

A Missio-Relational Reading of Romans¹

ABSTRACT:

As a complement to current approaches to the study of Romans, this paper employs a missio-relational reading of the Epistle to Romans. Missional and relational aspects are highlighted as well as the community orientation (instead of individualistic orientation) of selected passages and themes in Romans.

INTRODUCTION

As a complement to current critical approaches to the study of Romans (e.g. historical-critical, doctrinal, etc.), this study attempts to read the epistle in a missio-relational manner. This approach will highlight the missional focus and relational aspect of selected passages and themes in Romans, paying particular attention to the community orientation (instead of individualistic orientation).

Romans is an occasional letter written by Paul, a Jew of second Temple Judaism² and the apostle to the gentiles. Paul wrote Romans in order to address certain internal concerns within the Christian community in Rome, and to introduce himself to them in anticipation of a later mission trip to Spain.

Even though Paul had a specific, historical reason for writing this letter to the Christians in Rome, it still contains missional and relational elements that can be applied to the contemporary context of post-modern and post-Christian western society.

The methodology of this study is a missio-relational approach as compared to the regular practice of doctrinal-rationalist approach. This is a sequel to earlier works on “relationality” (Wan 2006a), “relational realism paradigm” (Wan 2006b) and “relational theology and missiology” (Wan 2007).

A MISSIOLOGICAL READING OF ROMANS

There is no question that Romans was considered a very significant book of the Bible at the time of the Reformation; this is especially true for the doctrine of “justification by

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the DoktorKlub, SAIACS (South Asian Institute of Advanced Christian Studies), August 18, 2009.

²For a free reference on the subject of ancient Judaism, Diaspora Judaism and second Temple Judaism, see Tomson 1990. (retrieved November 2009)

http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=xEAnB_ebCisC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Paul+as+both+a+Jew+of+second+Temple+Judaism+&ots=Vvy_HkB9Iq&sig=VaBk2fQnUhLKY7B0KgXoLpISt3E#v=onepage&q=Paul%20as%20both%20a%20Jew%20of%20second%20Temple%20Judaism&f=false

faith.” However, text covering the doctrinal topic of “justification by faith” is found for the most part only in Romans 3:21-5:21. Taken as a whole, the book of Romans is more missional in nature.

The beginning and conclusion of Romans contain a consistent emphasis on “obedience to the faith among all nations”³ (by apostolic duty, 1:5, and by the prophetic scriptures, 16:26). Paul had a strong motivation “to win the Gentiles” (Rom 15:15-16) and a strong desire to push on to new frontiers beyond Rome to Spain (Rom 15:19-20, 23-24, 28).

Peter T. O’Brien had proposed that from Rom 15:14-33 alone he could identify six “distinguishing marks” of Paul’s missionary activity.⁴ Similarly, Steve Strauss (2003) formulated five significant principles for missions strategy from Rom 15:14-33. Dean S. Gilliland (1983) extensively examined the missiological dimension of Romans.

The missiological focus of Romans is “the gospel”

In Romans, Paul articulated well his understanding of the truth of the gospel and grace.⁵ The main theme of Romans is “the gospel” with Romans 1:16 as the theme verse. The “message of missions” in Romans in the “prologue” is itemized below in terms of “the gospel” motif:

- The theme is “gospel” which is called “the gospel of Christ” (1:16)
- It is also called “the gospel of God” (1:1)
- It is also called “the gospel of his Son” (1:9)
- The effect of the “gospel” - “it is the power of God unto salvation” (1:16)
- The target of the “gospel” is “every one that believes” (1:16)
- The gospel manifested - “the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith”(1:17)
- The missional sequence of the gospel⁶ is “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (1:16)

A missiological reading of Romans can be supported by the motif of “the Gospel” and can be thematically diagramed, as shown below:

Figure 1 — “The Gospel” - Thematic diagram of Romans (Wan 2005:1)

Text	Theme	WHO
		• Jews & Gentiles

³ All Bible references are from KJV; unless indicated otherwise.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Gospel and Missions in the Writings of Paul*, 49.

⁵ According to Steve Strauss (2003:457), Paul began in 1:16 to fully develop his “theology of the gospel” and had a “major structural break in the Epistle to the Romans” at 15:13. See Steve Strauss, “Mission Theology in Romans 15:14-33” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (October-December 2003):457-74.

⁶ Since Rom 2:14-15 includes the gentiles (those without law), therefore “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (1:16) is a reference to the methodological sequence.

