

The Theology of Romans in Future Tense

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Introduction

Over the past decade a former student of mine has successfully planted a church in The Woodlands near Houston. I admire his success in this huge undertaking. But how could anyone possibly plant *more than 140* churches? That was the achievement of O. R. “Benny” Delmar, who died on January 25, 2007, at age 88. From Arizona to Wyoming and Montana and even Canada, Delmar left a rarely equaled church planting legacy.¹

This required great sacrifice on his part. The SBC Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board) hired him in the early 1950s for \$200 a month—and a set expense stipend. His wife Jo’s salary paid for much of the phone call and gasoline expense as Benny drove upward of 70,000 miles some years, traversing especially the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana.

What moved this man to such dedication? Carl Rice, an old friend of Delmar’s, gives a clue. He tells of driving across Wyoming with Delmar, who at one point told Rice to stop the car. They got out and surveyed a town in the valley below. Rice still recalls the incident:

“Look down on all those houses,” Benny said, and I can still hear the pathos in his voice and see the tears in his eyes, “All those people are going to spend eternity someplace,” he said. Just the thought of any person going to hell without even the chance to hear the Gospel—that would always move Benny to tears.

Eschatology—what is going to happen in the end, with its present gripping implications—moved Benny Delmar to an exemplary life in service of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This essay will argue that eschatology pervades Romans and goes far toward explaining key elements of what this great book contains. It also helps account for Paul’s tireless missionary drive. It is hard *not* to see a tie between Delmar’s intensity (above) and Paul’s confession of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish,” even willingness to be “accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom 9:2, 3).²

Admittedly, to assert the centrality of eschatology to the message of Romans is a controversial claim. The epistle is commonly thought to be primarily about other things. Through much of church history and particularly since the Reformation, Romans has been treated as a compendium of Christian or at least Pauline doctrine. Its contribution to the doctrine of justification by faith, or more broadly to the content and character of the gospel, has received particular attention. This approach still finds followers currently.³

In 1977 Karl Donfried’s *The Romans Debate* appeared, with an expanded new edition brought out in 1991.⁴ The essays contained in this anthology signaled an end to the dominance of the Romans-as-personal-soteriology outlook. For the last quarter century, the purpose of Romans

and to a considerable extent its content and message have been up for grabs. Beverly Roberts Gaventa has noted today's "booming enterprise" of Romans study, typified in "lively interest in Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament, the ethnic conflicts that appear to stand behind the letter, ongoing interest in Paul's understanding of Judaism, argumentative style, the roles of the women named in Romans 16."⁵ To this Gaventa adds her own stress on Romans' apocalyptic framework, an emphasis pioneered, as Gaventa notes, by Ernst Käsemann, J. Christiaan Beker, and J. Louis Martyn.⁶

The consensus today, to the extent we can speak of one, is that Romans should not be treated as a compendium of either Pauline or Christian theology. It should rather be seen as reflecting a particular historical and especially social situation. It is a statement about political and civic realities in Rome,⁷ or Jew-Gentile relations internal and external to the early church,⁸ rather than a foundational compilation (much less revelation) of Christian doctrine. Even where there is still talk of a dominant theme or theological emphasis in Romans, there is little widespread agreement among scholars on what is primary. "Faced with a multitude of competing suggestions, many scholars despair of fixing upon any one purpose and prefer to speak of 'reasons' rather than a reason for Romans."⁹

Yet there is one apparent point of agreement in the recent melee of investigations. In a survey by James C. Miller of over 300 books and articles dealing with Romans and appearing from 1991 to 2001, the word "eschatology" does not appear in any title.¹⁰ Eschatology receives primary attention in few if any of these hundreds of studies.¹¹

The formidable diversity in current Romans scholarship should not divert attention from the strong undercurrent of eschatology that dots the epistle from start to finish and pervades certain sections. Despite the fact that there is, to my knowledge, no book devoted solely to the eschatology of Romans, it is a subject worth exploring in the interest of a better understanding—and presentation—of the message of Romans.

Eschatology and the Discourse Flow of Romans

Robert Longacre and Wilber Wallace highlight the eschatology of Romans at least in the title of their study "Soteriology and Eschatology in Romans."¹² They detect persuasive discourse in Rom 1-5, hortatory discourse in Rom 6-8, predictive discourse in Rom 9-11, and another round of hortatory discourse in Rom 12:1-15:12 (other portions have their classification but need not concern us here). The main strand of discourse, in their view, is soteriological.

But there is a second and highly significant strand. They suggest that Rom 1:17 (with its citation of Hab 2:4) combines with the catena in Rom 15:9-12 to form "a grand inclusio that lexically brackets the whole body of the epistle."¹³ In this scheme Rom 9-11 is not an aside; it links conceptually with 1:17 and 15:9-12 to form a "smaller discourse" that is eschatological in orientation. This is intertwined with (which they distinguish from being embedded in) the "larger discourse," the soteriological sections which they find dominating the epistle.

