for his acceptance; the original reason is known to God and Paul but the book seems to have served almost all the purposes when one considers how salvation by grace through faith explained in the book has led to the salvation of many (expansion of ministry); the theology and doctrine for salvation (a ‘headquarters book’ for Christianity).

7. TEXT AND SUBJECT MATTER: THE ‘JEWISH-GENTILE’ CONFLICT IN ROME

Paul’s letter, focusing as it does on relationships between Jew and Gentile suggests clearly, as earlier mentioned that tensions existed in this church and ‘there was considerable conflict between these groups. It is further recognized that this conflict was primarily not ethnic ... but theological (different convictions about the status of God’s covenant and law, and so about salvation).’⁵⁶ Paul

⁵⁰ Ibid, 840

⁵¹ Oyemomi, p. 108

⁵² Harrison, p. 5 – Paul requested for prayers of protection and deliverance from unbelievers in Judea in Romans 15:3 so, Harrison advances this as a possible omen of the difficult experiences awaiting him.

⁵³ Dunn, “Letter to the Romans,” 839-840.

⁵⁴ Stott, p. 34

⁵⁵ Dunn, 841

⁵⁶ Stott, p. 34

deals with them by emphasizing righteousness based on faith alone and the Christian life lived out through love. These are the two main themes he emphasizes in

Romans 9 – 16. Paul also shows that the Jewish and Gentile Christians alike require a righteousness that can and must be lived out in personal and corporate Christian life. Paul's first readers surely recognized themselves in this letter.⁵⁷

The tensions based on theological positions of the house- churches in Rome bordered on issues like 'Judaizing Christianity' (Trying to make Christianity a part or shoot of Judaism with emphasis on righteousness based on obedience to the law); versus 'supporters of the law-free gospel' (Gentiles who saw no need to be held by laws). Those who lived by the law were considered 'weak in faith' while the other faction was seen as 'strong (Romans 14 – 15).'⁵⁸ Paul sought to be an authentic peacemaker from the beginning to the end of the book of Romans, pouring oil on troubled waters, 'anxious to preserve both truth and peace without sacrificing either for the other.'⁵⁹

8. MORE DETAILED LOOK AT TENSIONS IN ROMANS AND APPLICATION TO TENSIONS AMONG CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

A detailed look at chapters 9 – 16 helps the reader see God's divine plan for all mankind and man's role in attaining his God-destined position of righteousness and bliss through simple faith granted by God's grace. This section takes a look at some of the details in chapters 9 – 16 of Romans and seeks to apply them to denominational tensions among Christians today. As then, the tensions were based on theology/doctrine and not on race or colour, same are the case with Christian denominations. Some of the things that caused tensions in the past among Christians were issues of which books to be accepted as Scripture and therefore canonized, issues of whether to abolish or continue slave trade (leading to the beginning/break away of the Southern Baptist Convention from other Baptists because at the time, they believed some people were superior to others); etc. These tensions and some others have been taken care of by establishment of other denominations. Ever since Martin Luther stood up to his convictions of *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *sola scriptura* Scripture only as the source of authority; with the beginning of protestanism, it has become the practice that once there is a disagreement in understanding of Scripture or in doctrine, a new denomination springs up.

Perhaps with the 'house churches' in Rome, if the assertion that each of the five or more churches represented a particular doctrinal stance is anything to go by; then starting new denominations/churches has for long been the 'escape route' to disagreements and tensions among Christians. With issues of canonization and slave trade in the distant past, issues of women's ordination and involvement in practical priestly duties, the 'best' form of church polity, what the Lord's Supper is actually and what it should be called (communion, Lord's Supper, Thanksgiving feast, etc);⁶⁰ whether the elements used are to be regarded in terms of transubstantiation or consubstantiation, etc; issues on where homosexuals stand and whether or not God is pleased with them; whether salvation is in terms of eternal security or not; etc are issues that still rock churches and lead to tensions, disagreements and possible increase in denominations among Christians. As Pam Perdue observed in answer to a question on the major differences between major Christian denominations on Google; 'The theological differences can be fairly small, though hotly contested. A lot of the more important differences are matters of practice, rather than on the details of belief. It makes it hard to sum up the differences between any two denominations in just a sentence or two.'⁶¹ Basically, anytime someone comes along with

⁵⁷ Richards,

⁵⁸ Stott, pp. 34 – 35 citing Wedderburn.

