

By placing Paul's famous pericope about believers and the civil magistrate into contextual perspective, Dr. Decker has provided God's people with a helpful analysis of Romans 13:1–7. With exegetical acumen supplemented by historical sensitivity, the reader will better understand how this text fits the larger context of Scripture and will be aided by careful application.

James M. Renihan
President, International Reformed Baptist Seminary

It is always gratifying to see increased exegetical clarity with regard to an important passage of Scripture. It is especially gratifying when that clarity provides timely, practical guidance to the believer. Such clarity and practicality are the blessed results of Tim Decker's study on Romans 13. I have been convinced for many years of his exegetical approach to and understanding of Romans 13 and have defended it in my *Political Revolution in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Biblical Critique*. Recent events in the church and society have only emphasized both the doctrinal and practical necessity of this understanding of Romans 13. May God give this book great influence!

Sam Waldron
Pastor, Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Owensboro, KY
President, Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary

Christians are tasked with the difficult duty of navigating the “city of man” as citizens of the “city of God,” and as we do so, we look to the Word of the King for instruction on how to do so well in both cities. As the city of man morphs from affording “peaceful and quiet lives” (1 Timothy 2) to the saints of God to challenging some of the basic tenets of natural law, Christians return *ad fontes*. A key text for understanding our duties in the common kingdom is Romans 13, and Timothy Decker walks his readers through cultural, textual, and theological issues at play in this *locus classicus*. Pastors need tools in their belts as they help Christ's people lead godly and honorable lives under the civil government. Decker's work will be one such tool, contributing to your thinking as you prepare to lead the people entrusted to your care.

Daniel Scheiderer
Pastor of Grace Baptist Church, Chambersburg, PA,
Professor, Systematic Theology at IRBS,
Author of *Still Confessing*

Dr. Timothy Decker's new book, *A Revolutionary Reading of Romans 13: A Biblical Case for Lawful Subjection to the Civil Magistrate and Dutiful Resistance to Tyrants*, is a book that needed to be written and that needs to be read by our generation, both pastors and laypeople alike. As Dr. Decker notes, the recent COVID-19 crisis has exposed a great deal of confusion in the Christian church regarding the true meaning and implications of Romans 13:1–7 as well as other texts in Scripture that address the precise nature of the believer's relationship to the civil authorities. He effectively challenges the shallow assumption that Christians and churches are simply to obey the dictates of the government under which we live, no matter what, unless we are specifically required to do something egregiously sinful. The matter, as he demonstrates, is not quite that simple. This book is marked by careful, detailed, and yet engaging exegesis of the relevant passages. It also interacts with the history of Christian thought as Dr. Decker demonstrates that we are not the first Christians to wrestle with these issues. Many have thought hard about them and have written about them before us from whom we can learn. Especially helpful in that regard are the chapters in which he writes about what is called the lesser magistrate doctrine that was hammered out from Scripture and handed down by our forefathers, his treatment of the issue of sphere sovereignty and of tyranny biblically defined. These chapters are gold! But he doesn't merely leave his treatment at the exegetical, theological, and historical level; it is also marked by very practical and helpful application. I am very thankful God put it into the heart of this brother to write this book and for how well it is written. I highly recommend it!

Jeffery Smith
Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Coconut Creek, FL
Chairman of the Board of Directors, Reformed Baptist Seminary

Anyone who lived and labored through the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and beyond will have surely encountered the invocation of “Romans 13” in the relevant discourse. How ought people have responded to the various government mandates? Were these mandates wise or lawful? And if one’s conscience was violated, does he have a duty to then “defy tyrants” (as was alleged by some), or must he heed the admonitions in Romans 13 (as alleged by others) and simply comply with the mandates of the God-ordained authorities who are over him?

It seemed a horrendous dichotomy: loyalty to Scripture pitted against loyalty to one’s family and neighbors, obedience to the dictates of Romans 13 vs. the dictates of one’s conscience. Throw in some confusing mandates and contradictory data claims, and many Christians were left in an ethical lurch.

In this impressive volume, Dr. Timothy Decker does the hard work of diving deep into the exegetical, contextual, and hermeneutical factors that inform our understanding of Romans 13. Does Romans 13 require simple, blanket obedience to state mandates, as many Christians understand? Is there, perhaps, more nuance and complexity at play in the background of this much-contested chapter of Paul’s letter?

While one may not agree with all of Dr. Decker’s premises or conclusions, one will still be biblically stimulated, challenged, and perhaps even encouraged as he thinks through the intricacies of the church’s relation to the state in a more theologically informed way.

Sean G. Morris
Academic Dean, Blue Ridge Institute for Theological Education

**A REVOLUTIONARY
READING OF
ROMANS 13**

A REVOLUTIONARY READING OF ROMANS 13

**A BIBLICAL CASE FOR LAWFUL SUBJECTION TO THE CIVIL
MAGISTRATE AND DUTIFUL RESISTANCE TO TYRANTS**

TIMOTHY L. DECKER



FOUNDERS

MINISTRIES

CAPE CORAL, FLORIDA

A Revolutionary Reading of Romans 13

A Biblical Case for Lawful Subjection to the Civil Magistrate and Dutiful Resistance to Tyrants

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DEDICATION

*To my father, Charles Decker,
who served as a Law Enforcement Officer
with honor and excellence*

*You did not bear the sword in vain;
You loved righteousness and praised the good.
I am honored to be your son.*

Foreword

In blessed hindsight, 2020 was a low-key awakening for the sleepy Western church. Low-key because it was not the expansive repentance many of us wanted, but it *was* something. Sleepy, not because the eminent Reformation confessions and catechisms were silent to our woes, not because the founding fathers or documents were ignorant to our questions, and not because the churchmen of former years were uninvolved with the civil sphere but because these many voices and victors woefully were neglected, unheeded, and unapplied to the civil sphere by the contemporary church.

“Oh,” our forefathers had spoken, but “those old dusty books? We donated them to the thrift store with Grandpa’s full set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*.” And the seventeenth-century confessions and catechisms? “What are we, Roman Catholic?”

By God’s grace, the “old paths” are being cleared, and do they have stories to tell! Dr. Timothy Decker, applying the under-utilized Reformed tradition and hermeneutic, exegetes and applies the same Scriptures that informed and guarded the Reformers, Puritans, and Pilgrims as they forged a way from Europe to America. Decker curates the deep well of this tradition and complements it with his own robust commentary and pastorally pointed uses to recover these pivotal steering and guarding truths for our day.

Recovering Our Sphere Consciousness Post-COVID

God providentially used the COVID chaos of 2020 to expose the Western church’s consumerism, but not the consumerism we might initially perceive. For much of the twentieth and all the twenty-first century, the Western church has grown up with a silver, civil-sphere spoon in its mouth. We inherited abundant civil comforts, but by 2020, we proved we were not only poor managers of our received wealth but also gone hitting the links

while the wicked looted the seats of authority and snuck paganism through the city gates.

