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Romans, Reconciliation, and Role-Playing in Mozambique: Benefiting from the “New Perspective on Paul”

ALAN B. HOWELL

The “New Perspective on Paul” has shaped the author’s teaching of the book of Romans in Mozambique. Role-playing the background of the letter and using an important play on words in the Makua-Metto language helps present the historical and religious issues involved. This sets up a more comprehensive reading of Romans which, instead of focusing on individual justification, serves to find important points of contact and relevance for the church in Mozambique at congregational, civic, and cosmic levels.

Paul’s epistle to the Romans may be the most significant piece of literature for Protestant Christianity,¹ so it should not be a surprise that its interpretation has been hotly debated. One group of recent proposals under the heading “the New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) aims to reorient the dominant interpretive approaches (which have focused on individual justification, following Luther and others) by calling readers to consider the original historical and religious context more closely. A comprehensive summary of the NPP and a complete discussion of the controversial proposals are certainly beyond the scope of this article.² The purpose of this piece is to show how certain emphases of the “New Perspective on Paul” have been useful in teaching the book of Romans in Mozambique. This way of reading has made the letter resonate more deeply with our African friends than I had anticipated. My objective in appropriating the NPP has not been to teach it for its own sake but to faithfully communicate Romans in a way that helps the church in Mozambique to see the letter’s relevance today.

I begin with a short overview of the NPP and how it impacts a reading of Romans. I then look at how role-playing the historical situation in Rome helps Mozambican participants understand and identify with the church’s circumstances, which in turn sets the stage for a better interpretation of Paul’s counsel to its original recipients. Lastly, we will turn our attention to how reading Romans from a more comprehensive perspective connects with churches in northern Mozambique.

The New Perspective on Paul and the Book of Romans

Trying to define the NPP is complicated because this school of thought is not monolithic and its development is still ongoing. The authors in this category each have their own emphases—it is not one “new perspective” but a group of “perspectives” that interpret Paul’s writings from a variety of angles while still sharing a common corner.³ Kent Yinger

notes that while the chief proponents of the NPP (generally recognized as E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright) and others differ on certain specific issues, “the main lines of the NPP should be clear enough.”⁴ He traces the line of reasoning this way:

1. First-century Judaisms were not legalistic, but were characterized by covenantal nomism—saved by God’s grace and obligated to follow his ways. 2. Since Jews were not espousing works-righteousness, Paul was not opposing legalism in his letters. 3. Instead, at issue was a question of social identity: ‘Who belongs to the people of God and how is this known?’ i.e., does one have to be Jewish—be circumcised, keep food laws, celebrate Sabbath, etc.—in order to inherit the promises of Abraham? 4. Paul does not differ from most other Jews as to the roles of grace, faith, and works in salvation; where he differs is the conviction that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the Lord of all creation. No longer is the Torah the defining center of God’s dealings; what counts now is belonging to Christ.⁵

Another way to think of the difference between the “older perspective” on Paul and the NPP is to consider how each perceives the central question that lies as the heart of his letters. For the NPP, “the primary question being answered in these Pauline texts is not Martin Luther’s anguished ‘How may I, a sinner, find a gracious God?’ but “Who belongs to the company of the righteous, to God’s saved people?’ To read Paul as though he were answering the question, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ is to misread the apostle’s main intent. Instead, these parts of his letters that deal with salvation and justification are usually answering the question, ‘How may Gentiles take part in God’s saving grace to Israel?’ ”⁶ How we phrase the central question orients our expectations of what we will encounter in Paul. I would like to highlight two main NPP proposals or shifts⁷ that replace Luther’s inward-looking question and look briefly at how these shifts shape a reading of the book of Romans.

1. The shift to a more historical perspective—from primarily inwards to backwards—asking the question: What Jewish religious/cultural backgrounds and conflicts (potentially over boundary markers) are shaping this letter?