Longacre and Wallace provide a careful study showing the central place of eschatology in Romans on literary grounds. Paul's "prophetic view,"¹⁴ expressed in the

passages they flag, is “an eschatological high point” that in some ways even transcends the lofty claims of Romans 8—the admitted “grandeur” of which nevertheless “stops short of doxology.”¹⁵ Not so Romans 9-11—as Rom 11:33-36 eloquently attests. Longacre and Wallace alert us to the possibility that if we approach Romans looking for references to, or at least reverberations of, eschatology we are likely to find them. And they are not just on the fringes but are integral to the thought and ethical appeals of Romans.

Non-eschatological Futures in Romans

One way to analyze the eschatology of Romans is to take special note of future tense verbs.¹⁶ These occur in over eighty verses in Romans. Of course not all such verbs have anything to do with eschatology. In Romans, Paul is fond of a rhetorical device using the future form of *legō* (“I say”) and translated something like “What shall we say?” (Rom 3:5; cf. 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:1, 30). Using the same verbal root is Paul’s “You [singular] will say to me then ...” in 9:19 and 11:19. None of these references has any direct connection with eschatology. They are rather deliberative futures.¹⁷ Other non-eschatological futures occur where Paul makes projections about his travels (1:10; 15:18, 28, 29), cites non-eschatological Old Testament references from the LXX that use the future form (4:18; 9:7, 9, 12; 10:6, 7, 19; 13:9; 15:12), states proverbial truths (5:7; 7:3; 12:20),¹⁸ weighs (and rejects) a hypothetical course of action (6:2), and speaks about his ministry of provoking other Jews to jealousy (11:14) along with God’s future action of ingrafting or rejecting Jews and Gentiles in the present age (11:14, 21, 23, 24).

Paul uses future tense forms over two dozen times in Romans without touching directly on what will happen in the end at all. The discovery of a future form may say nothing about eschatology. But in the majority of instances, a future form serves as smoke signaling the fire of reference to what will happen in the end and often what difference that makes for people in Paul’s era and since.

Eschatological Futures in Romans

Four clusters of passages in Romans speak clearly of eschatology. These range in size from a few to about three dozen verses. They show that eschatology, far from being an isolated or secondary consideration in Romans, is actually a central theme from start to finish. In can be asked whether interpreters are really dealing with hermeneutical reality if their discussions fail to respect the high priority that Paul accords the eschatological truths which give his teaching the distinctive qualities it assumes in Romans.

God Will Liberate Creation and Trample Satan (Rom 8:21; 16:20)

The traditional view that Romans is about doctrine is, to say the least, not all wrong. “It was Paul’s genius—and perhaps his burden—that he could never address any problem, no matter how practical and in itself untheoretical, without relating it to theology. Paul’s writing in every sentence distills a vision of God and God’s action in Christ.”¹⁹ As he dictated this epistle to Tertius (Rom 16:22) sometime around AD 57, Paul devoted many precious papyrus pages to reflections dealing with most categories of Christian teaching. But his thoughts focused not only on ideas but also on the created world. This is a world “subjected to futility” (8:20) by

God. The poet Swinburne in “Dolores” (stanza 20) captures the outcome of this well in this cynical flourish:

Time turns the old days to derision,
Our loves into corpses or wives;
And marriage and death and division
Make barren our lives.

This misery is a lamentable component of the existence of Christian believers too, who join with creation more broadly in bemoaning the present flawed order of things and awaiting with longing a monumental transformation which will include “the redemption of [their] bodies” (8:23). In this context Paul states that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (8:21). Since Christ had long since risen and ascended when Paul wrote Romans, “will be set free” (*eleutherōthēsetai*) cannot be a reference to Christ’s resurrection, which lies in the past. He is rather speaking of the consummation. And this likely goes beyond an overarching “apocalyptic outlook” in which God is the victor over a personified cosmic evil called Sin, as Gaventa argues.²⁰ No doubt Paul’s outlook was in part apocalyptic. But Rom 8:21 is about personal soteriology (“the freedom of the glory of the children of God”) brought to its fullness by things to come. Eschatology links Paul’s apocalyptic convictions with his theology and subordinates the former to the latter. At some unspecified future juncture, God will liberate creation and particularly his people.

How will God accomplish this? Again, the answer is eschatological in nature. “The God of peace will soon crush [*syntripsei*] Satan under your feet” (16:20). James Hamilton has recently situated this

promise in the context of the *protoevangelium* found in Gen 3:15.²¹ Throughout Scripture, Hamilton demonstrates, one encounters the motif of God’s enemies being trampled underfoot. Jesus interpreted the mission activity of the seventy in this light, speaking provisionally but definitively of Satan’s demise in connection with the authority he gave his followers to mash “serpents and scorpions” under the soles of their feet (Luke 10:18-19). He was doubtless speaking proleptically. Paul sounds an identical note.

Romans 8:21 and 16:20 imply a panoramic Pauline vision extending back to creation’s bondage (likely a reference to the fall in Gen 3) and extending forward to creation’s coming liberation from the tyranny of this present age. Gaventa correctly states, pointing particularly to Rom 16:20, “The closing lines of Romans epitomize this conflict.”²² Whatever the message and concerns of Romans, Paul conveys them within a sweep of events leading up to a decisive eschatological move by God. This will consist of ultimate divine victory through destruction of the wicked (as Satan goes, so go his followers) and deliverance of the righteous—specifically, those under whose feet Satan will be trampled.