The tough reality is that the contemporary church has glutted itself on the hard-fought conveniences passed down by previous generations of strong, Christian men, families, and churches who made war against godless authoritarianism. Where civil magistrates overreached, confessional churchmen stiffened. Where authoritarian decrees were pronounced, lesser magistrates interposed. But, over years of ecclesiastical *laissez-faire* toward the civil sphere, we atrophied to the point of compliantly empty church parking lots and worship centers while the ungathered saints live-streamed Lord's Day "worship" all across this "one nation under God" from the comforts of our couches or even under the covers of our beds.

Prior to 2020, many Christian overseers in influential seats were never confronted with questions of how to respond to governing authorities commanding and threatening the church's gathered worship. Be they church closures or mask and vaccine mandates, church leaders may as well have been traversing the narthex in the pitch dark after the nursery workers failed to clean up the scooters and building blocks. Leaders pondered minimally, and even then, not too deeply or theologically, about the extent and boundaries of the civil government's jurisdiction, much less that of the local church's or the individual's. Church staff meetings rarely, if ever, involved questions and studies on Romans 13, protestant resistance theory, sphere sovereignty, casuistry, or just war.

Everyone found themselves monitoring the news, noting the infection tracker's tick upward, and daily being confronted by life-altering rulings from civil magistrates, employers, doctors, pastors, or family members. Life changed dramatically. Overnight we found ourselves lacking answers, tossed about by fear, confused by not just our civil authorities and medical community but also our pastor's decisions. This book is for us.

The Heart of the Matter

Most likely, you came to this book with questions hovering around the meaning of Romans 13, among other similar texts. What matters most to Christians is what Scripture says regarding submission to civil magistrates and resistance to tyrants. In Part 1, Decker proves a strong historical case for Christian resistance to tyranny in accordance with the ultimately authoritative Scriptures, expertly exegeted in parts 2 and 3. If the historical background information is not that important to you, then skip to the biblical meat in part 2.

Chapters 5 and 6 are the biblical backbone where Decker takes up the careful exegetical study of Romans 13:1–7. He helpfully navigates and distinguishes descriptive and prescriptive material while considering God’s role in acting by his secret will of decree (according to His sovereignly administered providence of the particular ruling officer) or his revealed will of command (according to God’s revealed commands in Scripture for how the prescribed office of civil magistrate must operate). Applying these two historical distinctions clears the way for sorting out the Christian response to civil authorities.

If, by God’s secret will of decree, the particular God-appointed civil ruler is wicked, the Christian has no recourse but to submit and not resist. God determines the officer’s wickedness; thus, he is not to be opposed. This would be a descriptive reading, describing the power of the officeholder in Rome during Paul’s day, which the subjects must not violate.

However, if by God’s revealed will of command, the civil ruler himself is wicked and has violated God’s commanded duties of his office, the Christian may resist the wicked ruler, within the Romans 13 bounds Decker expounds upon. This would be a prescriptive reading, prescribing the lawful duties of the office that must not be violated by the officer. The civil magistrate is ordained and commanded by God to perform the God-ordained and God-defined task of maintaining order and punishing evildoers in their God-determined jurisdiction.

Should the higher magistrate command what God forbids or forbid what God commands, Decker commends the traditional doctrine of the lesser magistrate as the biblically justified, built-in form of resistance to tyrants, as detailed in the Magdeburg Confession of 1550. In the interposition of the lesser magistrate between the tyrant and citizen, these subordinate powers are the corrective against private revolution. Decker concludes, “It is only permissible if an individual, acting in good conscience, serves within or under the sphere of a magistrate, a public person.” Thus, the resistance to tyranny is a matter of passive resistance, but if active resistance is necessitated, it must not be a private revolution but one administered by and alongside a public magistrate.

Decker is dead on in calling the church of Jesus Christ, especially by way of its ministers, to take up its public, prophetic voice to engage the civil sphere teaching magistrates everything Jesus commands. A pastor must not retreat to the “pulpit alone for his public influence.” Amen!

Readers will find the extended explanation of “be subject to” (Rom. 13:1, 5; Titus 2:5, 9; 3:1) helpful, not just in application to civil authority

but also to God-ordained authority in marriage, the church, and among fellow Christians. Does Scripture demand unquestioned and unqualified allegiance to each authority in a given jurisdiction? Prescriptive and descriptive categories are useful here.

Decker's commentary on descriptive and prescriptive distinctions for civil magistrates will lend much clarity to the identities and roles of governing authorities. It behooves Christians, as the best citizens, to understand the God-ordained jurisdictions of their rulers and best biblical practices under God's Word. Governments justly can implement a military or certain forms of taxation, use capital punishment, and commend and reward the good according to the standard of God's moral law as summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

Be ready for numerous penetrating, keen applications of and exhortations from the truths exegeted, especially in Romans 13, Titus 3:1, and 2 Peter 2:13–14. Whether on limitations of government power, underutilization of government power, or the pastor and Christian's prophetic proclamations to their magistrates, much help is before you in these pages.

Conclusion

Decker's work is both very precise and yet covers the wide scope of necessary topics to bring the reader into the broader Reformed tradition on the role of civil government, Abraham Kuyper's sphere-sovereignty, self-corrective actions within each sphere, limiting principles of spherical influence, biblical submission, the doctrine of the lesser magistrate, the law of retributive justice in the Noahic covenant, *imago Dei*, dominion mandate, ten qualifications of tyranny, and their meticulous application.

It has been a joy and blessing to participate in a small part of this wonderful work on Christian political theology. I was enlivened by Decker's meticulous exegesis, strengthened in conviction by his conclusions, encouraged by his exhortations, and convicted by his numerous applications. Truly, Decker is adept in application. As one friend says, "Make uses great again!" Decker surely does in this work.

Dusty Deevers
Elder, Grace Community Church of Elgin, OK

Preface

Writing a book like this was not as easy for me as I once thought it would be. I remember in 2020 preaching a series entitled “The Culture War Is a Spiritual Battle” where I took up issues such as gender identity, critical theory and intersectionality, the LGBTQ+ agenda, and the BLM riots. In my zeal for fidelity to Christ, I called the sheep placed in my charge by Christ to be ready and willing to suffer and even lose their job for the issue of gender identity and pronouns. That is, I said that Christians in the workplace would either submit to God’s Word and world or be forced to submit to the state-sanctioned religion of secularism and face the consequences.

That very week, after that sermon, at our Wednesday evening prayer meeting, a brother in my church who had recently moved to my area and joined my church requested prayers for a dire need. An incident had occurred at his place of employment over a transgender customer requiring certain names and pronouns that did not match the God-ordained biological truth. This brother, convicted and convinced by the Word of God (and almost certainly with the teaching he had received from my own lips only a few days prior) and unwilling to comply, came on the chopping block as to whether he had violated the company’s policies. I thought, “He could lose his job because he heeded the message I preached.”

That was the first time it had ever really dawned on me that when I herald forth the message of King Jesus, who himself told his disciples to carry their cross and die, I deliver the same message and therefore am an instrument that may bring about the inevitable persecution of Christ’s sheep. At the time, I was not ready for that. To think that my attempt to preach God’s Word faithfully would lead to a church member losing his job! This was a maturing season for me. I understood much more deeply how

John Knox felt, trembling as he entered the pulpit and administered the Word of God to the saints. He is often quoted as saying, “I have never once feared the Devil, but I tremble every time I enter the pulpit.”

