

**CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH
THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE BY
PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL
Romans 15: 14-24**

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Paul's letter to the church in Rome is unique among his thirteen letters collected in the New Testament. It is the only letter he wrote to a church he did not start. While he knows over thirty individuals in the church, he has no formal connection to or authority over it. Yet he spends over 14 chapters instructing this church in the gospel (see Rom 1:1-16) and in how to live in harmony with one another (See Romans 12 & 14). At the end of his letter, in this passage, he explains how this letter is part of his duty as the "apostle to the Gentiles". (We should be glad Paul wrote this letter because Christians through the centuries have regarded this letter as the clearest and most thorough explanation of the gospel that we have.) In these 11 verses we will see not only what Paul does but also why he does it. While Paul never calls every individual Christian to engage in the mission he is engaged in, yet he does set the pattern for how each local church is to think about its methods and purposes. We discover that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is Paul's method that we are to imitate. In this passage he explains why the proclamation of the gospel is the primary work of the church.

NOTE: As the leader you may want to familiarize yourself with Paul's conversion and the basic outline of his life. You should read Acts 9, 11:19-30, 13:1-3, 21:37-22:21, 26:1-32 and then review the maps of Paul's 3 missionary journeys in the back of your Bible.

STUDY

1. What impact would Paul's commendation of the Christians in Rome in v. 14 have upon them?

It would be a great encouragement to know that the apostle to the Gentiles has confidence in the sincerity of their faith and their health as a church. However, it might also cause them to wonder at why Paul has written them such a lengthy letter. He does not know them and he says they are competent to instruct each other so why is he writing to them? There would most likely be some wondering why he is sticking his nose into their affairs.

2. What reason does Paul give as to why he has written to them so boldly at the end of v. 15?

He wrote them this letter because of the grace God gave him.

3. According to v. 16, what is it that God gave to Paul contrary to what he deserved or earned and against every expectation?

God made Paul a servant of Christ Jesus and a person who acts as a priest of the gospel of God.

4. What is the goal of his service to Christ, of his acting as a priest of the gospel of God?

The goal of his service to Jesus, his priestly duty is to make the Gentile peoples an offering that is acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. He does this by proclaiming the gospel of God to the Gentiles.

5. Read Exodus 12:48-49, Leviticus 13:1-3, 15:31, 21:5-6, 16-23 & 22:17-26. How would you describe one of the main functions of the OT priest? What is the point that Paul is making about his ministry of proclaiming the gospel by using this metaphor?

Paul is using OT language and a thoroughly Jewish and OT word picture to explain what his life is all about. In the OT system of worship, it was the priests' primary duty to make sure that the animals and other offerings that were sacrificed were acceptable or holy. In addition, it was the duty of the priests to determine what people were acceptable or holy enough to enter into the temple court and participate in the worship in the temple. They were to make sure no Gentile or unclean Jew was permitted into the temple court. It would

have been an act of the highest dishonor to God to permit a non-Jewish person into the temple. What Paul is saying is that he, as the servant of Jesus Christ and by the proclamation of the good news about Jesus to Gentiles, is making unacceptable people acceptable to God. This is an astonishing word picture that Paul uses here. He stands in front of the Holy of Holies and invites unclean and repulsive Gentiles and Jews to enter into God's very presence, through Christ. He doesn't simply invite them in, but by his proclaiming the gospel, he actually makes them fit to enter into God's presence, into the Holy of Holies. He proclaims to men and women who are repugnant to God, who are unclean and offensive to the holiness of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. He declares that Christ has suffered and died to pay the penalty of sin and to wash away the filth of sin from all who will believe. He explains that all who repent of their sin and trust in Christ have been made acceptable to God by what Christ has done, not because of anything they have ever done.

6. Paul adds, at the end of v. 16, “sanctified (made holy, set apart for God's use) by the Holy Spirit. What is the relationship between Paul's proclaiming the gospel, the Gentiles being made an acceptable offering to God and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit?”

While he is the human mediator or priest, the actual making acceptable is a work of the Holy Spirit. This act of cleansing or of making unholy people holy is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not work apart from the proclamation of the gospel and the proclamation of the gospel is only effective because the Holy Spirit is making it effective. This is the same language as that of Jesus in John 3, 14, 16 and of Paul in Romans 8, Galatians 3 & 5, etc.

The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus is always the primary work of the church because it is the means by which the unacceptable are made acceptable.

7. What does Paul mean when he says that he glories in Christ Jesus in his service to God? What does it mean to “glory in” or (literally) “boast in” someone or something?

The center of Paul's attention and his affection is Jesus. The subject of his conversation is the greatness of the crucified and risen Jesus. He is like the most rabid sports fan, like the most affected teenage fan of a pop star. He declares the greatness of Jesus because he is overwhelmed with the greatness of Jesus. He's like a campaign worker for one of the Democratic presidential candidates. When one of them knocks on your door, he or she doesn't spend his time talking about how dedicated he are or how well their campaign is organized compared to the campaign of the other candidates. No, they have only one thing they want to talk about, their candidate. They boast in him, not in anything else.

