PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN CONDITION IN ROMANS 1:18-32 & 5:12-21

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I. Introduction

Dialogue with Paul on the subject of the sinfulness of humanity seems neither new nor interesting to Christians today. Over the centuries since Paul, many scholars have spent their time trying to understand what Paul tells us about human sin and its origin in view of Adam's fall. Different opinions have been raised on the basis of grammatical and theological analyses in one way or another, which provoke a tension between individual responsibility and inevitability concerning the sinfulness of humanity.

Yet, there seems to be no meta-narrative that claims to be THE answer. Every assertion has an adequate amount of reason to be rejected by others. Even a widely accepted view has to face serious criticism with enough reason. So there are numerous options, yet not THE answer. It seems almost unattainable to have a clear understanding of human sin in relation to its origin in Paul. Therefore, because of this ambiguity, should one give up discussing with Paul on the topic of human sinfulness? By no means! Rather, because of this openness, one might have more courage to approach Paul to explore what his understanding of human sin, especially in relation to its origin, is.

However, considering the previously discussed ambiguity on the subject of sin, one may ask a question of him/herself: Is Paul truly concerned about the sinfulness of humanity and its origin in consideration of Adam? Even if it is not certain at the moment whether Paul seriously takes into account the sinfulness of humanity and its origin with respect to Adam's fall, it is unequivocal that he expounds some aspects of the human condition in view of Adam's sin in Romans. To what extent does he tell us about the human condition? Provided that neither the sinfulness of humanity nor its origin is his primary concern, what would Paul's prime

interest be? Then, what is the place of his exposition of the human condition in view of Adam's sin in one's attempt to interpret Romans?

The aim of this paper is not to have THE answer to the questions raised. Rather, it aspires to broaden/sharpen one's insight by exploring some aspects, if not all, of Paul's understanding of the human condition in Romans, especially in 1:18-32 and 5:12-21, so that one may not go astray but keep in good touch with both Paul and the gospel he is not ashamed of.

II. The Jewish Understanding of the Human Condition

Exploring the Jewish understanding of the human condition may be a good place to start as one makes an effort to find Paul's understanding of it. How did other Jewish writers depict the human condition? Did they affect Paul's understanding of the human condition, or not? If one asserts Paul was, to some extent, interpreting and/or modifying them, in what sense can this assertion be acceptable? Or if the other denies any connection between Paul and other Jewish writers, in what sense can he or she make his or her argument conceivable?

Even if it is not the earliest example among Jewish literature,[1] Ps. 51:5 can be seen as one of the famous verses with which scholars have tried to explain human sinfulness and its origin in connection with Adam's fall. Whether or not King David wrote this Psalm is not the primary interest here. What is of importance in this paper is the psalmist's understanding of human sinfulness in verse 5.

What does the psalmist tell us about the human condition in this verse? Calvin is one of those who interpret this verse in such a way that supports the idea of hereditary sinfulness. Human beings have inherited the sinful nature from Adam, who is a legal representative of all mankind, because "we all forfeited along with him our original integrity."[2] Did the psalmist really have this in mind when he wrote, "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me"?[3] Rather, as many have come to agree, he seems to mean that he himself like others in general is "utterly

[1]Of course, the early chapters in Genesis provide clues to one's understanding of the human condition.

[2]John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, tr. by J. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1979), 291.

[3]All quotations are taken from the NRSV.

guilty from the beginning."[4] Barth is quite correct when he asserts that "the verse tells us that there is no time prior to man's transgression: the life of man is transgression from the very first."[5] Because the world in which a man is born and grows up is full of sin, explains Weiser, "when the child learns to distinguish between good and evil he discovers already in himself a natural tendency of his will is at variance with the will of God."[6] Therefore, deducing the concept of hereditary sin which has come to man by seminal transmission from this verse seems inadequate. Even though it is certain that the psalmist tells us that human beings are sinful from the very beginning, it is quite ambiguous that he elucidates any notion of the origin of human sinfulness or any idea of genetic transmission of sin.

The more explicit contemplations on the human condition in relation to the first man, Adam, can be found in "Early Judaism."[7] Especially, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch make it clear how contemporary Jewish thinkers understood the human condition pertaining to Adam's fall. Is it not interesting to explore these ideas, before moving toward Paul? It is important to understand the current intellectual setting in which Paul was sharpening his own ideas rather than to ignore it.

