

FROM LAW TO GRACE: AN INTERPRETATION OF PAUL'S GOSPEL IN
ROMANS 1- 8

By

Peter White, MDiv., MTh.

December, 2011

Introduction

Paul's writings are the major source of Christian theology both because of their volume and Paul's intensive theological writing style. Like a skilled lawyer, Apostle Paul presented the case for the gospel clearly and forthrightly in his letter to the believers in Rome. Though Paul had heard of the church at Rome, he had never been there. In spite of this barrier; Paul felt a bond with these believers in Rome. When Paul visited Corinth at the end of his missionary journey (Acts 20: 2 -3), he wrote the book of Romans as a letter of self introduction to Christians in Rome, whom he hoped to visit soon (Rom 1:13; 15:23 – 24)¹ This letter to the Romans was probably written around A.D. 57-58 .²

The purpose of this paper is to present Paul's idea on the law and grace as they pertain to salvation and the relevance of this interpretation for today.

Paul's idea on the law and grace as they pertain to salvation

In Roman 1, Paul stated how sinful mankind is and separate from God. God therefore gave the Law so that it may serve as a guiding principle for people.

The law is one of the primary concepts in the Bible. However, the specific translation of the term law is varied. It may be used for a commandment, a word, a decree, a judgment, a custom, or a prohibition. The first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) are known as books of the Law because they are based on the commandments which God revealed to Moses³. The Hebrew term most frequently translated 'law' in the Old Testament is 'Torah'. The central idea

¹ Roger Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, Theological Educational Fund Study Guide 11, (Southampton, The Camelot Press Ltd, 1975), p.2

² Andrew Wommack Ministries, *Introduction To The Book Of Romans*, <http://www.awmi.net/bible/rom> [Accessed 22 July 2011]

³ Roger Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, Theological Educational Fund Study Guide 11, (Southampton, The Camelot Press Ltd, 1975), p.210

of 'Torah' is instruction received from a superior authority (God) on how to live. Torah in the Old Testament came to mean the way of life for faithful Israelites⁴.

Paul's idea towards the Mosaic Law can be summarized in the following manner. First of all, he recognized that the Law had been given for a good purpose; it was holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12, 14). The demands of the Law were not evil, but had the effect of pointing out the sin of human beings (Rom. 7:7).⁵ Because of man's sinfulness, the Law became a curse instead of a blessing (Gal. 3:10-13). Second, Paul believed the Law was given for a good purpose, but it could not save (Rom. 3:20). If persons were to become children of God, it would be by means other than keeping the Law. The only means then that could pave way for people to reconcile with God was through atonement⁶. The third idea discovered in Paul's writing is that since the law could not lead to salvation, Christ freed us from the requirements of the Law by His death and resurrection. His death came to replace the law and the necessity of atonement (Rom. 8:3 - 4). Therefore, Christ became the end of the Law (Rom. 10:4), and it is faith that saves and not Law (Eph. 2:8-9). Paul, like Jesus, saw the Law fulfilled in the command to love (Rom. 13:8). Only with the aid of the Spirit of God can one meet the requirement to love which fulfills the Law (Rom. 8). Paul saw the Law as no longer to be viewed legalistically (Rom. 8:3; 13:8-10)⁷ Grace therefore came to replace the power of the law.

As stated by Von Rad, 'Every generation has the task to listen to what the Old book has to say to it in the needs of their time', Apostle Paul saw the needs of his time to be 'grace' not works or Law because of what Jesus Christ has done for mankind to replace the law. He

⁴ D. Glenn Saul, *Law, Ten Commandments, Torah*, Holman Bible Dictionary for windows version 1.0g, (Parson Technology 1994)

⁵ Charles B. Coursar, *The letters of Paul*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996), p.121

⁶ Hert Dominy, *Atonement*, Holman Bible Dictionary for windows version 1.0g, (Parson Technology 1994)

⁷ Ernest L. Martin, Ph.D, 1979 Edited by David Sielaff, August 2003, *The Principal Theology of the Book of Romans*, <http://www.askelm.com/doctrine/d030801.htm> [Accessed 22 July 2011]

therefore consulted the ‘Old Book’ to explain what it has to say to the prevailing issue of ‘law and grace.

