

# Editorial: Learning from the Epistle to the Romans

*Stephen J. Wellum*

**Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

It is certainly true that *all* and *every* portion of Scripture is vitally important. Given what Scripture is, namely, God's own breathed-out Word through the agency of human authors (see, e.g., 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21), we are not at liberty to create a canon within a canon. All Scripture, including for instance the census accounts of Numbers, the genealogical lists of the OT and NT, and other seemingly mundane parts of Scripture are God-given. Thus, they are crucial for our understanding of God's saving plan in Christ, instruction, and edification. In fact, as God's Word, Scripture alone serves as our foundation and final authority in every area of our thinking, behavior, and outlook. Scripture alone, precisely because it is Scripture, must captivate our thinking and imaginations and lead us to the Lord himself. *All* of Scripture must be read, studied, preached, prayed over, and applied to our lives. Scripture is, as John Calvin so beautifully portrayed it, our spectacles by which we look at, view, and understand our world and rightly think of our great God and Savior. For Christian theology, discerning the whole counsel of God requires listening attentively to the canon of Scripture as a whole.

However, with that said, this is not to deny that certain portions of the canon, or specific books of Scripture have exerted more of an influence upon the thinking, practice, and theology of the church throughout the ages. In this regard, some people have compared the diverse

books of the canon to instruments in a symphony orchestra: some instruments may be more prominent than others, but each one contributes to the harmony of the whole. In a similar fashion, *every* book of the canon is important for us, but certain books play an even greater role in our understanding of the gospel and our formulation of Christian doctrine.

In the history of the church, probably few would disagree that one of the most influential and significant books of Scripture has been Paul's Epistle to the Romans. One cannot help but think of the incredible influence Romans had on the thinking of Martin Luther, which helped spark the Protestant Reformation, or its influence on John Wesley, which was instrumental to his understanding of the gospel, or even its influence on the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian, Karl Barth, who, by reading Romans, turned from his classical liberalism to discover, in his own words: "the strange new world within the Bible." Undeniably, the Epistle to the Romans has played a huge role in the thinking, practice, and life of the church.

Romans was probably written from Corinth near the end of Paul's third missionary journey (ca 57 A.D. [Acts 20:3; cf. Rom 16:1-2; 16:23 with 1 Cor 1:14]). Even though Paul was not the founder of the church (1:10, 13; 15:22) nor had he ever visited Rome, it is clear from the opening verses that it was his intent to do so (1:8-15), probably to then use Rome as a

springboard to further missionary work in Spain (15:23-28). In terms of the content of the letter, even though Paul treats a number of crucial issues and topics, it is probably not illegitimate to say that its major unifying theme is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and all of its implications for our lives. No doubt, in common with other letters, Romans is an occasional letter that addresses a specific people and specific problems. However, given its subject matter—"the gospel"—it is also fair to acknowledge that Romans, as a letter, is in some sense timeless. It unpacks the relationship between the OT and the NT. It discusses such themes as the problem and nature of human sin and depravity, the righteousness of God alongside the wrath and grace of God, salvation found in Christ alone, justification by grace through faith, and the hope and security of the gospel. It considers the relationship of law to gospel, Israel to church, promise to fulfillment, divine election, and so on. Romans is a book that is foundational in the understanding and construction of a Christian theology. As in ages past, in every generation, Paul's letter to the Romans is must reading, and it demands our thorough study and prayerful application of its truths to our lives.

In this edition of *SBJT*, our aim is to do precisely that. Our seven contributors take various aspects of Romans with the one goal of helping us better understand, interpret, and apply the message of the letter to our lives. The first two essays written by John Polhill and Ben Merkle introduce us to the setting, context, and theology of the letter. They provide excellent overviews of the letter that allow us to understand and interpret it correctly. The next four essays unpack various themes and emphases in the book. Ardel Caneday

carefully thinks through Paul's argument in Romans 1-3 by showing important biblical-theological connections between Adam and Israel. Robert Yarbrough develops an often-neglected aspect of the book, namely, its eschatology, and he argues convincingly that eschatology not only pervades the letter and, thus, helps explain key elements of it, but also that this same eschatological outlook must captivate our thinking and lives today if we are going to be faithful servants of the Lord to our generation. Douglas Moo and Mark Seifrid reflect more specifically on Paul's use of the OT. Moo nicely lays out Paul's universalizing hermeneutic by which he legitimately reads the OT and sees the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's saving purposes in Christ. Seifrid, in his essay, continues to think through Paul's use of the OT by unpacking what is behind his "gospel hermeneutic." Both essays help us to understand better how Romans contributes to an entire canonical theology centered in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, Thomas Schreiner provides an excellent example of how to preach from Romans by giving us a sermon from Rom 13:8-10.

As a result of your reading this edition of *SBJT*, it is our prayer that all of us will become better readers, hearers, and doers of God's Word, especially as we study Romans together.