Apparently, the teaching of 4 Ezra on the topic of the present human condition in view of Adam is pessimistic. Ezra believes that all turn away from God inevitably on account, to some extent, of the sin of Adam (7:118), in whose heart "a grain of evil seed (*yetzer*)" was sown (4:30). In his groaning, "O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants" (7:118),[8] Ezra seems to endorse the view that human beings are incapable of choosing good but only evil in consequence of Adam's sin.

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[4]M. E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, WBC (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 19; W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub., 1984), 99; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV-1: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, tr. By G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 500.

[5]Barth, *Dogmatics*, 500.

[6]A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 406; C. C. Broyles, *Psalms*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1999), 228.

[7]This term belongs to J. R. Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism: From Sirach to 2 Baruch*, JSPSS 1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988).

[8]All the verses of both 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch are taken from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. By J. H. Charlesworth (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1983).

Yet, Ezra never gives up confidence in human free will and individual responsibility. As Levison points out, "Ezra is filled with ambivalence, combining uncomfortably freedom and determinism."[9] Nevertheless, by juxtaposing two contradictory ideas of hereditary sinfulness and individual responsibility in 7:116-31, "Ezra's complaint as a whole affirms individual responsibility."[10]

The concept of individual responsibility becomes much clearer when it comes to 2 Baruch in which Adam is "the paradigm of free choice and responsibility" (54:15c-16) rather than the cause of cosmic sinfulness, in comparison with 4 Ezra.[11] "Adam is, therefore, not the cause, except only for himself, but each of us has become our own Adam" (54:19). Thus, by all accounts, it is sure that both 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch definitely affirm individual responsibility, even though 4 Ezra draws more attention to the concept of hereditary sinfulness than 2 Baruch.[12]

How do the thoughts of these apocalyptic authors help our understanding of the human condition in Paul? Wright avers that Paul modified "the Jewish ideas of the eschatological humanity" in the light of the gospel.[13] Davies also asserts, "Paul was interpreting current Rabbinic thought,"[14] and adds, "the assertion both of inevitability and responsibility is an accentuation of the Rabbinic doctrine of sin."[15] In this view, it seems good to make

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[9]Levison, *Portraits*, 124.

[10]Ibid., 122; Levison explains this by adding, "In the end individual responsibility wins out, not necessarily because it is more correct theologically, but because it alone offers hope," 124; Even though Davies' interpretation differs from that of Levison when it comes to the issue of its relation to Paul, he seems to agree with Levison, at least, on this point, by mentioning, "That Adam's sin involved all his posterity . . . is sound Rabbinical doctrine; but the Rabbis were always anxious to safeguard human freedom, and so could not regard the relation between Adam's sin and the sinfulness of mankind as directly causal"(33).

[11]Ibid., 143.

[12]Ibid., 121-158; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: SPCK, 1955), 32.

[13]N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in the Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 35.

[14]Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 32.

[15]Ibid., 35.

use of the current Jewish thought as the background to establish the Pauline theology.[16]

However, Levison seems to have much difficulty with this point of view.[17] For him, Paul is no more and no less than Paul, whose interpretation of Adam is as unique as those of others. In his book, Levison spends not a few pages to prove "the inadequacy of studies of Adam as a background for Pauline theology."[18] For example,[19] regarding Davies' *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, he calls our attention to the limitation of Davies' study, by critiquing as follows:

> The study is limited to texts which are relevant for interpreting Paul, and exegesis of them is limited to determining how they illuminate Paul's theology. Therefore, while Davies succeeds in placing pivotal aspects of Paul's thought in the context of Early Judaism, he does not provide a complete analysis of the portraits of Adam which existed in Early Judaism.[20]

Then, what is the place of the current Jewish thought in the studies of Paul, especially in the area of the human condition? On the one hand, one might undeniably agree with Levison's argument that every interpretation of Adam in Early Judaism was as distinctive as Paul's that the immediate manipulation of them to support Pauline theology is neither adequate nor appropriate. Nevertheless, on the other hand, one could not but find the seeming parallels between Paul and others in their understanding of human sinfulness in its relation to Adam. To be fair, it must be wise to keep both in mind, as one begins a dialogue with Paul at this juncture.