⁵⁹ Stott, p. 35

⁶⁰ [entilza](#) 'A Broad Question and a Huge Can of Worms'

⁶¹ Pam Perdue 'Lots of little details and some big practices'

a doctrinal difference, the usual outcome is a new denomination. Even efforts to dismantle denominationalism have resulted in yet another denomination. The list goes on and on, of course.⁶²

Just as Paul tried to let the Israelites realize that while their refusal of salvation by faith opened a door for Gentiles but their unbelief was also a product of their pride and stubbornness;⁶³ likewise, many Christian denominations have sprung up as a result of pride, ego and stubbornness. James 4: 1-3 explains the root of many tensions that get so hot and unyielding to all attempts at peacemaking and correction. It is necessary at this point to see how Paul handled the Roman situation and to infer some lessons there from.

9. PAUL'S APPROACH TO THE TENSIONS IN ROME AND LESSONS FOR CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS

'...The key to Paul's reconciliation of the Old and New Testament revelations is found in his concept of "righteousness." In first century Judaism, "righteousness" was conformity to the written or oral Law. Following Jesus, Paul insists that righteousness requires actually being like God in motive and act. Only God can transform a sinful human being, to make him or her truly like the Lord.⁶⁴ Paul emphasizes the need to draw from examples in history (Old and New Testaments) that prove that *'God has consistently operated on principles imbedded in the Gospel in Old Testament as well as New Testament eras (Rom. 9 – 11).'*⁶⁵ Therefore, *Believers are to live out God's righteousness in relationships within the Christian community (Rom. 12 – 16). Paul gives a beautiful description of righteousness as God's character finds expression in the way Christians live together in the world.*⁶⁶

Paul establishes that both the Jews and the Gentiles have their respective wrong doings/ failures. While Jews lived based on the law, Gentiles tended to adhere to a law-free life. While the

Jews felt that they were sole beneficiaries of God's love and grace, Gentiles tended to despise Jews when God showed them grace and mercy. Paul tries to help the Gentile see that the Jewish rejection of salvation by faith is what has provided a chance for them to enjoy God's original plan for them. As for the Jews, though they had failed to accept God's salvation they had a second chance. 'God's choice of the Gentiles to obtain a righteousness they never sought is simply another expression of that sovereign grace that has always marked His actions (9 v. 30). As for Israel, the people stumbled through because they pursued righteousness as if it could be obtained by works rather than by faith (vv.31 – 33). In everything God has been consistent and totally fair.'⁶⁷

Paul shows through Chapter 10, which is about salvation through faith that God has made a provision for everyone. Paul emphasizes action showing one's response to what is heard. A message needs to be understood, accepted and acted upon in obedience to God. God had not rejected the people of Israel. Rather, they rejected Him by refusing and ignoring salvation by faith which has been echoed throughout all history. They however had another chance and Paul yearned for his own people, God's special ones to not miss the 'second chance' so that though once cut off, they should be grafted back in. Paul uses the analogy of grafting that if God could graft in a totally unrelated branch (Gentiles), it would be a very simple task to re-graft the former broken/cut off branches (Jews) into the tree rooted in God's ancient covenant with Abraham.⁶⁸ In Romans 10: 12 – 13, Paul implied that, 'Everyone has equal standing with God. We're all sinners. And we're all invited to believe and to be saved.'⁶⁹

In Romans 11, Paul further made it clear that God has not been partial. 'God is righteous. In sovereign grace God has chosen those who show faith, not those who "qualify" by mere physical descent from the patriarchs (Rom. 9). Israel's present rejection has come because they sought

⁶² entilza

⁶³ Stott, p. 41

⁶⁴ Richards, p. 734.

⁶⁵ Richards, 734

⁶⁶ Richards, p. 734.

⁶⁷ Richards, p. 745.