Reading Paul in light of Jewish backgrounds (and retreating from Luther’s question) helps us appreciate that his letters address communities wrestling with an understanding of holiness in their new, common identity in Christ. The struggle included how to make sense of their Jewish and Gentile heritages (with conflict often concentrated on the “hot button” boundary markers of circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws).⁸ A significant point of divergence between NPP and the older reading is over the role of these “works of the law.” Yinger explains: “Prior to Sanders, this referred to Jewish legalism, doing works in order to be saved. Dunn argues that this phrase refers not to works-righteousness but to particular observances of the Law that functioned as badges of Jewish identity in the ancient world. . . . Rather than being a code-phrase for legalism, ‘works of the law’ could be more accurately understood as a sociological category. It refers to a group of people, the Jewish people, who can be identified by their practices of these ‘works of the law.’ ”⁹

This is an important, complicated debate that is outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the position one takes on this issue will shape his/her reading of Romans. The ‘works of the law,’ following the NPP, have “as much to do with one’s social location (membership of the covenant group) as it does with theology.”¹⁰ While some NPP writers focus so much on sociology that Paul’s “theological views become secondary, the views of Dunn and Wright, on the other hand, represent more of a both-and to this issue of sociology versus theology.”¹¹ The “‘works of law’ do identify one’s social positioning (Jewish, non-Jewish), but precisely this social identity is central to the theological issue of justification.”¹² NPP writers helps us remember that “being part of Abraham’s offspring (Gal 3) is both a sociological and theological matter.”¹³ The church in Rome, for example, needed counsel on the issue of boundary markers and Paul reexamines circumcision as a sign of the covenant for being part of the people of God (2:25–3:1, 4:9–12) and tackles the issues of Sabbath observance and food laws (14:1–23).

Issues of religion and sociology are even at the forefront in the letter’s key thematic verses: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from the first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Rom 1:16–17 NIV). Readings of Romans that start with Luther’s question tend to put the weight on the quotation from Habakkuk in verse 17. Hence, Paul’s argument is principally about how the righteous will live by faith. A reading of Romans that follows the NPP angle, though, will weigh seriously the importance of verse 16—that Paul’s major agenda is to communicate that the gospel is God’s power to save all humans—first the Jews and then the Gentiles.

These two examples from the book of Romans, the way it addresses the “works of the law” or boundary marker issues and an important reference to the issue of Jews and Gentiles in its “theme verses,” unite sociology and theology into one cohesive whole. In the next section we will see how the gospel has even further implications, not only for the church community in Rome—the reconciliation of Jewish and Gentile Christians—but how it reverberates into other dimensions as well.

2. Shift to a more comprehensive perspective—from primarily inwards to outwards—asking the question: What are the congregational, civic, and cosmic dimensions that the gospel is addressing in this letter?

The NPP reminds us that an “individualistic focus represents a non-Pauline and modern Western way of viewing the world. Ancients understood themselves (i.e., as individuals) in terms of family and national heritage—group identity.”¹⁴ The corresponding critique of this position, though, is that some of the NPP proponents “seem to jettison much interest in individual salvation.”¹⁵ They have, in effect, thrown the baby of individual salvation out with the bathwater of critiquing an approach that ignores the communal dimensions. A more responsible position would be to “resist this reductionism (everything reduced to sociological matters) as a ‘false dichotomy’ and call for more of a both/and position,”¹⁶ or possibly even a primarily/and position—that Paul is primarily dealing with a question of

group identity but that certainly what he has to say has real and important implications for the individual. As Garlington notes, “to belong to the new covenant is to be among the community of the saved. And justification does, in fact, tell us how to be saved, in that it depicts God’s methods of saving sinners—by faith in Christ, not by works of the law—and placing them in covenant standing with himself.”¹⁷

So, while Paul’s letters undoubtedly have significance for the individual, the NPP emphasizes that a highly individualistic reading of Paul’s letters will distort the totality of its message. We need to read Romans, for example, with an awareness that the challenge of the gospel is to be heard in all arenas of life, with powerful implications at the congregational (e.g., 12:1–21); civic or political (e.g., 13:1–7); and cosmic levels (e.g., 8:1–39). Taking off the blinders imposed by a modern Western individualistic reading widens our field of vision. It helps to reveal how, at its essence, the book of Romans is about Paul applying his big picture understanding of the gospel to the big issue of how Jews and Gentiles together share in a righteousness through faith. That common identity makes them one big people of God, which in turn ends up being a big deal for the world as well.