God’s Future Triumph Transforms Believers Now (Rom 5:17, 21; 6:5, 14; 8:11)

A small but significant set of references speaks explicitly of believers’ present appropriation of God’s future redemptive action. Eschatology is fundamental to Paul’s teaching.

Rom 5:17 points to the *thanatos* (death) that reigned as the result of Adam’s transgression.²³ The result of this was judgment and condemnation (5:16)—not

physically and immediately, for Adam and Eve did not expire upon committing the archetypal sin, despite the divine warning that “in the day you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17; the “you” is plural). Rather, Paul envisions death here in eschatological terms. Death, destined for destruction on the last day, will take down many victims with it. Proof of the power and reality of this future event is that fact that death’s partner in crime, *hamartia* (sin), has all people who are outside of Christ enslaved already (Rom 6:16). One might say that sin and death are the *arrabōn* (deposit, down payment) of eternal destruction somewhat like the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5) is the *arrabōn* of redemption awaiting believers in the age to come.

Corresponding to the reign of death is a future hope: “Much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:17). While we may well think of this future-tense reign (*basileusousin*) in “already” terms as a personal possession through faith, it retains a “not yet” aspect. In its fullest sense it is eschatological in nature. The logic of the discourse here requires us to affirm that, for Paul, God’s future triumph over death—“eternal life” which awaits believers in the age to come (cf. 5:21)—transforms them already in the present.

Romans 6:5 describes a significant aspect of the form this future triumph takes: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” The “if” refers to a condition assumed to be factual; when Christ died, believers were by God’s gracious reckoning present, as Paul testifies elsewhere:

“I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20). It is just as factual, Paul affirms, that “we shall . . . be united with him” in terms of being raised from the dead. The future form *esometha* (we will be) in the second clause combines with *symphytoi* (joined, united)²⁴ in the first clause to set forth what will surely come to pass: believers’ reception of resurrection bodies.

Later in Romans 6 Paul stresses a primary outcome of this: “Sin will have no dominion over you.” Paul’s negated future tense usage (*ou kyrieusei*) assures readers of the possibility of transformed practical lives in the present. The logic of this, while clear enough in Romans 6 itself, is spelled out in Rom 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” Daily life for Christians is transformed, because God, who raised Jesus, “will . . . give life” (*zōopoïēsei*) to them on the basis of his eschatological act of raising Jesus, which, as 6:5 made clear, in turn assures believers of union with him in glorified bodies.

Things to come—particularly bodily resurrection—is determinative for believers’ assurance of reign over sin in the present.²⁵ Space does not permit comment here on the obvious implication that sanctification itself—a major sub-theme of Romans—is directly tied to eschatology.

God’s Current Vindicating Work Is Inseparable from End-Time Fulfillment of His Promises

Nine future tense occurrences in Romans point to God’s work, human experience, or both together, in the vindication of sinners unto eternal life.

In three cases this involves the *zaō* (I

live) word group. “The righteous shall live [*zēsetai*] by faith” (1:17) is a Habakkuk quotation describing not only how sinners can be right with God presently (as Martin Luther found to his immense relief) but also how they can “live eternally.”²⁶ This famous clause, often viewed as thematic for the entire book,²⁷ draws on the horizon of the future to epitomize the very nature of the gospel Paul preached. Paul is not saying that “the righteous” will enjoy daily biological existence through the gospel; to “live” in this sense is simply a fruit of common grace as long as a person draws earthly breath. He is rather pointing to life in the age to come as the outcome of reception of the gospel now.

Something similar can be observed in Rom 6:8: “Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that *we will* also *live* with him.” The italicized words translate the future tense *suzēsomen*,²⁸ a compound verb that occurs only two other times in the NT. In 2 Cor 7:3 it could refer to resurrection life in the age to come, as Paul assures the Corinthians that they are in his heart “to die together and to live together [*eis to synapothanein kai suzēn*]”²⁹ But in 2 Tim 2:11 the word definitely has end-time connotation: “If we have died with him, we will also live with him [*ei synapethanomen, kai suzēsomen*].” The pro-tasis refers to the cross and the apodosis to resurrection.

A similar idea occurs in Rom 8:13, as Paul points out that life in the flesh presages eschatological death, while “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live [*zēsesthe*].” Lohse explicitly notes, “The eschatological character” of life in the Spirit “is emphasized through the future *zēsesthe*.”³⁰ By the Spirit Christians enjoy life “which as an eschatological gift is already at work here

and now.”³¹

Moving beyond occurrences related to the *zaō* word group, seven other Romans passages (8:32; 14:4, 10, 11; 15:9, 11, 21) likewise extend assurance based on promised divine deliverance yet to be fully realized. This is surely the case in Paul’s statement that God “will ... graciously give us [*charisetai*] all things” in a famous extended forensic metaphor (Rom 8:32; cf. 8:31-39). Nothing, not even death itself “will be able [*dynēsetai*] to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What God “will graciously give us” certainly has its current implications, just as for Paul it has rootage in the historical past of Jesus’ coming, but Paul’s reference has primarily a real future in view: the likely prospect of harsh circumstances in this life, attended by God’s protection along the way and complete vindication in the end.