⁶⁸ Richards, p. 747

⁶⁹ Richards, p. 746, 'Insight.'

righteousness by works, not by faith, despite God's constant proclamation of His Good News (Rom. 9)⁷⁰ 'Jewish rejection of "by-faith righteousness" made room for vast number of Gentiles to be "grafted in" the "tree" rooted in God's ancient covenant with Abraham. This should not be a matter of Gentile pride, but a warning to 'never abandon the principle of salvation by grace through faith.'⁷¹ This also serves as a warning to those who have benefitted because some people can also be bypassed if they do not live up to standard. He who thinks he stand should take heed lest he fall! All those who get a chance to repent and be saved should see it as an act of grace. Protestants should not deride Roman Catholics but rather realize that their salvation also is by grace. They may think they are totally free of the possible eternal damnation in hell; but the one who falls back is worse off as he will partake in the same eternal damnation as the one who never received salvation by grace through faith. No Christians should look down on others because of differences in understanding of God's word. Rather, firmly, gently and lovingly, they should seek each to help the other. Some issues like slave trade which were once so hot are now history and those who refused then (i.e. the denominations now write of repentance and even sign documents to that effect).⁷² Perhaps with some more patient handling of the truth, one or two extra denominations would have been avoided.

Among the Jews, despite all stubbornness and unwillingness to budge, God kept a remnant for Himself – and He still does today; possibly in every denomination targeting those who are committed to doing His will.⁷³ Hence, Christians should not give up on any denomination. In the past, many Roman Catholics scorned and refused the idea or offer of salvation by grace through faith; likewise the Cherubim and Seraphim movement. Now, there are the Charismatic Catholics and the C & S youth movement who both teach and practice salvation by grace through faith. Christians should therefore teach in love and leave the Holy Spirit to convince and convict of sin, righteousness and judgment as is His job.

'On the basis of all God has done Paul urges believers to open themselves up to transformation rather than conform to this world's ways (Rom. 12: 1 – 2). The ways of the world are hatred, strife, anger, pride and all manifestations of the flesh. Paul shows that the practice of righteousness requires intimate ties to the new faith community. God has created a new thing: a living body. He has given each member gifts that enable him or her to contribute to the welfare to the whole (12: vv. 3 - 8).⁷⁴ And to function as a body, believers must practice love and serve one another. They must strengthen those interpersonal bonds that enable them to minister (vv. 9 – 21)' and not focus on the things that divide them.

No matter what the world does or the pressure it exerts, believers are to make sure they hold their own. Richards citing J. B. Phillips wrote "'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." The world exerts all sorts of pressures to force us to adopt its ways of thinking. But believers ... don't have to conform. We can be transformed from within by God.'⁷⁵ One of the key things in the world's way of thinking is self-centredness and believers are swallowing this satanic sponsored bait to think more of themselves and thus not care about others (12: 3). 'When we look at ourselves honestly, we realize we need others in the body of Christ and others need us. Christians are interdependent persons. ... Don't isolate yourself from other Christians.'⁷⁶

Richards proffers many solutions to the problem of conflict among denominations as he tries to interpret Paul's letter to the Romans as a second level recipient of the letter. Commenting on Romans 12, Richards wrote on the 'shape of love.' He states, 'this passage describes many ways that you and I can express God's love to others. Let's not complain if our local church isn't

⁷⁰ Richards, p. 747.

⁷¹ Richards, p. 747.

⁷² The Alliance of Baptists, "Statement of Racism and Repentance," 1990 cited in 'The Alliance of Baptists and LGTB topics' http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur2.htm. Assessed October 31, 2011.

⁷³ Richards, Insight, p. 747.

⁷⁴ Richards, p. 748

⁷⁵ Richards, p. 748, Insight.

⁷⁶ Richards, p. 748, Insight

characterized by the way of life described hers. Let's begin to live love ourselves among its members. Love is not only wonderful. Its catching.⁷⁷

Richards summarizing Romans 13 wrote: 'Living out God's "by faith righteousness" affects our relationship with other believers (Rom. 12) It also affects our relationship with the secular state and all our fellow human beings (Rom. 13). Christians must submit to governing authorities by obeying their rulers, paying taxes and following established laws (13:1 – 3).⁷⁸ Hence, rather than waste so much precious time on conflicts regarding whether to separate the Church and State or not to, Christians should be more proactive in finding creative ways to be more reliable patriotic and exemplary Christian citizens, faithful in paying taxes and giving to 'Caesar what is Caesar's' rather than trying to cheat on taxes and claiming issues of 'situational ethics' even when God's Spirit and conscience tell them that they are cheats. Submission to authorities shows respect for God while 'Christians must also show love to their fellow human beings (v. 8). *In fact, all the commandments are rooted in love: each calls us to avoid that which might harm a neighbor and so love will in practice fulfill God's Law. This obligation is urgent, for history rushes toward its end and we must clothe ourselves with Christ rather than gratify the desires of our sinful nature (vv. 11 – 14).*⁷⁹