Shifting to a More Historical Perspective: Using Role-Playing and a Play on Words to Look Backwards

In my experience, the best way to help people begin to understand the book of Romans from the angles of the NPP is to help them identify with the church in Rome by reenacting the events that led to the situation Paul was addressing. To lead Mozambican church leaders through this role-playing experience, I begin by asking everyone to vacate their seats and hand each person a nametag. About one third of the group are labeled “Jewish Christians,” with a handful of them designated as leaders. Another third of the group are labeled “Gentile Christians,” with a few of them labeled as leaders. And then the final third are given nametags that read “pagan.”¹⁸

Everyone stands around the edges of the room and we imagine that this space in front of us is Rome. The chairs, organized in rows, symbolize how the church is gathering together in that city. We start by setting the stage for the story and picturing the church in Rome as a mixture of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Since the Jewish Christians had a significant head-start in the faith, it is natural to assume their prominence in the church at its earliest stage. Participants labeled “Jewish Christian leaders” take their seats at the front, with the “Jewish Christians” sitting behind them; in the following rows are the “Gentile Christian leaders” and then the “Gentile Christians” sitting in the back. The “pagans” are left standing on the edge of the room watching what is taking place. I have the class imagine what worship is like at this period in the church in Rome—they suggest that the Jewish Christians are probably leading the community’s life and worship.

But then I inform the group that some time has passed and it is now the year AD 49. Emperor Claudius has issued a decree that all Jews must leave Rome.¹⁹ All the participants labeled “Jewish Christian” are asked to stand up and vacate their seats, moving to the edge of the room. Then I ask the group to imagine what happens next. Do

the Gentile Christians in Rome stop worshiping? No. So, I ask the “Gentile Christian leaders” to move to the front seats and the other “Gentile Christians” to fill in behind them. We try to picture what their church structure or worship looks like now that they are the ones in charge. Maybe it loses some of its Jewish flavor? It is easy to imagine that the majority of their songs are now being sung in Greek or Latin. Also, we imagine that as the Gentile Christians begin to feel more ownership of the church, they begin to evangelize their pagan neighbors. At this point, I go up to each of the “Pagans” in the room and cross out that label and write “Gentile Christian” on their nametags, asking them to take a seat with the church. We discuss what it would be like to be a part of a Gentile church functioning this way for about five or six years.

Then in the year 54, Claudius dies, his decree expires, and the Jews are finally allowed to return to Rome. We talk about the significance of this event, and I invite the “Jewish Christian” participants to go back to Rome and rejoin “their” church.²⁰ There is usually confusion at this point because the seats they used to sit in are now occupied by “Gentile Christians.”²¹ They fill in some of the seats on the side and in the back. We talk about how they may have reacted when they discovered that the church’s organization and worship have lost some of its Jewishness.²² I get the participants to imagine how this shock between the “founders” of the church and those who have continued following Christ in their absence could have manifested itself. To appreciate the division that is appearing in their community, I create a center aisle between the chairs and have the “Jewish Christians” sit on one side and “Gentile Christians” on the other.²³ To further highlight this separation between the two groups, I make a line using masking tape down the aisle to show that they are now divided.

