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0521640032 - Purpose and Cause in Pauline Exegesis: Romans 1.16-4.25 and a
New Approach to the Letters
Wendy Dabourne
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ASKING NEW EXEGETICAL QUESTIONS

The work reported in this study of Rom. 1.16–4.25 springs from two main issues. The first is the church's present alienation from the Bible, a widespread concern shared by many Christian NT scholars and affecting NT studies most obviously in hermeneutical questioning and experiment. The second is a concern that mainstream historical-critical study fails to take with full seriousness its own dictum that Paul's letters are *letters* and *pastoral* and must be treated as such. Many colleagues will consider this concern unnecessary, but if it is justified it means that the picture of Paul, his activity and his thought which emerges from mainstream scholarship is suffering significant distortion.

The starting point of the study is a confessional statement about scripture, using the language of our post-Enlightenment culture but in contrast with its secularity:

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated ... The Word of God on whom man's [*sic*] salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church.¹

Engaging as scholar and minister with the problem of alienation from the Bible has led me to conclude that it is not the fault of biblical scholars or of the historical-critical method, although both are often blamed. Nor is it the Bible's fault, although the strangeness of documents that belong to cultures distant from us in time and space is often blamed. Differences of cosmology are a classic

¹ Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union*, par. 5.

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example, and such problems are not trivial. Beside the real barrier, however, they seem small. In the world of the Bible, God is the Creator and God's purpose is being worked out. God is the measure of truth and justice. In present-day Western culture, God is a private option, an hypothesis that some people accept. The problem of the church's alienation from the Bible lies with the church. The church is too well embedded in the secular culture. This includes biblical scholars who own themselves and their work as part of the church, the body of Christ. Thus, the problem is an aspect of the struggle to be the church in the secular world, and there are no easy answers.

How, under God, can the church tackle the problem of alienation from the Bible? This would require another book. For our study, Newbigin offers a helpful statement:

[W]e get a picture of the Christian life as one in which we live *in* the biblical story as part of the community whose story it is, find in the story the clues to knowing God as his character becomes manifest in the story, and from within that indwelling try to understand and cope with the events of our time and the world about us and so carry the story forward. At the heart of the story, as the key to the whole, is the incarnation of the Word, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus defines for his disciples what is to be their relation to him. They are to 'dwell in' him. He is not to be the object of their observation, but the body of which they are a part. As they 'indwell' him in his body, they will both be led into fuller and fuller apprehension of the truth and also become the means through which God's will is done in the life of the world.²

This shows how radical is the action needed. Of course, the church is already indwelling the biblical story by its very existence as a confessing, worshipping, caring people of God. Nevertheless, there is a need to know the story better and to become more at home in it, because Christians are socialized and educated into the conflicting world of our secular culture. What is the role of Christian NT scholars in this undertaking?

The confessional statement offers the affirmation that '[the]

² *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 99.

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Word of God on whom man's salvation depends is to be heard and known from scripture appropriated in the ... life of the Church'. The scripture is described as 'the books of the Old and New Testaments [received] as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony in which [the church] hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated'. In this relationship, the church can grow towards living more fully 'in the biblical story'.

If Scripture is to be thus appropriated, Christians must first listen to the 'unique prophetic and apostolic testimony'. It is not a matter of wresting relevance from recalcitrant texts, and approaching Scripture in that spirit is likely to get in the way of hearing the Word of God.³ The apostolic testimony participates in the historical particularity of the incarnation. The church needs to listen to it, simply to be open to it on its own terms. This is the beginning, not the end, of the process of appropriation. The Christian NT scholar can be an enabler of that listening.

This role definition brings us to the concern of historical-critical scholarship with understanding the text as John's, or Mark's, or Paul's. It demands knowledge of the language of the texts and of their historical, cultural and church contexts. It demands the discipline of being aware of our own presuppositions and circumstances, so that we guard against blurring the distinctive testimony of the writers with personal concerns and emphases. It follows the Enlightenment insistence that the texts are not unmediated revelation or pure theology, but human documents which must be treated accordingly – in Paul's case, as letters, as pastoral, and as Paul's. Further, this role definition can give a purpose and a shape to Christians' practice of historical-critical scholarship. The work is not done simply for the fascination of the chase, but in the service of the church's task of listening. It gives a measure of which questions are most important.

New Testament Studies exists as a discipline in the secular university, and is widely seen to have its integrity as a secular discipline into which the church must not intrude. On the other hand, the documents are scripture – NT – only in the context of the church's life, and the church needs independent-minded biblical scholarship, not at the service of immediate issues or of the church's power structures, but an activity of the body of Christ.

³ With Stendahl, *Final Account*, 21.