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[16]J. McCant also makes use of the Rabbinic writings to support the individual responsibility of sin and death in "The Wesleyan Interpretation of Romans 5-8," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 16 (Spring 1981): 70.

[17]Emphasizing that the "portraits of Adam in Early Judaism are characterized more by diversity than by unity" (159), Levison concludes that Paul is one of the many other unique writers of Early Judaism who were interpreting Adam (161).

[18]Ibid., 14-23.

[19]For Levison, not only Davies but also Barrett and Dunn and Wright alike made the same mistake in their interpreting Adam in Early Judaism as the background for Pauline theology. He stresses that "the other early Jewish texts should not be grouped together as a background to Paul" (161).

[20]Levison, *Portraits*, 14.

III. Understanding of the Human Condition in Romans 1:18-32 & 5:12-21

Now, we have come to Paul to find out how he understands the human condition in Romans. What a fascinating task it is to sit at the table with Paul and have some time to discuss the issue on the human condition that he raised in his epistle to the Romans! Of course, not a few scholars have already made questions and answers in their previous dialogues with Paul on this topic. Yet, there must be still more to be dealt with in one's attempt to find the true meaning of this issue in Paul. Thus, let us get closer to Paul circumspectly, yet keeping the previous findings by others in mind as well.

In 1:18-32, Paul's perception of the human condition might be packed into two words, "ungodliness" and "wickedness,"[21] against which the impartial judgment of God is being revealed (v.18).[22] Despite the fact that human beings are to live in good, even perfect, harmony "with the Creator and within the created order," the wholeness of human existence has turned away from this "appropriate and natural relationship."[23] Thus, for Paul, the present human sinfulness, as a whole, is "a consequence of distorted relationships."[24]

Once this primeval relationship was broken off, then, everything went wrong. In spite of their having enough ability to know God, human beings gave up honoring him as God and darkened their senseless minds (v.21). Thus, "God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not

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[21]K. E. Brower considers 'ungodliness' as 'wrong relationship with the Creator', and 'wickedness' as 'wrong relationship within the created order', in "The Human Condition in Romans," unpublished booklet in the library. NTC, 2000, 5.

[22]After introducing the universality of the gospel (1:16-17), Paul "begins a section which leads to the conclusion that 'all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin' (3:9)," therefore, under 'the wrath of God'" (1:18), Brower, 'Human Condition,' 5.

[23]Ibid., 6.

[24]Brower's understanding of the human condition in terms of its 'relation' to the Creator seems to agree with that of Ziesler. Ziesler also points out that every aspect of human sinfulness is "the outcome of the fundamental abnormality, the confusing of Creator with creation." J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1989), 79.

be done" (v.28).[25] Then, "every kind of wickedness" became inevitable in human existence.[26]

On what basis is Paul developing the present understanding of the human condition as expounded in 1:18-32? Many scholars agree concerning this issue. It is not unambiguous that Paul is "describing man's sin in relation to its true biblical setting—the Genesis narrative of the creation and the fall," even though it is not made explicit until chapter 5.[27] Regarding the ideas in chapter 1, there is an attempt to find a connection between Paul and other Jewish writers, on the one hand,[28] whilst suspicion arises against it, on the other.[29] Again, it would be wise to keep both in mind as one goes further on to the next step.

Coupled with 1:18-32, 5:12-21 has held the attention of scores of scholars over the centuries, on the subject of human sinfulness. In fact, it has been an excellent source for debating this whole subject. Especially, scholars have put an extraordinary effort in to discern Paul's original intention of writing ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον in verse 12. All the suggested

[25]Ziesler comments on this, "it is not just morality that becomes corrupt, but reason itself" (*Romans*, 79).

[26]Cf. "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen.6:5).

[27]M. D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 76; S. E. Porter agrees with this when he states, "At points the language in 1:18ff and 3:23 may be similar to Genesis 1-3, but Paul does not present any explicit theory until 5:12ff." in "The Pauline Concept of Original Sin, in the Light of Rabbinic Background," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 (May 1990): 19; R. N. Longenecker also agrees with Hooker, by mentioning, "though the analysis of humanity's condition is set out differently in 1:18-32 and 5:12-21, most interpreters have been content to read 1:18-32 as 'the obviously deliberate echo of the Adam narratives'." in "The Focus of Romans: The Central Role of 5:1-8:39 in the Arrangement of the Letter," in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. by S. K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 65.