We discuss the tension in the church in Rome and how the two groups could have been feeling about and relating to each other. A year or two later, Paul writes his letter to this divided church in Rome. And as we read through and discuss it, I ask them to imagine how Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians will hear what Paul is saying at different parts of the epistle. I emphasize that Paul wants to remove the barrier between them (removing the masking tape down the aisle) and to help them regain their identity as a unified people. Though this reenactment does not perfectly represent the situation of the church in Rome (how could it?), the role-playing activity helps the text come alive and has been a helpful way to encourage Mozambican church leaders to step inside the historical/social situation that Paul is addressing in his letter to the Romans.²⁴

Paul’s goal in writing to the divided church in Rome is reconciliation. To make that point with Mozambican participants, I have found it helpful to take advantage of a play on words in the Makua-Metto language. There is only a slight difference in the pronunciation of the word for a woven mat (*ntthatto*) and the word for a bridge (*nthato*). Woven mats are powerful symbols of fellowship in Makua-Metto culture. A willingness to sit and potentially eat with someone expresses an openness to be in relationship with that person. Refusing to sit near or share a meal with someone is an action with loud symbolic meaning—it can constitute a rejection of them and/or their group. I ask Mozambicans to imagine that the church in Rome is like a woven mat that has been torn apart and now Paul is doing his best to weave it (them) back together as one united mat or *ntthatto* (Jews and Gentiles in fellowship through Christ).

This image of weaving or sewing is one that would be all too familiar to Paul. We should remember that, “far from being at the periphery of his life, Paul’s tentmaking was actually central to it.”²⁵ The apostle’s “trade occupied much of his time—from the years of his apprenticeship through the years of his life as a missionary of Christ, from before daylight through most of the day. Consequently, his trade in large measure determined his daily experience.”²⁶ Hock describes the lengthy apprenticeship in tentmaking that Paul would likely have experienced and then goes on to describe the work he would have been involved in:

Leatherworking involved two essential tasks: cutting the leather, which required round-edge and straight-edge knives; and sewing the leather, which required various awls. These tasks would have been done at a workbench, with the leatherworker sitting on a stool and bent over forward to work. With respect to tentmaking, an apprentice like Paul would have learned how to cut the leather pieces so that their placement would take advantage of the natural strengths of the leather and thus best withstand strains and pulling. An apprentice like Paul would have also learned how to sew these leather pieces together, using either a basting stitch, a seam stitch, or a felling stitch, the latter two being used where seams needed to be waterproof.²⁷

Paul’s tentmaking and leatherworking was not that different from his letter writing—stooped over (maybe the same) bench, crafting words to cut out problematic pieces in the churches, and selecting the right rhetorical tool to weave the separated community back together. He used every type of stitch imaginable, lining up the communities’ strengths and weaknesses to sew them into a new tent (or tabernacle/temple) that would be waterproof and able to withstand the storms of persecution and pressure from the world around them. To go back to the images that resonate with Makua-Metto culture, Paul is sewing or weaving back together this torn mat of fellowship (*ntthatto*) that will serve as a bridge (*nthato*) to connect Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. At the end of Romans (15:23–16:27), we see him using the upcoming offering for Jerusalem and the list of greetings to people of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds as a way to sew the church back together again, to reconnect their fellowship and call them to a common mission.

Shifting to a More Comprehensive Perspective: Exploring Further Dimensions of Reconciliation

The role-play (activity) and the word play (of the woven mat/bridge) in the previous section have been helpful ways for Makua-Metto participants to look backward to better understand the historical context. But the theme of reconciliation in the letter to the Romans has further implications that resonate outward into the world today. In this section we will look briefly at three other levels of reconciliation that connect with a reading of Romans in Mozambique: congregational, civic, and cosmic.

Conflict and Reconciliation at the Congregational Level

Dissent and division are problems within the church in Mozambique. While visible ethnic boundary markers are not the flash point for what divides people in our African context, division still happens based on history, leadership, culture, or favoritism. We have seen multiple denominations in our region splinter and congregations split to worship under different church registrations. On occasion our mission team has been called to help mediate conflicts in the church that stem from ethnic differences (for example, a Lomwe evangelist working among the Makua-Metto people). That should not be the case. For Paul, “the central symbol of (his) worldview is the united community: Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female: the one family of Abraham, the family for the world, the single family created anew in Jesus Christ from people of every kind.”²⁸ J. N. K. Mugambi offers a loud warning that “the plague of Christianity in Africa is its internal division and rivalry, not external threat.”²⁹ The church as a community needs reconciliation, and Romans speaks to that need.