Paul’s crucial discussion of *adiaphora* (Rom 14) turns on a future tense affirmation. Believers should be loath to pass judgment on each other, for we stand or fall not in terms of each other’s assessment but rather based on God’s ultimate determination. The “servant of another” whom we might be tempted to write off “will be upheld [*stathēsetai*]” by the Lord (14:4) as he or she persists in faith (14:22). “For we will all stand [*pantes parastēsometha*] before the judgment seat of God” (14:10), a temporal eventuality for which Paul provides scriptural proof from Isaiah: “It is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow [*kampsei*] to me, and every tongue confess [*exomologēsetai*] to God’” (14:11). Few chapters in Romans are more inescapably practical in their scope, and few are more dependent in their logic on assurances of current vindication—on the basis of which believers are to affirm

each other despite differences on non-essential matters—rooted in the eschatological decisions God will one day render. Eschatology is a primary foundation for interpersonal ethics.

It is also fundamental to missions. James W. Thompson has noted that the book of Romans as a whole “is a challenge to the Roman church to accept Paul’s theology of mission for its continuing life and transformation.”³² More particularly, Robert Jewett has argued that “the goal of the entire argument of Romans” is found in 15:7-13.³³ Jewett probably casts doctrine and “world unification through the gospel” in unhelpfully antithetical terms,³⁴ but his point remains that this is an important passage in Romans, inasmuch as the furtherance of the gospel is an undeniable Pauline priority. And Paul here refers Christ’s very coming, the obvious root of missions, to patriarchal promises made in part “in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (15:9).

Paul’s support for this assertion is drawn from future tense expressions in the LXX.³⁵ In Rom 15:9 he cites words attributed to David in 2 Sam 22:50 and Ps 17:49 (18:49 MT): “Therefore I will praise you [*exomologēsomai*] among the Gentiles, and sing [*psallo*] to your name.” A few verses later he quotes Isaiah: “The root of Jesse will come [*estai*], even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope [*elpisousin*]” (Rom 15:12; cf. Isa 11:10). Now Thomas Schreiner has plausibly argued that Paul “was first and foremost a missionary.”³⁶ If this is accepted, it is particularly significant that in setting forth the basis for the Gentile mission he looks to the future as envisioned by biblical writers. The proleptic vindication of Paul’s controversial outreach cannot be

separated from eschatological promises in Scripture regarding God’s intentions for the Gentiles and through them for the larger world, both in this age and the age to come.

It is worth noting that Paul’s confidence in the Gentile mission comes in part from future references in Isa 52:15 LXX: “Those who have never been told of him will see [*opsontai*], and those who have never heard will understand [*synēsousin*]” (Rom 15:21). Strictly speaking, it could be argued that this is not an eschatological reference but one that is being fulfilled in Paul’s own time. Yet in two senses there remains an eschatological edge here. Firstly, Paul’s writings as a whole show that he realizes his mission is not coterminous with the entire history of Gentile conversion—he is carrying an evangelistic torch that he must pass on to future generations until the Lord’s return.³⁷ Secondly, the fact that Gentiles see and understand is a function of God’s promise, the final fulfillment of which remains future for Paul. Eschatology remains central even to Paul’s understanding of the biblical confirmation of the fruit of his mission labors.

God Eschatological Judgment Dominates and Integrates the Entire Book of Romans

The largest number of future tense usages in Romans relate to final judgment. No other NT book speaks of God’s *orgē* (wrath) as frequently as Romans.³⁸ Paul had a robust doctrine of hell.³⁹ Like Jesus, Paul shared “with the Jewish tradition the expectation of a future judgment when God will vindicate the faithful and punish the wicked.”⁴⁰ Perhaps a third of the roughly 100 future tense occurrences in Romans relate to eschatological judgment. These references are found in most of the

major subdivisions of the epistle and by extension are implied in them all.⁴¹

1. *The Heart of the Gospel (1:18-4:25)*

As this section unfolds, God's end-time verdict of justification or condemnation is dominant. Paul asks the hypothetical judge of rank sinners whether he thinks that he will evade divine judgment: "Do you suppose ... that you will escape [ekpheuxē] the judgment of God?" (2:3) The answer is clearly no, because God "will render [apodōsei] to each one according to his works" (2:6). For Paul this can be explained with relative ease. Gentiles lacking the law "will also perish [apolountai]" without the law, while Jews who break the law "will be judged [krithēsontai] by the law" they possess and take such pride in (2:12). This can be explained, in turn, by the fact that it is not mere hearers of the law but those who actually do it who "will be justified [dikaiōthēsontai]" by God (2:13). The uncircumcision of the one who honors God's law "will ... be regarded [logisthēsetai] as circumcision" (2:26); in fact, that person's responsiveness to God "will condemn [krinei]" the person who possesses covenant benefits like the law and circumcision but transgresses what the covenant calls for (2:27).

