CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD A PROPER READING FOR IDENTIFYING THE HEART OF PAUL’S THOUGHT IN ROM 1:16–8:39

I. Introduction

Throughout history, Romans has been regarded as a theological treasure of the Bible, and various theological motifs have been found and studied according to issues in the history of interpretation. According to Graydon F. Snyder, at least sixteen major motifs have been identified in the history of interpretation of Romans: faith and works, Christology, church and state, grace and the justice of God, grace and free will (Augustine), the power of the state, justification by faith (M. Luther), the historical purpose of Romans, eschatology, God’s promise thwarted, universal toleration, the word of God (Karl Barth), existence as eschatology (Rudolf Bultmann), *agape* (Anders Nygren), and the New Perspective.¹ These themes could be grouped under certain theological categories. For example, J.A. Fitzmyer suggests five categories to organize forty-one theological themes in Romans: (1) theology proper, or Pauline teaching about God; (2) christology, or teaching about Jesus Christ and his role in God’s salvific plan; (3) pneumatology, or teaching about the Holy Spirit; (4) anthropology, or teaching about human beings with and without the influence of Christ; and (5) Christian conduct, or teaching about the call of humanity to Spirit-guided existence.²


² His categorization is (1) about God: God, the love of God, uprightness (or righteousness) of God, the wrath of God, divine plan of salvation, the Old Testament, and God’s gospel; (2) christology: Jesus Christ, names and titles used of Jesus in Romans (Jesus, Christ, the Lord, the son, God), the role ascribed to Jesus in Romans and the effects of the Christ-event; (3) pneumatology: the Spirit and grace; (4) anthropology: body, flesh, soul, spirit, mind, heart, conscience, humanity, Gentiles, Jews, the law, sin, humanity in Christ, faith, love/charity, hope, baptism, body of Christ and church; and (5) Christian conduct: in Christ, prayer, Christian conduct and attitude about civil authority (J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993], 103–72).
It is certain that these issues have been important to readers. However, as far as Paul, the author, is concerned, some important questions should be raised. Did Paul want the reader to catch all the implied theological messages when he wrote Romans? Or did he intend to give all of the theological issues in Romans the same degree of importance? ἂν γένοιτο (“may it never be”), since Paul did not write a systematic textbook, nor just enumerate all the theological themes. Instead, he wrote a letter that was used to deliver the author’s intention to a specific audience. Thus, reading Romans as the source for a theological encyclopedia is misleading with respect to Paul’s intention. Moreover, it is also naive to believe that when Paul wrote Romans, he treated all of the above theological themes with the same degree of importance. Even though the above theological themes are important, it is fully possible for Paul to stress certain theme(s) more than others according to various factors, such as the situation of the audience, Paul’s interest, etc. That is, borrowing J.C. Beker’s concept of contingency and coherence, Paul’s emphasis on the theological themes could be different in accordance with the contingency of Paul and his audience.

If, then, Paul did not mention every theological issue with the same emphasis, are there degrees of stress in his theological teachings? If there are, what are the relations among the theological issues? These questions also serve as the key to understand two other scholarly debated issues, such as the ‘center’ in Pauline theology and the purpose of Romans. Whatever the center and purpose of Romans are,

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3 Schreiner says that “The danger of reading Paul’s letters as systematic treatises is that one might conclude too much from reading only one letter” (T.R. Schreiner, Interpreting Pauline Epistles [Grand Rapids: Baker book, 1990], 42).