1-8	The world needs the Gospel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both can be saved by the Gospel (1:16-17) • Both are sinners in need of grace: Gentiles (1:8-32) and the Jew (2:1-3; 8). • Both can be saved through justification by faith (3: 21—4:26)
9-11	To Jews first then Gentiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both are parts of God’s plan (9-11).
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christians
12	Gospel-effected changes collectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All are to present their bodies as living sacrifice and render reasonable service to God (12:1) • All not be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of mind and seeking God’s will. (12:2) • All are to stay away from sense gratification (13:14)
13	Gospel-effected relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All are debtors to those have not heard the gospel (1:14). • All humble and empathetic and live peacefully with all (12: 14-18) <p>All good and submissive citizens (13:1-7)</p>
14-15	Gospel-effected community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love one another (12:9-13; 13:8-10). • Be sensitive to one another (14:1-8) • Build up one another (15:1-3)
16	Greetings -- 30+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership for the gospel sought by Paul prior to his visit to Rome

A missiological reading of Romans can also be supported by a thematic diagram of “missions” as shown below:

Figure 2 — “Missions” - Thematic diagram of Romans

Text	Theme	Elements of Christian Missions
1: 1-17	Messenger of the gospel, i.e. Paul and others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paul was called “to be an apostle” - Position: “separated unto the gospel of God” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not out of private wishes—“We have received grace and apostleship” • Responsibility, “among all nations, for his name” (1:5), also “ye also the called of Jesus Christ” (1:6) in Rome. • Called to be “the apostle of the Gentiles” (11:13) • Eagerly longing for Israel his kinsmen to be saved (9:1-3; 10:1)
1:18 -Ch 8	Message of missions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sinful gentiles (1:18-32) & Jews in need of the gospel (2) - God’s faithfulness & man’s neediness (3:1-20) - God’s righteousness manifested: Justification by faith (3:21-5:21) - God’s righteousness manifested, leading to struggle & victory (6:-8:)
Ch 9-11	Missional sequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “through the in-gathering of the nations that God is keeping his promise to Israel” (Wright 2006:528)

Ch 15	Paul's mission service	- Mission principle: "Not where Christ was named" (15:20), "But now having no more place in these parts [Corinth]" (15:23) - Paul's priestly service: the obedience of the nations as sacrifice (15:16-18)
15:14-33	Missionary strategy (Rome the capital)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prayer before arrival (1:8-10) • Visitation after arrival (1:11-13) • Taking Rome as a base to reach out westward (Spain) (15:23-28), hoping the church in Rome will be a partner for gospel outreach
Ch 16	Greetings to partners of the gospel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Such as Priscilla and Aquila • The house churches (Rom 16:5, 14-15)

In Figure 3 below, Romans is outlined in terms of double motifs: "the gospel" and "missions."

Figure 3 — Outline of Romans with Double Motifs

"the gospel"	Theme Verse: Rom 1:16	Outline	"missions"
Manifestation	"...the gospel of Christ...it is the power of God unto salvation" "to everyone that believeth..." and also to the Greek	1:18- Ch 8	Dynamics of missions
		12-15:13	Efficacy of missions
Method: (missional sequence)	"...salvation to everyone that believeth... to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"	9:11	Sequence of missionary effort
Messenger"	"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ"	1:1-17	Attitude of missionary
		15:14-33	Strategy of missions
		Ch 16	Greetings of the missionary

Paul's missionary identity in Romans

Paul's self identity is the apostle called to be the bearer of the gospel (Rom 1:1). He is the messenger of missions specifically called and separated unto the gospel of God. With the constant gratitude of a forgiven debtor (1:14) and with endurance and hope (5:1-5), the blessed servant reached out with the gospel message and was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Paul had two elements in his personal mission policy as shown in Romans: (Wan 2005:2)

1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

15:20 "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation."

The first element of Paul's personal mission policy is sequentially first to the Jews then gentiles. Paul's mission strategy was made clear in the missional sequence of "to the Jew first,

and also to the Greek” (1:16; 2:9-11). This strategy was also exemplified in his personal efforts (Acts 9: 20-22). In his first itinerary mission trip (Acts 13:5, 14, 42; 14:1; 15:21), Paul was resisted, slandered and persecuted (Acts 13:44-49) and even stoned (Acts 14:19). He announced that he would turn to the gentiles (Acts 13:46-49). However, again he returned to the Jewish synagogues on his second itinerary trip (Acts 17:1, 10, 13; 18:4-5, 19). Even on his third mission trip (Acts 18: 26; 19:8, 17), Paul continued preaching “to the Jews first, and also to the Greek.” This consistent mission strategy and personal policy is expounded in great detail in Romans 9 to 11.

The power of the gospel is well demonstrated by Paul’s experience of repentance and salvation, mentioned repeatedly in his letters (Eph. 3:1-13; 1 Cor. 15:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:12-17). In Romans, he points out that all men have sinned, but all have access to God’s grace through faith (Rom. 3:21-31; 5:1-2; 21), regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Paul also emphatically declares the efficacy of the gospel as universal (vv 3:21-31), but beginning with the Jews and expanded thereafter.

