

# Romans 1:1b by Wayne Barber

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### Romans 1:1b: The Eternal Works of God

by Dr. Wayne Barber

Paul was a man God could use. Why? Verse 1 says, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus." The word "bond-servant" means a slave. But it also means a love slave. It is the service of perfect freedom. God has set him free. Now that we have been set free, we can be what God wants us to be. Paul says, "I have chosen to serve Him and only Him. I only want to be about my Father's business."

Jesus said in Matthew 6:24-note, "No man can serve two masters. He will love one and he will hate the other." We have two choices at all times. We either serve ourselves or the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said, "I am sold out to serving Him." The reason then that he could be a man God could use was because he was a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once you and I have made that choice, we begin to get in on the eternal works of God.

Now I want you to understand that no man can do the works of the Father. The Father does those works through a man. Often times we get a little proud and think we can do it. We get our committees, and we plan out the works and say, "God, take our works and make them yours." But I want you to know that no man can do the works of the Father. The eternal works of the Father *He* does, but He chooses to use man to do them through.

Look in John 4. We see a beautiful example of this in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus constantly spoke of His mission. He is God. He has always been God. He is the God-man. It is sort of difficult for us to understand that—100% man, 100% God. At the same time He speaks as our example, He shows us how we are to walk in a holy relationship with God, how we are to be about God's business not just our business. In John 4:34 (cp Jn 17:4) Jesus has just taught and spoken to the Samaritan woman. The disciples have gone to get lunch. When they come back Jesus has already eaten. They say, "Wait a minute. Where did you find something to

eat around here?" Jesus says in Jn 4:34, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work." Whose work? His work. That is Jesus speaking here.

Now look in John 5:20. We can't do the same work Jesus came to do. He came to be our substitution on the cross. However, there is a principle here that I want us to see. Verse 20 says, "For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel." Drop down to verse 36: "But the witness which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me." I want you to see how He keeps pointing back to the Father.

Look in John 10:25: "Jesus answered them, 'I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me.'" Drop down to Jn 10:32: "Jesus answered them, 'I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?'" Then drop down in Jn 10:37: "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."

In John 14 we find the principle of the Christian life. It is not me doing the Father's works, it is the Father doing His works in and through me. No man can do the works of the Father. Verse 10 reads, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father."

What I want you to see is, as Jesus was to the Father, we are to be to Jesus. As the Father was to Jesus, doing His works through Him, the Lord Jesus will be to us doing His works through us. Maybe one day it can be said of us as it says in John 17:4, "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do." Jesus said that in His High Priestly prayer. We are not God. We will never be God. But what I am trying to show you is a principle.

The Apostle Paul says in II Timothy 4 that he had finished the course, He had accomplished his work, He had kept the faith. God has been allowed to do His work through him. I have to say, "God, it is useless to serve myself. It is a dead-end street. I don't want that anymore. God, I just want to do what you want me to do. I am sold out to Your truth. I hold it high in my life. God, speak Your truth to me. I will do what You tell me to do." Then we become the vessel through which the Father can accomplish His work. It is not us working for God. It is God working in and through us.

Now you say, "What has that got to do with Romans?" It has a lot to do with Romans. I want you to see, as we continue to introduce the book, that the very origin of the church in Rome was God's work, not man's work. I also want you to see that the opposition to that work, the opposition to all the Christians in Rome was by God's design. God did that. It wasn't because of man. It was because of God. God had a purpose in all the persecution that went on in Rome. But not only that, I want you to see that the objective of the letter to the church at Rome is God's work. It is an eternal work. It goes beyond those Christians in Rome. It reaches down through the centuries and has affected Christianity even until today. We need to see the difference between man's work and God's work. God's work is eternal. Man hates God's work because he wants the glory and the recognition for what he does. But the true bond-servant of Christ wants only glory to be given to Him.

The word "glory," *doxa*, means to give the recognition to the Lord Jesus Christ, the proper estimate of who He is. My life is to glorify not myself but Him. Your life is to glorify Him. We are to be bond-servants so that God can do His work in and through us.

