

# Why Exhort a Good Tree?: Anthropology and Paraenesis in Romans

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## Introduction

What is the proper role of exhortation in preaching? Should we avoid exhorting from the pulpit as much as possible, because we think of exhortations as “Law” and we want the Gospel to predominate? Should we avoid preaching with imperatives and cohortatives, because we assume that they always accuse? Is it even possible to preach for a sanctification goal? Put another way, if a good tree brings forth good fruit automatically and does not need to be exhorted to bear good fruit, then why not preach only accusing Law and forgiveness and let the rest take care of itself? Why exhort a good tree?

The fact of the matter is that the Biblical writers do a lot of exhorting of God’s people in sermonic as well as didactic contexts. This, we believe, has important ramifications. Even in Romans, which consists largely of accusing Law and the Gospel of justification, Paul often warns and exhorts Christians with respect to their Christian lives. In this study we will focus on the hortatory material of Romans, not only because it is fairly typical of Pauline paraenesis in general, but also because we believe that Pauline paraenesis has homiletical implications. To be sure, the issue of preaching sanctification is too large and complex to be thoroughly treated here, involving as it does both theological and homiletical considerations. Nevertheless, we believe that an exegetical approach—as distinct from speculative theologizing or simply asserting personal opinion—can make a contribution to the larger issue. It should be kept in mind that, in addition to the regular reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul’s epistles were meant to be read aloud in the

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public worship services. Because Paul's epistles occupied a position somewhat similar to that of a sermon today, they can help us address the question of preaching.

### The Anthropology of Christians

In order to understand the Pauline exhortatory material we must first examine what Paul says about the anthropology of Christians. Paul covers this topic chiefly in chapters 6-8, where he presents the condition of Christians in two fundamentally different ways.

#### 1. *The Past versus the Present*

One way that Paul speaks of Christians in these chapters is by depicting their present condition as radically different from their pre-Christian condition. Thus he makes a distinction between the past and the present, before the Christ-event and their Baptism, and now after the Christ-event and their Baptism. Whereas they were formerly outside of Christ, now they are in Christ.

In 6:1-10 Paul uses the language of life and death. Formerly Christians were "living" in sin—in reality dead in sin—and were dead to God, but now they have died to sin and have been made alive to God. Paul develops this point with the concept of being "in Christ." Through Baptism the Romans were united with Christ's death and resurrection. "We know that our old self was crucified with him, in order that the body dominated by sin might be rendered ineffective so that we are no longer enslaved to sin" (6:6).<sup>1</sup> When Christ died to sin once for all, they died to sin, and when He was raised to life toward God, they were raised to newness of life, and furthermore, they will be raised to life on the last day.

In 6:15-23 Paul shifts to the language of slavery. Here he contrasts two kinds of slavery, the first, a slavery that is abject slavery and the second, a slavery that is true freedom. Formerly they were slaves to sin and free with a false "freedom" in regard to righteousness, but now they truly have been freed from the tyrant of sin and have been enslaved to righteousness/God.

Paul continues with the image of death and slavery in 7:1-6, but now he applies it to the Law. The readers were formerly "in the flesh," when their sinful passions would use the Law as an instrument to work in their members to bear fruit for death. (Paul explains this process further in vv.

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<sup>1</sup>All translations are by the authors.

7-13.) But they have been put to death to the Law, so that they belong to another, to Christ, who was raised from the dead, in order that they might bear fruit for God. Now they have been released from the Law, which held them captive, by dying to it, so that they are slaves to God in the newness of the Spirit.

In 8:1-11 Paul focuses on the role of the Spirit for Christians. The Spirit has freed them from the rule of sin and of death. They are no longer in the flesh (cf. 7:5) but now in Christ Jesus and in the Spirit. The Spirit of the God who raised Christ dwells in them, and God will make alive also their mortal bodies through the indwelling Spirit.

## 2. *Two Conditions Simultaneously*

In addition to emphasizing the contrast between the past and the present, Paul also speaks of Christians as existing in two opposing conditions at the same time. The *locus classicus* for this view of the Christian occurs in 7:14-25. Although a minority position among exegetes, the interpretation of this section as referring to Paul's Christian experience has, in our opinion, strong arguments to support it.<sup>2</sup> Among the arguments are these: the shift to the present tense from the past tense used in verses 7-13; Paul's assent to and delight in the Law, which he denies for non-Christians in 8:7; the qualification given in verse 18—"there does not dwell in me, *that is, in my flesh*, anything good"—which is a necessary qualification in light of the indwelling Spirit (cf. 8:9, 11); the reference to the "inner self" (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16); the similarity between the fervent cry expressed in verse 24 and the statement made in 8:23; and the presence of the doxology in verse 25a.

