# Excerpt Page from Douglas Campbell
# Proper 10A — July 12, 2026

*Excerpt from* Preaching Romans: Four Perspectives*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (Eerdmans, 2019), pages 53-58, by Douglas Campbell titled,* ***"Romans and the Apocalyptic Reading of Paul."*** *Last week's excerpt explains "apocalyptic reading": that the revelation ("apocalypse" means "revelation") of Jesus the Messiah is like that of aliens landing on earth, showing us how enslaved by Sin we are and what it looks like to be free of it. This week's excerpt shows how to apply it to reading Romans. Luther made the mistake of focusing on Romans 1-3, not understanding that Paul is arguing against false teachers. So Luther mistakes the apocalyptic nature of Paul, narrowing the Gospel to "justification" and largely missing "sanctification" — that we can, living in Christ, begin to become better human beings.*

**The Apocalyptic Road through Romans**

How do we preach through Romans so that we interpret it apocalyptically and don't slip into dangerous foundationalisms of one sort or another?

I recommend expounding Romans in [a different] order, beginning with the revelation of God's true nature and purposes through Jesus . . . in chapters 5-8. Then it jumps to chapters 12-15 for a discussion about the church. [Our order of reading] loops back to Paul's account of Judaism, in which he heavily accents Abraham and the other patriarchs and matriarchs, in chapter 4 and chapters 9-11. Then it investigates the circumstances eliciting the letter found in the letter's practical framing sections (1:1-15; 15:14-16:27), using this information to deal finally with the great problem passage for apocalyptic readings, which is chapters 1-3 (specifically 1:18-3:20). We should now take a closer look at each of these stages.

*Stage 1: Beginning in Romans 5-8: The Revelation of God's Love*

The great Scandinavian scholar Nils Dahl noted some time ago that 5:1-11 anticipates the arguments of 8:14-39. Moreover, both sections speak unequivocally of God's love, proved in the cross. We need not fear any future, whether here on earth or cosmically, in view of the unshakable truth that God is on our side and will stop at nothing to love us and to gather us in. In the light of this revelation, we can see these truths anticipated earlier in the letter, especially in 3:23-26, which announces this argumentative agenda. We also know what to do with the revelation spoken of strategically in 1:16-17 and 3:21-22. God the Father is delivering us from the prison of the flesh through the costly death of his Son, who faithfully endured the horrors of the cross so that we might be resurrected. These are statements of God's Christocentric revelation, in which the divine love is central and paramount.

*Stage 2: Continuing in Romans 5-8: Christian Life in Christ*

The next question that arises concerns our ongoing Christian life, which is ethical but not necessarily governed by the torah. Paul describes carefully in 5:12-8:14 how Jesus has lifted us into a new, resurrected reality, which stands in counterpoint to any life lived in the flesh, where the powers have infiltrated our condition and both seduce and enslave us — the story of Adam. Even a good thing like the torah can be manipulated by our lusts, abetted by the powers, such is the corruption of our Adamic condition. Note, however, that this does not foreclose on *God* taking up the instructions of the torah in the new, resurrected situation. So Paul can still quote the Jewish Scriptures frequently, as he does upward of fifty times in Romans, but this usage must be at the behest of the Spirit. The new, resurrected mind, formed and guided by the Spirit, lives in a transcendent, relational world. So torah observance is not mandatory. Loving relationality is, however. These truths are enacted in baptism. Christians are now free to act rightly and live in two worlds. But they are summoned to reject the mentality of the flesh and to act in terms of the Spirit.

*Stage 3: Continuing with Romans 12-15 and the (Diverse) Church*

What comes next? The best place to go in Romans is to the more detailed description of the relational shape of the new community, which unfolds in 12:1-15:13. Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe the nature of the community. Its leaders are gifted with various skills and roles by the Spirit and called to a particular openhanded,

merciful, and considerate relationality, even to outsiders and enemies. It also emphasizes appropriately virtuous and skillful leadership. Moreover, it is *diverse*. A loving relationality can indwell different forms of life, whether more or less Jewish (so chap. 14). Some want to observe the seventh day and to follow the dietary prescriptions in the books of Moses; some do not feel so led. There is room within the community for both. *How* they relate together is more important than *what* they do.