In sum, this whole section is dominated by the conviction that human unbelief "will not nullify [katargēsei]" God's faithfulness (3:3), that God will prevail ("you will conquer [vikēseis]") over all human fecklessness (3:4), and that "God will judge [krinei] the world" (3:6).⁴² Paul's outlook is rooted in eschatological certainty: it is not by their own righteous deeds that people "will be justified [dikaiōthēsontai]" (3:20). Rather, the one God of both Gentile and Jew "will justify [dikaiōsei] the circumcision by faith and the uncircumcised

through faith" (3:30). For Paul "the heart of the gospel" is assured by the future God has revealed.

2. *The Assurance Provided by the Gospel (5:1-8:39)*

How can sinful humans endure the specter of eschatological judgment? Future tense affirmations furnish the answers. For Paul, because of Christ's death ("by his blood"), we who receive the gospel message "shall ... be saved [sōthēsometha] by him from the wrath of God" (5:9). From another angle, Christ having been raised, and being present at God's right hand, we "shall ... be saved [sōthēsometha] by his life" (5:10). The key to eternal life rather than never-ending judgment is provided by what Christ did to offset Adam's error: "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made [katastathēsontai] righteous" (5:19).

This means that there is hope even when we are pressed by the full range of desperate questions that arise in view of God's righteous judgment of universal human sinfulness. Paul makes use of the future tense to highlight such questions:

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver [rhysetai] me from this body of death? (7:24).

Who shall bring any charge [engkalesei] against God's elect? (8:33).

Who is to condemn [tis ho katakrinōn, a relatively rare future participle] (8:34).

Who shall separate [chōrisei] us from the love of Christ? (8:35).

And just as future forms are the vehicle for highlighting the human plight, a future quells the angst, as we have already noted earlier: nothing whatsoever "will be able [dynēsetai] to separate us" from God's

love in Christ (8:39).

3. *The Defense of the Gospel:
The Problem of Israel (9:1-11:36)*

What, then, becomes of Israel? In the much-debated chapters 9-11, one of the most disputed future tense affirmations in all of Romans answers that question: “all Israel will be saved [*sōthēsetai*]” (11:27). All serious commentaries devote careful attention to this passage without arriving as yet at consensus regarding its meaning. We cannot hope to determine a single normative interpretation here. It suffices to observe that Paul foresees, beyond the tensions crackling throughout the discourse of Romans 9-11, an eschatological denouement that will do full justice to God’s righteousness and the plight of his chosen people, so much so that the only thinkable conclusion to the matter is doxological (11:33-36). If “Rom. 9-11 is an important and integral part of the letter,”⁴³ eschatology holds a key to its message.

Paul constructs this big-picture future, however, from smaller future tense building blocks. In Romans 9 alone, he draws on some half-dozen OT passages to build his case. All of them project what the Lord God will do in times subsequent to the original writer. All of them had some measure of fulfillment already in OT times, and perhaps as well with the coming of Christ and the spread of the gospel message. Yet Paul also relates these statements to things to come—and in particular to the vindication of his thesis that “it is not as though the word of God has failed” (9:6). That may be the appearance. But this appearance is belied by the fact of what lies ahead.

Firstly, God’s present and future graciousness in accordance with his loving will are assured: “I will have mercy [*eleēsō*]

on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion [*oitirēsō*] on whom I have compassion” (9:15; cf. Exod 33:19 LXX). This is how God has always conducted his affairs, and this is who Paul knows he will continue to reveal himself to be. Moreover, secondly, this unchanging, loving will extends not only to the covenant people of promise but also to the Gentiles, a fact Paul grounds in Hosea. There God states that those formerly not his people “I will call [*kalesō*] ‘my people,’” and those who stood outside God’s redemptive love will be loved (9:26; Hos 2:25). It will come to pass (*estai*) that where non-Jews were formerly barred from covenant acceptance, “they will be called [*klēthesontai*] ‘sons of the living God’” (9:26; Hos 2:1 LXX). Clearly Paul finds present meaning in these future assurances. Thirdly, Isaiah also confirms Paul’s contention. He “cries out concerning Israel” that however innumerable their apparent numbers, “only a remnant of them will be saved [*sōthēsetai*]” (9:27; Isa 10:22). This is because of God’s pending but inexorable eschatological judgment: “For the Lord will carry out [*poiēsei*] his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay” (Rom 9:28; Isa 10:23). Far from God being unjust (Rom 9:14) or finding fault unfairly (9:19), Paul knows God is at work “to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy” (9:23) in accordance with past promises having future outcomes described by God’s word. As a result, fourthly, Romans 9 ends with the statement, again drawing on Isaiah, that whoever places trust in “the stone of stumbling” and “rock of offense” “will not be put to shame [*ou kataischynthēsetai*]” (9:33; Isa 28:16). Here eschatology adorns the confluence of Paul’s soteriology and Christology, as “not put to shame” depicts the favorable divine verdict on judgment

day that believers in Christ will rejoice to hear.