[28]Lonegenecker tries this by suggesting its similarity to Wisd., "Focus of Romans," 51.

[29]Admitting that the similarities exist between Rom.1 and Wisd.12, Hooker points out, "the differences are no less important than the similarities." And adds, "Rom.1 is concerned with a knowledge which was given to men but which they have suppressed," in contrast to *Wisd.12* which "speaks of a knowledge of God to which men should have attained through nature but have not" (76).

answers[30] are possibly located somewhere in-between the two extremes, "exclusively individual responsibility" and "exclusively fatal inevitability," pertaining to human existence under the dominion of sin and death. By all accounts, scholars have tried to put their own words into Paul's mouth. Nevertheless, all the results seem neither satisfactory nor confident to one another. One's confidence becomes another's doubt, and *vice versa*.

If neither the actual sinning of each individual nor the direct causal influence of Adam's depravity will agree with the teaching of this passage, what is, then, the present reality of sin in view of ἐφ᾽ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον? Is there any clue to solve this problem? If so, what can this be? A plausible option[31] has been made by use of a word of French origin, "solidarity,"[32] among scholarship.[33] "The only solution is that there must be some kind

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[30]Grammatical and theological interpretations that have been formulated against ἐφ᾽ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον in v.12 are as follows: "in death all sinned" by Patriarch Photius; "in Adam all sinned" by Augustine (cf. "in quo'" in the Vulgate); "because of Adam all sinned" by John Damascene; "because all sinned in their own persons independently of Adam, though after his example" by Pelagius; "because all sinned in their participation in Adam's transgression" by the realists (Modification of Augustine's view); "because all sinned in their own persons but as a result of the corrupt nature inherited from Adam" by Cyril of Alexandria & Cranfield; "because all sinned because they were constituted sinners as a result of Adam's transgression: when Adam sinned, he sinned as the legal representative of his race, who are also counted guilty of his first sin" by the Calvinistic federalists. For the details, refer to C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol.1 ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 275-79, and Porter, "Pauline Conception," 25.

[31]On the other hand, there are attempts to clarify the duality of voluntary and involuntary sides in Paul's idea of human sinfulness in relation to the nature of sin itself: C. K. Barrett claims that since sin is rather a "living and personal agency" than a "thing" it propagates itself after having "a means of entry into the race." *From First Adam to Last: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962), 20; J. A. Ziesler also agrees with this. *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 72.

[32]Lit. means " being perfectly united." *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

[33]L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 230; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 186; Brower, "Human Condition," 8; C. H. Dodd seems to agree with this, although he is a little vague in his view when he refers it to "a sort of mystical unity." *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944), 79.

of solidarity existing between 'the one' and 'the all'," Murray claims.[34] Thus, the wholeness of human existence under the dominion of sin and death has its origin in the "solidarity" of humanity with Adam. So, does all now become clear? It seems not enough at the moment, because of the inevitable limitation of the word itself.[35]

At this juncture, it would be perhaps worthwhile to just acknowledge the existing "ambivalence between destiny and individual guilt"[36] in verse 12 rather than to try to clarify never-to-be-solved questions for debate's sake. Porter recognizes this, saying "there is a recognizable tension here in Paul between destiny and individual action, but at this point Paul is not more specific."[37] In agony, one may ask the same question as in 4 Ezra: "O Adam, what have you done?" However, as we have recognized, Paul's account of human sin and death in relation to Adam seems uncertain at this point when he says: καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον:[38] Why is it so confusing that one can fail to extract Paul's understanding of the human condition as he intended from this passage?

To be certain, it is ours and not Paul's understanding that is unclear. There must be a certain problem on our side. What is it? The answer is obvious: It may not be a proper attitude to remain faithful to a few words without getting involved with the whole conversation in one's dialogue with Paul. The issue of the necessity and benefit of having a broader context on the subject of biblical studies arises here again.[39] To have a clearer understanding of Paul's intention in placing this passage in the midst of his

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[34]Murray, *Romans*, 186.

[35]Even though adopting the notion of "communal solidarity" seems to be the most plausible solution here because it fits both "in Adam" and "in Christ," the word might be misused by some to disregard individual responsibility.

[36]E. Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1980), 148.