“Set apart as an apostle for the Gentiles,” Paul made the will of God his priority, but not without mission strategy and practical movements. According to the will of God, Paul was “called [to be] an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God” yet he made great efforts to preach the gospel. Although Paul was “the apostle of the Gentiles”(11:13), as Gillian observes, “Paul never lost the vision for his own people. He could not forget that the Messiah’s kingdom was intended primarily for them” (Gillian 1983:30).

In Romans 1:3, Paul notes that Jesus was a descendent of David. Paul was aggressive in reaching his kinsmen who resisted the gospel. Moved by the Spirit and with the gratitude of a debtor, he endeavored to proclaim the gospel to all nations (1:14-15; 9:1; 15:17-21). But his heart-felt passion for his kinsmen was deep and solid (chapters 9-11), bringing them the gospel even at the risk of his own life (15:31). (Wan 2005:3)

The second element of Paul’s personal mission policy is to conduct pioneer work without duplicating what others had done (Rom. 15:20). Therefore his anticipated visit to Rome is very important to his mission strategy. He desired to win the partnership with individuals and the congregation in Rome (Rom. 15:22-29) for a westward movement based in the capital, launching beyond Rome to Spain.

Rome, as the capital of the Roman Empire, was the cultural, political and military center of the time, therefore strategic for gospel outreach. The church in Rome had grown (1:8, 13) with the potential to become the center of the western church and the base for a westward expansion of the gospel. Roger E. Hedlund’s suggestion is helpful, that Paul’s vision of mission was universal; yet his strategy was to use urban centers (Strauss 2003:462-463) as his missionary base. Rome as the capital was strategic to Paul’s missionary plan.⁷

⁷ “Paul’s apostolic ministry was directed toward the uncircumcised...Paul’s extensive ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19) as well as his plan to visit Rome en route to Spain (Acts 19:21; Rom. 15:24-28) tend to confirm this

Paul was motivated “to win obedience from the Gentiles” (Rom. 15:15-16); therefore he was determined to launch out to new frontiers (Rom. 15:20). He wanted the church in Rome to partner with him in his missionary ministry westward (Rom. 15:25, 28-30). Paul’s ministry of preaching the gospel included “evangelism and church planting...church nurturing” (Strauss 2003:463-464) and his ministry in the eastern Mediterranean region was his way of “fulfilled the gospel” (Bowers 1987:186.) from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom 15:18-20).

The first part of Romans (1:17-11:36) is Paul’s extensive exposition of the gospel that will become the basis of its missio-relational application in the second part (12-16). The following quotation bears out this point clearly:

“So, it is significant that he begins and ends his great missionary exposition of the gospel (which he hopes to take to Spain and invites the church at Rome to support him in doing so) with a summary of his life’s work as being aimed at achieving “*the obedience of faith among all the nations.*” (Wright 2006:527)

A RELATIONAL READING OF ROMANS

This study uses the same framework of vertical and horizontal relations modeled by Christopher J. H. Wright (2006:208-211), but focusing on selected themes and texts in Romans. The theological understanding of Paul in Romans (i.e. the gospel, salvation and grace) provides the basis for a relational reading of Romans. With the aid of a “relational framework” (Wan 2006a, 2006b, 2007) and a relational interpretation of “grace,” Romans can be divided into two major sections:

Figure 4 – Outlining Romans Relationally

Outline	Relationship	Scope
chapters 1-11	the gospel-effected relationship (grace: needed & made available to all vertically)	general (1-8): universality of the gospel specific (9-11): Jews and gentiles (grace available to all)
chapters 12-16	the gospel-transformed individuals in community (grace: received vertically is to be lived out in “relational reality” ⁸ horizontally)	general (12:1-21; 13:8-14) Specific - towards government (13:1-7) - the weak and the strong (14:1-15:13) ⁹

hypothesis...The so called missionary journeys really described the process of setting up a series of centers from which Paul carried out missionary work. Paul’s mission was essentially urban. First Corinth, then Ephesus in Asia Minor, became important mission centers in areas previously largely untouched...Paul’s strategy at Ephesus (Acts 19:10) resulted in the penetration of the entire province from a base established at the main center...As a result of his plan of action Paul could say that ‘from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel,’ so that there was ‘no longer any room for work in these regions,’ and he could move on to Rome and Spain (Rom 15:19, 23-24).” (Hedlund 2002:253).

⁸ This is illustrative of the paradigm of “relational realism” (Wan 2006b, 2007)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the “gospel messenger” Paul and the church in Rome (15:14-34) for “partnership in the gospel” - greetings to the saints of the church in Rome for “partnership in the gospel” (16)
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Figure 5 illustrates this approach in Romans in terms of “relational gospel,” i.e. a relational understanding of the gospel.