The themes of future exoneration and salvation continue in Romans 10. If you confess Christ truly and fully, “you will be saved [*sōthēsē*]” (10:9). This certainly has present application, but its ultimate utility emerges in the light of the eschatological issues that are at stake across the whole of Romans 9-11. The same is true of Paul’s restatement in 10:11 of the main point of 9:33: “Everyone who believes in” Christ “will not be put to shame [*ou kataischynthēsetai*].” Paul even deepens this Isaianic foundation by pointing to a related declaration in Joel 3:5 LXX: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved [*sōthēsetai*]” (10:13).

At issue in Romans 9-11 is the challenge posed by a gospel message that has been rejected by many of its ostensible beneficiaries. This is not an inter-religious quibble but an issue that will determine eternal destinies. The gravity of the matter is established at the beginning of the section by Paul’s expressed willingness to follow Christ in bearing divine anathema, if this were possible, for the sake of his yet unbelieving ethnic brethren (9:3). As Romans 9-11 moves to its conclusion, Paul admonishes Gentile readers not to trifle with gospel truths; “otherwise you too will be cut off [*ekkopēsē*]” (11:22) with the same disastrous consequences against which Paul warns his fellow Jews. For Paul admonishes them, “If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare [*phēisetai*] you” (11:21).

Throughout Romans 9-11, Paul’s vision is taken captive, not only to the Christ of whom he is *doulos* (slave, bondservant; Rom 1:1), but also to the vision of a final day of reckoning before the Lord God.

4. *The Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct* (12:1-15:13)

We have already referred to some future tense occurrences in this section as we discussed above how God’s current vindicating work is inseparable from end-time fulfillment of his promises. Now however we wish to confirm that this literary subunit of Romans, like the rest of the epistle, contains a strong undercurrent of expectation of God’s end-time judgment.

True, this undercurrent is visible quite apart from future tense references. For example, Rom 12:1 contains extremely strong words of appeal to God’s mercy, an appeal best explained by recognizing that Paul thinks people are hopeless in the end without this mercy. Paul’s equally strong affirmation of his apostolic privilege (12:3: “the grace given to me”; cf. 15:15; 1 Cor 3:10; Gal 2:9; Eph 3:7-8) likewise points to a conviction that eschatological issues are at stake, as do references to God’s wrath (12:19; 13:4, 5) and end-time judgment (13:2; cf. 2:2, 3; 3:8; 5:16). So do the end-time allusions that conclude the section (15:9-12) and that have already been discussed above.

But future tense usage is instrumental in confirming that eschatology is foundational to living in Christian harmony, a major theme of the whole section. Paul tells readers to co-exist peaceably, eschewing vengeful behavior because vengeance lies in other and better hands: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay [*antapodōsō*], says the Lord” (12:19). Paul’s vision of the end likewise informs his précis of Christian citizenship (13:1-7), at the head of which stands the warning that those who flaunt civil authority “will incur [*lēmψontai*] judgment” (13:2). As Schreiner notes,

“Scholars disagree whether the judgment is God’s eschatological judgment or a judgment imposed by earthly rulers.”⁴⁴ Schreiner opts for earthly rulers. Moo thinks reference is to “the eschatological judgment of God.”⁴⁵ In our view a hard distinction between the two is neither possible nor necessary,⁴⁶ since even if the immediate emphasis is on civil penalty, behind that stands God who delegates just punishment of wrongdoing (13:4) and who will have the final word on a potentially dreadful last day.

Quite apart from public life under the aegis and scrutiny of civil law, interpersonal congregational dealings proceed cognizant that God is witness to our actions and assessor of how we regard others. Before passing judgment on or despising a fellow Christian, Paul urges readers to recall that “we will all stand [*parastēsometha*] before the judgment seat of God” (14:10). Or again, “Each of us will give an account [*logon dōsei*] of himself before God” (14:12). To assure that present behavior is “acceptable to God” (14:18) and result in the glorification of God (15:6, 7), acute awareness of the final testing of our words and deeds is strongly advised. Paul’s use of the future tense in this section makes explicit this day of reckoning and its practical ramifications.

Conclusion

This essay argues that Paul’s future tense usage points to a dominant undercurrent of eschatological conviction informing the whole message of Romans. This is not to say that Romans is completely and only about eschatology. It does however caution us against under-appropriating Paul’s ubiquitous eschatological allusions in a sincere desire do justice to topics and themes that tend to get more

emphasis, perhaps because they are more readily visible or pragmatically useful.

When one of the greatest Romans interpreters of the last century spoke and wrote about “Preaching on Romans,” Paul’s acute eschatological awareness was muted if present at all.⁴⁷ A slightly more recent essay on “The Focus of Romans” skillfully draws attention to Paul’s rhetorical strategy but hardly manages to preserve the eschatological urgency to which, as we have seen above, his future tense references constantly and consistently call attention.⁴⁸ Long ago Adolf Schlatter pointed out that soon after Luther’s rediscovery of the urgent message of Romans, “a shadow fell across the epistle.”⁴⁹ Paul’s pressing communiqué became a formalized academic presentation. Contemporary exposition of Romans must work hard to avoid this fate.