*Stage 4: God's People, the Jews*

Paul is under pressure to show that a community of converted pagans and messianic Jews worshiping in the same body is in fact a legitimate development of the history of God's people, the Jews (9:30-31). So he argues in two sections that when we look back on the Jews from the vantage point of God revealed as *the* Jew, Jesus, we see a history of divine words and acts of resurrection written into Israel from its inception (chap. 4; 9:6-29). From the beginning God has called his people into being, just as Isaac was born from loins and a womb that were sterile and hence biologically dead (4:17-22). . . .

*Stage 5: Religion and Unbelievers*

Since many Jews in Paul's day continued to reject Jesus and his followers, however, we need to ask what comes next. Paul depicts a contest playing out between human resistance and God's purposes. The Jews are certainly called to respond to Jesus, like everyone else, affirming who he is, namely, the Lord. We learn from this that we are responsible for our sins, even if we are being manipulated on some level by evil powers (9:30-10:17). Paul, however, is confident that God will woo his people back, even as the majority currently resist him. In particular, the preservation of a small remnant of believing Jews shows that a full flowering forth will eventually take place, ultimately because God will never let go of his commitments and his promises to the original fathers and mothers of Israel (9:27-29; chap. 11). We learn from this that we have every reason for optimism about the future even when we are surrounded by the most incomprehensible sin. . . . In the contest between human stupidity and divine [goodness], without in any way overriding our [freedom], God will win!

*Stage 6: Why Paul Wrote Romans*

It is now worth putting a practical scenario in place. Although the reasons why Paul wrote Romans are much debated, only one theory can account for the letter's long engagements with various Jewish questions, when it was written by the apostle appointed by God to go to the pagans, who is writing to a primarily pagan audience. As 16:17-20 suggests directly, and 1:15 more subtly, *false teachers are heading to Rome*. We have already met these misdirected messianic Jews who attack Paul and his gospel in Galatians and in Philippians 3. At this point in the unfolding controversy, Paul is supposed to be traveling from Corinth eastward to Jerusalem to deliver a large sum of money to the church (15:23-33). He consequently expects to lose the race with his rivals westward to Rome, and so a letter has to take his place. In it, he must affirm his gospel, defend it from his enemies' criticisms, and try to take down their gospel, and we will need to sort out which discussion is which in Romans.

*Stage 7: False Teachers and Their False Gospel: Handling Romans 1-3*

If we read Romans 1-3 in its usual way, as a self-evident demonstration of the human problem, then we introduce foundationalism into Paul's thinking from the outset, and we undermine everything that we have said up to this moment. . . . Paul would commit, at least in Romans 1:19-20, to a fundamental role for natural theology. Moreover . . . , we make the apostle into a very muddled figure. Paul contradicts himself at a fundamental level. (He also gives a very unfair account of Judaism.) So we need to ask if there is another, more apocalyptic, way to read Romans 1-3 in the broader context of the apocalyptic road through Romans that we have already sketched out. And I would suggest, crucially, that in fact he is taking down his enemies' gospel in 1:18-3:20, not establishing his own, and in a way well known to ancient people but less familiar to modern readers. Here he argues *Socratically*.

Socratic attacks show how a position collapses on itself, and so they are particularly embarrassing. If Paul can show in his opening discussion how the gospel of his enemies is pointless, falling in on itself, he will have scored a key victory. Read in this fashion, the entire letter integrates smoothly together as an apocalyptic reading of Paul's gospel as a whole. And the overall result is a Paul who speaks with a clear voice — as the faithful and deeply insightful apostle of the apocalypse [that is, revelation] of Jesus Christ.