Let's look at those three things. First of all let's look at the origin of the church of Rome and the fact it was God's eternal work. I want to go into history a little bit. We don't have one single man we can go back to as the originator of the church at Rome. That doesn't mean God didn't do a work through Paul when he raised up the church at Philippi and Corinth and other places. But in Rome it is so clearly, distinctively God's work. We don't know exactly how it started, but we do know that it came out of the Jewish community. Cicero, one of the historians, said even in 59 B.C. there was a substantial thriving Jewish community in Rome.

Look with me in Acts 2:10 and you will get a clue of how God started the church in Rome. In this verse we see the regions and the areas from where the Jews had come for the Feast of Pentecost. I am breaking right in the middle of a list: "Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes."

A proselyte Jew is a Gentile who says, "You know, I'd like to become a Jew." He has to be circumcised. He comes in at a latter time in his life. The true Jews were circumcised on the eighth day. They were born into those families so they were Jews, orthodox Jews. There were also proselyte Jews, and God, by His eternal design, had them there at the Feast of Pentecost when the Spirit of God came to inaugurate the brand new covenant that we are all in, the covenant of God's grace.

Acts 2:11 tells you what they heard: "Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." What was spoken at Pentecost? It was the gospel of Jesus Christ. They all heard the gospel spoken in their own dialect. From men speaking in one tongue, they heard them in all of their languages.

Look at Acts 2:41: "So then, those who had received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." Of those three thousand, there is no question many of them were from Rome. They received the Lord Jesus Christ and God said, "I want a church in Rome. Therefore, I am planting My church over in Rome." It was God's eternal work. It was not any man's. The Spirit came, they heard the gospel, they received it and God got a church over in pagan Rome.

Bits and pieces of information that float down through history show us that there was a contention between the orthodox Jews of that area and the Christian Jews, those that had come to know their Messiah. As a matter of fact, there were uproars and riots going on in that community. This was an irritation to the Roman government. Rome was a pagan government. They worshipped Caesar. They were also polytheistic in worshipping other gods. When they would conquer a country, they would allow those other people to come in and worship whatever they wanted to worship. But there were two groups of people they couldn't tolerate—one was Jews and the other was the Christians—because they were monotheistic. They had one God. Therefore, they were constantly irritated with that community. When the contention began to arise, it caused all kinds of problems with the country.

Suetonius, one of the historians, recorded in the life of Claudius that a man named Crestas was the cause of much rioting and unrest among the Jews. Evidently Crestas had been one of the significant orthodox Jews, heard the gospel, repented, received Christ as his Lord and Savior and as a result, an uproar existed. Suetonius said this man named Crestas embraced a foreign superstition. That is what they called Christianity, a foreign superstition. He said he was the one causing the uproar.

Well, Suetonius made a description of Christians that reflected the attitude of their day. It says that he believed they were a baneful and pernicious class of people. The Emperor Claudius finally had enough. He said, "I am sick of all this infighting with these orthodox Jews and with these believing Jews. I am going to kick them all out of Rome."

You will find some of the history of that, and how it is very significant to Romans, when you read Acts 18:2. There are two people that are going to be mentioned here. Priscilla and Aquila are kicked out, but I want you to see how quickly they come back. Verse 2: "And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome." We know that was A.D. 49. History has already recorded that for us. They kicked them out. Claudius said, "I am sick of the whole mess." But it didn't work. When God starts something, no man can stop it. There is a difference in man's work and God's work. When God does it, it is eternal. When man does it, it will fade. They said the Titanic could never sink. One wise man before it ever sailed said, "Anything made by man's hands can sink." And it did! But what God does never fails.

The eternal work of God planted His church in Rome. Yes, they kicked them out in A.D. 49, but look in Romans 16:3, 4<sup>note</sup>. This is just a few years later. Priscilla and Aquila had been kicked out by Claudius in A.D. 49. Paul wrote the letter to the Romans in A.D. 57, just eight years later. Look at what happens. Verse 3 says, "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also greet the church that is in their house." Priscilla and Aquila, how did you get back? What God starts no man can stop. God wanted a church in Rome, so God put a church in Rome.

