

## "A SUMMARY OF PAUL'S ARGUMENT"

(Romans)

Douglas Moo

Since the paragraph both completes the body of the letter that began in 1:18 and restates one of the letters key themes, this is an appropriate place for some summary remarks about Paul's argument as a whole.

We must return one last time to one of the key issues in the modern interpretation of Romans: the tension between the personal focus and the community focus. Both are clearly present in Romans, both, Paul makes clear, are intrinsic to the gospel. Through the good news of Jesus Christ, God is both transforming individuals and forming a community.

The passage before us focuses on the latter, and many modern interpreters think this focus reflects Paul's real concern in the letter. I do not totally agree. I think Paul focuses on the community in 15:7-13 because these verses conclude a section (14:1-15:13) that is about the community. But however we decide this matter, we must read Romans in such a way that we focus on both transformation of the individual and formation of the community.

Interpreters in the past were sometimes guilty of seeing in Romans only the former, so that all they talked about were justification by faith, the sanctification of the believer, and one's duties as a believer. But some contemporary interpreters make the opposite mistake: Reading Romans in a culture obsessed with community and the need for reconciliation among races, ethnic groups, and nations, they emphasize only how we as God's people should function as a single, united body. Justification by faith and similar themes become minimized or reinterpreted.

We must keep things in balance. The heart of the gospel is the message of God's justifying work in Christ. The essential human problem is estrangement from God. Only when this estrangement is overcome and a person is reconciled to God by faith can we speak about God's good news having done its work. Our preaching and teaching must therefore confront people with sin and offer them redemption in Christ.

But God also wants to form people transformed by the gospel into communities that reflect the values of the gospel. Vertical reconciliation with God must lead to horizontal reconciliation with one another. Faithfulness to the gospel demands that any of us involved in ministry should seek to maintain a balance between the two perspectives. Some pastors are marvelous proclaimers of the gospel of individual transformation. They are passionate to save souls, rescuing people lost in sin and destined for hell. I commend their passion. But they need also to make clear—as Paul does in Romans—that the gospel not only rescues people from hell but also transforms whole persons, bringing



reconciliation with other people as well as with God.

But the opposite problem also exists: pastors who think that "soul-saving" is too old-fashioned and spend all their time talking about racial reconciliation, mending marriages, restoring families, and the like. God, of course, wants to do these things too. But he has chosen the way of individual transformation through a new relationship with God as the means. Focusing on horizontal reconciliation without encouraging vertical reconciliation first is to put the cart before the horse.

At Rome in Paul's day, mutual distrust between Jews and Gentiles threatened the unity of the church. Naturally, therefore, Paul addresses these groups. The tension between Jew and Gentile is in some ways a unique one, rooted in God's revelatory focus in the Old Testament on Jews. But Paul's vision ultimately transcends the Jewish-Gentile debate. God wants his church to be a place that transcends any cultural, racial, or ethnic division in a unity based on the gospel.

That vision is far from being a reality. In too many ways, our praise of God is still muted by the divisions among us. Some of those divisions are based on theology. I know of anti-charismatic churches that refuse to join with charismatic churches in occasional worship services. On the other side, I have been treated as a second-class Christian (if Christian at all) in charismatic churches. Such issues of theology create the most difficult divisions to overcome.

Some theological issues, as we have argued earlier, are worth separating over. But if some churches err in including too many within the scope of those whom God has accepted, I think that many more have drawn those lines far too narrowly. We need to be willing to put our own cherished ecclesiological traditions to the test of Scripture. Even when we think Scripture validates them, we may have to admit that they are not as clear as we think or as important as we make them to be. Theological differences need not mean division in worship and service.

Race, of course, is another serious cause of disunity in the church. Churches in certain cultural contexts have been able to incorporate blacks and whites in a single congregation. But such integrated churches are rare. The church I attend is 95 percent white. I have a number of black Christian friends; they tell me that their churches are 95 percent black. There are many reasons, of course, for such segregation in our churches, and not all the reasons are bad ones. But I have to think that my own understanding of the faith and the quality of corporate worship is hampered by too homogenous a racial mix.

My church and churches like mine need to take a hard look at the underlying attitudes that foster this segregation. I still hear white Christians doing a lot of racial stereotyping, telling racial jokes, and so forth. By tolerating this kind of talk, we will not root out sinful attitudes that stand in the way of genuine racial harmony, mutual acceptance, and unified praise of God.