

Reasons Why Paul is Writing a Letter to the Church in Rome

- First, Paul has taken on the role and responsibilities of being the apostle to the Gentiles (Eph 3:8). In his efforts to fulfill this role, Paul feels obligated to contact and foster the growth and development of the newly established Roman church. Therefore, he is reaching out with a letter that will hopefully strengthen and encourage their faith and theological development.
- Another reason he wrote the letter is to address the racial tensions between Jews and Gentiles. In the Roman church, there were disputes about the roles, positions, and importance of Jews before God and within the church. This caused conflict and division, which hindered the unity and spiritual development of those in the church. So, in writing his letter to the Romans, Paul sought to bring an end to this disunity. In fact, Paul wastes little time addressing this issue. In the first few chapters of Romans, he makes a great effort to affirm the equality of both Greeks and Jews in Christ and their equal position in the church.
- Paul also desires to travel to Rome and wants to let the church there know what he believes. In the first century church, people didn't have websites, LinkedIn profiles, or social media, so outside of written letters, there was little way for others to know who you were. So, Paul wrote a letter in which he laid out in detail who he believed Christ to be and the implications of that belief.

Romans Chapter 1

In Romans 1, there are two main parts: Paul's greetings and expressed desire to travel to Rome, and his criticism of idolatry.

In the first section, Paul does something he often does in his letters: he greets the people and establishes his identity. One important thing to notice is that Paul doesn't introduce himself in the same way many of us might. He doesn't mention his love for travel, his success as a tentmaker, or the prestigious rabbinic training he received. Instead, he immediately identifies himself as a follower of Christ, emphasizing that his identity is intrinsically linked to Christ and the work He did on earth.

The second part of the passage addresses God's contempt for idolatry. Here we see an example of what I like to call "biblical sleight of hand." The entire second half of chapter 1 is dedicated to addressing idolatry and unrighteousness. In the process, Paul also addresses the sin of homosexuality as a consequence of idolatry. The problem is that, because homosexuality is such a controversial issue in our culture, we often focus on this passage as the place where Paul addresses homosexuality, rather than recognizing that his primary focus is idolatry.

The issue with this is that we may then seek the wrong solution to the issue of homosexuality. The solution is not to argue with someone who is homosexual, telling them to stop, because homosexuality is a symptom, not the root problem. The root problem is idolatry, and this is what needs to be addressed. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that has the power to pierce the heart of the idolater, transforming both their soul and their practices. Both you and I are living proof that God can change the ways of an idolater and lead them to a life in pursuit of God's glory.

Questions:

1. When we think of our public image and how we want to be identified, do we associate our identity as closely with Christ as Paul does? Why or why not?
2. Beyond homosexuality, do we often focus on fixing the actions of lost people rather than addressing the heart issue?
3. How does one live a righteous life? What does that look like?