[37]At least Porter is aware of the tension at this point, even though he seems to be more comfortable with, what he calls, the federalist view ("Pauline Concept," 25-29).

[38]J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 215.

[39]G. D. Fee and D. Stuart state that "words only have meaning in sentences, and for the most part biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences." *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corp., 1982), 24.

argument, one should seek advice from Paul of Romans, at least of 5:12-21 together with 1:18-32 as a whole, not only of this phrase, ἐφ᾽ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον. As one notices, verse 12 is not a finished sentence in view of its grammatical incompleteness.[40] It requires more illumination. Thus, any conclusion made out of only this phrase seems invalid.[41]

Then in the light of what has been found so far, one may carefully conclude that as far as to the wholeness of human existence, it has been under the power of sin and death in its solidarity in Adam.[42] At this point, it is worth noting Hooker's comment on the relationship between Adam's depravity and human sinfulness:

> It is not necessary to discuss here exactly how Paul conceived of the relationship between Adam's fall and the sin of mankind in general; it is clear from Rom.5:12-21 that he did regard them as related, that he believed that sin had entered the world through Adam, and that every manifestation of sin is thus in some sense ultimately connected with the initial sin of Adam.[43]

VI. Conclusion

"Solution Defined" rather than "Condition Undefined"?

As discussed, it is recommended that 5:12-21 together with 1:18-32 need to be considered as a whole in one's attempt to know Paul's understanding of the human condition. However, in spite of the careful scrutiny of these two passages, one will still come to realize that there is no clear conception of the so-called doctrine of sin except for the fact that there is "a certain, yet not clearly defined, relation" between Adam's sin and the sinfulness of humanity. This uncertainty is natural, because Paul himself is not more specific at this point. Ellis states a quite crucial point here:

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[40]Murray points out that it has a protasis but not apodosis (*Romans*, 180).

[41]F.F. Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 123.

[42]One should keep "both-and" idea in mind: both voluntary and involuntary sides of human sinfulness.

[43]Hooker, *From Adam*, 79; Davies agrees with this point. *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 31.

"Although the passage is celebrated as having enunciated the principle of original sin, this was not Paul's primary purpose at all."[44]

If it is not so, what is Paul's primary concern in these passages? And what is the place of his exposition of the human condition in his whole argument in Romans? Even though everything seems vague thus far, it becomes utterly clear at this point that Paul's primary concern, as introduced (1:16-17) and developed throughout the first four chapters, is the universal effect of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the last Adam, and not that of sin of the first Adam and humanity.[45] It is the restoration in solidarity of humanity in Christ, not the condemnation in solidarity of the same in Adam, that is in every respect in Paul's mind.[46] It is the origin of the new life in Christ, not the origin of sin and death in Adam, that is paramount.[47] With this intent, Paul "sets the scene for the exposition of his gospel by emphasizing the universal need for such a message if there is to be any hope for mankind," Bruce affirms.[48]

For Paul, no matter how universal the effect of Adam's sin was and no matter how desperate the sinfulness of humanity was, the superabundance of the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, who has put "right what was wrong in Adam," abounds all the more (5:20).[49] Even though Paul juxtaposes the "grace in Christ" and the "sin in Adam," they are not compared as exact equivalents. "The act of grace does not balance the act of sin; it overbalances it."[50]

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[44]E. E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957), 58.

[45]E. P. Sanders says, "for Paul, the conviction of a universal solution preceded the conviction of a universal plight." *Paul and Palestine Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977), 474.

[46]Actually, redemption and restoration of the fallen humanity is not only Paul's primary concern but more also God's, as seen in the Genesis narratives. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), li-lii; See also his "Original Sin in Genesis 1-11," *Churchman* 104 (1990): 326; V. P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1982), 51.

[47]McCant, "Wesleyan Interpretation," 70.

[48]F. F. Bruce, *Paul: The Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), 327.

[49]Brower, "Human Condition," 8.

[50]Barrett, *Romans*, 113.

What then are we to say? Should we continue debating what Paul neither clearly defines nor primarily intends for debate's sake? By no means! If the solution offered in Christ is Paul's primary concern, so may it be ours. Only in the light of the gospel, can one unmistakably understand Paul. And that is the only way for one not to go astray but to stay in the best relationship with both Paul and the gospel of Jesus Christ that he is not ashamed of. Eventually, Paul concludes, "just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21).

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