The origin of the church of Rome was not any man's idea. It was God's idea. Claudius thought he could kick them out, but they came right back and were a thriving community eight years later. That was just three years after Claudius, the dispensable, had met his death. You see, no man can do the works of the Father. The works of the Father are eternal. Only God can do the works. But He chooses to work through men. Don't ever get the feeling if you don't get it done it won't get done. God will use somebody else you never thought He would choose. He will get it done. The key is to be a bond-servant so you can be a part of what He is doing. That is the key.

Secondly, the opposition to the church was also His idea. It was His work, His eternal work. Now you say, "Why would an eternal God plant a church in a pagan city like Rome and then let them be persecuted?" Oh, it is all God's design. Paul said in 2Timothy 3:12—note that if you desire to live a godly life, you shall be persecuted. That is part of it. But, you see, persecution always breeds purification of God's people. The more you persecute God's people, the more you are going to have of God's people. It doesn't work the way the world thinks it works.

Do you know what was going on in Rome during this time? Number 1, abortion. That was one of their natural things. Second, homosexuality. Why do you think he addresses that in chapter 1? That was one of the big things acceptable by the Roman government. Third, the feminist movement. That didn't start in America. That was going on in Rome. That has been going on ever since sin has been on this earth. That is nothing new.

The people who truly believed God were persecuted severely in Rome. As a matter of fact, in 57 A.D., the same year that Paul wrote the book of Romans, there was a woman by the name of Pompus Gracena. She was the wife of Plautus. He is the man who conquered the province of Britain for the Roman Empire in 43 A.D. She was put on trial for having embraced Christianity, although in their writings it is called this foreign superstition. She was acquitted, probably as the historian accounts, because of the position

that her husband had in high office. That shows you that they were putting people on trial during this time for becoming believers. It is documented by history. One of the satirists of the day, trying to make fun of Christianity, made a statement that Christians are to be compared to sewage and need to be dispelled out of the city.

God had the believers right where he wanted them to be, right in the midst of the most pagan culture of the day. It was polytheistic, and they hated Jews and Christians because they were monotheistic—they believed in one God.

Nero, the most deranged emperor who ever ruled on this earth, was a Roman. When he came to power he burned the city of Rome and blamed the Christians. Out of that the worst persecution the church has ever known began to develop. I and II Peter were written during that time. Paul also wrote I and II Timothy somewhere around that time. They would take Christians, put them in animal skins in the midst of an arena and have animals come out and eat them. People would pay to go watch it. They took Christians, soaked them in vats of oil, hang them on posts and burn them for torches while they had their orgies.

I could go on and on concerning the gruesome stuff they did to Christians. That was going on during this time. The Apostle Peter was martyred, crucified upside down, because of Nero. Paul was martyred, beheaded, because of Nero. Later on Domitian came on the throne. He was no better. Domitian is the one who exiled the Apostle John to the Island of Patmos. That is when God revealed Revelation to John and said, "John, it is bad now, but son, I am coming one day and I am putting all this unrighteousness down. I am going to establish My Kingdom of righteousness on this earth."

It was bad during those days. I want you to know that all the opposition those precious Christians went through was by God's design, because the more you persecute bond-servants of Christ, the more you are going to see them reproduce. It doesn't matter where it is—Romania, Russia, wherever. You can kill the man but you cannot kill the message that is in the man. God had a purpose in that. He was planting them deep.

Tertullian, one of the historians of that day, wrote in his Apology these words about the believers persecuted in Rome. He says, "The blood of the martyrs proved to be seed. Persecution and martyrdom did not extinguish Christianity in Rome. The church in that city continued to flourish in increasing vigor and to enjoy the esteem of Christians around the world as a church worthy of God, worthy of honor, worthy of congratulations, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy of purity, preeminent in love, walking in the law of Christ and bearing the Father's name." He said, "Listen, it didn't hurt them. It helped them. It grew them during that time." It is God's eternal work. No man can do the works of the Father. The works of the Father He will do in and through a man, but no man can touch what God can do.

