



Welcome to the Conversation

God does not love us if we change. God loves us so that we can change.

—RICHARD ROHR, *BREATHING UNDER WATER: SPIRITUALITY AND THE TWELVE STEPS*

I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.

—ANNIE LAMOTT, *TRAVELING MERCIES: SOME THOUGHTS ON FAITH*

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

—ROMANS 12:1–2

Give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives.

—GENERAL THANKSGIVING IN THE DAILY OFFICE,
BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

How is it that we change? How is it that we grow? Or to use the language of St. Paul, who wrote a letter to “all God’s beloved in Rome,” how can we be transformed? Think about your own spiritual journey, about moments when

ROMANS

you experienced change, growth, transformation, or renewal. What contributed to those experiences? What got in the way?

Think about the faith community to which you belong. Perhaps review in your mind those communities that have shaped you over the years. They may be communities in which you were profoundly formed. They may be communities you left, perhaps even fled. You may be in recovery from such places. Then ask the same kinds of questions. How do congregations change and grow? What brings about transformation? What brings about renewal and new life in communities of faith?

In the letter that Paul wrote to the Christians assembled in Rome, we get a case study in change, as he holds out the possibility of transformation for members of a congregation he had never met, an assembly meeting in the city at the center of the empire. He wrote with an invitation, perhaps even a challenge, to experience transformation. His Letter to the Romans, widely considered to be authentic in authorship, sets the stage for a long-anticipated visit he hopes to make as he moves westward in his mission.

In this letter, he builds a case that change and transformation are real possibilities, effected not so much by human intention or endeavor, but as a result of God's gracious activity in their lives. There is no doubt that this letter, across the generations, merits attention as an exploration of the transforming power of God's love. We enter into conversation with this letter in the hope, indeed the confidence, that transformation can still take place in our individual lives and in the lives of the communities to which we belong.

In the organization of the New Testament, the twenty-seven books that comprise the Christian Scriptures, we begin with the work of the evangelists: four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. We then come to a series of letters attributed to Paul, written either to congregations or to individuals. The Letter to the Romans comes first in that collection.

Perhaps it was placed first in the canon simply because of its length. But perhaps there's more to it than that. It offers the longest presentation of Paul's theology, a defense of the faithfulness of God, fidelity to the promises God has made, an argument extended over eleven chapters (with a few Pauline detours), leading into a discussion



of the ethical implications of this theology in five final chapters. In some respects, this letter becomes a lens through which the other letters can be read. From start to finish, the letter argues for the transforming power of the proclamation of God's grace. Paul knew that dynamic at work in his own life. While in this letter he cannot be accused of oversharing as far as his own spiritual autobiography is concerned, he nevertheless expresses confidence that this same power can unfold in the lives of the members of this community addressed in this letter. This power can change not only individuals, not only this congregation, but can change the world.

This Letter in the History of the Church

Any introduction to this letter must note its impact on the history of the church over the centuries, as this letter has had extraordinary influence at critical moments. Century after century, it has been a catalyst, active in the renewal and reformation of the church.

As described in his *Confessions*, Augustine's conversion came in the fourth century, a convergence of influences (as most conversion experiences are) when he recognized a need for personal transformation. Perhaps today we would say he hit bottom. A key catalyst for change had to do with his conversation with Scripture. Specifically, he was led to Paul's Letter to the Romans, the effect of his conversation with Scripture noted in *The Confessions*, written in 397:

But when a profound reflection had, from the secret depths of my soul, drawn together and heaped all my misery from the secret depths of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by as mighty a shower of tears. . . . I flung myself down, how, I know not, under a certain fig tree, giving free course to my tears and the streams of my eyes gushed out, an acceptable sacrifice unto Thee. And, not indeed in these words, but to this effect, spake I much unto Thee: But Thou, O Lord, how long? How long, Lord, wilt Thou be angry forever? . . . Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness? I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo, I heard the voice as of a boy or a girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting and often repeating, "*Tolle lege! Tolle lege!*" (Latin—"Take up and read!") . . . So quickly I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the volume of the apostles, when I rose thence. I grasped, opened, and in silence read that paragraph on which



ROMANS

my eyes first fell—“Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:13–14). No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended, by a light, as it were, of security into my heart, all the gloom of doubt vanished away.⁵