Figure 5 – Directional outline of Romans - “Relational Gospel”

Gospel & Grace	Relational Gospel		
	Who	How	Text
Gospel and Grace ↓	Apostle Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set apart for the gospel 	1:5
	Christians in Rome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • called of Jesus Christ • beloved of God, called to be saints 	1:6 1:7
	From God	Gospel truth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All mankind are in need of it from God • God’s righteousness manifested • Salvation: God’s grace given to all who believe 	1:18-3:20 3:21-5: 6:-8:
	Christians	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United with the Lord • Led by the Spirit 	6:1-8:4 8
	Jews & gentiles	Covenant-keeping God bringing mankind to Him and together	9-11
Grace →	Gospel-effected individuals are to live in grace horizontally with one another		12-16

On the point of “relational gospel,” Gilliland (1983:34-35) observes that there is a “dual theme” in all of Paul’s epistles, “what God does for people and...how people respond to the divine initiative.” The references in Romans are listed below:

Figure 6 – Relational Gospel in Romans: Dual-directional Understanding¹⁰

What God does for people	What persons experience as a result
“He was born a descendant of David; as to his divine holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death” (1:3-4)	“Through him God gave...the privilege of being an apostle” (1:5)
“Christ died for us” (5:8)	“We are now put right with God...who has now made us God’s friends” (5:9, 11)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H.S. – God’s special gift of new life (5:5) • H.S. helps -- inner direction of the mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts” by the H.S. (5:5) • Brought in line with God’s will (7:23; 11:34; 1Cor 2:13)
“Christ was raised from death” (6:4)	“So also we might live a new life” (6:4)
“What the law could not do...God did. He condemned sin in human nature by sending his own Son, who came with a nature like man’s sinful nature” (8:3)	“The law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death” (8:2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the Spirit of God...Christ from death...” (8:11) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Lives in you” (8:11)

⁹ Steve Strauss (2203:458) suggested that “Paul completed his call to unity begun in 14:1, he turned to Christ as the perfect example of one who gave up His rights for the sale of others.”

¹⁰ Adapted from Gilliland 1983:34-35.

• <i>Chrismata</i> , gifts from God (12:3; 1Cor 12:28)	• <i>Diakonia</i> , to serve & live in harmony (12:5-18)
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The “relational gospel” began with God’s grace vertically and it requires personal faith vertically from believers “in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:26, Gal 2:16). Faith is the way a believer expresses his “total response to the love of God”¹¹ and God’s grace for sinners.

The key concepts for salvation in Romans are all relational: “justification” (4:25; 5:16), “redemption” (Rom 3:24), “adoption” (8:23), “reconciliation” (5:10-11; 11:15) and “in Christ” (3:24; 8:1,2,39; 9:1; 12:5; 16:3,7,9,10). In Paul’s life and writings, “the heart of the gospel will always be found to derive from the action of God, through grace...” (Gilliand 1983:49).

Paul sometimes uses the word “justification” and “reconciliation” interchangeably, as illustrated in Rom 5:9-10, “now justified by his blood” and “we were reconciled to God by the death of his son.” “Justification” is a favorite term of scholars who are “doctrinal and rationalist” inclined when studying Romans. Their emphasis is on the “forensic” aspect of “justification” at the expense of the relational dimension of the word. Martin (1981:37) is helpful in clarifying that “justification” indicates broken interpersonal relationships that have now been put right.

Relational reading of Romans: prologue (1:1-17) and conclusion (chapter 16)

A simple relational reading of the prologue of Romans (1:1-17) can be listed below:

- Relational call: “called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God” (1:1)
- Relational gospel source: “promised by his prophets,” “of the seed of David” (1:2-3)
- Relational gospel effect: “we have received grace,” “I am ...the gospel to you” (1:4-17)

Paul defines his apostolic mission in Romans 1:5 and repeats it again in 16:26 (Wright 2006:247). The thematic verse for Romans, 1:16, serves as a prelude to “Paul’s full exposition of the gospel” that forms the framework for a relational reading of Romans. (Wright 2006:180, 208-215)

The extensive personal greetings that conclude the book of Romans, chapter 16, can best be explained in terms of Paul’s missionary strategy of “partnership of the gospel” with individuals and churches in Rome (Rom 15:22-29). The personal greetings in just Romans 16 is strikingly intentional and more extensive than greetings found in all other Pauline epistles combined. (Wan 2005:2)

Relational reading of Romans: gospel partnership of Paul and the Christians in Rome

¹¹ Gilliand 1983:3 who also made a helpful point, eventually “the faith” in effect became “a name for Paul’s religion of Jesus, and early became an expression that was synonymous with Christianity.”

When penning Romans, Paul had not visited the church in Rome, located in the capital of the Roman Empire and therefore strategic in the plan of westward outreach of the gospel. Paul “purposed” to come to Rome, but was not successful (1:8-13). So he wrote this letter to announce his travel plans and to ask the believers there to pray for him (1:8-10). He intended to get there after urgent business was properly handled (1:11-13), and be sent to Spain from there (15:23, 28). The figure below shows the horizontal relationship between Paul and the churches in Rome.

