



ROMANS: A LETTER THAT MAKES SENSE OF LIFE

Andrew Ollerton

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Andrew Ollerton's new book is fresh and accessible. The book has good hand-feel, is pleasingly laid out on the page and has an attractive cover. He lures us into the subject matter with the persuasive dexterity of a competent parent showing their child that the water is not actually shark infested. He is patient and generous with anecdotes and illustrations from his own family. He talks much of mountaineering, and – although heights and narrow ledges terrify me – Andrew talks us through the construction and presentation of Romans as though we were in fact with him on a mountain; climbing, negotiating and battling through, before carefully descending into the world to live with the understandings gained from the adventure of having explored and understood the text.

The themes and the structure are well laid out. They make sense and provide a solid, trustworthy framework onto which the complexities of the text of Romans can be laid out for ease, yes ease of understanding. He uses pictorial illustrations as well as his own stories for when we have had a surfeit of words. Maps, diagrams and charts all help us to negotiate tackling the letter. Andrew pauses, as a true mountaineer who is managing a reluctant or less fit climber, to admire the view and reflect on where we have been in the chapter with some searching questions. His style is to root us so much into the narrative of Paul's text that it is natural to apply it to our own mission, discipleship, and our understanding of doctrine and

theology. He shows us how Romans assists and educates us in the art of being Christian. I like this. Especially in today's Methodist landscape, having such a Jesus-centred book about a Jesus-centred letter is refreshing and galvanising.

As many Methodists are battling through their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Mandatory Training at the moment, Andrew offers us the biblical view. The Church in Rome was doing all of this way, way back. Andrew directs us initially to chapter 16 where we have the personal greetings and from which we deduce that the mix of enslaved people, servants, business class, the elite rich people and poor people, those from a variety of ethnic background and those with Jewish history as well as those who met Jesus while part of another culture and had their lives transformed – men and women – were all meeting together. This was radical and counter cultural when placed against the proud, Roman hierarchical structure of society. He outlines the potential issues that such a mix of people working together would face and how Jesus in their midst transforms attitudes and understanding without compromising the gospel's integrity.

Andrew's structure of the mountain with numbers to show how far we have come was good. At first I took delight in seeing my progress. Later on, when I was a good way on in the book, like the mountaineer I am, I was getting weary and

was ready to finish! It is a good system, however, please don't let my fickleness put you off pursuing the course with a steady pace and plenty of breaks. The structure is helpful and eases the reader into Paul's rhetorical style.

Throughout the book, we are challenged about the relevance of the gospel to our present society – this definitely has a post-pandemic feel to it. There is a sense of the UK culture which many authors who are not immersed in real life in the UK can miss. It is the UK's TV shows and music scene that are drawn on. It is the UK landscape and mountains that are referenced. This sense of 'home' makes it very accessible to engage with.

For ordinary disciples, Andrew's book is a grounded working out of Paul's complex theology and doctrine. He makes 'the Big R' accessible for all disciples who yearn to grow in faith. We don't need to avoid it because it is 'too hard'!

I read the whole book and was delighted by it. We are encouraged to place our very own selves into the scriptures which anchor us to God's promises. We are reminded that those same promises are real for us too.

Most importantly, the question of identity is embraced as we find ourselves located and identified 'in Christ.' When we, the people of God, embrace this for ourselves, so much makes sense.

I do commend this book to you. I've put Romans on my church preaching and study curriculum for the next Methodist year.

Reviewed by Catherine Hutton, Superintendent Minister of Sutton Circuit. Catherine is minister at Epsom & Cheam Methodist Churches, where she regularly writes bespoke Study Materials, innovates for mission and encourages deepened discipleship across the church.

**Andrew Ollerton joins us online on
Saturday 9 March to explore more of Romans**

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