And now, that realization returns to me as I hear about pastors imprisoned for simply living the conviction of the fourth commandment: *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy!* While so many churches around them were closing due to health measures exacted by the civil magistrate—and using Romans 13 as their justification—others refused to close. Hefty fines were levied on many pastors. For a few, jail awaited them as they were carted off before their wife and crying children. If what I put forth here is correct, and if those who read it come into agreement and like conviction, then they too will place themselves in the potential path of persecution by the state. Thankfully, the glory of Christ and the health of his church compel me to produce this, no matter how much it will physically harm some of God’s people. There is indeed a blessing in persecution (Matt. 5:10–12).

For any pastor convinced of what I have to say about Romans 13 and how it may affect you in your ministry, please commit to memory Romans 8:18, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Also consider 1 Peter 4:12–13, “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings.”

Introduction

In the circumstances of life brought about by God’s divine providence, I must confess that COVID-19 and the pandemic it caused have forced pastors in America like me to take up matters of theology and passages of Scripture that have previously been left to minor significance. They have caused many of us to examine God’s Word more closely and push back against reading Scripture with a simplistic understanding. With the ever-changing safety measures outlined by the CDC and with executive orders coming down from governors (and presidents), the theme of the Christian duty to submit to government as well as the topics of tyranny and political theology have been a renewed matter of concern for many of us since 2020. Then, in 2021, the vaccine mandate was the crucial issue. In consideration of those subjects, the discussion inevitably led to the use (and abuse?) of Romans 13:1–7.

If we truly embrace Romans 8:28—“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”—even during times like 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, then we will have to admit, or at least I did, that one of the good things for many of us was that it exposed huge gaps in our grasp of the Bible and theology. Particularly as Romans 13 was brought up so often (it became nearly as ubiquitous for the common Christian to cite Romans 13 as for John 3:16), many pastors were forced to look at it far more carefully than ever before.

What I Intend to Argue

Hopefully, the title of this book grabbed your attention. But let me first dissuade any false notion that I intend to offer a new reading of Romans 13 that has never been considered before. With the quality control of church history, interpreters who boldly tout such a presentation of novel interpretations usually come up short on their delivery. No, I am not seeking to offer a “revolutionary” reading of Romans 13 that no one has ever thought of. Rather, I am offering as a backdrop to Romans 13 the concept of what I will call “private revolution” or insurrection. “Private” in the sense that it is not under the authority of a proper magistrate in a public office, serving as a “public person.” I believe and will seek to demonstrate that this subject was on the minds of many within (and almost certainly the Jews without) the church in Rome. Read that way, Paul’s admonition to submit to the governing authority in Romans 13:1, 5 takes on a negative hue against sedition and insurrection rather than a positive assertion about practically unquestioned obedience to the magistrate.

In fact, if Paul’s point of application was to dissuade a private revolutionary spirit, then that also leads to a secondary understanding of his teaching on the civil magistrate and the role of government. That is, if Paul was calling those Christians in Rome not to engage in a private revolt against the governing authorities, then he was also, by extension and implication, teaching them that government, otherwise known as the civil magistrate, is a legitimate sphere of authority. Or, to say it more directly, he is teaching the God-ordained sphere of the civil magistrate and its role. Only after those two primary purposes are settled can one understand a tertiary purpose of Romans 13—the extent to which Christians are to submit to that civil sphere. It is important that this order be treated rightly, starting with what is primary, moving to what is secondary, and only after that emphasizing what is tertiary. It seems, however (and as the events of the past few years have demonstrated), that many pastors and Christians hear Romans 13 as if the third-level purpose is the primary one. In short, Romans 13 has been abused.

Therefore, what I intend to argue is that Paul’s command to submit in Romans 13:1, 5 is tantamount to a command to put away a revolutionary spirit, especially among the Jewish Christians. This is what I mean by a *revolutionary reading* of Romans 13. If it can be reasonably concluded that Paul’s command to submit to the governing authorities was given for the express purpose of warding off Jewish insurrection ideals within the church, then Romans 13 can hardly be used so broadly in application for

our current context of governmental oversight and (dare I say?) overreach. That would stretch any useful application of Romans 13 beyond its primary purpose, natural meaning, and inspired function. Or, to say it more plainly, Romans 13 does not primarily address to what extent or how much a Christian should obey the government but rather how they should not disrupt the current government by private revolution.

My Method of Approach

As it pertains to exegesis, I've found the "three worlds of a text" to be a helpful model of approach.¹ First, there is the world "behind" the text. That refers to the historical background and situation that led to the writing of the passage in question. For Romans, and chapter 13 specifically, this often gets overlooked or treated with little consideration. Yet as it happens, there is an amazing amount of historical information and important chronological details just within the New Testament itself that sheds a great deal of light on the occasion and purpose of Paul's writing to the Roman Christians and the themes taken up in Romans 13. Additionally, God's providence has preserved many matters for us outside the Bible that give added color and sharpen the picture. Even taken alone, this material of the world behind Romans tremendously helps Christians to reorient themselves away from a superficial reading of Romans 13.

The second world of the text is "within." This refers to the structure of the book, the contextual flow and progress of the discourse, the logic of the author, and the grammar and syntax of the passage in its original language. Word studies alone will not do at this point, though we'll do some. Contextually, there is a reason why many commentators struggle with the teaching and placement of Romans 13:1–7. However, if the world behind the text is properly established, then the world within the text becomes much easier to discern. Therefore, I will attempt to build a cumulative case for a revolutionary reading of Romans 13.

Finally, the world "in front of" or "above" the text deals with the theology and application for the church as well as the readers in their modern contexts. This is where we can compare Romans 13 with other places like

1 Though original to Paul Ricoeur, many will find David Alan Black's approach far more accessible, especially as it relates to biblical exegesis. See David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Students and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 66–67.

1 Peter 2 and the things “necessarily contained” in Scripture (Second London Baptist Confession 1.6; hereafter, 2LBC) or the “good and necessary consequences” of Scripture (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6; hereafter, WCF). Other theological matters must also be raised, such as the legitimacy and boundaries of rule of the sphere of the civil magistrate and concepts like tyranny. They, too, have a bearing on how Romans 13 must be understood.

At that point, theological perspectives and doctrinal implications can be drawn regarding whether Romans 13 would require churches to submit to lockdown orders or Christians to don masks. Again, for clarity and full disclosure, whatever one believes on these present-day matters, my goal in writing this is to make the case that Romans 13 does not primarily address such issues as is so often asserted. I hope that in these discussions and debates between good Christians whom I love on all sides of the issue, we will stop asserting Romans 13 casually and use it with the more carefully defined understanding it requires. For those in these debates who opt to use Romans 13, I believe (and hopefully will have demonstrated to you by the end) that Paul actually offers more support for those who would refrain from lockdown orders and vaccine mandates. But that is part of what the world *in front of* the text delves into.

In some respects, I have been studying the New Testament in academia, earning degrees, and teaching seminary courses “for such a time as this.” That is to say, a part of me feels more than up to the task of taking on the exegetical matters of Romans 13. But the gap of theological preparation I spoke of earlier leads me to believe that others far more capable than I could do a much better job teasing out the implications for our modern situation. At least, I hope to start the conversation and give ammunition to theologians with a far more analytical mind than my own. Regardless, we press on.

