




12-2014

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Recommended Citation

Moore, Mark (2014) "Book Review - Introducing Romans, Richard Longenecker," *Eleutheria*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elev/vol3/iss1/5>

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Book Review - Introducing Romans, Richard Longenecker

Abstract

Review of Richard Longenecker's *Introducing Romans*.

Keywords

Romans, Introduction, Longenecker

Cover Page Footnote

Ph.D. in Theology and Apologetics, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 2016 completion.

Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter. By Richard N. Longenecker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, xxvii + 490 pp., \$40.00 paper.

In *Introducing Romans*, Richard N. Longenecker brings together an impressive and thorough study of the major elements in Pauline studies concerning his letter to the Romans. The material brought together here stands as an extended introduction to his forthcoming full commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (NIGTC). In this much anticipated full commentary, many of the issues brought up in this volume will be given more complete individual treatment. Longenecker's own background makes him a suitable candidate to undertake this task. He has served in teaching positions at Wheaton College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Wycliffe College, and McMaster Divinity College, as well as being president of the Evangelical Theological Society in both America and Canada.

Longenecker sets up this introductory volume in five parts: part one deals with basic and relatively uncontested topics such as authorship, Paul's use of Tertius as an amanuensis, the integrity of the letter, and the occasion and date of Paul's writing. Part two looks at the "pivotal issues" of the audience of the letter and possible purposes for Paul writing Romans the way that he did. Part three discusses the various literary devices utilized by Paul to further his argument as well his use of early Christian confessions and the Old Testament. Part four pulls the lens out a bit and looks at the overall task of interpreting biblical texts and then applies this model of interpretation to specific, and long debated, passages in Romans. Part five draws everything together and serves as Longenecker's foundation for his overall view of the central idea in Romans.

Longenecker's main thesis in this work is that chapters 5–8 serve as the central "thrust" of Paul's theological argument in the letter, for these chapters best represent Paul's contextualization of the gospel for the Gentile members of the Roman church. He also affirms that the challenges raised in interpreting Romans as a contextualized gospel can serve as a contemporary model for the challenges of contextualizing the gospel message for new audiences, therefore a better understanding of Paul's approach to contextualization can shape and form new approaches of gospel contextualization or evangelism (though Longenecker strays from using this type of language).

In looking at Longenecker's main thesis, it is important to understand his view of contextualization and the audience for which Paul is putting the gospel in context. In part two, Longenecker lists the issue of audience, or *addressees* as he terms it, as a "pivotal" issue and based on his thesis the issue becomes paramount. Contextualization is based on the audience and conveying a possibly foreign concept to said audience in a way that they can grasp the content. The concept of contextualization relies on the premise that the audience would not understand some of the main tenets of the concept being conveyed unless it was filtered through language and illustrations known by the target audience. This understanding of contextualization raises questions about the audience of Romans considering the Jewish language and illustrations used by Paul throughout.

Longenecker answers the question of audience by surveying the major issues of audience through traditional lenses—Jewish audience with caveats to Gentiles, a predominately Gentile audience, a mix—and amasses a thorough and brief look at the major arguments for each view. He cautions the interpreter of Romans from trying to ascertain the audience by employing the technique of mirror reading, a caution that seems appropriate though one could argue that Paul perhaps does something similar by anticipating the major objections of his readers. To escape the pitfalls of mirror reading, Longenecker looks at extra-biblical issues to ascertain Paul's audience. He looks at Rome during the first-century as well as the possible origin of the church in Rome and a brief history of Jewish in Rome before the first century. Interestingly, Longenecker appears to downplay the importance of the edict of Claudius in AD 49 noting that this was not the first time Jews were expelled from Rome and that is likely that not all Jewish Christians left since they had separated from the general Jewish population in Rome.

