Getting Along When We Don't Agree: Interpreting Romans Using Simulation and Controversy

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E-mail to five first-year college students taking the same "Encountering the Bible" section: "You seem like a thoughtful student and a natural leader. Would you be willing to act as the leader of one of the small groups we'll be working in when we begin our study of Romans next week? You will not have any more preparation than anyone else in your group, but your role will be to keep the conversation going and make sure everyone has a chance to give their opinions."

For the past 14 years, I have taught Romans to approximately 30 different sections of 35 students each, plus several upper-level classes of students majoring within the Biblical and Religious Studies Department at Messiah College. Before that, I taught the course twice at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and other times in Sunday schools in various churches.

When I began my master's degree in the late 1980s in preparation for a PhD program at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, the first Bible class I took was Romans with Dr. Robert Jewett, a Pauline scholar. Although as a feminist I wanted to engage Paul, the dense, abstract, theological tract that I thought was Romans was not at the top of my list. But in my first class, when Jewett read his paper on "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," I was blown away. Phoebe? I hardly knew she existed. And Spain? I didn't know Spain was even mentioned in the New Testament.

In the weeks that followed, every class period introduced me to new information about why Paul wrote this lengthy speech, how Phoebe may have interpreted it, and how the house church represented in Romans 16 might have received it. I began to see that my new rhetorical and social-scientific tools for interpreting Romans were changing its meaning. No longer was the overall thrust "How can I as a sinner get right with God?" Rather, it concerned questions like "Is God fair to accept non-law-observant Gentiles on the same basis as Jews?" and "How should believing Jews and

Gentiles relate to each other?" Paul was far more positive about his Jewish theological roots than I had ever imagined.

As someone more experienced in religious journalism than scholarly research, I found the questions recurring in my head throughout that course were Why didn't I learn this in Sunday School? and Why didn't anybody teach me this before? And more important: Can this material be made accessible in Christian education and to laypeople in general?

How Can I "Preach This Gospel"?

If I had known at the time that this approach was part of a recent emerging paradigm in Romans study, I may not have felt as angry at being cheated in my early religious education, or as excited about figuring out how to teach it. Because these new methods highlighted the huge culture gap between the first-century Jesus movement and modern Western society, it seemed important to acknowledge and try to bridge the gap.

Gradually, an idea formed in my mind. If the original historical situation can be reconstructed to some degree, why not devise an interactive simulation? A class of students could recreate one or more Roman house churches, with each member playing a different role as Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, poor or not-so-poor. Then "Phoebe" could read chunks of text aloud (as would have happened in a mostly illiterate group with no access to extra copies of the letter), and the "Roman believers" could then discuss what they thought about Paul's ideas and whether or not they agreed with him. It wasn't authoritative scripture yet! Finally, they would end the simulation and discuss what the text may mean in today's cultural context. My idea eventually became *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation* (Herald, 1993); the second edition, with more teaching helps, is *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

As noted above, I have taught Romans many times, adapting this simulation to classes in church school, college, and seminary. The most ideal teaching situation is a three-week course that meets every day for several hours. This keeps students more immersed in their roles in the house church, providing larger blocks of time for a sustained simulation and discussion of contemporary application.

However, conditions are usually not ideal, and the material must be adapted to shorter and/or fewer classes. These can range from a one-session class on Rom. 14 to a three-session "highlights of Romans" study to a one-month unit in my first year "Encountering the Bible" college course. The curriculum itself was written for a 13-week Sunday school quarter. In addition to providing historical and cultural background and using material from the beginning and end of Romans to suggest reasons why Paul wrote this letter, I include profiles of each of the five house church or cell groups mentioned in Rom. 16:3-5, 10, 11, 14, and 15.[1] Because of ethnic and economic differences, these groups may not be getting along very well. Another chapter creates names, backgrounds, and roles for seven or eight characters in each group.

When house church members have developed their character sketches, they introduce themselves to everyone else in their group, and then the various house churches introduce themselves to each other. Only then can we begin reading and discussing the text of Romans. For oral reading, I try to find a good public reader as Phoebe, or I do it myself, condensing dense sections of Romans into easier text for today's shorter attention spans.

Tales from the Front Lines

My first experience teaching Romans (after a trial run in Sunday school at my home church in Chicago) was with a class of eight at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, during a month-long January 1990 term. We developed only one house church, that of Prisca and Aquila referred to in Rom. 16:3-5. Living in one household would have been socially, economically, and ethnically mixed, allowing for lively conversation.

