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**Paul's Accusers in  
Romans 3:8 and 6:1**

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**Introduction**

Scholars find themselves in a dilemma as to why Paul wrote his great letter to the church at Rome. Until recently Romans has been understood to be a theological treatise or a compendium of the Christian religion. Yet in 1836 F. C. Baur emphasized the importance of understanding the historical situation of the primitive churches. This type of investigation was needed because it would bring to greater light the specific needs of early Christian communities. Baur hoped that focusing on the specific needs of a particular church would help determine the purpose of any letter(s) written to it. Nevertheless, Karl Donfried points out that with respect to Paul's letter to the Romans, Baur's insights have been overlooked by most scholars.<sup>1</sup> But the current emphasis in New Testament studies on the importance of Baur's conclusions has produced an abundance of literature, especially on the letters of Paul. A particularly interesting part of this literature is the debate centering on Paul's letter to the Romans.

Basic to this debate is the question, 'To whom did Paul write Romans?' A variety of answers are given to this question. For example, 'He wrote the letter for: (1). himself; (2). Jerusalem; (3). the Church in general; (4). Rome and Ephesus; (5). Rome.' These answers seem to fall in two major categories. First, the letter was written to a general audience. Second, it was addressed specifically to the church at Rome. The first category of answers is known as the general-audience theory. In support of this idea we find T. W. Manson, Günther Bornkamm, Willi Marxsen, Jacob Jervell and Franz Leenhardt. More recently John Drane places an

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<sup>1</sup> Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977). 10.

emphasis on the idea that Paul's personal situation was the occasion for the letter's general address. The other category is called the specific-audience theory. Such scholars as Harry Gamble, Paul Minear, Ernst Käsemann, Karl Donfried, and W. S. Campbell are in agreement here. At present the majority of scholars accept the general theory, but the specific address theory is rapidly gaining ground.<sup>2</sup>

This essay takes the position that the letter to the Romans was written to address a specific set of circumstances in the Roman church. Two instances where the apostle seems to be arguing in a specific way can be found in Rom. 3:8 and 6:1. What Paul is contradicting, respectively, is a Judaizing accusation (3:8) and a Gentile-antinomian misinterpretation (6:1) of his doctrine of grace: He was accused of saying that evil should be done that good may come (3:8), or that grace may abound (6:1). A recent article by W. S. Campbell suggests that Christian Gentile-antinomians are in focus in both 3:8 and 6:1.<sup>3</sup> My purpose is to show that the texts suggest we are dealing with two distinct groups. But before we move to a discussion of this question we will look at the background to Romans.

### Background

The letter was probably written from Corinth during the Winter of AD 58.<sup>4</sup> Paul was at the crossroads of his career. His ministry to the East was over (Rom. 15:23). Now he was looking to the West. Free, and hoping to break new ground, he was ready to take the gospel to Spain (verse 24). But first he must visit Rome (verse 28).

<sup>2</sup> T. W. Manson, 'St. Paul's Letter to the Romans—and Others', *Romans Debate* (from now on R-D), ed., Karl P. Donfried, 1–16; Günther Bornkamm, 'Paul's Last Will and Testament', R-D, 17–31; Willi Marxsen, *New Testament Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); Jacob Jervell, 'The Letter to Jerusalem', R-D, 61–74; Franz Leenhardt, *Romans*, trnsl., H. Knight (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 14ff.; John Drane, 'Why did Paul write Romans?' *Pauline Studies*, eds., Donald Hagner and Murray Harris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 208–277. The scholars above favour the general-audience theory. The following scholars favour the specific-audience theory: Harry Gamble, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 8; Ernst Käseman, *Romans*, trnsl., Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 401; Karl P. Donfried, 'False Presuppositions', R-D, 120–148; W. S. Campbell, 'Why did Paul write Romans?' *Expository Times*, 85 (1974), 264–269.

<sup>3</sup> W. S. Campbell, 'Romans 3 as the Structural Centre of the Letter', *Novum Testamentum*, 23 (January, 1981), 31, n. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 190.

He had never visited the church at Rome (Rom. 1:13). Yet he refers in the letter to their strong faith in the Lord (1:6–8; 15:14f.). This reference to their strong faith is consistent with Paul's addressing the Roman Christians as if they were truly united, even though they may have been separated into conflicting house-churches.<sup>5</sup>

One urgent task remained before Paul could set his face toward Rome. He must see to it that the collection, gathered from the Gentile churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem, would be delivered safely.<sup>6</sup> Mentioned in Rom. 15:30f.; 1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Cor. 9:3f., the offering was a matter to which he devoted particular attention in the closing years of his ministry to the East.