Rediscovery of the eschatological edge of Romans is crucial here. But pressure from two sides will make this difficult. First, from the academic side comes this observation regarding contemporary theological thought: “The advent of post-modernity indicates for its defenders as well as for its critics the end of a unified framework of human expectation. . . . Even the new millennium does not seem to have kindled a new pervasive eschatological awareness.” The question is raised whether we are at “the end of the line for eschatology.”⁵⁰ What gave Paul’s message much of its bang sinks into oblivion with a whimper in the current academic setting. It certainly has not helped that dominant notions of God have now for many generations viewed God as part of the world,⁵¹ not a living being outside it, who can and will snuff it out and recreate the whole thing when he deigns to do so—as clearly implied in Paul’s usage of

“wrath of God” and the promise of better things to come.

Second, from the popular side, in the United States at least there is widespread denial that there could even be such a thing as an impending eschatological judgment. Whether within the church or elsewhere, “our nonchalance over our shaky situation reflects our disbelief in God’s judging activity.”⁵² “Shaky situation” here refers to our economic, political, military, and social plight, but Paul would surely say that it applies to our status before God too. For the message of Romans is not just apostolic instruction: it is prophetic outcry and warning. The problem is that it comes dressed in such symmetry, profundity, and intellectual elegance. It has become a Rubik’s Cube for erstwhile expositors instead of a fire alarm to rouse God’s people from their lethargy and shallowness.

Perhaps it took the societal chaos of Germany between the World Wars, and the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, for an interpreter writing there in 1935 to be able to say: “It is evident that every sentence of [Romans] is ‘eschatologically’ aimed. For God’s message announces the Messiah through whom God’s rule will come about, the savior from whom those who believe will receive acquittal in the judgment.”⁵³

Among the 140-plus churches that Benny Delmar planted, one was in Missoula, Montana: Trinity Baptist Church. It celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this August. There my wife met the Lord and was baptized; there I began to discover what Christian discipleship means and was eventually ordained into gospel ministry. Personally I owe a lot to the self-sacrificial ministry of this man (and supportive wife) who could be moved

to tears over the judgment soon to befall this world of sinners. While Delmar (to my knowledge) never set out to publish a work on Romans, he may have grasped its fundamental thesis better than most of us who do.

ENDNOTES

¹See Karen L. Willoughby, “Benny Delmar, dead at 88, leaves church planting legacy,” n.p. [cited 9 July 2007]. Online: <http://www.namb.net/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=9qKILUOzEpH&b=227361&ct=3532429>. My thanks to Glen A. Land for calling my attention to this story.

²Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are to the ESV.

³See, e.g., E. Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK 4/15; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 45-46 (adducing Moo, n. 24 below, in support); U. Wilckens, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Band 1: *Geschichte der urchristlichen Theologie*, Teilband 3: *Die Briefe des Urchristentums* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2005), 48-49.

⁴Karl Donfried, *The Romans Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁵Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Toward a Widescreen Edition,” *Interpretation* 58, no. 3 (2004): 229-40.

⁶Ibid. 236 n. 26.

⁷See N. T. Wright, “A Fresh Perspective on Paul?” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 83, no. 1 (2001): 21-39.

⁸See, e.g., J. D. G. Dunn, “Romans, Letter to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 848-49.

⁹Brendan Byrne, “Interpreting Romans: The New Perspective and Beyond,” *Interpretation* 58, no. 3 (2004): 242-43.

¹⁰James C. Miller, "The Romans Debate: 1991-2001," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 9 (2001): 306-49. Miller seems to have overlooked B. W. Longenecker, *Eschatology and the Covenant: A Comparison of 4 Ezra and Romans 1-11* (JSNTSupp 57; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991). He has also omitted Robert E. Longacre and Wilber B. Wallace, "Soteriology and Eschatology in Romans," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 367-82, on which see below.

¹¹Possible exceptions: P. J. Achtemeier, "Unsearchable Judgments and Inscrutable Ways: Reflections on the Discussion of Romans," in *Pauline Theology. IV. Looking Back, Pressing On* (SBLSS 4; ed. E. E. Johnson and D. M. Hays; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 3-21; R. W. Funk, "Apostolic 'Parousia': Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 249-268; J. C. Miller, *The Obedience of Faith, the Eschatological People of God, and the Purpose of Romans* (SBLDS 177; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

¹²See n. 10 above.

¹³Ibid., 379.

¹⁴Ibid., 380.

¹⁵Ibid., 382.

¹⁶I use "future tense" here morphologically. Not all future tense usages refer to the temporal future. Yet even if Stanley Porter is correct to say that "temporal reference in Greek" is "not grammaticalized in any of the tense forms," he concedes that "the Future can have as

one of its subordinate uses future temporal reference" (*Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* [New York: Peter Lang, 1993], 411). Through exegesis below we will seek to make plausible that many of Paul's future tense references in Romans do make temporally future reference at least in part.

¹⁷So Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 570.

¹⁸Cf. the "gnomic future" in *ibid.* 571.

¹⁹Byrne, "Interpreting Romans," 252.

²⁰Gaventa, "The Cosmic Power of Sin."

²¹"The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 30-54, esp. 32-33, 39-40, 42.

²²Gaventa, "The Cosmic Power of Sin," 237.