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This study examines Rom. 1.16–4.25. It is a scholarly study, offering to NT scholarship an alternative way of practising historical-critical exegesis on Paul's letters, and an alternative understanding of this important passage. It is also part of the scholarly work of enabling the church in its task of listening to Paul's apostolic testimony. It is not intended to provide the preacher with sermon material, but so to open up the text that believers may be helped to grapple with Romans and come to know it as part of their own life, part of their participation in the biblical story.

Listening to Paul's apostolic testimony sets us the same task of explicating the text as Paul's that is undertaken in mainstream historical-critical study. Here we encounter the concern that historical-critical scholarship is failing in its endeavour to take Paul's letters seriously as letters and as pastoral. The study opens up these issues, and a new approach to the text is developed. We are not rejecting the historical-critical method, but modifying the way it is usually practised on Paul's letters, especially by developing new or sharpened exegetical questions.

Questions are the most important tool of exegetes. Their skills and knowledge in the areas of the language and culture of the NT and the language and culture of biblical scholarship enable them to use the tools effectively. The basic exegetical tool is the question, What does this text mean? It is shattering to realize that exegetical experiment and hermeneutical study over several decades have broken it. The concept 'the meaning of the text' has been relativized. Is the meaning what the writer intended to say? Does meaning inhere in the structures of the text itself, independently of the writer's intention? Does meaning arise in the encounter between text and reader? A text like Romans yields meaning through readings based on any of these assumptions. When we consider short sections, a greater range is likely to open up. By what criteria can we decide what constitutes 'the meaning of the text'? If we cannot establish criteria, does the text offer an apparently infinite range of meaning, all of which is at our disposal?

This disabling of the question seems to paralyse us. We advance by recognizing that the blanket question corresponds poorly with actual practice. A text is a series of conventional marks on a sufficiently smooth surface. All our language about its meaning is metaphor. In reading texts in general we conceive the meaning in different ways, depending on the nature of the text and what we want to do with it. A comparison of poetry and instruction

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manuals makes this obvious. If we find some Sumerian prayers, we feel fairly confident that their meaning for us as historical sources is different from their meaning for the Sumerians who prayed them. Thus, the fact that we are no longer sure how to go about answering the blanket question, What does Romans mean? forces our attention onto ourselves as readers. What kind of a text are we reading? Romans is a letter written as part of Paul's ministry and of the continuing life of the church of the fifties, with no thought that it would come to be scripture. What do we want to do with it? NT scholarship wants to listen to it as Paul's; the church wants to listen to it as part of Paul's apostolic testimony.

In both cases, we must take it very seriously as Paul's. This will move us into the world where God is not a private option, as far as we can be so moved. We must look at Paul's intention. He was writing a letter to the believers in Rome. Our first question, then, is, What was Paul intending to say to the Romans? This will not exhaust the meaning of the text as Paul's. We want to learn from it about Paul's understanding of the gospel, about Paul as a pastor and as a person. The NT scholar's wider task includes using Romans as a source for understanding the church and the world in which Paul wrote, but this limited study offers only an indirect contribution to that work.

We asked what kind of text we are reading and what we want to do with it. Our answers show that the model of meaning applicable here is meaning conceived as contained in the text and in some sense governed by the author's intention. Authorial intention is normally given considerable weight in considering the meaning of a letter. For scripture, this is much more debated. The moves we have made do not, of course, constitute any general answer to the puzzle about the meaning of meaning.

The study of Rom. 1.16–4.25 presented in chapters 2–12 has two aims: to make a substantial contribution to the understanding of the passage as Paul's, and to use it as a test case for developing a new historical-critical approach to Paul's letters. We shall consider carefully their character as letters and as pastoral, and the consequences of the breakdown of the question, What does this text mean? The aims are complementary, and they create interactive elements in the study. Chapter 13 is a review, considering particularly the wider application of the work.

We begin by examining the problems the passage raises.

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EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1.16–4.25: THE BASIC CONCEPTION AND ITS PROBLEMS

Working in mainstream NT scholarship, we approach texts with existing conceptions, conscious and unconscious, of them and of our task as exegetes. Approaching a Pauline letter, we know who Paul was and what this letter is about. The debate provides this basic conception, a framework within which we formulate our questions and wrestle with the problems the text poses.

The basic conception of Rom. 1.16–4.25 is that it is Paul's account of the way God justifies people. Rom. 1.16–17 is the theme statement for this account and/or for Romans. Rom. 1.18–3.20 presents the human predicament, that all are sinners. Rom. 3.21–6 announces God's solution, justification for all who believe through God's gracious action in the Cross. Rom. 3.27–31 spells out some consequences. Romans 4 deals with Abraham's faith. This account may be seen as a presentation of the gospel or of the doctrine of justification, as didactic or polemical. Paul used the language of his time and place, so to understand it we must work to cross the culture gap, study Paul's terms, and recognize the critical importance of the Jew–Gentile distinction. We shall refer to this basic conception as the justification account or justification framework.