But some students were skeptical. For the first two days, Kent[2] slouched in his seat, looking bored. But after the first weekend, he was leaning forward, enthusiastically immersed in the conversation. When I commented on the difference, he admitted that he finally started reading the material and got turned on. As the most liberal (or licentious) Gentile in our group, someone who enjoyed "sinning so that grace could much more abound," we needed Kent's antinomian remarks and accounts of questionable behavior on trading journeys for his master.

More difficult to deal with was Janet, preparing to pastor in the Foursquare Gospel Church. Her story taught me and our class how

unsettling a nontraditional method of Bible study can become. Janet was a good speaker, so I asked her to be Phoebe, the reader, as well as playing the role of a responsible slave house manager. But by the end of the first week, she was ready to drop out. She knew the traditional Romans, and this approach was simply too human. "I don't believe the New Testament Christians experienced such conflict with each other. That's not the way Christians behave. When you know the Lord, you all agree and get along with each other. That's what happened to me." I talked her into hanging on, especially since it would hardly be appropriate to lose Phoebe.

Janet managed until the last Wednesday, when we discussed Rom. 13, the passage on paying taxes and obeying the government. As we moved into contemporary implications of this text, denominational proclivities emerged. "If Paul asks us to pay our taxes, what do we do about war taxes?" asked Leonard, a Mennonite pastor taking courses during his year's sabbatical. "If Paul tells us to feed our enemies instead of killing them (12:14-21), how can we pay taxes that support war?"(This was when US involvement in Central America dominated the news, full of murders, the Iran-Contra scandal, and other human rights abuses in El Salvador and Nicaragua.) Greg, who had seen Nicaraguan oppression first hand, also struggled with the tax issue. Janet was appalled that anyone would question the government's foreign policy. "We have to support democracy against Communism. It can't be helped if some people get killed in the process. We must obey the government, just like Paul says," she declared. "On the other hand, I'll pay your war taxes if you pay my taxes for welfare," she added. "I think it's wrong to give money to people who don't work for a living."

The discussion moved toward abortion, since many Mennonites link abortion with their general position on nonviolence. Here Janet was adamant. Abortion was always wrong because it killed human life. Anna asked Janet what she would do if she lived in China, where abortion was mandatory in the event of a second pregnancy: "Would you obey the government in this instance?"

"I certainly would not!" Janet maintained. I would never have an abortion!"

"But then you'd be disobeying the government," insisted Anna. "How is that consistent with your view of Romans 13?"

Janet was trapped and silenced. Even though I internally sided with the majority, I felt uncomfortable about her isolation. I can't wait till tomorrow, I thought. That's when we deal with Rom. 14 and how we get along with each other even when we don't agree.

Janet was absent after our last break. Students worried about this absence, afraid they had come down too hard on her. The next day she did not show up at all. My hopes for practicing "strenuous tolerance"[3] when Christians disagree were dashed. Janet, who declared that when people love the Lord they all get along, needed to understand the message of Rom. 14. Instead, her absence provided a powerful negative lesson for the rest of the class on the importance of accepting others when we don't agree with them – and how hard it is to carry out. I hope none of those students ever forget Paul's instructions to welcome others – "but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions" (14:1); I never will.

When Janet did not return on our last day of class, I phoned her to find out what happened. "I couldn't come back," she said. "I was so upset by our conversation on Wednesday, and that Christian people can actually relativize abortion. I could have never gone back." To her, we must have seemed like heretics that she could not associate with. "However," she said, "my husband and I are moving soon anyhow. We want to attend Pat Robertson's new seminary in eastern Virginia. I think we'll be a lot more comfortable there."

I'm sure you will be, I thought, knowing I had failed to reach this student with Paul's message of Christian tolerance. Figuring out the contemporary implications of Romans can be upsetting.

Multi-Ethnic Roman House Churches

My most enthusiastic Romans class came a few years later, also at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. It was another January term, but this time I had nearly 35 students, enough for five house churches. Some of the students had remarkable acting skills, and by sheer serendipity our "Phoebe" was a woman by the same name, an experienced reader who always performed in costume. The class was enormously enriched by the fact that nearly a third of them were from other cultures – either international students or persons of color from urban backgrounds in the US. The ethnic diversity

of Romans delighted them. "That liberal/conservative struggle among Jews and Gentiles in Romans is the same sort of thing that's happening in my church back home," said the Ethiopian student.