In this section Paul continues to describe the Law of God in a positive way, as he did in verses 7-13; "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (v. 12). Here he depicts how he as a Christian encounters the Law. On the one hand, he recognizes that the Law is spiritual. Therefore, he agrees with the Law that it is good, he delights in the Law according to his inner self, and he wants to obey it. On the other hand, he is fleshly, sold under sin. Indeed, more clearly now than during his former life (cf. 6:21), he sees in the light of the Law that sin works even now in his fleshly members producing disobedience. Thus

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<sup>2</sup>For further discussion, see M. H. Franzmann, *Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968); C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (vol. 1; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975); M. P. Middendorf, *The "I" in the Storm: Paul's Use of the First Person Singular in Romans 7* (Th.D. dissertation; Concordia Seminary, 1990); M. Winger, *By What Law?: The Meaning of Νόμος in the Letters of Paul* (SBL Dissertation Series 128; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992): 159-196.

he does not do the good that he wants to do, and he does the evil that he does not want to do. The point of the section is to stress that the Law of God, while it remains good and spiritual, is powerless to deliver from sin, to lessen sin or to produce its own obedience even for an apostle. By implication the same situation applies to other Christians as well.<sup>3</sup>

This section reveals a division in the Christian Paul between will and deeds, an inner dissonance that was not there in his pre-Christian life. Formerly he was whole-heartedly devoted to sin, which used the Law as its opportunity to deceive him and to increase sin (7:7-13). But now there is a contrast between his essential self (the real "I") and the flesh, a contrast that he now recognizes with utmost clarity. On the one side we see the renewed mind and will, which want to obey God's will, while on the other side is the sin that dwells in the flesh. It is the latter, not the essential self, that works disobedience. Nevertheless, the section paints a picture of perpetual failure and disobedience with respect to actions. The Christian Paul regrets and repudiates his actions. In his concluding statement he summarizes the discussion, "So then, I myself with the mind serve the law of God but with the flesh the law of sin" (v. 25b). He finds himself simultaneously rendering service to two opposing realities.

Again in chapter 8 Paul refers to Christians as simultaneously having two opposing conditions. In verse 10 he says, "But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness." The body is dead and will die because of sin that dwells in the flesh. But the indwelling Spirit gives life now and will give life eschatologically because of God's imputed righteousness (cf. vv. 11, 23).

We may say, then, that when Paul articulates an anthropology in Romans, he gives two different analyses. On the one hand, Christians used to be enslaved to sin and the flesh, but now they have been delivered from that slavery to become "slaves" of Christ, led by the Spirit. On the other hand, Christians (not just Paul) have two active and opposing forces within them, one that serves sin and the other that serves God. What does this mean for the life of the Christian? If we only had the first picture, we might be tempted to think of the Christian life as one automatic and continual victory. We might conclude that Christians need only remain passive, allowing Christ and the Spirit to produce in and through them good fruit. For they are dead to sin and alive to God; their old self has been crucified; the body of sin has been rendered powerless. However, the second picture reveals the presence of

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<sup>3</sup>On the rhetorical function of the first person singular in chapter 7, see Middendorf.

sin and the flesh as active enemies.<sup>4</sup> Because sin constantly seeks to take control, there is a struggle in the Christian life. And yet, if we only had the second picture, we might conclude that the Christian life is one of continual failure, that Christians have no arsenal with which to defeat the enemy and to bear good fruit. The first picture corrects such a false inference by seeing Christians as already having been placed on the side of God. Therefore, both perspectives are necessary in that they inform each other and mutually correct any false inferences.

### The Exhortations of Romans

We are now ready to consider the exhortations that are given in chapters 6, 8, and 12-16 of Romans. Our interest is not to provide a comprehensive treatment of the content of Pauline paraenesis and ethics<sup>5</sup> but to spell out its general characteristics and the anthropological perspectives that are presupposed in the material.

The first point that needs to be stressed is that Paul's exhortations are addressed to Christians, to those in Christ who want to and are able to live for God. In fact, the epistle's first exhortations directed toward human beings occur in chapter 6 after the discussion of justification and Baptism (6:11-13, 19).

Second, it is clear that, although the addressees are Christians, they cannot live for God by their own power and abilities. The power comes from the Spirit working through the Gospel. Therefore, Paul's exhortations are based on Gospel indicative statements. This is true not only for chapter 6 but also for chapters 12-16. Paul repeatedly sprinkles Gospel indicatives into the midst of the paraenetic material. For example, "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God" (12:1); "Therefore, welcome one another as Christ also welcomed you, for the glory of God" (15:7); "I beseech you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit" (15:30). Paraenesis is not only grounded in statements about the Christ-event in the past but also in promises regarding the future. Romans 13:11-14 provides a classic example: here Paul exhorts the Romans to act in a way appropriate to the light of the

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<sup>4</sup>The second picture is already presupposed in 6:1, "What, then, shall we say? Let us remain in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" Chapter 6 assumes that sin remains an active threat, and 7:14-25 spells out this presupposed anthropology in more detail.

