

Romans 1:1-17

There's no place to start like the very beginning because it is a very good place to start. The beginning of Romans is a wonderful place to start. It's a wonderful place to start because in the first 17 verses we are introduced to the first three elements of an ancient letter, we get to explore the difference between exegesis and hermeneutics, and we have examples of the use of audience conventions. These three opportunities provide a chance to reinforce those essential matters necessary to understanding this letter that Paul wrote in the year 58 from the city of Corinth.

Salutation

The first part of an ancient letter is the salutation, as you may recall. There are three parts to a salutation: the sender, the recipient, and the greeting. Understanding that these are three crucial elements helps us determine the beginning and the end of the salutation segment of an ancient letter. Paul's letter to the Romans is not only lengthy in its entire content but provides a lengthy salutation when compared to the salutations in Paul's other letters. For instance, in 1 Corinthians the salutation consists of three verses, 2 Corinthians consists of two verses, while 1 Thessalonians records the entire salutation in a single verse. The salutation in Romans is found in verses 1-7. Because these verses include items that do not need to be part of an ancient letter's salutation we can learn something about Paul and this letter. These 'unnecessary' items provide clues to the topics covered in the third element of an ancient letter, the body, as Paul begins writing and addressing his audience.

Sender

The first part of an ancient salutation is the sender. Verse one identifies the sender as Paul, a bondservant of Christ Jesus, who is called as an apostle. These two

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elements, a bondservant and an apostle, identify Paul's view of both his status and his role in proclaiming what he calls the gospel of God for which he is set apart. These two terms introduce the concepts of audience convention and exegesis versus hermeneutics.

Audience conventions, as you may recall, refer to those concepts Paul does not need to explain because they are self-explanatory to his audience. He does not take time to explain to the Romans what he means by saying he is a bondservant of Christ Jesus as the Romans would be very familiar with the role and duties of a bondservant. Neither does he explain what it means to be an apostle for the same reason. However in terms of exegesis and hermeneutics it is important for us to understand today what these terms might mean. Without such knowledge we might, based on our own audience conventions, jump to the conclusion that the term bondservant means Paul sold himself into the service of Jesus until such a time as he can repay his debts. This understanding would be based on the concept of a bondservant from the 17th and 18th centuries in British and American culture. By the term apostle, we may understand that Paul views himself among the elite of those followers of Jesus, because we reserve the term apostle for those 12 disciples of Jesus and a very select group of others in the first century.

The question arises, "is a 21st century audience convention equivalent to a first century audience convention?" The answer is, not really. In the classical world of the first century the term Paul uses for bondservant, *doulos*, refers to one who is born as a slave. We can understand very quickly the 21st century and first century audiences understand this term differently. In a common Greek English lexicon the term, *doulos*,

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references simply being a slave. We can understand by the very first few words of Paul's letter to the Romans, indeed the first two words of Paul's letter to the Romans, that we've entered a world that may be more complex than we realized at first. This book is not designed or intended to answer all these questions but to raise them in sufficient quantity that we begin to change how we think about reading Paul's letter to the Romans while at the same time providing enough answers that we don't get bogged down in the minutia that we do not yet understand.

So in the salutation we see that Paul has identified himself briefly yet specifically to his audience. The recipient of the letter is not identified until verse 7. Between verse 2 and verse 6 Paul includes information that would not normally be provided in a salutation as we could see by examining the examples of his other letters presented above. We'll get to the recipient in verse 7 briefly but for now we want to explore what Paul is saying in verses 2-6 and how that information could be looked at exegetically to help us understand this letter. Verse 1 ends by Paul saying that he was "set apart for the gospel of God," while verse 2 begins with "which" indicating that what he is about to say is related to some element of his previous selection. We know from the Greek grammar that what he is talking about in verses 2-6 refers specifically to the term gospel. So Paul now indicates that this gospel was a) promised by God's prophets, b) promised in the Scripture, and c) concerns the Son of God. Paul is indicating to his readers that what he is about to write is not really all that new. The proclamation that he has been set apart, the basic meaning for the word apostle, to announce has to do with the same message that God has been declaring for centuries of Jewish history. As we read through Paul's letter and progress through his argument will find him returning

again and again to this basic statement, essentially that he is not proclaiming anything new but simply exclaiming what God's prophets already proclaimed.