Another church leader from El Salvador connected the attitudes of scorning and passing judgment among the Roman Christians with the paternalistic attitudes of white US Mennonite church administrators toward native leaders in his country. A Japanese student drew diagrams of Paul's theology from Rom. 1-4 and its message for the church she was returning to in Japan. A Chinese pastor wrote her paper on the women of Rom. 16, thrilled to find strong evidence for women's leadership in first-century Roman churches. I was touched by a Puerto Rican man's reflection paper at the end of the course. He wrote of how skeptical he had been at the beginning: "I thought role-play was just for children – but within a few days I found out that I really WAS Vitalis, a humble cobbler in the house church of the Saints (16:15). I could learn better about Paul's letter from Vitalis's perspective."

This diversity sharpened students' awareness of economic and class issues in the Roman churches. They took seriously the fact that at least a third of them were slaves with no human rights, and that most lived at subsistence level. For instance, the slave Theotekna attended the house church of Prisca and Aquila, though she came from another household where her master regularly beat and abused her. Theotekna had heard of Jesus through her brother Aurelius, a slave in Prisca and Aquila's household. Despite his lowly position, Aurelius would bring her plight to the whole group and plead with them for help, finding support in Paul's vision of the equality of Jew and Gentile. The house church decided to save money to buy Theotekna from her master. By the end of the course, they had succeeded in doing so. They were thrilled, and the rest of us celebrated with them!

I was also pleased at the ingenuity of the poverty-stricken house church of the Saints living down in the slums of Trastevere. Discussing the ethics of hospitality and the command to "contribute to the needs of the saints" in 12:13, this house church pondered how they would keep from starving if they paid their taxes as instructed in 13:1-7.

Visiting another house church at the time, I looked up to see the entire group of Saints marching over to the Narcissus cell group, who were supposedly economically better off as upwardly mobile slaves in an imperial

household. "Can you share some of your food?" they begged. "We had to pay our taxes and now we're starving!" The Narcissiani were startled by the request, and sheepish because they didn't have any food at the time. However, at the next day's simulation they produced pretzels and cookies, and ceremoniously presented them to the Saints.

Can Teenagers Imagine What Slavery is Like?

Since then I've taught on the college level, and I spend a month on a Romans study with first-year students. With less knowledge or experience in multi-cultural situations, these students naturally exhibit less theological understanding. Sometimes house church discussions in the earlier chapters of Romans get repetitive when students do not prepare adequately ahead of time and end up arguing the same issue of law-observance versus non-law-observance for several consecutive class periods. However, inductive questions and "dear diary" requirements for each class have helped alleviate that.

A liberal Gentile male will occasionally boast of sexual indiscretions or flirting with orgiastic religions, shocking his more conservative, probably Jewish, counterparts. One very creative Prisca suggested to her surprised house church that she was pregnant and would need to buy the abused slave Theotekna for the baby's nurse! I've had bright, articulate students play Epaenetus (16:5), a Jewish refugee butcher returning to Rome who insists on preparing kosher meat for the household, annoying the Gentile house manager. Roman names intrigue the students; they tell me they remember each other's Roman names better than their real ones. I chuckled to hear the girls in Lucius's house church call him "luscious."

The reality of ancient slavery is difficult for today's American youth to comprehend. They rarely see it as degrading and brutal as black slavery was in the US centuries later. When "slaves" write up their character sketches, they imagine considerate masters who teach them how to read and write and promise to free them when they become adults so they can get married. I often require them to further research and rewrite their character sketches, in order to get some sense of what it would be like to live with no human rights, not even to one's own body, and with no likelihood of freedom until one is old or sick. This introduction to ancient slavery also provides an opportunity

for me to draw attention to the reality of today's horrific trade in sex slavery and the slavery of millions of child workers.

Teaching Romans to an upper-level college class of Bible and Christian Ministry majors and minors provides more excitement and versatility than the first-year general education class does. One vocal and articulate house church called "The Brothers and Sisters" deadlocked over conservative/liberal lifestyles and beliefs that pervaded every conversation throughout simulations on Rom. 1-11. Their intense arguments would distract the neighbors living only a few feet away. But by the time we reached the ethical admonitions of Rom. 12, something changed. I was sitting with another house church when I looked up to see the most legalistic, loud-mouthed Jewish brother embracing each of his fellow brothers and sisters. He had at last "seen the light," come to understand Paul's message of a law-free gospel, and was becoming reconciled with his cell group.

We conclude each course with a Roman meal, inviting all house churches to participate. I usually prompt Prisca and Aquila to issue the invitation, assuming they are the only ones wealthy enough to have a house. Because of the deep symbolism of "commensality" in this culture, bringing the squabbling house churches together is a momentous occasion. Still in their roles, they can mix with each other and tell stories from their own house church experience. Phoebe leads the Lord's Supper ritual, using the Mediterranean meal custom of bread-breaking before the meal and the drinking ritual at the end.