In Romans 3:21–31, Paul reminds the church that neither Jews nor Gentiles have grounds for boasting and that the basis for their salvation is found in Jesus Christ. When I talk about the implications of this text with Mozambicans, I like to ask them if this problem of boasting, pride, or looking down on other groups is a problem in the church. The answer is always a resounding “Yes!” To help unpack how Paul is counseling the church in Rome in this section, it has been helpful to use the examples of ships and stars.³⁰ I ask them to imagine two fishermen who have gone out in their boats. They are from the same village but they do not get along with each other. The first man looks across the water at the other and notices that his boat is riding low in the water—he is sinking! The first man laughs to himself at the plight of the other—glad to see that his enemy is getting what he “deserves.” The second man, unaware that he himself is sinking, glances over at the first one and realizes that the other’s boat has sprung a leak—it won’t be long until his boat is sunk! That second man chuckles to himself. Both of these men are in trouble; neither are in a position to look down on the other. Our Mozambican friends are quick to note that it is only Christ who can plug the leak in either boat, or better yet, invite both of them to leave their sinking vessels behind and together join him in God’s boat.

The other example that has been helpful is to consider two women, one standing on the beach and the other on top of a tall mountain. Both look up and see the evening star shining brightly—it is beautiful and they reach out to touch it. Even though one of these women is miles closer than the other, neither of them has any chance of touching the star, neither woman has grounds for boasting—Jesus is the one who holds the stars in his hands. These two illustrations of ships and stars have been helpful for showing how Paul’s counsel to move beyond pride and boasting are important steps for reconciliation and unity at the congregational level even today.³¹

Conflict and Reconciliation at the Civic Level

The country of Mozambique has experienced great suffering and violence. Following almost five centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, this nation only achieved autonomy after the war of independence terminated in 1975. It is telling to note that “the green, black, gold and red flag of Mozambique is the only national flag in the world to show an AK47. Crossed with a hoe above an open book, the Russian-made gun forms one side of the pyramid

which represents the war of liberation and on which independence was built: armed struggle, tilling the land, reading and writing.”³² Unfortunately, not long after independence, Mozambique was plunged into a civil war that included deliberate destabilization efforts backed by external forces. It wasn’t until the early 1990s that peace agreements were formalized and opposing military forces in Mozambique took on the form of opposing political parties. Unfortunately, that did not put an end to violence, as the minority party has sometimes acted as an insurgency, resorting to acts of terrorism and destabilization to achieve its goals. Hopes for development through literacy or agriculture were dashed as “the revolutionary trinity of book, hoe, gun was chewed up and swallowed by the ravaging (civil war) . . . and spat out as the singularity of the gun.”³³ The country of Mozambique has been famished for lasting peace, having suffered too long from division. Mozambique’s civic arena needs the peace of Christ for real reconciliation. The letter to the Romans can help the church find a place to stand and speak appropriately to that need.

One way that the church can encourage reconciliation and peace at the civic level is to model respect for government authorities and pray for them as Paul instructs the church in Rome. Walters cautions us against reading Romans 13:1–7 as a comprehensive theology of church and state, reminding us to consider carefully this counsel’s context and function:

When Paul wrote Romans, the Christians were in an extremely vulnerable position. This pericope addresses the altered circumstances of Roman Christianity following the edict of Claudius. Previously the Christians operated under the umbrella of the synagogue, but now they must survive independently, as small house-churches, alienated from the synagogues and lacking the greater tolerance Rome afforded to ancient religions. The best course of action would be for Christians to keep their heads down by living “peaceably with all men.” This would be facilitated by avoiding disruptive encounters of any kind; a painful lesson from experience (the Claudian expulsion) should have already suggested this strategy. Moreover, they should stay clear of politically charged controversies such as the tax resistance movements of that period. Instead, they must be subject to the governing authorities as ordained protectors of the divine order, thereby illustrating the non-subversive nature of the Christian congregations.³⁴