PART 1:

**The Historical World Behind
Romans 13**

CHAPTER 1

The Background to Romans and Paul's Pastoral Occasion

This opening chapter intends to pull back the social and historical curtain and peer into the first-century world behind Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. This inquiry into the past is vital as it will help establish why Paul would even raise the matters of civil government and a citizen's duty to submit in Romans 13. When considering the full scope of all the details behind the epistle to the Romans, there is a strong reason to understand Paul prohibiting *private revolution* against the Roman empire.¹ If it does not mean this, then those who would use Romans 13 as a blanket exhortation for near total obedience to the magistrate (except for sin) need to provide an account of Paul's occasion and purpose behind the letter of Romans in general. They would further need to supply a plausible historical setting that accounts for the apostle's purpose in taking up the themes in Romans 13:1–7 more specifically.

Background to Paul's Epistle to the Church at Rome

Scholars are quick to point out that all Paul's letters, and indeed all the New Testament documents, are occasional in nature and written to address specific matters pertaining to a target audience. Yet Christians, pulpiteers, and theologians often forget to consider this component in their exposition.

1 By "private revolution," I mean a revolution undertaken by private citizens and not under the authority, jurisdiction, and leadership of a public magistrate. See chapter 7 for an elaboration on this notion.

This is perhaps the truest of Paul's letter to the Romans. In my experience, this Pauline epistle has been treated as the apostle's theological *magnum opus* or a compendium of Paul's doctrine of the gospel. And while Romans is indeed perhaps "the greatest letter ever written,"² the assumption that gets reinforced with such a claim is that Paul merely wrote the letter for the sake of theologizing, for the sake of expounding and extoling the glory of God in the doctrine of justification by faith. That is, readers often overlook or are unaware of the occasion that led Paul to write it in the first place.

On the other hand, when the occasion of Romans is taken up, many only look to the explicit statements of the letter itself. That in itself is not a bad thing. Paul tells his readers that the epistle of Romans was a missionary letter of some kind meant to establish a base of operation for a Western Europe mission. No doubt this was the surface reason Paul gave (Rom. 15:24, 28). "Whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while. . . . Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain." But then why does Paul take sixteen chapters to make such a request, and then only to make the request toward the conclusion at that? Was his reputation and title as an apostle not sufficient to request this from the church there in Rome? The contents of the letter and its historical background have led many to delve into a deeper investigation of the occasion driving Paul to spend so much time on the matters he took up.

This is very much the central dispute in what is often referred to as "the Romans debate." Consider the comments of F. F. Bruce in a series of essays collected in a book with the same title: "The 'Romans debate' is the debate about the character of the letter . . . and, *above all, Paul's purpose in sending it.*"³ Bruce's is one of numerous articles that take up varying views and perspectives. Without getting into the minutiae of each approach, the book's editor, Karl Donfried, carefully drew out two important methodological principles in his own article, only the first of which is of relevance to us here: "Any study of Romans should proceed on the initial assumption that this letter was written by Paul to deal with a concrete situation in Rome. . . . This methodological principle is of great importance since so many recent studies begin with the opposite assumption and *never* even explore

2 This was the title of John Piper's sermon series when he preached through Romans from 1998 to 2006.

3 F. F. Bruce, "The Romans Debate—Continued," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 175 (italics added).

the historical data available concerning Jews and Christians in Rome.”⁴ Can you imagine reading a commentary or a theologian, or even hearing a pastor work through Romans, where there is no exploration of the historical data that led Paul to write Romans?

To simplify the Romans debate, we may consider two popular options. First, Paul's purpose in writing to the Roman Christians was to raise funding and support for himself and establish Rome as the headquarters of his next missionary venture.⁵ Second, there was an occasion behind the letter and a pastoral purpose for which Paul was seeking to address various matters that had arisen in the church.⁶ Some have even wondered if perhaps this helps explain Paul's allusion to the “spiritual gift” mentioned in Romans 1:11. While other purposes have also been offered, they are either secondary to these two major proposals or sub-occasions of the various pastoral matters Paul was addressing.⁷

As is often the case, we do not have to pose an either/or scenario. These two options do not have to cancel out each other. Richard Longenecker astutely noted that “these two viewpoints, . . . while seemingly in opposition to one another, should probably not, however, be understood as mutually exclusive.”⁸ That is to say, if Paul desired the church at Rome to help him in his apostolic endeavors to Spain, he would have to treat any and all church wounds with a pastoral application of the salve of the gospel. Were these wounds left untreated, they could fester and cause a rupture in the church, potentially leaving Paul with further difficulties while on the mission field. Therefore, it is not whether one purpose or the other is correct. Both are at work in Paul's occasion for writing to the Roman Christians. This forces us to ask a follow-up question: What events and occasions might have brought about the wounds experienced by the church at Rome? For that, we must first delve into the beginnings and constituent makeup of this church.

4 Karl P. Donfried, “False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans,” in *The Romans Debate*, 103–104.

5 For this view, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 3–9.

6 See, for just one example, Paul B. Fowler, *The Structure of Romans: The Argument of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

7 For a summary of the various views, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 158–160. These various views are simply subcategories of the specific pastoral occasion causing Paul to address the potential problems.

8 Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 10.

Origins and Makeup of the Church at Rome

Little is known of the beginnings of the church at Rome. The most likely theory is that the original membership of the church at Rome was composed of the Jewish pilgrims and Gentile proselytes who had attended the festival of Pentecost in Acts 2. Of those represented in Acts 2, Luke recorded some to be from Rome (Acts 2:10–11). These pilgrims converted to the Way of Jesus of Nazareth and took their newfound beliefs with them back to Rome.⁹ Such a likely scenario would indicate (1) a church founded without a direct/in-person influence from an apostle, (2) a church constituted primarily if not exclusively of Jewish Christians, and therefore (3) a church that took many of its Jewish traditions with it from Jerusalem back to Rome. This accords nicely with the conclusions of New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer: “Roman Christians seem to have been in continual contact with the Christians of Jerusalem, and Christianity there seems to have been shaped by that of Jerusalem. . . . It seems to have been influenced especially by those associated with Peter and James of Jerusalem, in other words, by Christians who retained some Jewish observances and remained faithful to the Jewish legal and cultic heritage without insisting on circumcisions for Gentile converts.”¹⁰

This understanding of the Christians in Rome has a good historical pedigree as well. The fourth-century Christian writer known as Ambrosiaster said, “It is established that there were Jews living in Rome in the times of the apostles, and that those Jews who had believed [in Christ] passed on to the Romans the tradition that they ought to profess Christ *but keep the law*.”¹¹

Assuming, for now, this is true, how much more context does that lend to passages in Romans 14–15? The weaker brother was in dispute with the stronger over matters such as eating certain foods, feasts, and religious celebrations, honoring certain days on ritual calendars, and other religious/cultic rites either on the Jewish side or the Gentile. Indeed, if Gentiles slowly made their way into a predominantly Jewish Christian church, certainly

9 For a scholarly treatment and consideration of many historical sources, see Raymond E. Brown, “The Beginnings of Christianity at Rome,” in *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity*, ed. John P. Meier and Raymond E. Brown (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1983), 92–104.