Conversation with Scripture changed the course of Augustine’s life. It led him to a theology that asserted that the grace and love of God redirects human affection. Augustine’s theology in turn redirected the course of the church. His interpretation of Paul’s letters continues to shape the church, for better or for worse. In some respects, we work hard to correct Augustinian interpretation, perhaps insightful for his time but difficult to translate to our own. Key themes expressed in the Letter to the Romans, themes like the need all people have for power beyond themselves to redirect misguided love, are at the heart of Augustine’s theology. At a critical moment when the empire was crumbling and it was not clear how the church would move forward, Paul’s letters, and especially the Letter to the Romans, served as transformative guide. It had to do with the embrace of grace. That is not the only time in the history of the church that this letter has had that effect.

In the early sixteenth century, the Letter to the Romans was key to the development of the theology of Martin Luther, a theology that emphasized the belief that right relationship with God comes through the unmerited grace of God, revealed in Jesus’s death and resurrection. This theology galvanized political, social, and ecclesiastical forces to contribute to the energy of the Reformation. As often happens in moments of spiritual change or development, Scripture served as a catalyst, providing a way for social and cultural transformation to take place.

The Letter to the Romans was key. Luther writes:

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the righteousness of God,” in chapter 1:17 because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. . . . At last, by the mercy of God, meditating night and day, I gave heed to the context of the words . . . and there I began to



WELCOME TO THE CONVERSATION

understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning . . . and whereas before the “righteousness of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to paradise.⁶

As in the case of Augustine, Luther’s interpretation of Paul’s letter, transformative in his own day but now centuries old, needs to be interpreted for our own time. Along with other leaders in these times of reformation and revival in the church (William Tyndale, John Calvin, John Wesley), Luther entered into conversation with this New Testament letter, opening the door to change and transformation in their own contexts. The Letter to the Romans shifted their individual spiritual journeys, and by virtue of their positions of leadership, shifted the culture around them. It began with conversation with Scripture, which led to the embrace of grace.

Karl Barth published his commentary on Romans in the early twentieth century as the horrors of the First World War were shattering optimism about humanity in Europe. Technology applied to warfare brought unprecedented horrific results. What would theologians and interpreters of Scripture say in the face of such carnage? Where was God in this collective experience? How could the human condition be explained when the best that humanity had to offer led to this kind of conflagration? Barth spent ten years as a pastor (1911–1921), a tenure that had profound impact on his theology as “Barth’s liberal assurances were initially undermined by his exposure to the Swiss social democratic movement. . . . The outbreak of the Great War further disillusioned him. . . . Most of his former teachers signed a declaration of support for the Kaiser.” Barth described his experience as follows: “An entire world of theological exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which up to that point I had accepted as basically credible, was thereby shaken to the foundations, and with it everything which flowed at that time from the pens of the German theologians.”⁷

Barth returned to a conversation with Scripture, especially studying the Letter to the Romans in 1916, which resulted in his



ROMANS

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commentary, first published in 1919. That commentary offered a critique of the liberal theology of the previous generations, at a time when hard questions about the power of evil emerged from the trenches where so many young men died. Barth's commentary was described in graphic terms, as if a bomb had been detonated on the playground of the theologians of his day. As we will see in reflection on the first chapter of this letter, Paul speaks of the "power" of the gospel. In Greek, the word for power is *dunamis*, which provides the root for the word "dynamite." This letter has conveyed transformative, perhaps even explosive, power over the course of the history of the church.

Barth's reference to the shaking of the foundations (a lift from the book of Jeremiah) brings to mind a series of sermons by Paul Tillich, collected under the title of *The Shaking of the Foundations*.⁸ One of those sermons, prompted by the Letter to the Romans, speaks of the transforming power of grace. It provides a powerful introduction to our reflection on this letter. Prompted by a verse in Romans 5, Tillich speaks about the interface of sin and grace:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace.⁹



WELCOME TO THE CONVERSATION

As we enter into conversation with this letter, here's the question this book will seek to address: Does Paul's letter still have a transforming word for our day? What does it have to say to a church in need of renewal? Pollsters indicate disheartening shifts in religious affiliation in our culture. Traditions and institutions face new challenges, including the sense that they are obsolete or irrelevant. Division and partisanship between human communities (including and perhaps especially religious communities) seem to be on the rise, as the moral failures of religious leaders and institutions are on display for all the world to see, as people increasingly self-identify as spiritual not religious. Against that background Paul's letter bears a message that matters. It holds the promise of renewed spiritual vitality that can emerge when the grace of God is embraced and proclaimed, when confidence is placed in the reality of God's love that comes as free gift, and when that gift is viewed expansively, not as the possession or province of one particular group.