Figure 7 — Horizontal relationship: Apostle Paul and the Church in Rome

Text	Paul the missionary	The church in Rome
1:1-17	Repeatedly desired but failed to pay visit; now determined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “beloved of God, called to be saints” (1:7) • “that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (1:8) • “I long to see you...impart unto you some spiritual gift...comforted together...mutual faith...” (1:11-12)
15:14-33	With “a firm and settled conviction, a confident certainty” (Cranfield 1979:441)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A mature church of genuine believers in Christ” (Strauss 2003:459) • “demonstrated their faith in Christ by their relationships and their firm grasp of the truth of the gospel” (Strauss 2003:459) • Anticipated fellowship with them, then being sent by them westward to Spain (15:22-24)
Ch 16	Greetings & benediction from missionary Paul who desired for partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal greetings of 30+ to individual and house churches; • Benediction: “to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ” (16:25)

More than winning converts and sharing spiritual blessings with those in Rome (Rom 1:11-13), the intention of Paul’s systematic coverage of “gospel” and “grace” in Romans 1:18-15:13 was to prepare “these believers in every way possible, especially in the right belief, to rise to the challenge and become a missionary center (Rom 15:24, 28)” (Gilliand 1983:32)

Relational reading of Romans: the gospel of reconciliation¹² (Rom 5:10-11; 11:15) and the Lordship of Christ

One form of the vertical relationship found in Romans is “reconciliation” between the just God and fallen man. The gospel of reconciliation is a relational reality as described by Gilliland (1983:25):

“Reconciliation that comes by the means of grace describes salvation in its simplest terms. Men and women are brought into harmony with God through a voluntary act on God’s part...”

¹² On the theme of “reconciliation,” see Martin 1981.

Paul became a changed person after his confrontation with the resurrected Lord who reconciled the persecutor Saul to begin “a ministry that always took its message and strength from the reality of a reconciling gospel.” (Gilliand 1983:29)

The Hellenistic world of the Greek is full of their gods. The gospel of reconciliation takes on a new meaning when viewed from a Hellenist perspective:

“The gospel is a message of restored relations, and it is this that Paul deals with in Romans 5:6-11 and in II Corinthians 5:18-21. For the Greeks reconciliation was all-encompassing. The whole world of the convert is indeed changed as a result of the deeply personal nature of the harmony that has been restored between a sinful man or woman and his or her God. Those who were once outright ‘enemies’ of God and had every right to fear the consequences of the wrath of God are now at peace and are saved by the initiative that God took through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:6-11).” (Gilliand 1983:100)

Another form of the vertical relationship found in Romans is the “lordship” of the risen Jesus over Paul since his conversion (Act 9:4), the new Christian (Rom 10:9) and to be “affirmed over all people, both the dead and the living (Rom 14:9),” “extends over both the lives of people and the world in which they live” (Rom 10:9) (Gillian 1983:26, 51).

To Paul, the lordship of Jesus over “the world” is a relational understanding. As G.E. Ladd in *A Theology of New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1974:397-399) explained, the word “*cosmos*” (“the world”) as used by Paul referred to the universe (i.e. the totality of all exists” (Rom1:20), the inhabited earth and the dwelling place of man (1:8; 4:13), mankind (i.e. the totality of human society) and angels (3:6, 19; 11:5). He explicitly stated that “It is not merely the world of men but the worldly system and the complex of relationships that have been created by men.”

Relational reading of Romans: “indebtedness” (Rom 1:12; 8:12; 13:8; 15:27)

The term “*opheilete*,” is used four times in Romans with multiple meanings that can be described in terms of vertical and horizontal relations spiritually, socially and missiologically.

- **“Debt” in mission outreach - Rom 1:14**

Paul freely received “grace” from God (“received grace and apostleship” Rom 1:5). He wishes henceforth ~~is~~ to pay back his vertical “debt” by sharing the gospel horizontally with Greeks and Gentiles, wise and unwise (“I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise – Rom 1:14). Paul took many concrete steps to pay the “gospel debt” to those in Rome: praying for them (Rom 1: 8-10), planning to pay them a visit (Rom 15:22-24), sharing with them spiritual blessings (Rom 1:11), etc. Paul’s strong passion for the lost, his sacrificial service, suffering for the sake of the gospel...are characteristics of a

“debtor” striving his best to pay back what he owed vertically to God’s grace and horizontally to serve others.

- **Not “debtors” to the flesh spiritually – Rom 8:12**

A gospel-transformed individual is not obliged to the flesh (“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.” – Rom 8:12). His experience is described in Rom 8:10, “And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” Vertically “the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you...quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit” (Rom 8:11). A gospel-transformed individual is a “son of God” ...led by the Spirit of God” (Rom 8:14) and ought not be ruled by the “flesh” as if he is a “debtor” to the flesh (Rom 8:12).