According to John Polhill, ‘For Paul, grace is practically synonymous with the gospel. Grace brings salvation’⁸. As a Pharisee, he had sought to do that by fulfilling the divine law. Now he had come to see that it was not a matter of earning God's acceptance but rather of coming to accept God's acceptance of him through Jesus Christ. So, he came to see a sharp antithesis between law and grace. Law is the way of self-help, of earning one's own salvation. Grace is God's way of salvation, totally unearned (Rom. 3:24; 4:4; 11:6). Grace is appropriated by faith in what God has done in Christ (Rom. 4:16). God's grace comes to sinners, not to those who merit God's acceptance (Rom. 5:20-21). It is through Christ's atoning work on the cross that God's grace comes to mankind, setting us free from the bondage of sin (Rom. 3:24-31). Christ is the Representative who breaks the reign of sin and brings life and acceptance with God through divine grace (Rom. 5:15, 17). Roger is of the view that the word grace is used to express God's love or generosity seen in action on behalf of those who do not deserve it. Grace is seen in very part of God's saving activity in the gift of His Son (Rom 3: 24, 5: 15 – 21)⁹.

Paul therefore, presented the Good News to his audience in this manner; salvation is available to all, regardless of a person's identity, sin, or heritage. We are saved by *grace* (unearned, undeserved favor from God) through *faith* (complete trust) in Christ and his finished work. Through him we can stand before God justified, ‘not guilty’ (Rom. 3:21–5:21). With this foundation Paul moves directly into a discussion of the freedom that comes from being saved.

⁸ John Polhill, *Grace*, Holman Bible Dictionary for windows version 1.0g, (Parson Technology 1994)

⁹ Roger Bowen, *A Guide to Romans*, Theological Educational Fund Study Guide 11, (The Camelot Press Ltd, Southampton, 1975), p.209

That is freedom from the power of sin (Rom. 6:1-23), freedom from the domination of the law (Rom. 7:1-25), freedom to become like Christ and discover God's limitless love (Rom. 8:1-39)¹⁰.

Paul did not condemn anyone as he wrote to the church in Rome. He logically presented his case. In like manner, internally condemning a person in a hostile, self-righteous manner is different than identifying a person's need for the savior. It is only when a person realizes his lack of ability to earn God's favor, the depravity of his mind, heart, and will, and his need for a savior that he will be open to hear the gospel. We are to proclaim God's Grace and never our own achievements. We set ourselves up for a great failure when we begin to boast of our own accomplishments without pointing toward God as it was common among the Jewish community. They boast of their circumcision, fastening and the keeping of the Sabbath and its rituals. Paul in his presentation made it clear that we are what we are and we have what we have only through the grace of God.

Paul also tells us that circumcision is an outward identification of their relationship with God means nothing unless there is a true internal relationship. People today often believe that because they went through an outward ritual such as baptism, infant sprinkling and participated in communion, they are saved. Paul teaches that these things mean nothing to God unless one has a changed heart. Paul told the highly religious Jews that they are just as guilty as heathens and are still in need of a savior.

The relevance of this interpretation today

This form of interpretation is relevant today as long as people of every race, culture, and nationality are estranged from God because of sin. Many people get caught up in religion and can falsely believe that because they go to church, own a Bible, or even at times tell other people

¹⁰ Everett F. Harrison, *Romans* in The Expository Bible commentary with the New International version, Romans through to Galatians Volume 10, (Zondervan, Grand Rapid, Michigan, 1976), p.83

to be more religious that they earn points to gain God's favor because they are doing the things God apparently wants them to do. In order to address this issue in the light of salvation, the contemporary reader (interpreter) must engage with the subject matter which was informed by the people's (audience or the worlds of the reader) view on salvation through works as it was during the time of Paul. In this engagement, the 'text' plays a very important role because it is the text that throws light on the subject matter. The reader should not forget that every 'text' has an author and his worlds. For this reason, the presentation of the author of a text can either be influenced by his experiences and background or that of the author's world. Therefore care must be taken when applying that same text in contemporary times.