10 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 33. See also Brown, “The Beginnings of Christianity at Rome,” 104, for a nearly identical statement.

11 Ambrosiaster, *Ambrosiaster’s Commentary on the Pauline Epistles: Romans*, trans. Theodore S. de Bruyn (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 2 (italics added).

ethnic and cultural tensions would be high. It seems more than probable that there was a clear indication of a Jew/Gentile rift in the church at Rome. But what could have caused it? And why would Paul want to correct it before he made Rome his new headquarters?

The first question requires more explanation, which we will discuss in the next section. However, even a cursory reading of the New Testament will bear light on the racial tensions between Jews and Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles, and even Jews influenced by Gentiles (i.e., Hellenistic Jews) versus Jews who stayed in the promised land (see Acts 6:1). Consider the incident with Jesus and the woman at the well where it is recorded, “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9). Or how it was almost certainly surprising that Jesus would bless a Syro-Phoenician Canaanite woman who was a “dog” (see Matt. 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24–30). Then there was the early church division pitting the Hellenistic Jewish widows against the more pious “homeland” Jewish widows (Acts 6:1–7).

In fact, the most central Christian controversy the early church had to address was over Gentiles entering the covenant community without becoming Jews through old covenant physical circumcision. That is to say, Christianity's first major heresy was over how, under the administration of the new covenant, the ethnic division God had previously established in the old covenant was to be reconciled. Thus, you have the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 and the correspondingly similar letter from Paul to the Galatian churches addressing the same controversy at length.

Indeed, Galatians, in many respects, is like Romans as it, too, is dealing with a Jew/Gentile controversy. What is important historically and for relevance regarding the occasion of the writing of Romans is what Paul records in Galatians 2:11–16:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as

the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

That this incident happened in Antioch, likely the initial sending location and headquarters for Paul's first apostolic missionary journey to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1–3), is of extreme significance. It seems that the apostles and Christian leaders from Jerusalem were influenced into Jewish peer pressure from the "circumcision party" that came from Jerusalem. One New Testament theologian remarks of this incident, "The Jewish Christians let themselves be intimidated by their fellow Jews. They do not want to compromise themselves vis-à-vis their fellow Jews by contact with uncircumcised people."¹² If the apostle Peter was prone to such coercion and gross error, leading Paul's mother church in Antioch to fall astray (even Barnabas backslid!), certainly Paul knew the danger of Jew/Gentile fractures in a local church and how that could have devastating consequences on his missionary efforts. He also knew the deleterious influence that pro-circumcision Jews could have on Jewish Christians. That would include a private revolutionary spirit pervasive among most Jews from the Judean region.

All this is to say that if in Antioch Paul was willing to rebuke Peter for falling backward, away from new covenant worship to the old covenant divisions, as a "gospel issue," then how much more would a church like the one in Rome be tempted to make the same mistakes? Instead of the church at Rome being a great blessing and missionary hub for Paul, it would inevitably collapse into ethnic schism, leaving Paul without aid while on the field.

Jew and Gentile Church Constituency

So, what may have caused the rift between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome? While there is quite a bit of data to consider and sift through, it is well worth the effort to piece it all together. The goal here is to present results that seem plausible and very likely to explain the historical occasion giving rise to Paul's pastoral purpose. To begin with, we will look at the makeup of the city of Rome and, consequently, the church there.

12 Jakob Van Bruggen, *Paul: Pioneer for Israel's Messiah*, trans. Ed M. Van der Maas (Philipsburg: P&R, 2005), 81.

Because the population of Jews in Rome was so dense (some have estimated as high as 10 percent),¹³ it is not surprising that Christianity spread widely and within the synagogues. New Testament scholar David deSilva remarks, "Rome already had a noticeable Jewish presence by the second century BC. . . . By the time of Augustus, the community [of Jews] had grown to such an extent that eight thousand Jews could gather to show support for the request brought by an embassy to Augustus from Judea."¹⁴ Speculation has arisen that with such a large Jewish population and the multiple expulsions from the capital itself (more on that below), Rome perpetuated an anti-Semitic sentiment.¹⁵ While that may very well be, and perhaps fueled some ethnically bigoted tendencies in the church at Rome, it does seem that Rome's discriminations were equally prejudiced to all types of groups. In fact, the data seems to suggest more of a general policy of banishment for any group whenever peace was not maintained. One classical scholar writes, "The central concern that profoundly determined Rome's measures concerning its Jewish subjects [was] the wish to maintain law and order. When law and order were maintained (in the eyes of the Roman authorities), Jews had nothing to fear. When they were disturbed, as in 19 C.E. or under Claudius [in 49], legal and administrative measures were taken."¹⁶ While neither affirming nor denying an antisemitic prejudice in Rome, what seems clear is that a group of people, whether ethnically bound or by other means, could be banished from the capital city.

Of these two expulsions mentioned—in AD 19 and 49—the second occurred under Emperor Claudius and was recorded in sacred Scripture. Acts 18:2, "And he [Paul] found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them."

13 Take for a representative example this claim from Naomi E. Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *A Concise History of the Jewish People* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 67; Norman F. Cantor, *The Jewish Experience* (Castle, 1999), xvi.

14 David A. deSilva, "Jews in the Diaspora," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 275. This information was cited from Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, 17.300.

15 See, for example, Wolfgang Wiefel, "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, Revised and Expanded. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 85–101.

16 Leonard Victor Rutgers, "Roman Policy towards the Jews: Expulsion from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.," *Classical Antiquity* 13, no. 1 (1994): 74.

We learn from this passage that, upon his arrival in Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, who had been part of that expulsion under Claudius.

This banishment was also recorded in the now-famous account of the ancient Roman historian Suetonius, in his work on Emperor Claudius. It is famous due to its nature as an unbiased first-century or late-second-century recording of the historicity of Jesus. He wrote, “He [Claudius] banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus [lat. *impulsore Chresto*].”¹⁷ Most agree that this reference to “Chrestus” is a mispronounced designation for Christ, or *Christos*, and therefore, a reference to the Christians in Rome.¹⁸ This would indicate that in Suetonius’s mind (and Claudius’s), there is no distinction between the Jewish factions in the synagogue that confess Jesus as Messiah (i.e., Jewish Christians) and those who denied Jesus as Messiah and Son of David. Rather than making a distinction over the various Jewish sects causing controversy, the emperor opted for a simpler solution to restore peace to Rome: expel all the Jews and those related to Jewish synagogue worship. Problem solved.

Additionally, Suetonius recorded similar events under Emperor Tiberius, emperor from AD 14 to 37. He reigned during the expulsion in AD 19 and was the emperor at the time of Jesus’s death.

