

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Past Accomplishments and Future Aspirations

By Dan Trygg

“But I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, ¹⁶ to be a minister (public-servant) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering-as-a-priest the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might become well-pleasing, having-been-sanctified by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷ Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸ For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, ... but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴ whenever I go to Spain-- for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while- ²⁵ but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints.”

Romans 15:15-18,23-25

Paul is beginning to wrap up his letter to the Roman church. He begins, almost apologetically, saying that he had written very boldly to them regarding some things. **He had gone beyond what would normally be a simple letter of introduction. Instead, he had written almost a theological treatise! His purpose: to remind them again of those things he had considered important to include in his letter. Why? Because this was his grace-gifting, his function in the Body of Christ.** God had empowered him in a special way to be kind of a public-servant, one assigned to work to benefit the entire community. **He was serving the gospel of God as a priest**, working in sacred things, as if he was in the temple, in order that the offering of the Gentiles might come to be well-pleasing to God, having-been-sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In this word picture, Paul is likening himself to a priest preparing an offering to God. In this case, **it is the Gentiles who are the gift being offered to God. Paul's work is to get them ready so that they would be very-favorable and acceptable to God.**

It is clear by the language that the Gentile nations that do not know God are not currently acceptable on their own. This acceptability comes by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (vs. 16), i.e., the setting-them-apart in dedication to God through the new birth *and* the inner working of the Spirit in their lives, expressed in transformed living. **There are two aspects of sanctification in view, here. On the one hand, Paul says that “we have been sanctified in Jesus Christ” and are “called ‘holy-ones’ (‘saints’, ‘dedicated-ones’)”** (1 Cor. 1:2). **It is a starting point, an identity.** We ARE “set-apart ones”, “ones dedicated-to-God”. **On the other hand, sanctification is also presented as the outworking of a process**, where we choose to present ourselves to live for God in our day-to-day living (Rom. 6:19,22; 1 Thess. 4:3). **God desires that the sanctification which He initiated in us by new birth would be matured and expressed outwardly in our habitual behaviors**, ...here and now, not just in some far away future. In Titus 3:3-5, Paul would write, **“He saved us not because of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but by the washing of regeneration (new life – lit. – ‘birth-again’) and renewal (made entirely different) of the Holy Spirit.”** By responding to the gospel in faith, we are radically transformed inside, ...made as a “new creation”, ...created as something that did not exist before, and of a superior nature (2 Cor. 5:17). This Spirit, God “poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, in order that *being justified* by that grace, we might become heirs (and present recipients) of the hope of age-type life (generally translated as “eternal life”, but the words really describe “life of the age to come” that is available to us *now*), ...in order that the ones believing in God might have in mind to engage in good deeds...” (Tit. 3:6-8). **Note that the inner transformation is to lead to outer expressions in practical living.**

Paul saw that the working of Christ in his life was especially operational in bringing the Gentiles to the obedience of faith in Christ. He had said that very thing way back in chapter one (vs. 5), and he dials it up again here in chapter 15. When Jesus had called Ananias to pray over Saul (who became Paul) to receive his sight, He had told him that Paul was His chosen vessel to “bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). When Paul gives his own testimony in Acts 26, he reports that when Jesus had earlier appeared to him on the road to Damascus, He had said, “...for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷ delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, *to whom I am sending you*, ¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (vss. 16-18). **Not only had Jesus Himself plainly said this to Paul, but the apostles Peter, John and James had also observed the same thing**, in Galatians 2, “...*seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised* (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised *effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles*), and *recognizing the grace that had been given to me*, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and

Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor-- the very thing I also was eager to do" (Gal. 2:7-10). **Paul's spiritual gifts, the operations of the grace of God in his life, were visible in the fruit of his actions.** (This will be true for you, too, if you grow and are obedient to God.)