The above stated approach to Bible interpretation is named by Manfred Oeming as the application of the Hermeneutical square or Spiral. According to him, the hermeneutical square consists of four essential factors. These four factors are the author, the reader, the text and the subject matter. Each of these factors interrelates with the other. The author has the aim to communicate a message which may be an insight or experience from his world; the text contains what the author intends to communicate. The reader connects with the author and his world through 'the text and its world. The subject matter connects the author, the text and the reader in their separate worlds¹¹.

Applying the hermeneutical square in contemporary interpretation would help the interpreter not to interpret the Biblical 'text' literally but would rather put every single aspect of the function of the hermeneutical spiral into proper considering as the need arise. This would protect the interpreter not to impose things that were not written for contemporary generation but were written because of the issues prevailing as at the time the 'text' was written.

¹¹Manfred Oeming, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), pp. 7- 8

Using the Hermeneutical spiral would also help theologians to do responsible bible interpretation. This is to support Stone and Duke's concern raised in their reflection on the role of scripture as a context for theology. They stated that in people's desire to read and interpret the scripture, they should do their best to do a responsible scripture interpretation by applying a proper Biblical hermeneutics¹².

Conclusion

Paul's letter to the Romans moves with logical precision as the theme of 'the righteousness of God' is developed in its relevance for the Christians in Rome. The expertise of the inspired writer emerges clearly as Paul, although dealing with the problems of a specific group of Christians in Rome, unwaveringly elevated the discussion to a level that also addresses the needs of Christians in all places and at all times.

¹² Stone. Howard.W and Duke, O. James, *How to Think Theologically*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 44 - 47

Bibliography

Andrew Wommack Ministries, *Introduction To The Book Of Romans*, <http://www.awmi.net/bible/rom> [Accessed 22 July 2011]

Bowen, Roger, *A Guide to Romans*, Theological Educational Fund Study Guide 11, (Southampton, The Camelot Press Ltd, 1975), p.2

- p.210

- p.209

Coursar, Charles B, *The letters of Paul*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 75

- p.121

Dominy, Hert, *Atonement*, Holman Bible Dictionary f or windows version 1.0g, (Parson Technology 1994)

Glenn, D. Saul, *Law, Ten Commandments, Torah*, Holman Bible Dictionary f or windows version 1.0g, (Parson Technology 1994)

Harrison, Everett F, *Romans* in The Expository Bible commentary with the New International version, Romans through to Galatians Volume 10, (Zondervan, Grand Rapid, Michigan, 1976), p.83

Martin, Ernest L, (Ph.D), 1979 Edited by David Sielaff, August 2003, The Principal Theology of the Book of Romans, <http://www.askelm.com/doctrine/d030801.htm> [Accessed 22 July 2011]

Oeming, Manfred, *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), pp. 7- 8

Polhill, John, *Gace*, Holman Bible Dictionary f or windows version 1.0g, (Parson Technology 1994)

Stone. Howard.W and Duke, O. James, *How to Think Theologically*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 44 - 47

Author:

Peter White holds Master of Divinity and Master of Theology from Trinity Graduate School of Apologetics and Theology, India. He has also completed Master of Arts (Religions) at the University of Ghana, Legon, waiting for graduation. Peter is currently pursuing Doctor of Theology at Trinity Graduate School of Apologetics and Theology, India. Peter heads the Ghana branch of Trinity Graduate School of Apologetics and Theology.