He suppressed all foreign religions, and the Egyptian and Jewish rites, obliging those who practiced that kind of superstition, to burn their vestments, and all their sacred utensils. He distributed the Jewish youths, under the pretense of military service, among the provinces noted for an unhealthy climate; and dismissed from the city all the rest of that nation as well as those who were proselytes to that religion [lat. *similia sectantes*, or “similar sects”], under pain of slavery for life, unless they complied. He also expelled the astrologers.¹⁹

17 Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, ed. A. Thompson (Philadelphia: Gebbie & Co., 1889), Perseus Digital Library, *Claudius*, 25, accessed 3/2/2023, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

18 See, for example, Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 177.

19 Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 36, accessed 3/2/2023, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

We note, first, that these emperors did not single out Jews. Their partiality was equally projected on any who would upset the stability of Rome. Second, finding both a mispronunciation of “Christ” with respect to his Jewish followers in Rome as well as a reference to a “similar sect” within the Jewish religion, it seems reasonable to conclude that much of the unrest raised in Rome was between Jews and those Jewish Christians who claimed Jesus as their Messiah. Whether Roman citizens could draw a sharp distinction between the embroiled Jewish in-fighting for these expulsions is partly the issue.

Now, consider why this in-fighting led to such notable instigation and extreme punishment. Certainly, more was at stake than mere differences of theology. As 2020 taught us, theology and politics often go hand in glove. Politically, Rome afforded the Jews and their synagogue worship the status of a *religio licita* (“approved religion”). That means they were excluded from practicing idolatry to Rome, the pagan gods, and imperial worship. They were also given special tax incentives and even afforded Sabbath privileges.²⁰ With Gentiles eventually joining this Jewish religious sect known as Christianity, anyone (Jew or Gentile) might lay hold of these special privileges under the Jewish umbrella. They would have been part of a legitimate religion with legalized civil and pagan exemptions. And as more Gentiles converted to Christianity in Rome, there would be an increase in non-ethnic “Jews” (i.e., Gentile Christians) advocating for a *Jewish* religious exemption.

Now, what would happen to the Jews, their synagogues, and their special privileges if Rome took note of such abuses from these non-ethnic Jews? For prudence’s sake, might they decide that all Judaism would be considered unapproved, or a *religio illicita*? That is to say, the ethnic Jews not confessing Jesus as Messiah had a great deal to lose to the Christian sect that was also taking advantage of Jewish privileges. It is only logical to expect that those Jews controlling the synagogues and enjoying their religious freedom would not want anything to compromise their status before Rome, including the new Christian sect spreading within the Jewish synagogues.

With all this information in place, it seems more than reasonable to conclude that the church at Rome up to this point was largely composed of Jews and former Gentile proselytes who had converted even further to Christianity. However, that would all change with Claudius’s banishment of the Jews from Rome in AD 49. What was once a predominantly Jewish church, both ethnically and culturally, was immediately made exclusively

20 Solomon Grayzel, “The Jews and Roman Law,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 2 (1968): 93–117.

Gentile by the Roman emperor, who banished all the ethnic Jews. This banishment was said to have occurred due to a great controversy and chaos stirring in the city of Rome among the Jewish constituency. This unrest in the Jewish community is likely explained by the “Gentile invasion” into a Jewish sect that followed a Jewish Messiah named Jesus. If Gentiles were seen to be abusing the Jewish privileges in Rome, then Rome might retract those Jewish privileges. This would lead to synagogue excommunication, as Jewish Christians, and now Gentiles, were being thrust out from their former places of worship. For these Jewish Christians and Gentile converts, this would cut them off from the Scriptures and the ability to worship in peace. I believe this best explains how the religious and ethnic strife arose in Rome. And for Rome, then, peace was easily restored by the emperor simply banishing all those who created the controversy.

Now in that time, an extreme administrative action such as a forced exile was only as good as the emperor who decreed it. Claudius’s death in AD 54 and the beginning of Nero’s reign seemed to permit a fresh start for the Jews, who could now return to Rome. Paul Fowler, a Presbyterian New Testament scholar, described the situation in Rome this way:

These events all happened in a relatively short span of time, affecting believers in a profound way. First they were embedded in the Jewish community; then they were expelled from the Jewish community, with many being expelled from Rome itself; then those remaining had to proceed forward without those who were expelled; then many of those expelled returned to the church they formerly led. *It was while exiles were returning that Paul wrote the letter.* These were clearly unsettling years in the lives of believers in Rome.²¹

Specifically, Jewish Christians were returning to an ecclesiastical situation in which they went from being the founders and leaders of the church in Rome, to advocates for synagogue worship in a heated debate, becoming instigators who disturbed the peace of Rome, then exiles banished from Rome, and finally, refugees returning home, though as visitors and outsiders. All the cultural heritage (or baggage) they brought with them to this Christian congregation had been thrown out or altered by the Gentile Christians now leading the church. One would not have to attend any church for very long to see how matters of strong versus weak brothers

21 Fowler, *The Structure of Romans*, 129 (italics added).

would become a major problem within a local assembly. And as Paul spoke to some of the controversies in Romans 14–15, we have insight into the disputes over Roman cultic rituals, religious ceremonies, communal meals, and perhaps even the proper day or days for regular worship.

Now put yourself in a situation such as that. If we were to make a modern parallel, this is not simply a church arguing over the color of its carpet or which Bible translation they should use. This is not simply changing from traditional hymns to contemporary praise music. This was a change down to the very cultural and theological identity of the congregation. This would be like a church in the Southern Baptist Convention leaving to join the United Methodist Church. Or more accurately, imagine a High-Church congregation, very liturgically minded with many formalities, transitioning into a very loose, seeker-friendly, informal church. We wouldn't expect the transition to be a smooth one. Along with such a change in worship style and substance was also a change in leadership. Even further, the change was not because of agreement among the congregants but because many people were forced to leave and only allowed to return once the changes had set in. Is it not reasonable to expect that such a church would eventually fracture and divide?

Finally, consider one more date. The Jewish expulsion by Claudius occurred in AD 49. His death and the end of that banishment was in AD 54. If Paul wrote Romans around AD 57–58, as most scholars believe, there is a very short time of only two to four years between the permission for the Jews to return “home” to Rome and the events that led up to Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome.²² That would indicate that this ethnic disruption

22 Michael J. Kruger, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 171. Guthrie posed anywhere between AD 57–59. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th rev. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1990), 408. Likewise, Carson and Moo claim AD 57 “within a year or two.” D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan Academic, 2005), 394. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles argued for a winter date between AD 54–55: however, they conclude, “It is wisest to content oneself with a general estimate that Romans was written in the mid- to late- AD 50s.” Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 595. David deSilva said, “Sometime between 55 and 58 C.E.” David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 605. Wright and Bird put it around AD 56 or 57. N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019),

between the Jews and Gentile Christians was extremely precarious, which would explain much of the backdrop to the practical matters raised in chapters 12–15. And for Paul, the theological answer to the ethnic division was taken up in Romans 1–11. He first explicated the matter of universal sin equally upon all ethnicities, Jew and Gentile alike (chapters 1–3), and then the universal means for sinners to be justified before a righteous Judge (chapters 3–5). Once having established the basis for reconciling their differences, he would go on in chapters 12–15 to offer practical applications as to how this works in the life of the church struggling with Christians of varying levels of strong and weak consciences.