From Corinth he needed to carry the collection to Jerusalem before going on to Rome, then Spain. Issues pertinent to all four locations helped shape the content of the letter. At Corinth, Paul was reminded of class prejudice which still abounded in the Church of Christ (1 Cor. 11:17–34). With Jerusalem surfaced the necessity of rooting the Church family on its Old Testament foundation (Rom. 9–11). Spain reminded Paul of the Great Commission (1:14–17). The specific situation of the church at Rome provided a classic focal point for the convergence of issues that arose out of his missionary experience.

### Romans 3:8 and 6:1: One Party?

When speaking of a specific situation at Rome, caution needs to be taken in ascribing any amount of precision as to how many groups of 'weak' and 'strong' were at Rome. But there does appear to be conflict between at least two groups. These two groups come into focus in Rom. 3:8 and 6:1. In 3:8 we have to do with certain Judaizers who accuse Paul of saying 'Let us do evil that good may come.' In 6:1 we encounter the misinterpretation of Paul's doctrine in real life. These are Gentile-Christian antinomians who misunderstood Paul's doctrine of grace and called Paul the champion of their 'free' lifestyle. But W. S. Campbell says: 'According to 3:8 some people slanderously report that Paul preaches the doing of evil that good may ensue and grace abound. In 6:1f. Paul repudiates such suggestions with a strongly ethically oriented exposition

<sup>5</sup> Some scholars do not believe that there was a church at Rome when Paul wrote the letter. Hans-Werner Bartsch, for one, can only refer to the church at Rome as 'Roman Christianity'. He points to the absence of the term *ekklesia* from the prescript and body of Romans. See, Hans-Werner Bartsch, 'The Concept of Faith in Paul's Letter to the Romans', *Biblical Research*, 13 (1968), 44.

<sup>6</sup> Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy* (Naperville: Allenson, 1966).

of the Christian's union with Christ's death and resurrection in baptism<sup>60</sup> . . . It is significant that in 6:3f. Paul addresses directly the Roman Christians using the second person plural and in 6:11–13 he becomes even more precise in his use of the imperative. This is clear proof that the suggestion—that continuing in sin in order that grace may abound represents a Jewish parody of Paul's gospel—is a mistaken opinion. Paul is addressing baptized Christians and exhorting and commanding them not to live in antinomian existence. This suggests that those who slanderously reported Paul in 3:8 may be Gentile Christians who mistakenly attributed their own antinomianism to Paul's gospel of grace<sup>62,7</sup>.

Is Campbell correct in concluding that we are dealing with mistaken Gentile-Christian antinomians in Rom. 3:8? For an answer to this question we must look at a particular verb in 3:8. That verb is βλασφημούμεθα. The verb βλασφημέω means to injure the reputation of someone.<sup>8</sup> βλασφημούμεθα is better understood when we see how Paul uses the same term in another similar context, 1 Cor. 10:30: 'If we partake with thankfulness, *why am I denounced* because of that for which I give thanks?' (RSV is used throughout). Paul is being viciously denounced, or literally, 'I am evil spoken of', βλασφημούμαι. The only difference between the two verbs is their number. But the meaning is the same. In both places, Paul was being maliciously and intentionally defamed. Therefore, it is not likely that the term refers to Gentile-Christian antinomians. These Gentiles would not defame their own champion. Therefore, when Paul used βλασφημέω in Rom. 3:8, we would expect that the group in question was diametrically opposed to Paul and maliciously denounced him to the Roman church. The proper understanding of βλασφημέω, therefore, suggests that we cannot agree with Campbell that the group in focus in 3:8 was composed of Gentile-Christian antinomians.

### Paul's Answer to the Judaizers

Consequently we must disagree with Campbell on another and

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, 'Structural Centre', 36. Campbell cites W. Lütgert, 'Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem', BFChTh, 17 (2), (Gütersloh, 1913), 76–79. Lütgert, Campbell states, maintains that Paul is not protesting in self-defense against Jews or Jewish-Christians.

<sup>8</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1973), s.v. βλασφημέω; Liddell and Scott, Jones and McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), s.v. βλασφημέω.

related point,<sup>9</sup> that Paul does not answer the accusation of Rom. 3:8 until 6:1–11. Our suggestion is that the balance of 3, after 3:8, is an (!) answer to the Judaizers' accusation of Paul, but not the complete answer. The answer is not completed until 6:1–11 where Paul in a climactic way deals with both Judaizers and antinomians. In 3 Paul argues against the Judaizers' accusation that he says, 'Let us do evil that good may come.' He argues by comparing a possible consequence (this consequence will be discussed later) of this idea with his teaching on the righteousness of God.