The second thing we know is that this gospel is about Jesus. The next several phrases identify Jesus as a particularly unique individual within history. He is declared to be a descendent of David, this phrase basically means God's anointed Messiah. Jesus is declared to be the Son of God, not only in position but also in power because Jesus was resurrected. Here we have two specific descriptions of Jesus which differ in meaning from the first century to the 21st century. An audience sensitive to Jewish history found in the Old Testament would understand the phrase "descendent of David." But unless that same audience is familiar with ancient Roman history they would not understand the impact and meaning behind the phrase "Son of God" because that term was used to describe the Roman Emperor since the time of Augustus who died 44 years before Paul wrote this letter. This term had been applied to three emperors since then, Tiberius, Caligula, and the current Emperor Claudius. The statement Paul is making has a distinct meaning in the first century that we would not comprehend in the 21st century, without asking questions that have to do with exegesis. This good news that Paul has been set apart to proclaim and that has been proclaimed by God's prophets of old is about one who will rule the world as it is now known.

This brief example of looking at the audience convention and what the exegetical meaning of a word may be amplifies the importance of historical study to fully understanding what the Scripture says. The good news, at least for you the reader, is that this historical study is really a lifelong journey. As one continues to learn, as one continues to ask questions, more and more details will be understood until your

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audience convention approximates that of the first century audience. The bad news is we will never fully recover this first century audience convention, we can only approximate it. Probably most important at this point in our study of Paul's letter to the Romans is to understand that as we read the text there will be many unanswered questions. There will be many details that must be set aside temporarily so that we may have a full understanding of what Paul is trying to say in this letter. If we wish to bog down and answer every detail as it arises then we will face the risk of missing the beauty of the forest in the face of single saplings.

Having identified the gospel and some terms regarding Jesus Paul makes a very beautiful statement, as he states "through Jesus we have received" identifying that his view of this proclamation of the gospel of God is not the singular, "I". Instead, this proclamation is done by a multitude of people. The other element that is found in 1:5 has to do with one of those other topics of the first chapter, inclusion. Paul says in verse 5, "to bring about the obedience of faith". If one turns briefly to Romans 16:26 Paul makes the following statement, "leading to obedience of faith." Furthermore, 16:25-27 includes the following words: Gospel, Jesus, Scripture, and prophets, all terms we find in the salutation section of Romans. This identification of inclusion helps the knowing reader to understand that between chapter 1:5 and 16:26 Paul is talking about the gospel that God promised through his prophets and is now bringing about. This gospel is about Jesus who will rule both the Jews as descendent of David and the Gentiles as the son of God.

Since it takes Paul 16 chapters to talk about the details of this proclamation we can understand that this brief foray into inclusion only helps wipe the steam from the

mirror so we might get a better glance at what lies behind the steam. This clarification is made possible simply because we understand the genre of an ancient letter and that it should contain a salutation, which includes on a normal basis only the sender, the recipient, and a greeting. By seeing the salutation as one part of the letter we can see what is added, and thus note a clue is provided for us as the reader into what this following text will provide us. Just as a mystery novel helps us to anticipate that it is likely someone will die and at the very end the detective will solve the mystery, understanding an ancient letter helps to anticipate what we will experience in the words to follow.

Recipients

The next element of the ancient salutation is the recipients, which we noted do not appear until Romans 1:7. Paul addresses all those beloved of God living in Rome. We will find out when we get to chapter 16 that there are an estimated five distinct congregations whom Paul is addressing. The audience of this particular epistle is not the church at Rome but more clearly the churches in Rome with no single congregation selected for special attention. The salutation concludes with a typical greeting of Paul: Grace and peace to you. The use of the term grace in this instance is an altered form of the typical Greek greeting, *xairein*, and emphasizes that the grace is from God as well as from Jesus Christ. The peace greeting is a typical Jewish greeting from the Hebrew word, *shalom*. It typically refers to wholeness, wellness, or even completeness as one is united with God in God's desired covenant relationship. In this brief section of verses 1-7 we find the typical Pauline inclusion in that in verse 1 he is set apart for the gospel of God, i.e. the proclamation of God, and at the end he greets them with the blessing of

grace and peace from this same God, perhaps indicating that this grace and peace is part of the "gospel." He also represents for the third time in these short verses the phrase of Jesus Christ who is on two occasions addressed as Lord. These thematic repetitions help us understand the central topic of this letter without going into specific details: Paul is writing about Jesus because that is God's message.