Paul and Nero

There is a final historical matter we need to take up to help situate the epistle to the Romans in its historical context and Paul's pastoral concern. Given that the controversy surrounding Romans 13 is the role of government and the rulers of the day, we need to consider the date of Paul's letter to the Romans more carefully as well as the emperor and his disposition at the time of the writing. That is, what do we know about Nero up until and at the time when Paul wrote Romans?

We briefly alluded to and cited many scholarly works that place the writing of Romans around AD 56–58.²³ Part of the determination for this date is that Paul wrote this letter almost certainly while he was in or near Corinth, as recorded in Acts 20:1–6. We come to this conclusion when we compare features of Romans with other New Testament passages, especially the Corinthian correspondence. After such a comparison, it becomes apparent that Paul wrote from or near Corinth somewhere and sometime during his third missionary journey. For example, consider that Paul said he was raising funds from Macedonia and Achaia for Jerusalem in Romans 15:25–26, which fits with Acts 20:2–3, “Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece and stayed three months. And when the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia.” Though Corinth is not mentioned by name in Acts 20, the regions of Greece and

506.

23 Most recently, evangelical New Testament scholar Jonathan Bernier argued for an AD 56/57 winter date of composition. Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 154–156.

Macedonia contain Corinth. This also aligns with Paul's journey to Jerusalem in the context of Acts 20, especially Acts 19:21, "When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'"

In Romans 16:21, Paul mentions a greeting to the Romans from a "Sosipater" (Σωσίπατρος; *Sōsipatros*), whereas in Acts 20:4, a "Sopater" (Σώπατρος; *Sōpatros*) accompanied Paul further to Asia, perhaps coming from his stop in Corinth. Are these two passages referring to the same individual? It would seem likely. In Romans 16:23, we learn that Gaius was hosting Paul. According to 1 Corinthians 1:14, Gaius was a member of the church at Corinth, again assuming these two passages refer to the same man. Also, in Romans 16:23, Paul sent the greetings of one Erastus, the manager of the city (ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως; *ho oikonomos tēs poleōs*). It would seem this Erastus was an influential civic figure of a certain city left unnamed by Paul but which the recipients of Romans knew of already, as Paul simply called it "the city." Could this be the same Erastus associated with Corinth in 2 Timothy 4:20? Could this also be the same Erastus confirmed by archeological findings in Corinth as a man with civic authority?²⁴ Lastly, Phoebe, a "minister" or "servant" from the church in Cenchræa (Rom. 16:1), was likely the one delivering Paul's letter to the Romans. This fits with a Corinthian provenance of Paul, as Cenchræa was a port city near Corinth.

All these details, when compared to timelines for Paul, would demand a date before AD 59. If we take a mid-60s date for Paul's execution, then between the time of his writing the letter to the Romans and his execution, he still has to travel to Jerusalem, where he would be arrested (Acts 21), await trial in Caesarea for two years, then complete the arduous journey to Rome in his appeal to Caesar Nero recorded in Acts, where, on his arrival, he would remain another two years under house arrest (Acts 28:30). After this imprisonment and regaining his freedom, he would (so one theory goes) write more letters, such as the pastoral epistles, possibly travel further

²⁴ In 1929, archeologists found a first-century pavement inscription on the streets of Corinth reading, ERASTVS-PRO-AEDILIT[at]E S-P-STRAVIT. In full: *Erastus pro aedilitate sua pecunia stravit*. The English translation is, "Erastus in return for his aedileship laid (the pavement) at his own expense." See David W. J. Gill, "Erastus the Aedile," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (November 1989): 293–301. For an additional inscription that places one named "Erastus" in Corinth, see Andrew D. Clarke, "Another Corinthian Erastus Inscription," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 1 (May 1991): 146–151.

(though where is not revealed), return to Rome for another imprisonment, and finally, be executed.²⁵ It seems more than likely, fitting all those details in and working backward, that Paul wrote to the Romans before AD 59.

Some scholars are willing to be far more precise in their dating of Romans. Here is a summation of how Charles Cranfield, in his magisterial commentary on Romans, argued: Due to an ancient inscription uncovered that places Gallio as proconsul of Achaia in AD 52, a position typically only held for one year, this would correspond with Paul before Gallio in Acts 18:12–17 around AD 51. Therefore, we can reasonably record Paul’s travels on a timeline with these dates. After “remain[ing] a good while” in Achaia (Acts 18:18), he departed to Cenchrea and then Ephesus, where he remained an undisclosed length of time, though they wanted him to stay longer (v. 20). Eventually, he arrived at Caesarea (a port city leading to Jerusalem), making it to “the church,” which likely refers to Jerusalem. He then returned to Antioch (v. 21). Given the unknown length of stay in Ephesus and time to travel to Jerusalem and then Antioch, Cranfield believed that “it was not till the autumn of 53 that he reached Ephesus again (19:1).”²⁶ Then we learn that Paul’s time in Ephesus in Acts 19 was some two to three years long (compare 19:8–10 with 20:31). This would lead him to Macedonia and Corinth in Acts 20 in or around AD 55 or 56.²⁷

For our purposes here, this entire discussion is only important for us to note insofar as we recognize the series of events. Starting from Claudius’s Jewish expulsion in AD 49, the likely time for a permitted return to begin in 54, and the eventual writing of the letter to the Romans around 56–58, we can conclude with much confidence that Paul wrote Romans within the first five years of Emperor Nero’s reign. This time setting and mention of Nero are of great importance for properly interpreting Romans 13.

When it comes to Emperor Nero, most associate a great amount of wickedness with that name, and rightfully so. The Roman historian Suetonius would eventually describe Nero as a man of “petulancy, lewdness, luxury, avarice, and cruelty, he practiced at first with reserve and in private,

25 For a helpful chronology of Paul, see Robert L. Reymond, *Paul: Missionary Theologian* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2000), 8; F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 475; and Stanely E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) 47–69.

26 C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 14.

27 For his full and far more detailed argument, see Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 12–16.

as if prompted to them only by the folly of youth.”²⁸ And that is just the beginning of his description of Nero’s great evils. He was violent, thieving, and lustful, and a rapist—first in disguise, then openly. Economically, he left Rome in financial peril. “He thought there was no other use of riches and money than to squander them away profusely. . . . He was himself extravagant and profuse, beyond all bounds.”²⁹ His pride manifested both in his garb—never wearing the same garments twice—and in his zeal for gawdy constructions, buildings, and palaces. When funds ran dry, he would steal and plunder for more. He was also well known for the murder of his mother and his multiple wives, one of whom he kicked while she was pregnant. Suetonius described his eventual violent madness: “From this period he butchered, without distinction or quarter, all whom his caprice suggested as objects for his cruelty; and upon the most frivolous pretenses.”³⁰

Nero was infamous for burning great segments of Rome in AD 64 and then blaming the Christians, using them as scapegoats. Tacitus, another Roman historian, records the following: “Nero substituted as culprits [of the fire in Rome], and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.”³¹ Whether through extrabiblical sources such as the historians Suetonius or Tacitus or possible biblical references to Nero’s legacy and the stigmatized “666,” many are aware of the sinful exploits of this infamous Roman emperor.³²

What is less well known to many and hardly mentioned in the context of Paul’s epistle to the Romans is what came to be called the *quinquennium Neronis*. This was Emperor Trajan’s (reigned AD 98–117) title for the flourishing and prosperity of the first five years of Nero’s reign (AD 54–59). I have countless personal recollections of sermons and lectures that included the depravities of Nero combined with the shocking statements of Paul honoring such a government and ruler in Romans 13. Yet very seldom, if ever,

28 Suetonius, *Nero*, 26.

29 Suetonius, 30.

30 Suetonius, 37.

31 Tacitus, *The Annals*, Loeb Classical Library, tran. John Jackson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), 15.44.

