I am currently in the middle of a thread discussing the significance of Paul to the history of early Christianity. So far I have been trying to argue that Paul is of utmost importance to the New Testament itself, but that it is very difficult to know how much of what we think of as Pauline theology (the doctrine of the atonement, for example) was *distinctive* of Paul (I doubt if he came up with the idea himself) and that there are some prominent features of Paul’s thought – e.g., the importance of Jesus’ resurrection – that he must have inherited from Christians before him.

One of my ultimate points is going to be that whatever one thinks about Paul’s originality, it is clear that the gospel that he proclaimed looked very different from what Jesus himself taught. To get to that point, I have to deal a bit more with what it is that Paul proclaimed.

Nowhere does Paul lay out his gospel message more clearly than in the book of Romans. The reason is that this letter – unlike all the others that we have from Paul’s hand – was not written to a church that he himself had founded and was not written to deal with problems that had arisen in the the community (unlike the other six). Paul explicitly indicates that he had not founded this church and in fact had never even been to Rome. He does want to come there, though, because he wants to use it as a base of operation for his mission further to the West, to Spain.

But he knows that (some of? all?) the Roman Christians have heard rumors about him and his mission and his message, and he needs to set the record straight so they will support him. To do so, he lays out his gospel message to them, explaining what it is he stands for.

And so Romans is his attempt to explain his gospel message. In my textbook on the New Testament I try to explain what this message is. It will take two or three posts here to lay it all out. Here’s the first bit, taken from the book:

Pauline Models for Salvation

Rather than launching into a passage-by-passage exposition of Romans, it may be more useful at this point to reflect in broader terms on what Paul has to say in this letter about his central theme, the gospel. (Remember: Paul is not speaking about a Gospel book that contains a record of Jesus’ words and deeds, but about his own gospel message.) In fact, Paul has a variety of things to say about it, and it is easy at places to become confused, wondering if Paul is being consistent with himself. In most instances (I’m not sure I can vouch for all of them), Paul is not inconsistent and is not himself confused. The difficulty is that he discusses God’s act of salvation in a number of different ways and sometimes does not clearly indicate which way he is thinking about. Or to put the matter somewhat differently, Paul has various modes of understanding — various conceptual models — of what it means to say that God brought about salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

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Paul’s “Participationist” Model of Salvation
Paul’s Gospel Message