

## Our Questions and Theses<sup>1</sup>

1. *Evil*: One central topic is the understanding of evil. This question is as widely asked today as when Paul wrote. Its importance is not simply the satisfaction of human curiosity. It is also determinative of our multifold response to evil. Paul blamed the widespread evil of his world on idolatry. The idols he had in mind are not so important today. But to focus on idolatry—that is, giving ultimate commitment to creatures instead of to God—as the source of evil may be as illuminating today as it was to Paul’s first readers.

2. *Sexual Excess*: Paul saw the most vivid consequence of idolatry in sexual excess and the most disturbing form of that excess in same-sex sex. Paul’s statements have supported Christian condemnation of such sex throughout the centuries. Today, many Christians believe that much same-sex sex need not be any more connected to idolatry than is heterosexual sex, and that they are called to end blanket condemnation of either form of sex. This divergence of views is tearing apart the old-line churches. The relevance of Paul’s statements in Romans to the crisis in the old-line churches is obvious.

3. *Legalism*: Those today who abhor same-sex sex rarely connect it with idolatry. However, many feel revulsion to what they see as “unnatural” sex. Some people in Paul’s day would have called it “unclean.” Today, some people call that revulsion “homophobic.” Whether or not this religio-psychological feeling guides the hostile response, the opposition to same-sex sex typically expresses itself in prohibitions that are part of a legal code intended to govern life—at least in the church. Although Paul’s

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from John B. Cobb, Jr. and David J. Lull, *Romans*, Chalice Commentaries for Today (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).

treatment of idolatry and sexuality was brief, his discussion of the role of law for believers was very extensive. The role of such law in contemporary Protestantism is also quite extensive. If we place the question of same-sex sex in the context of this central theological question, the church may be able to come to authentically Pauline conclusions. In any case, quite apart from its relevance to disputes about same-sex sex, this issue of legalism is of enormous importance for old-line Protestant churches.

“Legalism” plays a large role in our exposition. We use the term to mean what Paul was opposing. This was far more than what is often meant by the term. Many whom we regard as legalistic typically define legalism as referring to others—namely, those who teach that people can save themselves through obedience to law. No doubt such an understanding of life exists, and Christians are right to make their rejection of those ideas explicit. But Paul did not have anything of this sort in mind when he declared the law irrelevant to salvation. The Jews with whom he disputed about the law held to no such view. For them salvation was God’s gift. Conformation to God’s will as expressed in the law was the appropriate human response to that gift. The dispute was about the desirability of this response. Paul and his adversaries certainly agreed that the one thing both desired was “righteousness.” The issue was whether obeying laws was the way to achieve that end. This question was of great importance, especially to Gentile followers of Jesus in Paul’s day. It is equally important today.

4. *Life in the Spirit*: Many Christians today, like Paul’s critics in his own time, suppose that living apart from moral principles, guidelines, patterns, rules, codes, or laws cannot lead to true righteousness. Paul was sure that it would if one were rightly related to Christ. For him this relation involved love of neighbor, which led to fulfilling the

purpose of the law. The new life in Christ was to be a life led by the Spirit.

Understanding, encouraging, and proclaiming this alternative are urgent tasks for the church today.

The lack of rules or laws does not mean that the issues that arise in Christian life and community are to be settled arbitrarily. On the contrary, they are to be thoughtfully considered in terms of what love requires. There is no certainty that such reflection will always lead to the right answer. But it remains of crucial importance that we take seriously Paul's reflections on such issues. They are excellent models for our reflections.

We emphasize equally that conforming to laws need not be legalistic. One may decide to conform for many good reasons. Paul often conformed and encouraged Jewish believers in Jesus to do so. To forbid conformation would be as legalistic as to demand it.

*5. Life of the Faithful:* Much of Paul's letter is devoted to discussing the nature of this law-free life informed by the Spirit. He struggled with the fact that, even as the faithful experienced the Spirit working in them, they still experienced "the flesh" resisting and opposing. Freedom from the law does not mean freedom from deep tension and struggle. We think it important to understand Paul's view of the life of the faithful and also to consider its relevance in the ongoing life of the church.