The church in our part of Mozambique is small, relatively powerless politically, and must be wise in the way it relates to the powers and authorities. By reading Romans 13:1–7 in light of its historical context, Mozambican church leaders have found their situation to be surprisingly similar. They hear Paul’s counsel to respect the government authorities as speaking to their situation, but in a way that acknowledges the limitations of human systems. In this text, “Paul insists, over against normal imperial rhetoric, that earthly rulers are not themselves divine, but are answerable to the one true God. They are God’s servants, and as servants they can expect to be held accountable. This passage actually represents a severe demotion of the rulers from the position they would have claimed to occupy.”³⁵ By modeling the proper type of respect for the governing authorities while still speaking courageously about justice and truth, the church can find a space where it can exist as a minority, as well as potentially find its place as an advocate for reconciliation at the civic level.

Conflict and Reconciliation at the Cosmic Level

Wright notes that one place where the NPP helps us understand the cosmic dimensions of the gospel message is Romans 8.³⁶ There we can see that, “Paul’s vision of God’s saving purpose drives him beyond any idea of a merely personal or human redemption. What is at stake in all this is creation as a whole and the fulfillment of God’s original intention in creating the cosmos.”³⁷ Chapter 8 has been helpful in connecting the dots between the Holy Spirit’s redemptive work to liberate human beings and the world they inhabit. That chapter reminds us that followers of Jesus share in the same Holy Spirit that speaks to God on our behalf and reminds us that we are all (both Jew and Gentile!) children of God (8:12–17), that our reconciliation to God signals the liberation of creation that also has been suffering under sin (8:18–21), while also noting that nothing in all of creation has the ability to separate us from the love of God in Christ (8:37–39).

In many ways, the Greco-Roman worldview around the time of the New Testament was closer to a typical African worldview than that of the Western perspective today. At that time, the spiritual realm was seen as ever-present and affecting human lives: “‘spirits’ or however they may be termed, could be found everywhere.”³⁸ Since the spirit realm is one that is perceived as both active and full of secrecy for the Makua-Metto people, I try to speak openly about this topic in order to shed some light on this dark and mysterious part of life. I often share this conviction: human beings are made for possession.³⁹ That idea, that we were “made for possession,” may sound strange to Western ears, but it is one that I believe Paul would agree with. Romans 7 and 8 contrast how being led, controlled, or indwelled by “sin” is different than being led, controlled, or indwelled by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Our Mozambican friends connect easily with the idea that humans were made for possession and understand that there is a drastic difference between being possessed by God’s Holy Spirit and being possessed by a lesser spirit.⁴¹ While many people in this context are filled with destructive, divisive, deceptive, and defective spirits,⁴² all of God’s children can share in God’s Holy Spirit. The Spirit of life whose power raised Jesus from the dead can dwell in us, empowering us, possessing us to live as Jesus’s disciples. Romans 8 offers a pneumatology that speaks to the realities of life in northern Mozambique. Dunn notes that:

in thus setting Christian self-understanding against a cosmic background Paul also provides a clear outline of the salvation process as he saw it working out in believer’s experience. The two decisive moments are reception of the Spirit and redemption of the body, with the intervening period characterized by eschatological tension—the strain between what has already become and what is yet to become, the strain of a relationship with God already established but not yet matured. The first decisive moment which integrates the individual into the plan of cosmic redemption is the gift of the Spirit, God’s effective power reaching out to man and welcomed by him as the chief directive force in his life.⁴³

The gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit liberates human beings, but Paul goes on to show in Romans 8 that our liberation signals the liberation of creation as well (8:18–21). The earth has been groaning under the separation caused by sin. It too was “made for possession,” but had been possessed by human beings possessed by sin and death. The reception of the