No wonder Paul wrote what he wrote in Romans 8. I want you to think of these things when you are studying Romans. It is important to know what was going on during that time. It is important to know that he brought up homosexuality in chapter 1 because it was an issue they were dealing with during that day. It is important to know some of these things. Then when you get hold of the book, you begin to realize how eternal the book is. Ro 8:28-note reads, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"

You have to understand what they were going through. How would you like to have that letter come to you knowing that it came from an Apostle? It was the very breath and hand of God. God is speaking here: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Man, what a message to people who lived in a pagan society and were persecuted daily for their faith. The works of God are eternal. Even the opposition to His work is an eternal work of God. God uses it for His own purpose—magnifying and bringing glory to His name.

We see that the origin of the church is God's eternal work. He put it there. No man did. Not only that, but the opposition to the church was God's eternal work. There is one more thing I want you to see. The objective of Paul's letter to this church was also an eternal work of God. This book is a very precious book. It is not a piece of literature. It is God's breathed Word. I want to tell you something. If we are not going to listen to it and respect it and allow it to do its changing work in our life, we are missing the whole point. This was not just written to the Romans. This was written to Christians all down through the centuries. In Ro 15:15-note it

says, "But I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again." In Ro 16:17-note he says, "Watch out for the people trying to deceive you." We know why he wrote the people there at Rome. We know about the Antinomianism, which meant people against the Law, and licentious, doing what you want to do, don't worry about sin. That is why Romans 6:1ff-note is so vivid in our minds. We know the legalists that he had to deal with, those who said you may be saved by grace, but you are kept by the law. We know that. But this book is the greatest treatise on salvation that has ever been written. It is not just for them. It is for us and has been for every generation known to man.

Romans was the instrument God used to change the lives of three people who have effected Christianity as much as anybody who ever lived. The Apostle Paul, writing a letter to people he wanted to come and visit, had no idea of the eternal work of what God was doing through him in that letter. First of all was Augustine and I quote from the history,

"In the summer of A.D. 386, Arealeas Augustinus,... sat weeping in the garden of his friend, Aleapeus, almost persuaded to begin a new life, yet lacking the final resolution to break with the old. As he sat, he heard a child singing, 'Take up and read. Take up and read.' Picking up a scroll which lay at his friend's side, he let his eyes rest on the words of Romans 13:13,14-note which says, 'Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.' No further would I read he tells us, nor had I any need. Instantly at the end of the sentence a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

What the church and the world owes to this light that illuminated Augustine's mind, no one has the power to even begin to compute.

In 1513, Martin Luther, professor of Biblical theology in the University of Whittenberg, began to deliver a course of lectures on the Psalms. His mind at the time was preoccupied with the agonizing endeavor to find a gracious God. He came out of a works background and could not find a gracious God in Scripture. To him, God was a condemning God and he was looking for a gracious God. He was struck by the prayer of Psalm 31:1-note which says, "In Thy righteousness deliver me." Then he asked, "But how could God's righteousness deliver me? Was it not calculated to condemn the sinner and not save him?" As he pondered this question, his attention was more and more attracted to Paul's statement in Romans 1:17-note, that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith to faith as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live," a quotation of Habakkuk 2:4. The outcome of his study is best told in his own words:

"I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but this one expression, the righteousness of God, because I took it to mean that the righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous, night and day I pondered until I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby through grace and sheer mercy He justifies us by faith. Thereunto I felt myself to be reborn and have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning and whenever before the righteousness of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet and greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven."

The consequences of Luther's new insight into the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ are written in the annals of history.

In the evening of May 24, 1738, John Wesley went very unwillingly to a society in Alders Gate Street in London where someone was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, as he recorded in his journal, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, he says, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for my salvation and an assurance was given to me that He had taken my sins away, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death." That critical moment in John Wesley's life, in the book of Romans provided the spark which kindled the inextinguishable blaze of the 18th century evangelical revival.

When you approach this book, approach it very honorably, quietly. It is an eternal work of God. God is going to take the book of Romans and do something I believe in our hearts that we will be thankful for all eternity. I don't know what it is going to be. This book is the greatest treatise on salvation you will ever get a hold of. I believe God is going to turn lights on inside of us that is going to be incredible; the impact it is going to have on our families and on this world. It is going to be an eternal work of God.