<sup>5</sup>The standard work on this topic is V. P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968). For introductory surveys of the secondary literature, see under "ethics" and "teaching/paraenesis" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, D. G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

coming day of salvation. Thus, the Gospel motivates and enables Christians in their life of new obedience.

Third, Paul exhorts his hearers to live out their lives practically and experientially in a way that conforms with what they are already by virtue of Baptism. He calls for their new status to be actualized in their daily life. To do this Paul uses several different images. With the language of death and life he encourages them to reckon themselves as dead to sin and alive to God, as they in fact are (6:11). He reminds them with the language of lordship that grace rules and will rule over them (5:21; 6:14; cf. 14:9), and on this basis he exhorts them to submit to God, to offer their members—their hands and feet, their concrete actions—for service to God as weapons of righteousness (6:13, 16, 19). He speaks of the Christian life as walking down a path, walking in newness of life (6:4), walking according to the Spirit (8:4), and being led by the Spirit (8:14). Again, the basis is the fact that they already have been given new life in Christ and the Spirit. He urges them to employ the Spirit as their weapon to mortify the flesh, because they are in the Spirit and debtors not to the flesh but to God (8:9, 12-13). With the baptismal language of armor or garments he encourages them to put off the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light, the Lord Jesus Christ (13:12-14; cf. Gal. 3:27). With these images and others Paul exhorts the Romans to activate their new status in every part of their being, in their mind, intentions, speech, and actions.

Fourth, Pauline paraenesis exhibits a twofold character of negative warning and positive encouraging. This is necessary because it is still possible for Christians to return to their former life under sin that leads to death. Sin remains an ever-present threat. Thus, Paul exhorts with imperatives such as these: “Therefore, let not sin rule in your mortal body to obey its lusts” (6:12); “Do not present your members as weapons of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and (present) your members as weapons of righteousness to God” (6:13; cf. v. 19); “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires” (13:14). In addition to these more general kinds of exhortation, Paul gives more specific and concrete guidance in both negative and positive form.<sup>8</sup> How should you respond to those who persecute you? Bless them and don’t

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<sup>8</sup>To be sure, Paul addresses the specific issues emerging in the context of the church in Rome. Yet, Paul uses generalized language that still speaks to other situations as well. For an introduction to the scholarly discussion regarding the circumstances of the church in Rome, see the articles in K. P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate*, revised and expanded edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991).

curse them (12:14; cf. vv. 17-21). What about your approach to the government? Don't rebel against the government but pay your taxes (13:1-7). How should the strong and the weak relate to each other in the congregation? Chapter 14 treats the issue at length.

Fifth, it should be noted that Paul's intent in paraenesis is not to accuse the Romans as sinners. He does that in chapters 1-3, where the tone is notably different. Paraenesis uses the language of urging, appealing, and beseeching rather than that of harsh demanding and condemning. Can Christians as sinners still hear paraenesis as accusatory? No doubt they can. If the addressees were not paying taxes, presumably they would have felt accused by 13:6-7. But there were probably other hearers in the church in Rome who saw the rightness of Paul's appeal and gladly embraced it.

We now come to several crucial points regarding anthropology. The exhortations, both the more general and the more specific, presuppose that the addressees are practical, down-to-earth, flesh-and-blood Christians who actively live their Christian life with the involvement of their mind, will, and body. These are, after all, exhortations, imperatives and cohortatives, and not indicatives that only describe the Christian life.

How, then, should we understand the anthropology implied in such paraenesis? It is, it seems, a very basic and practical anthropology. The hearers are assumed to be ordinary, concrete human beings who actively participate in their everyday living. They seem to be in a position to make decisions, to be led astray, to be reminded, to be encouraged, and to be persuaded, just as we all are. Paul addresses them as if they are a third party standing before two powers, sin and the Spirit, and he exhorts them to pay attention to the impulses of the Spirit and to resist those of sin. He urges them, for example, to be transformed by the renewing of their mind, to present their hands and feet, their intentions and actions, as weapons for God's service, and to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God. To adopt and slightly modify an analogy from Plato, each Christian is, as it were, a good charioteer with two horses, a good, white horse and a bad, black horse.<sup>7</sup> The charioteer has the freedom to favor one horse over the other, and Paul urges the individual to let the good horse lead and to resist the bad horse.