His survey of extra-biblical issues concerning the make up of the Roman church does lead him to the conclusion that Paul's audience was a mix of both Jews and Gentiles, but it was predominately Gentile at the time of Paul was writing the letter. He does point out, though, that this predominately Gentile church was strongly influenced by Jewish thought and the church in Jerusalem. He notes that the earliest believers in Rome did not appear to form their own form of governing body but looked to the church in Jerusalem for direction and guidance, thus underscoring the Jewish character with which the church was formed. It is here that Longenecker makes an extremely valuable observation and connection. Earlier arguments for a predominately Gentile audience seem to miss the overt Jewish and covenantal language that Paul uses, not to mention his explicitly Jewish illustrations like Abraham and David. By stressing that this largely Gentile church had been shaped by Jewish thought and the Jerusalem church, Longenecker makes the issue less about ethnicity and more theology, noting a misunderstanding of the Law as the crux of the problem. While this move is intriguing some might argue that Paul does appear to divide his argument ethnically, not just theologically, and that this view seems to miss the importance of chapters 9–11 to the letter.

Longenecker uses this view of the audience of the letter to give direction to the other issue in Romans he labels as pivotal: the issue of purpose. He cites Stanley Towers who states that confusion over Paul's purpose among interpreters would clear up if everyone viewed that audience as god-fearing, which insinuates a strong Gentile presence but laced with Jewish overtones and thought. For Longenecker, one of the main purposes Paul is writing is to impart to the Romans "some spiritual gift," which Longenecker understands as Paul's gospel. It seems here that by "Paul's gospel," Longenecker means the gospel that Paul preached, or contextualized, for the Gentiles on his missionary journeys. Paul is hoping that his understanding of the gospel will help the church in Rome. It seems this point is overstressed though and does not give enough weight to the content of the rest of the letter.

As noted above, Longenecker's view of the audience is also extremely important to his thesis and stress on chapters 5–8 as key to the entire letter. For a contextualized gospel to be key, the audience needed to be shaped in such a way that contextualization was needed. A predominately Gentile audience would need a different explanation of the gospel, especially concerning the covenant and use of the Mosaic law. He strengthens his case that the section 5–8 is a summary of Paul's contextualized gospel by using his section on Paul's usage of the Old Testament throughout the epistle to show that Paul surprisingly uses the least Old Testament references and allusions in chapters 5–8. He cites that only two Old Testament references are used in 5–8, while about eighteen are used in 1:16–4:25, almost thirty in 9–11, and ten more in 12:1–15:13. For Longenecker, this puts the main thrust of the theological argument of Romans clearly in these passages for it fits his understanding of the gospel that Paul preached to the Gentiles. It does appear again, though, that this contradicts or at least strains his earlier stress on the Jewish character of the church in Rome which influenced its current Gentile majority.

Building on his survey of the varied literary conventions utilized by Paul, along with an overview of Jewish Christian themes, Longenecker's break down of the main argument of 5–8 is rather helpful in pursuing his overall thesis. He shows that in 5–8 *peace* and *reconciliation* become the main themes of the gospel instead of the more Jewish ideas of justification or propitiation. The universal story of sin through Adam replaces the story of deliverance from exile. Questions about the relationship of sin and grace and law are answered. Life in the Spirit and God's love close out the section. While Longenecker uses this summary to strengthen his thesis and focus on 5–8, and often repeats it in several sections, the argument seems to fall short of being conclusive.

Longenecker's scholarship and his mastery of Pauline sources is admirable and envious, and his forthcoming commentary on Romans will surely be a staple in Roman's research for years to come. Yet his overall argument here seems to discount the rest of Paul's letter and the overwhelmingly Jewish tone that it possesses. If chapters 5–8 are a picture of Paul's gospel to the Gentiles, why does he not use the same themes in his letter to the Galatians? In fact, Galatians uses the same illustrations and even Old Testament quotations we see in 1:16–4:25. Also, just because 5–8 are different than the rest of Romans, the tone and focus and even the sheer amount of Old Testament quotations in the other sections of Romans should point us towards a more complete explanation. Longenecker reminds us that Romans 5–8 is an extremely important section in the letter but, in the end, it should remain as a part of the letter not the central focus.

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