*6. Salvation:* Protestant churches today speak confusedly and confusingly on the fundamental question of what constitutes "salvation" and how it is attained. For the most part, Paul spoke of "salvation" as future. With respect to what already characterized the lives of the faithful, Paul spoke of their having been declared and made righteous and of the work of the Spirit within them. They anticipated being resurrected with Jesus and the final glorification entailed in that, along with the liberation of all creation. That was for

Paul “salvation” in the full sense, although he could use the word to refer to the whole process that moved to this final end.

7. *Jesus’ Death*: Closely related to the question about the nature of salvation is the question of what enables people to enter this path. Paul points to the death of Jesus as a crucial event in this regard. The most common explanation today is that Jesus’ death atoned for human sins and that the redemptive effects of this atonement can be claimed through faith. This doctrine is supposed to be Pauline. We will carefully examine the text to which appeal is made in support of this idea, and we will propose a different reading of Paul’s understanding of the efficacy of Jesus’ death.

8. *Justification by Faith Alone*: Luther famously thematized the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He derived it primarily from Romans. The questions of legalism and salvation are clearly bound up with this doctrine. But recognizing their importance leads us to ask again just what the words we translate in this way meant to Paul. The focus of the debate has been on “justification.” This idea is important to Paul and even more central to the Reformation, but the term has lost its currency in the contemporary church. We think we need to recover its natural and important usage and that close attention to Paul will enable us to do this. We will both explain the importance of forensic justification—that is, God’s judging us as righteous apart from actual righteousness on our part—and also argue that the contrast between this forensic justification and actually becoming righteous has been overdrawn in the tradition. Paul deals with this more wisely.

9. *Faith(fullness)*: This latter point depends on clarifying what Paul meant by *pistis*, the Greek word usually translated as “faith.” Our proposal is that it is usually better

translated as “faithfulness.” This makes clear that it was, for Paul, an encompassing way of being in the world and not simply an interior attitude of belief or trust to be contrasted with outward behavior.

When *pistis* is understood in this way, the old debate about whether justification is simply God’s acceptance of us in our unchanged sinfulness, or involves some transformation of our character, is largely superseded. Understanding *pistis* as faithfulness not only changes the understanding of the relation of *pistis* and works but also provides new ways of understanding the process of salvation.

10. *Jesus’ Faith(fullness) and Our Salvation*: Closely related to the way *pistis* is understood is the relation of *pistis* to Jesus. Just how Jesus functions as our savior is clearly a question in today’s churches. Especially those who do not accept a notion of substitutionary atonement are often at a loss to see how faith in Jesus can save. Many find Paul’s language perplexing. The main problem, we now believe, is that theologians and translators have supposed that Paul was not interested in Jesus’ own *pistis*. Therefore, where Paul spoke of Jesus’ *pistis*, they interpreted it as referring to the *pistis* of believers directed toward Jesus. If we recognize this error, and see that Paul was deeply interested in Jesus’ faithfulness to God, much makes sense that is otherwise obscure. The connection between Paul and Jesus, which today is again being presented as an irresolvable difference, becomes much closer, and the nature of Jesus’ saving work becomes more intelligible.

11. *Jesus and Paul*: This is closely related to the larger question of the relation of Paul and Jesus. Sometimes a contrast is drawn between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus. Certainly there is a difference. But, if Paul taught that we should

participate in Jesus' faithfulness and righteousness, the difference is not so sharp a contrast. Further, their understanding of God and of the centrality of love, their strong condemnation of judging others, even their understanding of the law have more resemblances than differences.

12. *Election and Predestination*: Luther and Calvin are among those who have derived from Romans a strong insistence on the primacy of God's action over human ones. Paul wrote that only *pistis* is required for human salvation, so that no one has a basis for boasting. The Reformers insisted that *pistis* also is God's gift and appealed to Paul's account of predestination to show that the saving action is entirely on God's side. This fit with the widespread doctrine of divine omnipotence. On the other hand, Christians have always held human beings responsible for their sins. We will inquire how Paul dealt with this nest of theological issues.

13. *God's Wrath and Judgment*: This is related to the role of God's wrath and judgment, which the first chapters of Romans emphasize. Today many Christians find this notion offensive. But Paul also was engaged in showing that wrath and judgment are not the deepest expressions of God's righteousness. In Jesus' faithfulness to death God's righteousness is manifest as love. In this context, how are we to understand the talk of God's wrath and judgment?