In his summary of Romans 14, Richards wrote 'Believers are to accept one another without condemnation for personal convictions (14: 1- 2). We have no right to judge others on some issues, for they are matters of conscience to be settled between the individual and the Lord. Believers must then "stop passing judgment on one another" (vv. 3 – 12). Instead each person needs to be sensitive to how his or her choices affect others (vv. 13 – 18) and choose to do those things which "lead to peace and mutual edification" (vv. 19 – 21). In this way we protect each person's conscience and the quality of his or her personal relationship with the Lord (vv. 22 – 23).⁸⁰

"Disputable matters," (14: 1) are so called when they 'involve choices which God has not spoken clearly of in His Word. ...Many of the convictions which Christians hold dearly – do's and don'ts some passionately believe are God's will even though Scripture is silent – fall in this category.'⁸¹ Some issues that are not explicitly given as commands like 'Do not drink alcohol;' Lesbianism is a sin; ladies must not wear trousers and so on are examples of issues that cause tension but which are not explicitly specified in scripture. Paul teaches accepting all Christians as they are instead of passing judgment on their 'weak faith' as the issues in question are disputable matters. Richards, in his insight on Romans 14 further explains that the Greek *paralambano* used in 14: 1 is translated as 'accept' and it is 'a powerful relational term. It means to welcome, as with open heart and arms, eager and ready to share all of life. This is the kind of love we owe one another in Christ.' ...While the church should agree with God to not condone sin by exposing sin and disciplining believers who sin; 'neither the individual nor congregation has any right to pass judgment.'⁸²

Richards interprets judging other Christians as follows: 'Too many Christians – leaders and lay people – act as if fellow believers were accountable to them rather than Jesus. When we pass judgment on others, we usurp Jesus' role as Lord and deny Him the place that is rightfully His in our fellow believer's life. What a terrible sin this is.'⁸³ We are therefore to look at disputable matters by examining what we do. We should ask ourselves the question "Will my exercise of freedom cause harm to a brother/sister?" Richards further commented s on insight that 'A misuse

⁷⁷ Richards, p. 748, Insight

⁷⁸ Richards, p. 749

⁷⁹ Richards, p. 749, italics mine.

⁸⁰ Richards, p. 750

⁸¹ Richards, p. 750

⁸² Richards, p. 750

⁸³ Richards, p. 750

of freedom may “tear down” *katalyo* God's work in a fellow believer (14: 20) rather than “build up” *oikodome*, that person (14: 19).⁸⁴

Richards, summarizing Romans chapter 15 wrote, ‘Paul continues the topic developed in Romans 14. Practicing righteousness requires us to live love with one another. This means we strong ones must “bear with” the weak in the interest of building them up (15: 1 – 4). Our goal is the experience of a God-given spirit of unity enabling us to glorify Him together (vv. 5 – 6).’⁸⁵ Unity among Christians is therefore the key phrase here.

From Paul's life, experiences and ministry, he came to terms with the fact that the way to help another is not to persecute nor to castigate. He learnt over time that the best is to live the Christian life in love, service and humility. Fighting, bickering and strife are only tools of the devil. Opportunities we have for salvation are just by God's divine grace through faith. We are to exhibit a righteousness based on faith as Christians. Where we have differences in opinion over matters of doctrine, we must not lose sight of the fact that we belong to the same loving community; the body of Christ. ‘... In that context of community strong and weak learn to “accept (welcome, cf. 15: 7) one another. Paul's statement of the basis of acceptance here is significant.