The expression of trust in God's grace, a theme of the Letter to the Romans, has the power to change individual lives. It also has the power to change communities, which is why it matters that we enter into this conversation. Such a conversation does not mean that we will like or understand everything in the letter. Paul wrote out of his own context, with its own limits. Augustine, Luther, and Barth each interpreted this letter for their time. Our time has its own character, context, and challenges. In the spirit of conversation, a word that suggests companionship on the journey, we hope that faithful attention to this ancient letter may open the door for new insights into the expansiveness of the grace of God. As we enter into this conversation, a few introductory comments are offered, setting this letter in the context of other letters attributed to Paul.

**Paul's Letters: What They Have in Common,
How They Differ**

J. Christiaan Beker, in his study of Paul, spoke of both coherence and contingency in Paul's work.¹⁰ Coherence reflects a continuity of structure and theme. Contingency suggests particular or occasional dimensions, reminders that these letters were written to specific congregations or people.



ROMANS

When we speak of coherence, in terms of structure, we note that the Letter to the Romans follows the pattern of a number of other letters attributed to Paul. It reflects the ways letters were structured in Paul's day. Paul's letters often begin with a greeting and an expression of thanksgiving for the community or individual being addressed (though the terse beginning of the Letter to the Galatians gives the reader a clue that Paul is not entirely happy with this crowd, and that the letter that follows will be sharp in tone).

Paul introduces himself, in the custom of letters of his day, and seeks to establish authority from the outset, eager to get readers to see why they should pay attention to what he has to say. Often in these introductions, Paul will weave prayers for these communities into his discussion, perhaps incorporating portions of liturgy, hymns, and early creedal formulations that may have been in use when members of the early church assembled. After these introductions, Paul often will turn to the theological question, describing who God is, and what God has done, especially as revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul encountered the risen Christ on that Damascus Road, an event described numerous times in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as in several of his letters. It is interesting to note that Paul, unlike gospel writers, seems to have limited interest (or perhaps even awareness) of the events of Jesus's life prior to Holy Week. His main focus is on the last week of Jesus's life, on what those events in and around Jerusalem reveal about Jesus and about the one whom Jesus called Father, the one whose continuing presence is known through the Holy Spirit. Again and again, in a variety of ways, Paul returns to the theme of divine initiative in the reconciliation of relationship between God and humanity, a transforming dynamic seen throughout the Letter to the Romans. This dynamic, which is as much an event as it is a theological principle, can be described as grace.

Having reflected on who God is and what God has done, Paul in his letters will often shift, in one way or another, to what we call the "so-what" factor. As pastor, as coach, as model of discipleship, Paul encourages his readers to consider the practical implications of his theological insights. What difference does the theology make for

their lives in the world? These are always good questions to ask. What will these congregations do in response to God's grace? As we hear the challenge in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, will they accept the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1)?

A persistent practical theme, woven throughout all of Paul's letters, addresses a challenge for these communities. How will they live in unity, as a reflection of the grace of God? What will their unity (or lack thereof) say to a world that is watching?

The ethical portions of Paul's letter can get quite practical, speaking about the ways that Christians are to live in the world, in the community of faith, in households, in the work place, as citizens. These passages, some of them presenting troublesome obstacles for modern readers, reflect the culture out of which Paul wrote. That is why our conversation with Scripture matters. In each generation, communities of faith are called to interpret Scripture with the courage to affirm what they believe and what they refuse to believe, the courage to pose questions that animate faith.

