

Northolt Park Baptist Church

God's New People – Romans 1-11 and 12:1

We have come to a point where we need to think about where we're at as a church, and where we'd like to be at. But we're going to reflect on that in tandem with looking at Romans 12. It would be possible to talk together about how we feel, about where the church is strong and weak, about what we think we should be doing, and yet to drift from the moorings that the Bible itself offers us.

So, that's the agenda we're setting ourselves over the next few weeks – to look at just one significant passage about the church, where Paul lays out a vision of *God's new people* – to make sure we begin our thinking from an appropriate place, so that we can see how what Paul says to the church in Rome *there* and *then* might apply to us as a church in the *here* and *now*.

Depending on your preference, here we are looking at either one word or eleven chapters! Take a look at the opening word of 12:1 – 'Therefore'. That's crucial. And, of course, prompts the question we know we need to ask, What is the 'therefore' there for?

Paul is talking here about the church, God's new people, but he doesn't begin talking about the church in Romans chapter 1; he begins in chapter 12, and to understand what he is about to say, we need to understand what he's said before.

Romans paints an amazing picture of salvation. We're taken from our sin and alienation from God, what Christ has done on our behalf, the importance of faith as the means by which we are made right before God, our new life in Christ, the work of the Spirit in our lives. And Romans 8 brings it all to an amazing climax, focusing on the hope we have, that all things will work out for the good, that we are safe and secure, that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. We get to the end of chapter 8,

and breathe a deep and gratified sigh. What a great letter this is, and what an amazing finish! Until we turn over the page, and discover there's more! In fact, we're only half-way through!

We then spend three chapters thinking about God's promises related to Israel. They're difficult chapters, and we're not quite certain we fully understand them. But we work our way through them, and they conclude with a great outburst of praise to God (11:33-36). Surely now we really have got there! Amen! And we sink back with a great sense of being overwhelmed at what God has done for his people. It's amazing. There can't be any more to add, can there? And then we turn over the page to discover 12:1 – 'Therefore'!

I recall being a young Christian listening intently to a great Welsh preacher expounding Scripture. Half an hour into an amazing sermon, he announced: 'and that's the end of my introduction!' In a sense, Romans 1-11 has been just the introduction. That's an exaggeration, of course; but we can sometimes treat chapters 12-16 as an add-on to the letter. In fact, arguably, this is where it's all been leading up to – the life of God's new people.

In Romans 1-11, Paul shows how God has redrawn the boundaries of what it means to belong to the people of God. The one God is now the God of both Jew and Gentile. The promise of the covenant is to all Abraham's seed. Circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit is what matters, not circumcision of the flesh by the hands of human beings. People enter the covenant without reference to their family history, without reference to the works of the law. The gospel is open to all who believe. All, whether Jew or Gentile, who call on the name of the Lord Jesus are saved. God has gathered together a new people in Christ.

Therefore... Paul will now go on to speak about our life together as that new people of God.

And what he says is entirely in tune with the rest of the New Testament, which is not about me as a Christian, but about *us* as a *church*. Together we make up the people of God, and it's our relationship as the new covenant people of God that's in view in Romans 12, and which we'll come to over the next few weeks.

I wonder if you could guess what word is used most in Romans? Once we get rid of words like 'the' and 'and' and 'in', the word most used is not 'law' or 'sin' or 'faith' or 'Jew' or 'Gentile', or even 'Jesus'. The word used most in Romans is 'God'.

In all our reflections on church, we begin where we should always begin – with God himself. When Paul talks about God's new people, that's the point – they are *God's* new people.

Romans 1-11 – this is what God has done for us... Romans 12:1 – *therefore!*

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 22 April 2007