

Reading Romans as about Christians and not about Christians

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As I have been going through Romans once again with my Sunday school class, it has increasingly become evident to me how hard it is – and at the same time how important it is – to realize that this isn't a Christian document.

In saying that, I don't mean that Paul's message was not that which at a later time would be labelled "Christian." But neither am I simply pointing out that, when Paul wrote, the label "Christian" had not caught on yet, and Paul does not use it.

But when we realize that Paul did not have a clear label such as "Christian" for the movement of which he was a part, it should make us wonder: Did Paul think of himself as part of a distinct group at all? Did he simply think of himself as Jewish?

When he advocated the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles in the people of God, if there was no clearly distinct Christian church at this stage, then we must understand him to have been advocating the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles *in Judaism*, the elimination for all intents and purposes of the Jew/Gentile distinction, to be replaced simply by a multi-ethnic Israel on the one hand, and those who refused to be a part of it on the other. Perhaps when we understand Paul this way, against the backdrop of increasing anti-Roman sentiment that would erupt within decades in a war against Rome, it becomes clear just what a radical message he was advocating. His letters are not an attempt to define "Christian" identity in a certain way, but an attempt to define *Jewish* identity in that way.

It may seem ironic, but one of the best ways to grasp this point, as a Christian reader of Romans, is to read Paul as talking about Christians. Not as a Christian so much as *about* Christians. Read him as though he were emphasizing that Christian boundary markers are of no importance. Christian and non-Christian are distinctions that do not matter – only keeping the commandments is what counts.

I've shared some thoughts along those lines before on my blog, but let me [share something very recent along the same lines by Richard Hall](#).

It is radical, and includes an expletive (those who've read Paul in Greek know that he was not above using them from time to time). And you will probably never read Romans in the same way again if you [click through and read it](#). But I hope you will, and that after doing so, you'll come back here and let me know how it affected you.

Originally posted at [Exploring Our Matrix](#).