- **“Debt” as the practical way to love - Rom 13:8**

Horizontal relationships within the community of gospel-transformed individuals are to be characterized by “love” (“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another” - Rom 13:8). “Liberty” misused will result in “hurting your brother...no longer acting in love” (Rom 14:15). “Liberty” can divide the weak from the strong (Rom 14) but “love” (Rom 13:8) will bind gospel-transformed individuals together. “Love” is to be practiced with an attitude of a “debtor” who after receiving the “love” vertically from God is then obliged to “love” the brethren horizontally as a way to pay back. “How Paul’s injunctions to love stand out! They cover all attitudes, judge all motives, and guard every action. The individual Christian is to learn love because he has been changed by love. Love is characteristic of the Spirit and Spirit is the source of love (Rom 15:30; Gal. 5:22).” (Gilliand 1983:130)

- **“Debt” from spiritual blessings - Rom 15:27**

Horizontal relationships of those who are recipients of spiritual blessings are marked as “debt” - “It has pleased them verily; and their debtors they are” (Rom 15:27). Both the Jerusalem saints and believers in Rome are recipients of God’s grace from God vertically. Yet horizontally believers in Rome have been spiritually blessed by the suffering saints in Jerusalem and thus are “debtors” to them spiritually. Now they are to share horizontally to meet the material needs of those in Jerusalem.

Relational reading of Romans: the truth of “gospel” and “grace”

Paul experienced firsthand the grace of God and the truth that the gospel is “the power unto salvation” (Rom 1:16) thus to him the gospel is “truth about a living Christ...The vibrant connection between himself (Paul) and the risen Christ amazed and encouraged...Paul was to see this life-changing confrontation on the way to Damascus as an expression of God’s loving grace.” (Gilliand 1983:23)

Paul's experience of being confronted by the risen Lord, which led to his conversion, calling and commission,¹³ is closely linked to his theology. "Paul made personal relationships between men and God a basic theme in his theology...It is impossible to imagine the message of Paul without the idea of grace at the center." (Gilliand 1983:25) The figure below lists references in Romans and the relationship between Christ and Paul.

Figure 8 — Vertical relationship of the Gospel: Christ and Paul

Christ	Paul	Text
The Lord	An apostle	1: 1
The Gospel	Because of and for the Gospel	1:1
Source of Grace	Recipient of Grace	1:5
Justifier	Justified	3:26
Righteousness	Made Righteous	3:24
Son of God	Gospel Servant	1:9
Example	Follower	8:29-30

Paul's self-identity is "I am an apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13) as distinct from other apostles, if viewed in the light of Gal 1:15-16:

"God...chose me even before I was born, and called me to serve him...he decided to reveal his Son to me, so that I might preach the Good News about him to the Gentiles"

For Paul, this "grace" (Rom 15:5) is a personal experience of transformation from being a persecutor of the "risen Lord" to becoming an apostle to the gentiles. Similarly, it is "grace" that the gentiles are collectively "grafted in" as wild shoots (Rom 11:17), while the Jews have been "broken off" the tree of Abraham. Thus the truth of "grace" introduced in Romans and the imagery Paul uses (Paul personally and the gentiles collectively) are more suited for a relational interpretation than doctrinal or rationalist interpretation.

"The ruling impulse" of Paul's life was "to carry Jesus' Good News of universal grace far and wide" (Gilliand 1983:30) and his sacrificial ministry for the gospel is his way of relationally reciprocating the grace received.

In addition to the comments on "gospel" and "grace" shown in Figure 5 above, "the obedience that comes from faith" of Rom 1:5 and 16:26 is to be reconsidered relationally. We can see that "the obedience of faith" is exactly what Abraham demonstrated in response to God's command and promise.

"Faith" and "obedience" are the two words that are most definitive of Abraham's walk with God" (Wright 2006:247). The gospel of grace from God vertically downward to man is

¹³ Gilliland (1983:29) made a good point in saying that "It is impossible to separate the phenomena of his conversion and his calling."

to be responded vertically upward by man to God by faith and obedience. Wright in the quotation below articulated well this relational perspective:

“So Paul sees Abraham not only (as all Jews did) as the model for what should have been *Israel’s* covenantal response to God but also as the model for *all the nations* who would be blessed through him. We can summarize this double message thus: The good news of Jesus is the means by which the nations will be blessed through Paul’s missionary apostleship; the faith and obedience of the nations will be the means by which they will enter into that blessing, or indeed in Abrahamic terms, ‘bless themselves.’” (Wright 2006:248) (italic – original)

Relational reading of Romans: Paul’s priestly service

From Rom 15:14-16, one can glimpse the “relational gospel” in terms of Paul’s “priestly service” (Strauss 2003:459) to the Gentile nations (15:15-16). His vertical relationship with God resulted in him being a servant of the gospel (Rom 1: 1-17). All these are closely tied with his own conversion, calling and consecration, filled by the Spirit and commissioned to be the bearer of the gospel to the region beyond (Act 9:10-17).