Many of Paul's letters conclude with greetings and instructions to members of these congregations, reminding the reader that these are specific communications to specific folks, communications bearing authority. One might wonder whether Paul could have imagined these letters being read thousands of years later, thousands of miles away. That specificity leads us to recognize the contingent dimension to each one of Paul's letters, a dimension that bears noting as we begin this conversation. These contingent elements account for differences in the letters. We see that dimension in this Letter to the Romans, written at the height of Paul's career (probably somewhere between 54 and 58 CE). As he writes, he has been at this entrepreneurial work for a bit of time. The letter conveys learning from that experience. He's been on the road for a number of years, pursuing his entrepreneurial missionary effort. The letter, though written to a community he did not establish, filled with people he did not know, has a distinctive dimension. The letter addresses a unique audience, particular concerns, and perhaps most important, a specific agenda on Paul's mind.

To get a handle on the contingent or specific intention in this letter, we might compare it to other letters. When Paul undertakes the

ROMANS

Corinthian correspondence, he addresses a community he founded, a community about which he cared deeply, a community he knew well, a community battling specific issues, maybe even a community slipping away from his authority in the glow of a more dynamic, eloquent leader. We can read both affection and exasperation in the Corinthian correspondence (presented as two letters in the New Testament canon, though perhaps an amalgam of three or more). Paul weighs in on controversies about sexual ethics, money, leadership, and religious rules. (Apparently, there is nothing new under the sun, as these are issues about which the church still argues.) He seems to know the controversies and the antagonists quite well.

When Paul writes to the Philippian congregation, it is clear he is enamored of this congregation and encouraged by their faith journey. He writes to this beloved church from an ancient Near Eastern prison, which must have been a fairly grim setting. Yet the overriding theme of the letter is one of joy, born of intimate familiarity with the congregants, born of deep and abiding affection for them, born of confidence in the God who guides and provides. He is able to talk about specific challenges going on in the congregation, including a fight between two members, hard as it may be for us to believe that arguments ever happen in church.

When we come to the Letter to the Romans, we get little of that specificity.

Perhaps because Paul did not know this congregation, because he had not yet visited them, he may be less able to address them with that sense of familiarity. But that is not to say that there aren't specific issues on Paul's mind. He has an agenda. As an expression of the broader theme of unity and solidarity in the body of Christ, Paul is concerned about a collection of money for the beleaguered Christians in Jerusalem. The letter comes as a kind of promotional piece, getting the Roman Christians ready to participate in a contribution to the fund that Paul was collecting for those who lived in Jerusalem. That offering of financial support had a sacramental dimension, an outward and visible symbol of the unity that Paul wished for the church, a sign to the world of the transformative power of the gospel.



Beyond this interest in collecting financial resources for Christian brothers and sisters in need, Paul hopes to make a good impression on this community so that he could use this assembly as a launching pad for ministry to the West. The hope for his ministry, indeed, his ambition is to move westward to Spain where he wishes to begin another church, out of a desire to work in places where others have not been, a desire to have freedom to shape these communities in the ways he feels called. Though someone else had founded the community at Rome, Paul hopes that this community will help him reach his Western goal. The lengthy presentation of his theology in this letter provides a way to build a foundation for the work that lies ahead.

Finally, he addresses in this letter the relationship between the Jewish and Gentile communities, living in tension within the Roman Christian assembly, a tension reflected on a more widespread level in the city of Rome, and across the empire. The city's minority Jewish population was under fire. They had been expelled by the emperor, as we read in a rather chilling throwaway line in the Corinthian correspondence in which Prisca and Aquila are cited as coming to Corinth because as Jews they had been forced to leave Rome. As James Carroll has demonstrated in his book *Constantine's Sword*,¹¹ the roots of anti-Semitism run deep in the history of Western culture. As Paul writes to the Romans, it seems that Jews had been allowed to come back to the city of Rome, and to the Christian congregation gathered there. Reading between the lines of the letter, especially in that distinct section identified as chapters 9–11, there are issues about the relationship between the Jewish and Gentile communities. Paul intimates that boasting was taking place, one group claiming superior spirituality to another group. This is yet another illustration (as if we needed it) that there is actually little that is new in the life of the church. That provides all the more reason for us to enter into conversation with this early letter. This concern about boasting will appear throughout the letter, a coherent theme in Paul's work. As we see how it is addressed from Paul's perspective, we can begin to shape a faithful response to the divisions in our communities in our own day.



ROMANS

Many Conversations at Once

The understanding of history is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow.