Paul uses terms in his comparison that point to opponents and readers with a strong Old Testament background. He appeals to the Law and the Prophets (Rom. 3:10–20) in order to show that belief in the Lord Jesus Christ is the appropriate response to the Righteousness of God. Such terms appear as ἀπολυτρόσεως (verse 24), and ἱλαστήριον (verse 25). Terms like these are best understood in the context of the sacrificial language of the Old Testament. The Law and the Prophets themselves direct one to Christ's propitiatory work at Calvary. Thus, for Paul, the Law is very much a part of God's saving act in history and as such the Law cannot be brushed aside. Unfortunately, those who accused Paul of advocating, 'Let us do evil . . .' had the antinomians of Rome (6:1) to point to as the outcome of (the distortion of) Paul's doctrine of grace.

We will now look at the accusation of Rom. 3:8 and see how it relates to its immediate context. Verse 8 is related inseparably to verses 5 and 7: (1). verse 5; 'But if our *wickedness serves to show the Justice of God . . .*' (2). verse 7; 'But if *through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to His glory . . .*' (3). verse 8; 'And *why not do evil good may come?*' In three ways Paul illustrates the accusation against him. Verse 5 is an ethical illustration using the general-abstract categories of wickedness vs (God's) Justice. In verse 7 the ethical illustration of the accusation is reduced to the specific-personal level: now it is personal falsehood vs the truthfulness of God. Verse 8 shows the accusation reduced still further to a practical level and to one axiom. That axiom is common to all 3 verses as shown by the underscored portions: 'Evil is necessary for good'. And since good is contingent on evil, 'Why not do evil that good may come?'

Paul immediately draws out the consequence of this parody of his doctrine. That consequence is: 'God has no basis on which to judge evil.' There is, therefore, no place for the Law, since the Law

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, 'Structural Centre', 36.

is the basis of God's justice: '... since through the Law is the knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20). Paul's main concern is not to become embroiled in a philosophical debate about whether or not evil is necessary for good. His main concern is to show that the consequence of this parody of his doctrine does not allow for the justice of God to be executed.

Paul's concern for God's justice, and the subsequent importance of the Law, invalidated the Judaizers' accusation against him. Paul himself said, 'But if our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world?' (Rom. 3:5f.). Paul took the first step in establishing God's right to judge when he showed that the Law was important and necessary for God's indictment of evil (verses 9-20).

### **Paul's Use of the Old Testament**

From the beginning to the end of Rom. 3 Paul employs the Law very effectively in his theological argumentation. One purpose for this skillful use of the Law was to allay any suspicion, probably aroused by the Judaizers, that he despised and therefore had no use for the Law. The Law to which Paul appeals in verses 3-18 is not strictly the Mosaic Law but the Law as the Old Testament, specifically the Septuagint (LXX). The first argument he counters with the Law is found in verse 3. The argument is that the Gospel is probably not true because the majority of Jews have not believed. Paul answers, that in spite of widespread Jewish unbelief, God is true and all others are false. He cites Ps. 51:4. From Rom. 3:10-18 Paul repeatedly calls on the Law as a witness against sin, sinful men, and specifically sinful Israel. He quotes from Ps. 14:1-3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; and 36:1 in that order. Indicting Israel he refers to Isa. 59:7f. Having used the Law in its wider sense from Rom. 3:3-18, Paul now places emphasis on the importance of the Mosaic Law.

The Mosaic Law is important because it is the only fitting contrast to sin. By it 'The whole world is held accountable to God' (Rom. 3:19). 'Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin' (verse 20). Along with the Prophets, it bears witness to God's faithfulness in Jesus Christ to all those who believe (verse 21f.). The Law removes all human boasting (verse 23). Paul clearly shows that God's right to judge and punish rests on the foundation of the Law. Paul finalizes his argument against the consequence of the accusation by asking, 'Do we then overthrow the Law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the Law' (verse 31). Paul successfully uses the Law in its wider and stricter sense to

refute the accusation and its consequence, levelled at him by the Judaizers in 3:8.

The issue of Rom. 3:8 surfaces again in a different context in 6:1. Here Paul addresses the antinomian misinterpretation of his doctrine of grace. There is one clue we have here that he is not dealing primarily with Judaizers or Jewish legalists: His theological argumentation in 6:1–11 contains no appeals to the Old Testament or the Prophets, and his answer to antinomian behaviour is remarkably free of terms or symbols characteristic of a Jewish background. Instead, what we find in 6:1–11 is a direct appeal to the traditional Church doctrine of baptism. It is a forceful ethical argument designed to bring the antinomian into greater identification with Christ's death to sin (verse 3).