Scholars' acquaintance with the problems of the text enriches the basic conception. There are major problems, such as the role of the law, and apparent inconsistencies, such as the appearance of law-keeping Gentiles in an argument that all have sinned. There are problems of detail. Is ὁ κρίνων in Rom. 2.1–5 the Jew or any self-righteous person? Rom. 3.9a; 4.1 present particularly difficult text-critical problems. Some problems arise from lack of information. For instance, we lack sufficient context in contemporary literature to understand fully ἰλαστήριον (Rom. 3.25a).

The basic conception thus enriched constitutes the common ground of the scholarly debate on Rom. 1.16–4.25. It allows for many styles and emphases in interpretation, and vigorous argument

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about what Paul thought and meant. New exegeses are judged by their scholarly competence, ability to cast new light on some of the problems, and theological substance. Within this framework, the debate proceeds on the assumption that we know what the text is about and are seeking solutions to the problems.

In current exegesis, there are two kinds of challenge to the basic conception. There are suggestions that Rom. 1.16–4.25 is not a justification account. For instance, Minear presents Rom. 1.18–4.15 as part of Paul's theological grounding for his critically important assertion, *πάντες δὲ ὁ οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως ἁμαρτία ἐστίν* (Rom. 14.23). It is addressed to one of five groups Minear identifies in Rome, showing the equality of all who are sinners justified by grace.¹ For Elliott, Rom. 1.16–4.25 is concerned primarily with God's sovereignty, integrity and freedom. In particular, the accountability of all people to God is presented to Gentiles, using the Jew as a paradigmatic case.² Watson presents a sociological reading, with Romans 1–11 an address to Jewish Christians, mainly to convert them to Paul's view of the law so that the Roman churches may be united as a Pauline Gentile church.³ Although such interpretations have attracted considerable interest, none has accounted for the text better than readings within the basic conception, so they have not displaced it.

In 1977, Sanders published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. This convinced the majority of NT scholars that in the Judaism of Paul's period the law did not function as a means of earning one's own justification. This has led to reconsideration of the role of the law in Rom. 1.16–4.25, since Paul had been seen as arguing against justification by works. It has also given impetus to the recognition of the importance of practical questions about Jew–Gentile relationships in the first-century church. Dunn's *Romans* and Ziesler's *Paul's Letter to the Romans* presented the first attempts to produce whole readings of Romans that take account of Sanders' work. Both accept the basic conception in Rom. 1.16–4.25, and we can see that dealing with the new questions strains it.

Neither commentator takes Rom. 1.16–4.25 as the first major section. Within the traditional pattern of analyses of structure, Dunn sees Rom. 1.18–5.21 as the first major section of the letter body, with Romans 5 setting out first conclusions from the

¹ *The Obedience of Faith*, chs. 2 and, esp., 3.

² *The Rhetoric of Romans*, ch. 2 and excursus.

³ *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, chs. 5–7.

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presentation of God's saving righteousness to faith, and Rom. 1.16–17 as the climax of the introduction and the theme for what follows.⁴ Ziesler breaks with the tradition. Rom. 1.16–17 is the transition to and opening of the letter body, then the human predicament and God's solution are presented in Rom. 1.18–3.31, but Rom. 4.1–8.39 is a complex unit developing four main aspects of this solution. The first is presented in Rom. 4.1–5.21.⁵ These differences reflect two problems for exegesis within the basic conception. Does the section end at Rom. 4.25, 5.11 or 5.21? What is the function of Romans 4? In line with tradition, both of these readings stress Abraham's justification by faith as showing the continuity between the gospel and God's action with Israel, but they stress more strongly the issue of Jew and Gentile together within the people of God.

Both scholars explicate Rom. 1.16–17 as presenting the message of justification by faith. Each sows a seed of the element which will strain the framework provided by the basic conception. For Dunn, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι is programmatic for the letter, bringing the Jew–Gentile issue into sharp focus, here as a reminder to Gentiles that Jewish prerogative and Gentile outreach are together important to the gospel.⁶ Ziesler's special emphasis is on God's faithfulness bringing about a people of God which includes all who are willing to receive. As they move through the text, the impact of the questions raised by Sanders' work is very visible. Ziesler argues that Paul's target is not human self-righteousness, especially Jewish,⁷ and he sees his attention directed to questions about the new people of God created by God's new action. This questions contemporary Jewish self-understanding and demands a new interpretation of Israel's election. Ziesler's understanding of righteousness in Paul makes a distinctive contribution, but the Jew–Gentile question strains the basic conception. Dunn sees the important secondary theme of the law raising many of the most difficult problems of understanding Romans. Using a sociological perspective, he expounds Paul's treatment of problems raised by a Jewish misunderstanding of the law as a boundary marker, defining the realm of election and thus of privilege.⁸ In his reading, this

⁴ *Romans*, vii–viii, 38.⁵ *Romans*, 35–6.⁶ *Romans*, 47.⁷ *Romans*, 1–2.⁸ *Romans*, lxvi, lxxi.

strains the basic conception, which nevertheless defines the structure and themes of the passage.