Prayer/Thanksgiving

The next element of the ancient letter genre is the prayer or thanksgiving. In this particular case Paul begins with a thanksgiving and does not pray for them until verse 10. He gives thanks that their faith is being proclaimed, indicating that Paul has heard from various sources about the audience to whom he addresses this letter and their particular faith in Jesus. This is essential to understand because one proposed or perhaps supposed reading of this letter is that Paul is writing to these people in Rome to convert them to Christianity. Such an understanding simply does not stand up to the test of the text. Not only does Paul give thanks to them and pray for them, there is also what might be understood as a mutual admiration society that Paul describes. He wants to see them so that he can help them and they can help him, each one helping one another by the other's faith, the item that he gives thanks for in verse 8. The final part of this brief section tells us that Paul has not yet been to Rome, but going to Rome has been part of his bucket list for some time yet he has been prevented from visiting Rome. This information helps us understand that one of the purposes behind this letter is to inform the churches of Rome of his intent and desire to visit them.

When we look at the two motivations for Paul writing the letter discussed in the previous chapter, Paul writes because there is a crisis or he writes to tell them of his

intentions, we can see that there is no real crisis at this point to which Paul refers. In fact, the other place in the New Testament where Paul addresses the faith being heard is in 1 Thessalonians. First Thessalonians is a letter where the issue is their lack of understanding as to what will happen now that someone has died in their congregation. This letter is perhaps the earliest written by Paul and dates to around the year 50, also being written from the city of Corinth. A brief note at this point, should we expect based on our examination of 1:5 and 16:26 that later in the letter there will be a section which acts as the closing parentheses to the prayer/thanksgiving segment of this letter?

In the first 15 verses of this letter we have seen the first two elements of the genre of an ancient letter, the salutation and the prayer/thanksgiving. With verse 16 and continuing on until 11:33 we have the third element. The body section of the letter is where we find the main argument/discussion of the author. Because the body extends for such a lengthy time we will not be returning to the concept of the genre of an ancient letter until we approach chapter 12. We will however, speak frequently as a reminder that we are working our way through the body of the letter.

Thesis

If we take a moment to recall the rhetoric of the ancient world, specifically the diatribe rhetoric of the ancient Greco-Roman world we will recall that a diatribe begins by stating its thesis. Critical to understanding Paul's letter to the Romans is identifying this thesis. The thesis is found in 1:16 – 17. Picking up on the theme in verse 15 of speaking the gospel to those in Rome, Paul says "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." This serves as the basis of his thesis. He goes on to discuss exactly what that might entail and to

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whom it is proclaimed. The who is to Jews first and then to the Greeks and what it might entail is the righteousness of God.

What we understand about the gospel in the thesis at this point is that Paul is a) unashamed, b) the gospel is power, C) it has to do with salvation or deliverance, D) it is revealed through faith, and E) it discusses righteousness. If this truly is the thesis of Paul's letter then we might anticipate that the topics mentioned in these two verses are found at various points throughout the remainder of the body of the letter. Whether they are or not is not necessarily to be questioned: what should be questioned is whether you as the reader hears these words throughout the rest of the body of the letter. Just as an indicator that they are repeated the word "power" occurs another five times after verse 16, three of those in the body of the letter in the NAS 95 translation. In the Greek text the word translated as power, *dunamis*, appears three times. Salvation in the Greek does not occur again until chapters 10 and 11 where it occurs three times. So what word is repeated enough to consider it to be the theme of Paul's letter? Is it faith or is it righteousness? Once again in the NAS 95 translation faith occurs in at least 20 verses within the body of the letter. Righteousness, on the other hand, occurs in at least 25 verses within the same segment of the letter. So the statement that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel is highlighted by his discussion of the gospel in verse 17 where he says "in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed" helps us to understand that what Paul wishes to talk about in this letter to the Romans is his viewpoint on the righteousness of God. The high point of this discussion comes in chapters 4-6 where various forms of the word "righteousness" appear with the highest frequency.

The first 17 verses of this letter help us to understand various things that we

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highlighted in the first chapter: exegesis, hermeneutics, genre, rhetoric, and audience conventions. As we progress through the rest of this monumental writing of Christian history we will continue to examine the words on the page through these various lenses. It will also be useful if we provide short outlines of the argument in order to understand the ebb and flow of Paul's discussion. Currently, we can provide a brief outline of the salutation and prayer/thanksgiving segments. The salutation is found in 1:1 – 7, while the prayer/thanksgiving is found in 1:8 – 15. Due to the extreme length of the body we will need to break it down into smaller segments that will help us understand Paul's discussion and thought process. This will begin in the next chapter as we move towards the second element of a diatribe rhetoric; the antithesis.