Paul “pictured his ministry among the Gentiles” (horizontal dimension) as “an act of worship, similar to that of an Old Testament priest bringing a burnt offering to the altar” (Strauss 2003:460) (vertical dimension). Paul was accompanied by representatives of Gentile churches in his journey to Jerusalem (Act 20:4-5) (horizontal dimension) and may be considered by Paul as “a token and a seal of his own greater and more far-reaching sacrifices to God” (Strauss 2003:460) (vertical dimension).

“As a priest, Paul had simply been the agent of God’s work” (vertically) in his ministry of “bringing about the obedience of the Gentile nations” unto God (vertical and horizontal dimensions combined).

Vertically Paul’s apostolic calling is to be set apart for the gospel (Rom 1:1 & 1 Cor 1:17) and his subsequent service in the gospel (Rom 1:9) is horizontally ministering to Jews and nations in his entire life. Paul’s priestly ministry of evangelism is found in Rom 15:16, “the only place in the New Testament where anyone speaks of their own ministry in priestly terms” (Wright 2006:525).

Relational reading of Romans: the Trinity

It is impossible to review the many passages in Romans dealing with the vertical relationship between the Trinity and Christian; the figure below is only a sample from Rom 8.

Figure 9 - Vertical relationship: Triune God and Christians in Ro 8

The Father	The Son	The Holy Spirit
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God sending his own Son (3) • heirs of God (17) • the glorious liberty of the children of God (21) • who are the called according to his purpose (28) • predestinated...called.. justified...glorified (30, 33) • God be for us, who can be against us (31) • spared not his own Son ...delivered him up for us...freely give us all things (32) • nothing shall separate us from the love of God (39) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No condemnation (1) • free from the law of sin and death (2) • Christ in you: life & righteousness (10) • joint-heirs with Christ (17) • be conformed to the image of his Son (29) • be the firstborn among many brethren (29) • Christ died...risen again...at the right hand of God... intercession for us (34) • Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ (35) • more than conquerors through him that loved us (37) • the love of God...in Christ Jesus our Lord (39) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mind things after the Spirit (5) the Spirit of God dwell in you. (9) • quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you (11) • through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body (13) Spirit of adoption: cry Abba Father (15) • bears witness...children of God (16) • have the first fruits of the Spirit (23) Spirit helps our infirmities (26) • makes intercession for the saints (27)
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Paul uses the term “*philadelphia*” only twice (i.e. earthly and friendly love, Rom 12:10; 1Thess 4:9); but he uses “*agape*” extensively elsewhere. The self-giving love of the Triune God moves towards man vertically as the basis of self-giving love among gospel-effected individuals moving horizontally.

Figure 10 — Pattern of the “Self-giving Love” of the Triune Godhead

Triune God	Relation in Action
The Father: giving the Son	“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all...” (8:32)
The Son giving Himself	“...in due time Christ died for the ungodly.” (5:6)
The H.S. giving His presence	“...if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you...” (8:9)

God accepts hostile humankind into his holy fellowship and thus sets a pattern for people to deal with one another. Miroslav Volf (1996) conducted an extensive study on the social significance of “the divine self-sacrifice” (i.e. God embraced rebellious mankind into a divine fellowship and is the model of horizontal relationship within humanity, 1996:20) (Volf 1996)

Relational reading of Romans: the Cross and the Christian

The “centrality of the cross” in Christian mission is well developed by Wright (2006:312-323) and Romans provides plenty of data to support it. “The cross” is the center of Paul’s concern relationally in Romans as shown in the figure below:

Figure 11 —The Cross: God-man vertical relationship

Key	Practice
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Providence	God's self-sacrificial love at the cross (3:21-21)
Process	Acceptance of sinners (6-7)
Result	Salvation, reconciliation and glorification (8-11)

To Paul, "the cross" is the death of Jesus and believers are to joint Jesus first in his death then resurrection. Christians are spiritually dead because of disobedience and sin (Rom 6:8, 11; Eph 2:1, 5) but are now alive to God. Thus for Paul "the cross" is a relational reality, not merely a propositional understanding. The figure below shows the vertical relationship between Christ and Christians

Figure 12 - Vertical relationship: Christ and Christians

Christ	Christian	Text
The Savior	Saved by Gospel	1:16-17
Source of Grace	Recipient of Grace	1:5
Justifier	Justified	3:26
Righteousness	Made Righteous	3:24
Son of God	Gospel Servant	1:9
Example	Follower	8:29-30
The Word of Christ	Faith	10:17
Sacrificial death	Living sacrifice	5:17; 8:32; 12:1
Died for sin	Dead to sin	6:11
Christ - the head	Members of the body ("in union")	12:5

Since the fall began with Adam (Rom 5:12-16), "humanity is a prisoner of war (Rom 7:23);" (Martin 1981:58-59) but in Christ (vertical relationship) there is justification and life (Rom 5:17-21). In fact, the entire created order is awaiting the full salvation (Rom 8:18-25). Therefore, there is more "in the biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to biblical mission than evangelism" (Wright 2006:314). Deriving from Rom 8:18-25, Wright proposed that the theology of the cross is cosmic, holistic and social in scope (Wright 2006:312-316).