—KARL BARTH, PREFACE TO THE 1ST ED., *THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS*

With that as an introduction, welcome to this conversation with Paul's Letter to the Romans. The fact is, there are many conversations going on at one time. First, as we read this letter, this is a conversation between Paul and a particular gathering of Christians. We are reading someone else's mail, maybe engaging in holy eavesdropping on a letter written in another time and place. As students of

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Scripture, we must acknowledge that there is much about author and recipients of the letter that we do not know. It's always wise to come to Scripture in that spirit of humility.

This is a conversation that Paul has with imagined questioners. While history has only preserved one side of this conversation, as we read, we imagine the questions that prompt Paul to write what he does. Again and again, in the style of diatribe, he poses questions that would ostensibly challenge his argument. Then he answers them. As we reflect on this letter and interpret its meaning, we will explore what it might have meant to those first-century Christians to be part of this conversation.

This is a conversation that Paul has with his own Scriptures. As Paul makes his argument, he does so with repeated reference to the Scriptures he knew. As we move through the letter, we will note the ways that Paul has that conversation with Scripture, noting the authority he grants to the Scriptures of his tradition. For the Jewish community, references to passages from the Hebrew Scripture would indicate that this letter is not simply a product of Paul's intellect or imagination, impressive as those may have been. To people who honored tradition, Paul demonstrates that what he proposes has holy precedent.

This is a conversation that Paul has with his God, as he raises deep and timeless questions about God's faithfulness. He seeks understanding, for the sake of these Roman Christians, but also for



himself, about the mystery of God's activity in the world, the surprising, occasionally inscrutable ways that God acts.

This is a conversation that Paul has with himself. While we get little of the autobiographic information that comes, for instance, in the Letter to the Galatians (chapters 1 and 2) or the Letter to the Philipians (3:4–4:1), we do have moments in which Paul's own struggles come through loud and clear. He grapples with freedom and compulsion, with anguishing questions about why some people have faith and why others don't, and with the persistent human propensity toward boasting, so toxic for community life.

Finally, this is a conversation that Paul unwittingly has with us, as we "take and read" to discover what this letter means to us in our own day. As we listen in on the conversation between Paul and a community he had never visited, we find in the liveliness of Scripture that we enter into conversation with the letter. We find that many of the questions about the faithfulness of God, about the struggles and shortcomings we face in our inner being, about the mystery of who believes and who does not, about the ways we are called to live in the world, about the ways we can be transformed, all these questions can be asked these days. As Anglicans, we will enter into this conversation mindful not only of the authority of Scripture, but also the call to approach the theological enterprise (and we are all theologians) with reference not only to Scripture, but to tradition, reason, and experience.

There are many ways one could go about engaging in conversation with this letter. Because of the way the letter is written, our journey through this book will trace the argument that Paul offers, with commentary on the passages, and plenty of questions along the way. He is, in fact, building a case, marked by a few diversions and digressions, even detours, along the way. We may find the case compelling. We may find it confusing. It may trigger questions. It may make us mad. But for all kinds of reasons, it is well worth the conversation.

This book is offered in the hopes that congregations will read Paul's letter carefully and prayerfully, using these chapters as a guide for engagement, considering what the letter said to the people who first received it, and what it says to us. As you read each of the chapters in this book, be sure to read the correlating passages in Paul's



ROMANS

letter first. Mark your questions as you read the Scripture. As this book serves as companion to this letter, and as you read Paul's letter, let Paul's letter read you as well. Be open to its power to transform, as Paul describes the mystery of the grace of God, which meets us where we are but loves us too much to leave us there.

Let the Conversation Begin

At the end of this book, the reader will find an invitation to enter into conversation with the passages that have been considered, with questions about how those ancient words apply today. These questions are intended for personal reflection. Perhaps it is your spiritual practice to keep a journal. You may want to jot down questions as you read the words of Paul, or respond to the questions asked at the end of the book. You may want to discuss them with others and form a small group to meet for discussion.

As we begin this conversation, and before we actually read and respond to portions of the letter, take time to consider the questions listed in the back of the book. They have to do with your own journey of faith, as a way to enter into the call to transformation being offered by Paul to this Roman congregation.

Finally, as you enter into conversation with this portion of Scripture, offer this prayer for your own appropriation of its message:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹²

And note as this prayer indicates, and as Paul's letter repeats, that ultimately the gospel proclaimed in this letter is about hope.