14. *Mutual Immanence*: Paul's language was often that of mutual immanence and participation. He often wrote of the mutual indwelling of the faithful and Christ or the Spirit, and of the participation of the faithful in Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet the way reality was conceptualized in the Greco-Roman and Medieval worlds forced thinkers to interpret what Paul wrote about Christ, his death and resurrection, and the Spirit in terms

of external relations—that is, as realities or events that do not, indeed cannot, effect any essential change in the faithful. Modern thought, with its understanding of reality as consisting of unrelated, static substances, only intensified this need. Partly as a result, many people are looking outside the old-line churches for a fuller experience of their relations with God and with one another and a more adequate interpretation of that experience than sophisticated thought has allowed them in the Western church.

Process or process-relational thought, to which the authors of this commentary subscribe, recovers the understanding of mutual immanence and participation in such a way that Paul's teaching can be taken much more straightforwardly. We believe that if the old-line churches appropriate Paul's understanding on these matters, they can respond far better to the spiritual hungers of our time. Furthermore, when Christians understand that, for Paul, faithfulness was participation in, or internalization of, Jesus' faithfulness even to death on the cross, we can see how *pistis* leads to righteousness/justification both as God's acceptance of sinners in their sinfulness and as their participation in the righteousness of Jesus.

15. *The Future*: For Paul, salvation in the full sense named a future state, rather than the present condition of the faithful. His thought is often described as “apocalyptic,” because Paul envisioned a future when God would transform the entire universe in a climactic, unilateral act as the consummation of God's salvation of the world. Today apocalypticism is once again widespread in popular Christianity, and affirmed by some old-line theologians as well. On the other hand, it seems incredible and unattractive to many Christians. Some of its expressions in proposals for public policy—with respect to Israel and to the environment, for example—are disturbing. We who write these words,

despite being drawn to Paul in many ways, are among those who find apocalyptic thinking incredible and unattractive.

Nevertheless, Paul's vision repays careful attention. It is quite different from most forms of apocalypticism. Paul certainly rejects any this-worldly understanding of salvation, but his view is far removed from millenarian speculations and ideas of individualistic rewards and punishments when we die.

16. *Christians and Jews*: We live in a world in which the relationship of Christians and Jews suffers from centuries of persecutions of Jews by Christians. Few things are more important than Christian repentance for the anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior in and of the church, and rejection of the theological teachings that have supported them. Although it would be ridiculous to charge Paul, the Jew, with being anti-Jewish, his formulations, especially in Romans, have encouraged later anti-Jewish teaching. On the other hand, the effort to counter that teaching has led to downplaying Paul's anti-legalistic emphasis. We hope to show that in interaction with Romans we can develop the grounds for a faithfulness to Paul's teaching that supports respect and appreciation for Jews and Judaism in their otherness and difference, while also appropriating Paul's clear rejection of all forms of legalism for followers of Jesus.

17. *Individualism and Salvation History*: Christianity has tended to view salvation in individualistic terms. This emphasis was intensified in evangelicalism, even when it accepted an apocalyptic understanding of salvation. The understanding that faith as an act of belief by an individual is the one requirement for salvation supports this individualism. It seems to make concern for broader historical events secondary or even unimportant, so that the quest for social justice, for example, becomes optional for the believer.

Paul, on the other hand, seems to have subsumed the destiny of individuals in a larger narrative of the history of salvation. That specific narrative may be inaccessible to people today. But the questions of how individual destiny is related to the wider course of historic events and of how this in turn relates to salvation are important today as well. They are important with respect to Christian-Jewish relations, but not only those. We will seek to learn what we can in dialogue with Paul's rich account of salvation history.

18. *Hierarchical Institutions*: Paul has been vilified for his acceptance of hierarchical institutions. Slavery and the patriarchal family are two examples. Yet there is much in his message that cuts against hierarchy. Romans is not the best source to study the role of women and slaves in his thought and practice, but the concluding chapter does provide indirect light on these matters. These are issues of such importance with respect to the present appropriation of Paul that we will learn what we can.

19. *Economic and Political Issues*: All the points emphasized thus far have dealt chiefly with the church and its beliefs. The text of Romans is explicitly addressed to questions of this sort. But we have become more aware of how our lives as Christians today are bound up with the global situation. And as this has forced itself on our attention, we have also become aware that Paul's text relates to the wider world in which he wrote. In the remainder of this section, we will consider the economic and political issues that we can engage in dialog with Paul.