To make the point by means of a different analogy, picture the Christian as a conscientious lumberjack who seeks to traverse a river over floating logs.<sup>8</sup> The lumberjack wants to get to the other side, wants to step on solid, not rotted or flimsy, logs, and wants to use proper

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Plato's *Phaedrus*, sections 25ff.

<sup>8</sup>The analogy was suggested by our colleague Robert Rosin.

technique. But he is, perhaps, a novice, or foolish, easily deceived and distracted. So he thinks that maybe this funny-looking log will be OK this time or that it will do to take a shortcut and become lax in proper technique. Therefore, the lumberjack needs practical, down-to-earth advice, instruction, warnings, and encouragement in the task that lies ahead. He needs warnings against trying to straddle two logs at the same time (cf. "make no provision for the flesh"), exhortations to keep on concentrating and dedicating himself entirely to the goal of crossing the river (cf. "present your members as weapons of righteousness to God"; "be transformed by the renewing of your mind"), specific guidance as to which logs he should jump on (cf. "bless those who persecute you"; "let every person be subordinate to the governing authorities"), and general encouragement (cf. "reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus").

### Exhortation and Anthropology

Now the problem arises: How does the above perspective square with the Pauline emphasis on the Christian life being produced by the power of Spirit working through the Gospel? We might understand the relationship between the charioteer/lumberjack model and the new man/good tree model by comparing two different approaches to physics, that of Newton and that of Einstein. There is an everyday sort of experiential and phenomenological understanding of the universe (= Newton), and there is a deeper, more theoretical, and ontological understanding (= Einstein). Both of these understandings are correct, but they come into play in different contexts, when different data are under consideration.

To give an example, when one desires to cut a billiard ball into another ball, one does so on the basis of Newtonian considerations, not by studying electrons, quarks, and other subatomic particles, or by considering the curvature of space or the relationship between the speed of light, energy, and mass. But when one wishes to explore the distance of bodies in the universe, or the life-cycle of red stars and dwarf stars, or the nature of black holes, one must take into account deeper considerations, such as the nature of subatomic particles, the curvature of space, and the formula  $E=mc^2$ . The former approach is more applicable to everyday life and more "phenomenological," while the latter approach handles the data in a more ultimate and deeper "ontological" way.

And so it is with the Christian life. With respect to exhortation, Paul addresses Christians in terms of their everyday life and appeals to them as concrete, down-to-earth human beings. Accordingly, Paul makes arguments in order to persuade them. But Paul can also describe the



Christian life in a deeper and more profound way, according to which the Spirit working through the Gospel produces sanctification. The former understanding may be likened to Newton and the latter understanding to Einstein.

### Homiletical Implications

What practical implications does all of the above have for homiletics? First, the people sitting in the pews remain sinners, and therefore, they continually need to hear the accusing Law and the comforting Gospel of forgiveness. As Romans 7 makes plain, the Christian life never reaches a stage where forgiveness becomes unnecessary or less important.

Second, the people sitting in the pews are Christians. As Paul also emphasizes in Romans, the Gospel has liberated Christians from the domination of sin so that now they have new life in Christ. The Spirit working through the Gospel produces in and through them the fruit of the Spirit. As Luther puts it, "Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active."<sup>9</sup> In short, a good tree bears good fruit. This is the "Einsteinian" view of the Christian life. It has the value of referring to the new life of obedience as a work of God and of maintaining the inseparable connection and the proper order of justification (Rom. 1-5) and sanctification (Rom. 6-8).

Third, Christians are practical, concrete, flesh-and-blood human beings who fully participate with their mind, will, and body in their day-to-day lives. Such Christians not only need but actually welcome exhortation and everyday guidance. As they live their daily lives, they are, as it were, "Newtonians." They make personal decisions also in the spiritual realm, and they "choose" to do right or wrong. Therefore, they need to be warned against the ever-present threat of sin, and they need to be encouraged with Gospel-based exhortations.

Finally, given this situation, we should avoid two dangers. Problems arise when the "Newtonian" outlook is taken to be a full description of the "real," fundamental state of affairs, when, for example, people think that they can, of their own nature and by their own reason and strength, choose for God and live a God-pleasing life. Against this danger the "Einsteinian" model needs emphasis, that a good tree yields good fruit by the power of the Spirit of Christ working through the effective Gospel. A

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<sup>9</sup>Luther's statement is quoted in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration IV, paragraphs 10-11 (Tappert's translation).

distorted approach also emerges when we fail to treat Christians as down-to-earth human beings by never warning and exhorting them, because we consider it useless to warn and exhort a good tree. With respect to this danger the paraenetic “Newtonian” model applies. Both perspectives are necessary for a balanced, Biblical view of sanctification. When we apply the texts of Scripture to people’s lives, we should speak to their actual situation, perspective, and concern by making use of the full range of apostolic and prophetic wisdom.