I arrange a Roman meal with the college dining services for my first-year students (extra credit for coming in costume!), but in situations where participants prepare their own meals, we have potlucks. My book includes lists of appropriate foods and some a number of recipes. Group members can bring only items appropriate to their religious or socio-economic station in life, i.e., no meat from poor people or from conservatives who cannot get kosher meat (Rom. 14:2). I make sure some wealthier liberal Gentiles bring pork or ham so the food laws can be observed or flouted, depending on one's character. Some observant Jews watch what they eat with great care.

Can simulated agape meals and Holy Communion have real spiritual meaning for the participants? It doesn't always happen among some less mature college students. Others react differently. Two years ago I led a Romans simulation for a Mennonite Ministers' Week in Waterloo, Ontario. We concluded with a ritual of hand washing and sharing bread and grape juice in separate house churches. The leader of one house church told me afterward that he had been concerned whether this ritual would have appropriate spiritual impact within a simulation. But he found it deeply meaningful for himself, and looking around his group he saw tears in many eyes. It was a time for unity after many heated debates.

Teaching Through Controversy and Conflict

I admit that this method does not allow material to be presented as systematically as I would like it to be. My tension also mounts when house churches get stuck on repetitive conflicts, mostly because they haven't done enough homework. I think about how much more thoroughly Romans theology would be covered if I simply lectured.

Another challenge is keeping up with scholarship on Romans and adjusting the simulation accordingly. For example, what if the Jewish believers were still meeting in the synagogues? What if Claudius' edict expelling Jews was not a major factor affecting how Paul wrote his letter? What if the ethnic, religious, and political disagreements in Rome were far more nuanced than we can simulate? (Of course they were.) Virginia Wiles, a Pauline scholar in a more diverse liberal arts college, used my approach for Romans but included a synagogue of Jews who also reacted to Paul's letter. Wiles also created a web site with sample character sketches and additional information on ancient Rome, which I also found helpful.[4]

Conclusion

In spite of these limitations, I close with some key concepts that role-playing Roman house churches can highlight:

- First, the early churches experienced conflict and not all believers agreed on many theological and ethical issues. Contrary to what Janet believed, if people "come to know the Lord," they will not always get along with each other and experience unity of mind

and heart. Understanding how NT writings exhibit the human limitations of the earliest believers can make the documents more accessible.

- Conversely, this method of presenting a new paradigm of interpreting Romans is less threatening, especially to younger students. During my years at Messiah, a Brethren in Christ college filled with Christian/evangelical students, I did not have a single student who had ever previously heard of the "emerging paradigm" of Romans interpretation, even though various forms of it have been accepted by scholars for years. The traditional paradigm, in which Romans timelessly tells individuals how to get saved by grace through faith and not the Jewish law, prevails in the church at large. Yet students (except Janet!) did not resist this approach as I imagine some may have otherwise.

- Third, I almost never need to talk about women's leadership in the early church – and today. With the deacon Phoebe speaking for Paul, and at least half the house church leaders being females (Junia is an apostle!), I get less resistance than if I lectured on women's leadership in the early church.

- Fourth, by arguing their case for or against the need to keep the Mosaic law, students come to appreciate the value of Jewish covenant traditions. They learn the difference between religious identity markers and ethical practices. They feel how easily grace can slip into license to do whatever one wants.

- Fifth, educational research has demonstrated that teaching through constructive controversy is more effective than either lecture or group discussion.[5] Even though less material is "covered," more is retained as students wrestle with and provide arguments for or against various positions. Yet students, perhaps especially Christian students, have a difficult time vigorously debating their peers for fear of hurting or being hurt. Using role-play first, where they can be as obnoxious as they wish, loosens

up participants to speak their minds during the subsequent debate and discussion on contemporary application.

- Sixth, role-playing is fun!

Notes

[1] Much of this material is drawn from Robert Jewett's research, as well as Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in dem ersten beiden Jahrhunderten: Untersuchen zur Sozialgeschichte* [The Christians of the City of Rome in the First Two Centuries: Exploring Social History] (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989).

[2] Not their real names.

[3] This term is used by Robert Jewett in *Christian Tolerance: Paul's Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

[4] www.nbts.edu/academics/faculty/wiles/romans/simul/htm

[5] For example, see David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith, "Constructive Controversy: The Educative Power of Intellectual Conflict" in *Change* (Jan./Feb. 2000): 29-37. Also David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith, *Academic Controversy: Enriching College Instruction through Intellectual Conflict. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Volume 25, No. 3*. (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, 1996).

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