32 This is to take “the number of a man,” 666 in Rev 13:18, as a reference to Nero using the practice of gematria (“Let him who has understanding calculate the number”). See “Nero and the Beast” in Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 384–452.

have I heard in a sermon any distinction made between Nero's early reign and his latter reign.

Fourth-century Roman historian Sextus Aurelius Victor said, "He [Nero], although he had reigned as many years as his stepfather while a very young man, nevertheless was so outstanding for five years especially in enhancing the city, that Trajan quite often justifiably asserted that all emperors fell far short of Nero in his (first) five years."³³ Indeed, reading the many early chapters of Suetonius on Nero's beginnings as emperor, many would be shockingly surprised at the descriptions of Nero during those years. Perhaps this is what led the famous early fourth-century church historian Eusebius to say, "It is probable indeed that as Nero was more disposed to mildness in the beginning, Paul's defense of his doctrine was more easily received."³⁴

Guided by the philosopher Seneca and influenced by his mother, whom he allowed to manage his private and public affairs, Nero was known to be judicious and generous in his early reign. He would not delay justice but nevertheless gave special consideration to sentencing and punishment. He was said to salute many people of various castes of society, even by name and without the help of a prompter. He was also known to remove taxes.³⁵ If this five-year period is proximately correct (AD 54–59),³⁶ then it overlaps with the writing of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. This fact alone will bear an important perspective for correctly interpreting the role of government and submission in Romans 13. But even now, the typical description of Nero rings hollow as it is so often applied to Romans 13. Indeed, it could be well said of the empire and its magisterial leadership under Nero at the time of Paul's writing, "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. . . . He is God's minister to you for good" (Rom 13:3–4). That was a remarkably true statement during the first five years of Nero's reign, the *quinquennium Neronis*.

33 Aurelius Victor, *Book on the Emperors*, trans. H. W. Bird (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 7.

34 Eusebius, *Church History*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, 2.22.8.

35 See especially Suetonius, *Nero*, 10.

36 Not all agree that Trajan's reference to the *quinquennium Neronis* should be understood as a favorable one. See J. G. C. Anderson, "Trajan on the Quinquennium Neronis," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 1 (1911): 173–179. Less pessimistic, Lepper argued that "like all good paradoxes, [it] may have a grain of truth in it." F. A. Lepper, "Some Reflections on the 'Quinquennium Neronis,'" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 47, no. 1/2 (1957): 103.

Summary So Far

As we've seen, studying the background material of the book of Romans yields great insight, especially as it might affect our understanding of chapter 13. The pastoral occasion Paul was addressing to ensure a healthy church for a missionary launchpad was one of ethnic tension. The cultural and ethnic heritage of the church, thoroughly and almost exclusively Jewish from its inception, almost overnight transitioned to a solely populated Gentile membership and leadership. As the Jewish Christians returned to worship with their Christian brothers in Rome, they were returning to a congregational setting that was, for them, quite foreign. Additionally, they were returning to a city that had recently banished an entire ethnic group that made up as high as 10 percent of the city's population. Those Jewish Christians returning with the rest of the Jews had something in common—no love lost upon Rome. Their families were uprooted, their livelihoods were destroyed, and their faith was transformed, down to their church leadership and membership. That final hurdle—the transformation of the once predominantly Jewish church in Rome—may have caused the greatest difficulty among the brethren in Rome. What was meant to be the stabilizing influence for a small community of outcasts (being both Jews and Christians in pagan Rome) now became the very source of spiritual quaking.

You see this demonstrated in Paul's use of the expression "the body of Christ" prominently in Romans and 1 Corinthians with the context of local church unity. First Corinthians was addressed to a local church dealing with all kinds of divisions perpetuated by pride.³⁷ Yet the gospel was the solution. The believers' joining to Christ meant that they were all brought into the body of Christ despite their factions. Likewise, the church at Rome was experiencing a similar fissure. But their fracture was a result of political turmoil from without and ethnic strife from within. Nevertheless, Paul would again appeal to the gospel as the solution to this division and remind them of their union with Christ as the cause of their inclusion among the body of Christ. It would be later in Ephesians and Colossians that this expression would take on the added element of the headship of Christ. But for the sake of unity in both Romans and 1 Corinthians, the theme of local church communion among the fractured body was supreme.³⁸

37 Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 1st ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001), 92–94.

38 On this distinction between the use of the "body of Christ" in Romans and 1 Corinthians pertaining to unity over against the function of headship in Ephesians and Colossians, see Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans.

By today's standards, it is rather admirable that a church split did not occur in Rome, at least not initially. Rather, the new Gentile leadership and the returning Jewish Christians at the church in Rome seemingly tried to work out their differences. We can only imagine the arguments that arose, but we get a good idea from the "strong versus weak" section in Romans 14–15. Especially at issue were cultic rituals such as eating certain foods or keeping certain calendrical festivals. Given that both former pagan Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians thoroughly influenced by Jerusalem wrestled with matters of food and cultic calendars, the straw that broke the apostle's back and forced Paul to write was one of politics. Should Christians support a Roman government that could at any moment banish them by the decree of an emperor? Is it permissible to join private revolutionary groups that would endeavor to throw off the shackles of such a government? At the very least, were they permitted to withhold their taxes?.

On the other hand, there were likely Gentile Christians, natural citizens of Rome, who advocated for the support and honor of the new emperor, Nero, who seemingly was doing a good job in his reign. Did not Jesus tell us to "render to Caesar"? There may also have been a contingent of Gentile Christians against paying taxes or submitting to the civil magistrate. It is possible that earlier in his letter Paul was addressing these very Gentiles who were also practicing libertine antinomianism against the law of God (see Romans 6–7). They could have believed they were free to disregard the role of the magistrate under the lordship of Jesus. This would help explain why Paul calls for submission to the magistrate because their sphere of authority starts at the edge of a sword and for conscience's sake (Rom. 13:5).

I have labored to point out thus far that Paul was not writing in a vacuum and advocating unqualified obedience to the government. There was a context, a historical texture. There was an occasion and a pastoral purpose behind the apostle's letter. A number of the members of the church at Rome had great wounds and scars caused by the previous imperial regime. Undoubtedly, the scuttlebutt around the synagogue water coolers in Rome was about sedition and uprising. And Paul would undoubtedly have been aware of such subversive discussions. This would give a plausible historical occasion for the apostolic need to take up the matter of private revolution with the Roman Christians. That there was a hostile Jewish attitude toward Rome is confirmed both in Scripture and in extrabiblical literature. In fact, the prevailing animus toward Rome is no small detail and adds a further layer to the historical context. It is to that attitude we must now turn our attention.

John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 369–387.