Holy Spirit and the redemption of our bodies, then, are not merely the grounds for individual salvation but have a more comprehensive effect—redemption of the creation/cosmos.⁴⁴

Conclusion

This article began by noting the complexity of the NPP. Wright states that “there are probably almost as many ‘New Perspective’ positions as there are writers espousing it—and . . . I disagree with most of them. What I agree is as follows. It is blindingly obvious when you read Romans . . . that virtually whenever Paul talks about justification he does so in the context of a critique of Judaism and of the coming together of Jew and gentile in Christ.”⁴⁵ Approaching Romans through Luther’s inward-looking question can lead the reader to think that Paul’s letter primarily represents a sequence of individual Christian experience, from justification in chapters 1–5 to sanctification in chapters 6–8. Instead, “what drives the argument from beginning (1:16) to end (15:13) is expressed in the conclusion—that God might give Jews and Gentiles ‘the same attitude of mind toward each other that Jesus Christ had,’ so that together ‘with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (15:5–6). The focus of the argument is on what makes such unity possible: God’s righteousness given to Jew and Gentile alike on the basis of faith in Christ Jesus and effective through the gift of the Spirit.”⁴⁶ The role-playing activity and the play on words in Makua-Metto (for woven mat/bridge) have been effective tools in helping Mozambicans understand the historical and social background for the church in Rome and this focus in Paul’s letter. That approach creates a more comprehensive reading of Romans that, instead of focusing only on individual justification (a topic of less interest in the Makua-Metto context),⁴⁷ serves to locate important points of contact and relevance for the church in Mozambique at the congregational, civic, and cosmic levels. The New Perspective on Paul has been helpful for finding the primary questions at the heart of Romans and connecting them to the questions and concerns about reconciliation that resonate with the Makua-Metto people.

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¹ “This letter is arguably the most influential book in Christian history, perhaps in the history of Western Civilization. But that doesn’t necessarily make it easy to read!” Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stewart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 317–8.

² One important online resource that contains a large collection of writings on the New Perspective on Paul that is updated regularly is The Paul Page, <http://thepaulpage.com>.

³ “There are, in fact, numerous New Perspectives on Paul,” says Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 24. Yinger’s book is a short, helpful introduction to the NPP, and it will serve as our guide to help us

find our path and note major features in this complicated discipline.

4 Ibid., 30.

5 Ibid., 30–31.

6 Ibid., 23.

7 N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 289.

8 Ibid.

9 Yinger, 20. He goes on to notes that “Dunn bolstered his understanding of ‘works of the law’ by finding similar usage of the phrase in other Jewish writings. Thus a number of the Dead Sea Scrolls used the Hebrew equivalent to ‘works of the law,’ it became clear who did and who did not belong to the sect. The phrase did not suggest a theology of meritorious agreement, but it spoke of how to identify the true followers of God. Paul does the same in Galatians when he contrasts those who are ‘of the works of the law’ with ‘those who are of faith’ (Gal. 3:9–10)” (21).

10 Ibid., 32.

11 Ibid., 49.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 84. Stinton, summarizing the work of many others on concepts of community in traditional Africa, states, “a cardinal point in African anthropology is that individual identity is established and fulfilled only in the context of community. To be is essentially to participate in family and community.” Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 145.

15 Yinger, 83.

16 Ibid., 84.

17 Don Garlington, *In Defense of the New Perspective on Paul: Essays and Reviews* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 11–12.

18 There are certainly other groups present in Rome. “Jews not following Jesus as Messiah,” for example, who want to keep the Jewish boundary markers, are an important group related to the background of this letter, but since Paul is not addressing them, and my goal is to help participants identify with recipients of the letter as well as understand the original context, they will not be included as part of the role-playing.

19 Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4, tells us: “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.”