Ziesler concludes that in Rom. 1.18–3.20 Paul is trying to prove not that every individual is grossly and helplessly sinful, but that Jews as much as Gentiles are sinners and answerable to God. This makes the detail of the text more manageable. Finally, however, the argument has provided the basis of justification by grace – ‘humanity as a whole, Jew and Greek, is in need of liberation’.⁹ Ziesler is too honest to gloss over the inadequacy of Paul’s argument, and his exegesis shows the strain this inadequacy creates.¹⁰ The same tension between the basic conception and the interpretation of detail runs in Dunn’s exegesis of the passage. He takes for granted the need to demonstrate that all have sinned, speaking of a universal indictment with a major element of attack on Jewish self-assurance. Rom. 3.9–20 is a summing up of the universal indictment.¹¹ In his *Explanation*, however, it appears far more as the final demonstration that Jews also stand under the condemnation they passed on Gentiles in Rom. 1.18–32.¹² Nevertheless, the basic conception is obviously shaping Dunn’s thinking. His *Explanation* of Rom. 3.22c–23 pictures Paul explaining universal sin to Jews who think that they are an exception.¹³

Dunn treats Rom. 3.21–31 as one unit with two sub-sections, the announcement of justification and some consequences for Jewish self-understanding. His exposition shows a continuation of the pattern of his treatment of Rom. 1.18–3.20. Rom. 3.21–6 is an account of justification, but Paul has concentrated on the one controversial element, justification for all on the basis of faith. Dunn treats the passage as exposition, but also as though it were addressed to Jews who thought that they ought to be an exception, thereby achieving a close link with Rom. 3.27–31. Similarly, the pattern of Ziesler’s exposition continues. He treats the passage as one unit. In his exegesis of Rom. 3.21–6 as an account of justification, he constantly makes explicit the implication of what Paul is saying, that Jews are no different from Gentiles in this matter. In this context, Rom. 3.27 says that Jews have no boast over against Gentiles – not that they have no boast before God.

⁹ *Romans*, 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, e.g. 100, 109–10 on Rom. 3.23.

¹¹ *Romans*, 51.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 178.

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Neither Dunn nor Ziesler has explicitly questioned the basic conception, but both exegeses show Rom. 1.16–4.25 as a justification account heavily influenced by the Jew–Gentile questions. This shows more clearly in Ziesler’s book because his readership needs to be introduced to the scholarly conception. Dunn assumes familiarity with it. One result is that his exposition reads as though Paul was addressing Jews, although he concludes that Romans is addressed to Gentiles.¹⁴

In *The Reasons for Romans*, Wedderburn outlines a reading of Rom. 1.16–4.25.¹⁵ Rom. 1.16–18 presents three thematic statements. Rom. 1.19–3.20 develops the theme of the revelation of God’s wrath and also is an argument that all, including the Jews who thought that they were privileged, stand guilty before God. Rom. 3.21–6 describes how God’s righteousness is available to all through grace. This saving righteousness is exercised through a judgement of condemnation. God has replaced law with faith, for Jew and Gentile alike (Rom. 3.27–30). This establishes the law, which attests the principle of justification by faith in the critical case of Abraham (Rom. 3.30–4.25). This is the first stage of the argument of Romans 1–11, in which Paul is defending his gospel against charges of unrighteousness. This includes a question of God’s own righteousness or unrighteousness.¹⁶ It seems likely that if this reading were presented on the same scale as Dunn’s commentary, it also would look like a justification account for Jews, but with a strong reference to the question of God’s righteousness.

We may say, then, that current challenges have not displaced the basic conception of Rom. 1.16–4.25 as a justification account, although developments in understanding of the law, particularly, have strained it considerably.

This study starts with the recognition of discrepancies between the basic conception and Paul’s text that are so serious as to demand that it be directly questioned. They pose problems which cannot be solved within it. This means not that we have been unable to solve them with present knowledge or methods, but that they can be shown to be incapable of solution. Either we are making a mistake or Paul was. There are three of these discrepancies.

¹⁴ *Romans*, xlv.

¹⁵ *Reasons*, 123–30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112–14.