Because this was clearly the inworking of God's grace in Paul, it gave him a reason to boast in Christ Jesus in things pertaining to God. At this juncture, he describes what CHRIST had accomplished through him. **Note that the "end game", the purpose, is to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles in word and deed. The focus is NOT only upon conversion; it is on discipleship.** As Jesus had commanded, "...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..." (Matt. 28:20). **Paul was carrying out the Great Commission. What does that look like? Obedience. Obedience in what you say and what you do.**

So, what did Jesus accomplish through Paul? **In miraculous signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ worked through him, with the result that from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, Paul had made full the gospel.** To make some sense of what Paul is saying, Jerusalem is less than 150 miles from Egypt, and Illyricum was at the extreme northwestern edge of Macedonia. Following direct routes, not taking into account the very rugged terrain, or the circuitous roads, that is over 1800 miles *on foot!* And, of course, Paul had been over much of that territory two or three times. Some versions translate this phrase as "fully-preached the gospel". That sounds like he preached everywhere. That is *not* what is being implied. Rather, **by God's power, the gospel was demonstrated by signs and wonders, and by Holy Spirit conviction, conversion and life-transformation. The good-news message was fulfilled in peoples' experience. Paul did not practice "saturation evangelism"; he practiced "contagion evangelism".** He started little home-group church-meetings, ...got them started in developing their relationships with God and learning to build one another up at the leading of the Holy Spirit, ...and then *he left them to infect the rest of the city and the surrounding area with the power-filled life of Jesus*, which was operating in them. From *that perspective*, and because he did not want to impinge on the work of another gospel preacher, Paul's statement in verse 23 makes more sense, "...but now, with no further place for me in these regions." Paul was running out of places that had not yet had a living witness of Jesus Christ reach them. He hoped to visit Rome on his way to Spain, ...the entire opposite end of the Empire, to the far western frontier. And, he would be sharing Christ, starting home groups, all along the way.

Paul had intended to come to Rome for quite some time, but his preoccupation in his work had hindered him from doing so. As he had mentioned in chapter one, he hoped to be able to minister to them, and also to be ministered by them, should he be able finally to come (1:8-15). **He also hoped**, he says here in chapter 15, **to be "helped by them" on his way to Spain. This was a common and widely accepted practice, to host traveling preachers and help them on their way** (3 Jn. 1:5-8). All of the apostles, and the brothers of Jesus, traveled about in this manner, bringing their wives along with them, as well (1 Cor. 9:4,5). **Although Paul often supported himself with his craft** (Acts 18:3), **he also had received support from other churches, which freed him up to give himself more fully to preaching the Word** (Phil. 4:10-20; 2 Cor. 11:9; Acts 18:5). And, he had already made the case, earlier in the letter, for how it was necessary to "send" preachers to proclaim the gospel to those who have not heard (Rom. 10:12-14). **It was clearly understood that to "send" someone as a preacher included financially supporting them in their ministry.**

Although Paul mentioned this as a future possibility, he only mentions it in passing. He has other things on his itinerary. **As he writes, he is preparing to take an offering for the poor from the Greek churches to the church in Jerusalem.** This little bit of information helps us to very clearly narrow down when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. Paul was writing from Corinth on his third missionary journey. He was preparing to take the offering collected by a number of churches from Macedonia and Achaia, and accompany a delegation of representatives from these churches to bring their offering to the church in Jerusalem. This probably took place in the spring of 58 A.D. (Acts 20:1-6), thus, this letter was probably written in the fall of 57. **Paul says that the Macedonians and Achaians were pleased (lit., "thought it good") to do this. Aside from simply helping the poor, Paul adds: "and they are indebted" to these poor.** This is the third time that the language of "debt" occurs in this epistle (cf. 13:10; 15:1). Paul is saying that the Gentiles who shared in the spiritual things that originated in Jerusalem were obligated or indebted to render as a religious service (liturgy) to them in material things. Clearly, this is based in a historical situation, in that Jerusalem was the source of the entire Christian movement, and virtually everything that the Gentile believers benefited from, spiritually, had originated from there, in very recent history. **The principle is clearly stated, however. If we share in someone's spiritual blessings, ...their teachings and ministry to us..., we have an obligation to minister to them materially, should they need it.** Paul states this unapologetically in Galatians 6:6-8: "Let the one who is taught the Word, share with the one teaching in all good things. Do not be deceived, **God is not mocked, for whatever a person sows, this he will also reap. If he sows to the flesh, he will reap rottenness; but if he sows to the Spirit, he will reap eternal life.**" We have an obligation, a *debt* in God's eyes, to help them, materially, as an act of religious service to Him.