

New Testament Literature - New and Old Paul and Introduction to the Book of Romans

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Abstract

In Lecture 14 of New Testament Literature, Dr. Dave Mathewson explores the nature of Paul's epistles as occasional letters written to specific historical situations rather than systematic theology textbooks. He re-evaluates Paul's background, challenging the traditional view of a guilt-ridden Pharisee by emphasizing Paul's self-professed confidence in his Jewish identity prior to his Damascus Road encounter. Dr. Mathewson then analyzes the Book of Romans, contrasting Martin Luther's traditional view—focused on Paul combating legalism and individual justification—with the New Perspective on Paul, which highlights issues of Jewish exclusivism and Gentile inclusion. Ultimately, he posits that Romans serves missional, apologetic, and pastoral purposes, demonstrating that through faith in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles are unified as the equal people of God.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Pauline Epistles

- A. Transition from the Book of Acts to Paul's letters
 - 1. Acts establishes Paul as a dominant figure in early Christianity
 - 2. Epistles follow canonical order in the New Testament, not chronological order
- B. The Occasional Nature of Paul's Letters
 - 1. Written in response to specific local church situations and crises
 - 2. Letters do not represent a complete, systematic theology textbook
 - 3. Analogies for interpreting occasional letters
 - a. Listening to one end of a phone conversation
 - b. Reading someone else's mail
 - 4. Reconstructing the plausible context to properly interpret the text
- C. Scope and Circulation of the Epistles
 - 1. Context-specific address vs. intended broader circulation (e.g., Colossians)
 - 2. Early collection and circulation of Paul's letters by the end of the 1st century (2 Peter reference)

II. Background and Profile of the Apostle Paul

- A. Dual Citizenship and Cultural Background

1. Devout Jew and Pharisee with zealot tendencies
2. Former violent persecutor of the early church

B. Critique of the Traditional View of Paul

1. Traditional view: Guilt-ridden Pharisee with an introspective conscience frustrated by the law
2. Autobiographical evidence (Galatians 1; Philippians 3)
 - a. Advanced beyond peers in ancestral traditions
 - b. Blameless with respect to legal righteousness
 - c. Completely confident in his Jewish standing prior to Christ

C. The Damascus Road Encounter (Acts 9)

1. Both a spiritual conversion and a divine commissioning
2. Conversion: Re-orienting life around Jesus as the Messiah
3. Commissioning: Calling to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles

III. Introduction to the Book of Romans

A. Historical Context and Impact

1. Profound impact on Church history (e.g., Augustine, Martin Luther, Karl Barth)
2. Written by Paul, transcribed by an amanuensis (Tertius, Romans 16:22)

B. Threefold Purpose of Romans

1. Missional purpose: Securing Rome as a financial and prayer support base for mission to Spain
2. Apologetic purpose: Explaining and defending the gospel message
3. Pastoral purpose: Addressing disunity between Jewish and Gentile believers
 - a. Background: Edict of Emperor Claudius (49 AD) expelling Jews from Rome
 - b. Rescinding of edict upon Claudius's death (54 AD) and return of Jewish Christians
 - c. Resulting tension over Gentile-dominant church leadership and Jewish legal identity

IV. Major Interpretive Approaches: The Old vs. New Perspective on Paul

A. The Traditional ("Old") Perspective (Martin Luther)

1. Core Problem: Human inability to keep the law due to sin
2. Key Conflict: Faith in Christ vs. legalism (earning salvation by good works)
3. Core Question: How is an individual sinner made right before a holy God?
4. Character: Individualistic and vertical focus

B. The Challenge and the "New Perspective on Paul" (E.P. Sanders and James Dunn)

1. E.P. Sanders and "Covenantal Nomism"
 - a. 1st-century Judaism was not legalistic; salvation was understood as initiated by God's grace
 - b. Law-keeping ("nomism") functioned to maintain covenantal standing, not earn entry
 - c. The law ceased to define God's people after the coming of Christ
2. James Dunn and "Nationalism / Jewish Exclusivism"

- a. "Works of the law" refer to Jewish identity markers/badges (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath)
 - b. Key Conflict: Faith in Christ vs. Jewish nationalism/exclusivism
 - c. Core Question: How do Jews and Gentiles relate as the unified people of God?
 - d. Character: Communal and horizontal focus
- C. Integrative Solution (Dr. Dave Mathewson)
- 1. Synthetic approach including both perspectives
 - 2. Affirmation of the New Perspective: Addressing Jewish exclusivism and Gentile inclusion
 - 3. Continuity with the Traditional View: Underlying human sinfulness and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