Figure 13 — "The Cross" - Horizontal relationship between Paul & his kinsmen

Key	Practice	Reference
Motive	Self-giving love	"For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." 9:3
Process	Acceptance of sinners	"That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart." (9:2)
Result	Salvation and Reconciliation	"And not only [so], but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." (5:11)

In the concluding chapter of Romans, we find a case study for "the cross" in the life-story of Aquila and Priscilla. They were political refugees from Rome and hosted missionary Paul, even saving his life in Corinth. They were transient church workers and coached Apollos in Ephesus. Later they founded a house church in their home in Rome (Act 18; Rom 16:3-5). Paul's commendation on their practice of "the cross" is listed below.

Figure 14 — Horizontal relationship of “the cross” — Pricilla and Aquila

Key	Practice	Pricilla and Aquila
Motive	Self-giving love	“Who have for my life laid down their own necks” (16:4)
Process	Life-risking	Cf. Acts 18:1-11
Result	The life of the apostle to the Gentiles spared and the Gentile churches ought to be grateful to them	“not only I am thankful, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.” (16:4)

Relational reading of Romans: the gospel-effected community

The gospel is not merely a matter of vertical “personal guilt and individual forgiveness” (Wright 2006:314). It has also a horizontal or social dimension that should not be overlooked. This social or horizontal dimension is vividly described below:

“Sin spreads horizontally within society and sin propagates itself vertically between generations. It thus generates contexts and connections that are laden with collective sin. Sin becomes endemic, structural and embedded in history.” (Wright 2006:431)

Paul’s teaching about the church in Rom 12:4-5 is best described in the vertical relationship to the Head (“in union with Christ”) and horizontally to one another as “members of the body” (12:5).

Figure 15 - Horizontal relationship of gospel-effected individual

TEXT	SUB-THEME	TARGET GROUP
1-8	All are in need of the “gospel”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saved by the power of the gospel(1:16-17) • All are sinners in need of the Gospel: Gentiles (1 : 18-32) & Jews(2 : 1—3 : 8) • All can be justified by God (3 : 21—4 : 25) • All are to “love” as debtors (8:12)
9-11	Sequence of the gospel: Jews 1 st then gentiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both are in God’s plan of salvation (9-11)
12	Gospel-transformed individuals in community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apart from the world (12:2) • Governed by “love” (12:9)
13	Gospel-effected individuals are to submit to civil authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. (13:1) • Wherefore ye must needs be subject,(13:4-5)
14-15	Gospel-effected individuals to fellow believers are to love & share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sensitive to one another (14:1-6;15:1-2) • Accept one another (15:7) • “grace” received are to be shared (15:27)

The aggregate of gospel-transformed individuals are to live out the unmerited “grace” collectively in community, demonstrating the power of the gospel horizontally in real life practice.¹⁴

¹⁴ This study is about Romans; but it is worth mentioning that the social dimension and application of “the cross” in Romans is well delineated by Volf (1996:22-28) in terms of “identity, otherness and reconciliation.”

The various spiritual “gifts” (*charismata*, Rom 12) are to be understood as unmerited endowment vertically from God and to be practiced horizontally in service (*diakonia*) within the context of the church.

In Romans 12:1-8, Figure 16 below shows the vertical and horizontal relationships of the transformed individuals living collectively in community. They work out “grace” received in “relational reality” (see earlier publications on “relational realism,” Wan 2006b, Wan 2007)

Figure 16 - Gospel-transformed Individuals in Community: Rom 12: 1-8

VERTICAL		HORIZONTAL
↓	be transformed by the renewing of your mind (2)	the grace given unto Paul (3)
↓	prove what is...good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (2)	measure of faith from God (3)
↑	present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God (1)	(Christ – the head) (4,5)
		grace given & proportion of faith (6)
		not to think of self more highly than he/she ought (3) ← →
		many members in one body (4,5) ← →
		many gifts to serve (6-8) ← →

4. CONCLUSION

In this study of the Epistle to Romans, the author has employed a missio-relational reading, complementary to other approaches, to gain missiological understanding and demonstrate the viability of a relational approach. A missiological reading of Romans was carried out by identifying the double motifs: “the gospel” and “missions” and Paul’s self-identity as “a missionary to the gentiles.” A relational approach was demonstrated to be helpful in studying the themes of “relational gospel,” “indebtedness,” Paul’s “priestly service,” and gospel-effected relationships vertically and horizontally.

The missional aspects of Romans have been highlighted for readers in the post-Christian west and relational insights are introduced for the post-modernists who are starving for personal and communal relationships.

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