In the earlier debate over “disputable matters” a person was accepted or condemned on the basis of his or her agreement with an individual's convictions. Now at last the church has learned to accept one another on the same basis that Chris accepted us: as we are – fully, completely, because we are loved and valued for ourselves.’ ‘As our congregations reach this level of spiritual maturity the “weak” will become “strong,” and the issue of “disputable matters” will no longer exist,’ notes Richards.⁸⁶ Richard's insight on chapter 16 (16: 25 – 27) has this: How is it possible to take sinful human beings motivated by selfish and sinful passions, separated by racial prejudice and vast social differences, and create a community bonded together by selfless love? Only God could do it in the world of the 1st century. And only God can do it today.’⁸⁷ With God, it is possible for churches to unite, show love, acceptance and to stand on faith and truth, yet practice peace. These principles will help end strife in the body of Christ and present a better legacy to children born and unborn and a worthwhile witness to the watching world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible: The Letter to the Romans*. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978), 1-2 Cousar, Charles B. *The Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996)
- [2] Davidson, F. and Martin, Ralph P. “Romans,” *New Bible Commentary* 3rd ed. D. Guthrie and others (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Intervarsity Press, 1988
- [3] Dunn, J.D.G. “Romans, Letter to the,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* ed. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and others. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993). entilza ‘A Broad Question and a Huge Can of Worms’ <http://askville.amazon.com>. Assessed October 31, 2011
- [4] Harrison, Everett, F. ‘Romans’ in Gaebelien, Frank E. (Gen. Ed) *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1976, p. 3. *New International Version Study Bible*, (Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1979), text notes.
- [5] Oeming, Manfred *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), p. ix
- [6] Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991
- [7] Oyemomi, Emmanuel ‘Pauline Writings’ Lecture notes for RCT 530, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso. August 2011

⁸⁴ Richards, p. 750

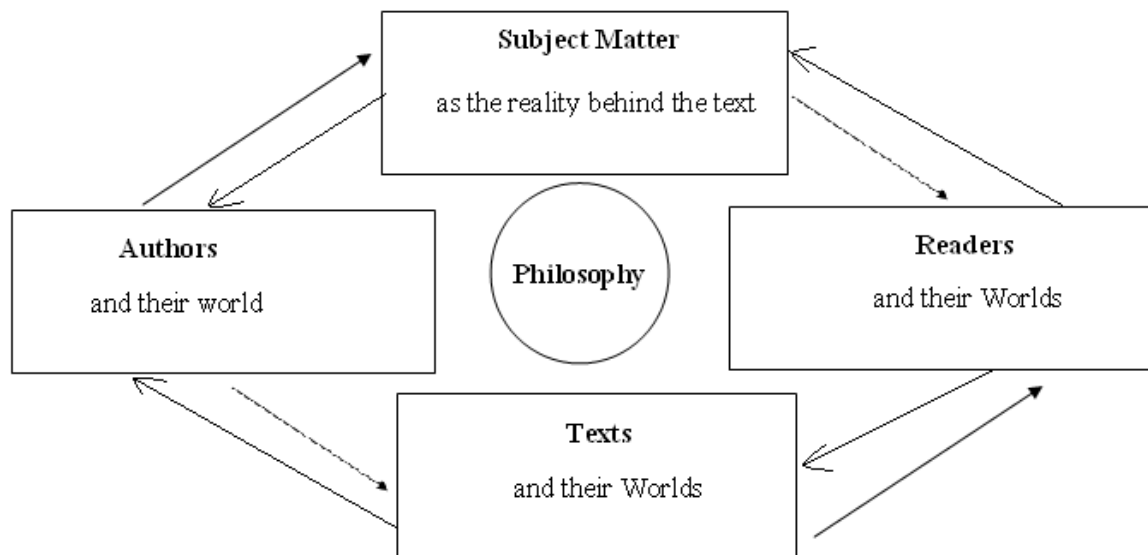
⁸⁵ Richards, p. 751

⁸⁶ Richards, p. 751

⁸⁷ Richards, p. 752

- [8] Perdue, Pam ‘Lots of little details and some big practices’ <http://askville.amazon.com>. Assessed October 31, 2011
- [9] Reasoner, M. “Rome and Roman Christianity,” Dictionary of Paul and His Letters ed G.F. Hawthorne, R P. Martin, and others. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993)
- [10] Richards, Lawrence O. Bible Reader’s Companion. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries
- [11] Stott, John (series ed.) The Message of Romans (Leicester, England: Intervarsity press 1994), The Alliance of Baptists, “Statement of Racism and Repentance,” 1990 cited in ‘The Alliance of Baptists and LGTB topics’ http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur2.htm. Assessed October 31, 2011.
- [12] Yaboah, Brandford class discussions, SREL 610: Theology of Saint Paul, M. A. Study of Religions Sandwich programme, (University of Ghana, Legon). 18 July, 2011

APPENDIX



The hermeneutical square structured as a hermeneutical circle (as presented by Oeming, p. 7)