Paul mentions the doctrine that was possibly misconstrued: 'But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound' (Rom. 5:20). This doctrine was confused to mean, 'It does not matter if we should sin, grace abounds.' Barrett suggests that it is 'probable that there were in the Pauline churches antinomians who drew the conclusion that sin might be indulged to the full, and adversaries who alleged that this was the logical outcome of the Pauline system.<sup>10</sup> Paul is at pains to demonstrate, in Rom. 6:1–11, that by grace Christians are freed from the tyranny of the law, sin, and death (verse 6). Baptism concretely signifies the accomplishment of this release (verse 3f.). At baptism, it is primarily union with the death of Jesus Christ that gives meaning to the Christian's existence.

Although, perhaps, Paul's idea of the identification of the believer with Christ appears similar to Hellenistic-mystery ideas of baptism,<sup>11</sup> Paul's thought was fundamentally different. But it is tempting to suggest that in Rom. 6:1–11 Paul could have appealed to baptism, as opposed to the Law and the Prophets, because baptism had some meaning already in the antinomian's pre-Christian background. At any rate, unlike the Hellenistic mysteries, the apostle considered Christian conduct an important result of identification with Christ's death and resurrection at baptism.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Romans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 120. See also W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *Romans* (New York: Scribner's 1895). Although the church at Rome was not a Pauline church, still Barrett is helpful here.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions*, transl. John E. Stealy (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978), 325ff.

<sup>12</sup> Unlike all other Oriental cults, Mithraism, especially in ancient Rome, emphasized the importance of imperative ethical behaviour as necessary for salvation in this world and that to come. See, Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York: Dover, 1956), 199f. and Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, transl. Thomas J. McCormack (New York: Dover, 1956), 143–149.

Paul finalizes the argument of Rom. 3:8–31 and 6:1–11 by establishing that when we die with Christ in baptism, we die to sin. He concludes the argument begun in an Old Testament framework (3:8–31) as he presents it in a traditionally Christian form against the antinomian (6:1–11).

We might add here that the intensity of the conflict between Jewish legalists and antinomians was such that Paul was forced to use the style of argumentation which would most effectively communicate his message to the respective groups. To impress the Jewish legalistic Christians Paul would have to argue against the Judaizers almost exclusively from the Law. He does this in Rom. 3:8–31. But the antinomian would not be easily convinced by an argument from the Law. So Paul reacts against the antinomian conclusion by emphasizing the meaning of Christian baptism. Paul wisely chose to answer both parties on their own terms.

### Conclusion

We conclude this essay by reviewing the key points.

(1). Campbell is incorrect in his suggestion that Gentile-Christian antinomians are in focus in Rom. 3:8. Our understanding of βλασφημέω suggests fierce opponents of Paul who maliciously denounced him to the Roman church. These opponents were probably Judaizers who attempted to win the Jewish-Christian legalists over to their side.

(2). We must, therefore, disagree with Campbell on another and related point, that Paul does not answer the Judaizing accusation of 3:8 until 6:1–11. Our suggestion is that 3:8–31 is an (!) answer to the accusation, 'Let us do evil that good may come.' In his argument Paul confronts the consequence of that accusation. That consequence is, 'God has no basis on which to judge evil.' In 3 Paul uses the wide and strict sense of the Law to show that the Law is fundamental to God's right to judge. Responding to the consequence of the accusation Paul invalidates the Judaizing accusation (3:8) against him. Should this point be overlooked in our reading of 3, one is obliged to accept the common assumption that Paul does not address the accusation of 3:8 until 6:1–11.<sup>13</sup>

(3). The Old Testament terminology and argumentation in 3, and the virtual absence of Old Testament terms and symbols from

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<sup>13</sup> For the common assumption that Paul does not answer the accusation of Rom. 3:8 until 6:1–11, besides Campbell, 'Structural Centre', 36, see C. K. Barrett, *op. cit.*, 65; F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1978), 135; and John Murray, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 98.

6:1–11 demonstrate that Paul probably chose to answer two distinct groups on their separate terms.

Thus, in Rom. 6:1–11 Paul directly confronts the embarrassing but ironic reality of the criticism hurled at him in 3:8. With devastating force Paul replies in 6:1–11 that the life of the believer, legalist or antinomian, begins with death to sin at baptism. Once dead to sin, it is illogical, yes, it ought to be impossible, to continue in it. The new life of the Christian is certainly not a release from the Law to lawlessness. But neither is it a life reconciled to God by the works of the Law.