²³On this topic broadly see C. Clifton Black II, "Pauline Perspectives on Death in Romans 5-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 413-33.

²⁴Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 368 n. 76.

²⁵Cf. E. Tamez, "The Challenge to Live as Resurrected: Reflections on Romans Six and Eight," *Spiritus* 3, no. 1 (2003): 86-95.

²⁶Moo, *Romans*, 77.

²⁷E.g., Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Theme of Romans," in *The Romans Debate*, 335; Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 29.

²⁸This is "a genuine future, just as

esometha in verse 5"; see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 320.

²⁹To relate this merely to "a common friendship theme in ancient texts" and to Paul's obviously this-worldly reference in 1 Thess 2:8 (so Craig Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005], 197) may be an under-interpretation. The NIV (so also TNIV) translation, "we would live or die with you," achieves smooth English but at the cost of reversing the Greek word order and replacing "and" with "or." BDAG does not appear to offer "or" as a gloss for *kai*. When an ancient Greek writer (in this case Athenaeus of Naucratis; fl. ca. AD 200) wished to speak of "living and dying" with others in strictly this-worldly terms, he could write "living and dying with [*suzōntas kai sunapothnēskontas*]" ; see Georg Strecker and Udo Schnelle, eds., *Neuer Wettstein II/1* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 465. Paul's word order, to say nothing of his doctrine as expressed elsewhere, suggests a more nuanced frame of reference.

³⁰Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 239 n. 7.

³¹Ibid., 239.

³²James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 89.

³³Robert Jewett, "Following the Argument of Romans," in *The Romans Debate*, 265-77 (citing 276).

³⁴Demonstrating the inextricably intertwined character of doctrine

and ethics (as well as affective devotion, or love), is Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). For the outflow of doctrine into mission see especially "Theology of Mission," 71-75. It should also be asked of Jewett's thesis how apt "world unification" is to describe the goal of the Pauline mission.

³⁵Robert Kraft levies criticism against use of this term ("Paramania: Beside, Before, and Beyond Bible Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 [2007]: 17-18. But to speak of a compilation of our printed editions (e.g., Rahlfs) as "the LXX" is not necessarily to indicate ignorance of the complexities and uncertainties surrounding the translation and transmission of various OT books from Hebrew or Aramaic into Greek. The recognition that "strictly speaking, there is really no such thing as the Septuagint" (Karen H. Jobs and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 30) is a textbook commonplace. NT writers like Paul studied and assiduously exegeted an apparent collection of writings (which came to be called canonical, a category of which Kraft is skeptical) and not others (which are called extra-canonical, a category in which Kraft seems to vest particular importance). It is reasonable to call the corpus favored by NT writers *something*, however fuzzy our exact knowledge of the original form/s of those texts. "LXX" is a workable blanket term, the use of which need

not be as historically irresponsible, philologically uncritical, or dogmatically predetermined as Kraft appears to imply. For a fascinating history of aspects of the reception of this corpus see Abraham and David J. Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint: From Classical Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006).

³⁶Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 37. Note also Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, eds., *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

³⁷It is often argued that the early church was dominated by the expectation of Christ's imminent return. Against this, H. Giesen, *Jesu Heilsbotschaft und die Kirche. Studien zur Eschatologie und Ekklesiologie bei den Synoptikern und im ersten Petrusbrief* (BETL CLXXIX; Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2004) points out that "there is no New Testament author who advances as a certain and binding doctrine a particular time of an imminent parousia" (7; cf. the whole of chapter 11 and especially 276-78). Figures like Paul could expect Christ's return, yet also foresee a possible extended interim before it would take place.

³⁸See Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4, 5.

³⁹Douglas J. Moo, "Paul on Hell," in *Hell under Fire* (ed. C. W. Morgan and R. A. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 91-109.

⁴⁰Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*, 92. Note also, e.g., J.-N. Aletti, "Rétribution et jugement de

Dieu en Rom 1-3. Enjeux du problème et proposition d'interprétation," *Didaskalia* 36 (2006): 47-63.

⁴¹For convenience, in coming paragraphs we will follow the literary outline of Moo, *Romans*, v-vi.

⁴²My translations throughout the sentence. In all three cases ESV renders the future differently, and correctly, out of contextual considerations. But future forms anchor the rhetoric and point to an end-time frame of reference.

⁴³Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 547; cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 530.

⁴⁴Schreiner, *Romans*, 679.

⁴⁵Moo, *Romans*, 799.

⁴⁶Cf. Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 355.

⁴⁷C. E. B. Cranfield, *On Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 69-80.

⁴⁸Richard N. Longenecker, "The Focus of Romans: The Central Role of 5:1-8:39 in the Argument of the Letter," in *Romans and the People of God* (ed. Sven Soderlund and N. T. Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 49-69.

⁴⁹Adolf Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit: ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief* (5th ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1975 [= 1935]), 7.

⁵⁰Christoph Schwöbel, "Last Things First? The Century of Eschatology in Retrospect," in *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology* (ed. David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 236.

⁵¹John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

⁵²Steven J. Keillor, *God's Judgments: Interpreting History and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 195.

⁵³Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit*, 10.