20 Walters believes that the “edict’s scope . . . was more socio-religious than ethnic. When Christian Jews, like Aquila and Priscilla, and gentile Christians who lived as Jews were driven from Rome, the ratio of gentile Christians without Jewish socialization increased. Because the self-identity of these Christians was not shaped in a Jewish context they were less likely to conform to Jewish practices. Roman Christianity lacked significant ‘Jewish’ presence for about five years, until the death of Claudius (54 C.E.), when the edict lapsed and the ‘Jews’ returned.” James C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity*(Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 60.

21 “During the intervening years between the expulsion and the lapse of the edict, gentile Christians in Rome would have attracted other gentiles who had not previously been involved with Judaism. Moreover, anti-Jewish sentiments that were common among some Roman residents were easily intensified by the Christian message itself” (Walters, 63–64).

22 “Christian Jews in Rome in the aftermath of the Claudian edict found themselves in an exceedingly painful situation: Being a Christian involved changes that were more radical than they could have previously imagined. The resocialization they once expected of gentiles who wished to enter the Jewish community was now being required of them” (Walters, 63).

23 Churches in our part of Mozambique often are separated by gender with men sitting on one side and women on the other, so this is a surprising contrast to show a church “separated” by ethnic identity.

24 I also used a version of this activity for a New Testament survey course at Harding University in the spring of 2016. From that experience, I saw that doing this reenactment activity to explore the story of the church in Rome was useful not only for teaching the book of Romans to Mozambicans but also for teaching it to Millennials. As the university students listened to the letter, I had the class imagine an approval meter where Jewish and Gentile Christians gave their thumbs up and thumbs down at different points from each of their perspectives at the different stages in Paul’s discourse.

25 Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980), 67.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 24–25.

28 Wright, *Pauline Perspectives*, 409.

29 J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), viii. Ideally, Christianity should resist tribalism that, in certain regions, was exacerbated by colonial

powers, instead of being caught up and participating in divisive systems.

30 Here I am adapting an idea from Mike Cope, “Sermons from Romans 1–8” in *Preaching Romans*, ed. David Fleer and Dave Bland (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002), 161–3.

31 Paul is trying to transform the “us vs. them” and turn it into “us = them in Christ.”

32 Sarah LeFanu, *S is for Samora: A Lexical Biography of Samora Machel and the Mozambican Dream* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

33 *Ibid.*, 7.

34 Walters, 65–66.

35 N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 78.

36 Wright, *New Perspectives on Paul*, 289.

37 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 487.

38 Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 82.

39 I am indebted to Phil Henderson for introducing me to this idea.

40 Especially Romans 7:20; 8:5–7; and 8:14.

41 One example that has been helpful is to think of human beings as cups. We were made to have our souls filled by something—and we will be filled by something. If nature abhors a vacuum, then it is even more true in the spiritual realm (e.g., Luke 11:24–26). And whatever we are filled with can’t remain hidden for long. There is a spillover effect into the rest of our lives.

42 For more on the impact of the occult and spirit possession among the Makua-Metto people see my “The Occult in Mozambique: Dramatic Case Studies” in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (July 2011): 284–88; “Turning it Beautiful: Divination, Discernment and a Theology of Suffering” in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 29, vol. 3 (Fall 2012): 129–37; and “Building a Better Bridge: The Quest for Blessing in an African Folk Islamic Context” in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32, no. 1 (Jan-Mar 2015): 43–51.

43 Dunn, 489–90.

44 While there could be a danger of non-Christian environmental movements hijacking a biblical “redemption of creation” theology, that should not make us fearful of exploring the important implications of this for the church in different contexts today—a task which is certainly outside the scope of this article.

45 Wright, *Pauline Perspectives*, 276.

46 Fee and Stewart, 318.

47 For more on approaching justification and the atonement among the Makua-Metto people see my “Through the Kaleidoscope: Animism, Contextualization and the Atonement,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 135–42; and “From Mozambique to Millennials: Shame, Frontier Peoples, and the Search for Open Atonement Paths,” with Logan T. Thompson, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 33, no. 4 (Oct–Dec 2016): 157–65.