Paul says that not only does he boast in Christ's greatness in his finished work but he boasts in the ongoing work of Christ through him. He isn't simply glorying in what Christ has done but in what Christ is doing. Everywhere Paul has gone throughout the Roman empire, Gentile people have gone from being people who have no knowledge of the true and living God, from idol worshippers who live unholy and rebellious lives to believing and holy people who love and worship the true and living God. Therefore, Paul is delighting in the fact that Jesus, through him,, a former persecutor of the church, is making sinners acceptable to God.

8. What is the reason that Paul's labor and his words have resulted in the conversion of thousands of Gentiles? Compare 1 Corinthians 15:10.

Paul has seen men and women, boys and girls, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen all embrace Jesus Christ and a life of obedience to him as the result of his simply declaring the message of Christ's coming and dying and rising and giving of the Holy Spirit. These effects are the result of the work of Jesus Christ, not him. Paul says that his speaking and acting were actually the speaking and acting of Jesus himself.

9. What words and works are Jesus performing through that is resulting in others obeying Christ? Are you rejoicing in Jesus' work through you? Why or why not?

The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus is always the primary work of the church because it is what Christ is doing through the church.

10. What is Paul's astonishing claim in vv. 19b and 23a? (NOTE: It is about 1000 miles as the crow flies from Jerusalem to Ilyricum. It contains a land area about the size of the eastern U.S.)

What Paul is saying is that he has fully proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ in the previous 25 years throughout a land area equivalent to one-third of the U.S. He has so fully proclaimed the gospel in these regions that there is no more work for him to do.

11. What does Paul mean by this? How can he say that he has no more work to do in this area? See v. 20 for the answer. (CLUE: What is the "foundation" he is talking about? See 1 Corinthians 3:10-11)

His goal has always been to preach the gospel where the gospel has never been preached before. His commission from Jesus Christ was to go and preach to Gentile people who had no knowledge of the gospel, where no church existed. His objective was to always be on the leading edge of the expansion of the Christian church. He does not say that this is what every Christian is supposed to do. In fact, when he says his goal was to not build on anyone else's foundation he is acknowledging two things. First, other people are also engaging in this work of going into the regions of the world where there is no church in order to start churches through preaching the gospel. Others are laying the same foundation he is laying among unreached peoples. Second, he knows that others must build upon the foundation that he lays. In fact, this is the exact point he makes in 1 Corinthians 3 when he explains that the church is God's building and that he laid the foundation, which is Jesus Christ, and that now others are coming behind him and building on that foundation. Paul is the excavator and the one who lays the foundation for the church by going to places where the church does not exist and proclaiming Christ and thus forming local churches in places where no church existed before. Others then come and build on that foundation. Therefore, when he says there is no more place for him to work in these regions, he means that throughout this geographical area there are enough local

churches begun that the gospel will be lived and proclaimed sufficiently so that the entire region will be reached with the gospel.

12. Paul then quotes Isaiah 52:15 as the biblical justification for his conviction that he only preach the gospel where Christ has not yet been preached. Why does he quote this verse? What is he saying about God's will for the world? Compare Isaiah 52 with Genesis 12:1-3.

It has always been God's intention to include among his people, representatives from among those Gentile nations who have never heard about him. This goes all the way back to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 when God told Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through his descendants. Paul knows that God's will has always been that people from every tribe and tongue and nation and people be part of his kingdom and join in his glad worship forever and ever (Rev. 7:9-10 is the fulfillment of this purpose).

13. In vv. 23-24 how does Paul show this conviction of his in his plans and his relationship with the church in Rome?

Paul explains that the reason he is coming to Rome to visit them is not only because he has wanted to meet them for a long time but so that they can help him get to Spain, a place where the gospel has not yet been preached.

14. What does the example of Paul's life mean for each of us individually and for us as a church?

What Paul is showing us here is that the church is always sending representatives of Jesus into the peoples of the world who have never been told about Christ. Not everyone goes but every local church is to be concerned about and involved in making sure that some are going among the unreached peoples of the world. We live in a world of about 6 billion people and currently over 2 billion of them have no one bearing witness to the glorious Christ in their language and cultural context. Therefore, we are to be involved in doing something about that. Paul never commands every Christian to adopt his mission. He

clearly recognizes that while he lays the foundation of Christ where he is not known, others must come behind him and build on that foundation. However, his example does show us that every church and every Christian ought to care about, pray for, give money towards and mobilize some to go so that all the nations of the world have established churches in them.

15. What is the ultimate reason God wants people from every nation, tribe, people and language to worship him through Christ and therefore our ultimate reason for going and giving and praying? (See Exodus 9:16, Isaiah 43: 5-7, Romans 1:5, Rev. 7:9-10)

It is the same reason that we do everything we do, we yearn that God's name be exalted and revered and delighted in more than anything and everything else in the universe. We know, as John Piper says, "the fame and greatness and worth of an object of beauty increases in proportion to the diversity of those who recognize its beauty. If a work of art is regarded as great among a small and like-minded group of people, but not by anyone else, the art is probably not truly great... But if a work of art continues to win more and more admirers not only across cultures but also across decades and centuries, then its greatness is irresistibly manifested." God's glory is most clearly made manifest in the glad worship of the most diverse group of human beings that will ever be assembled. In other words, the glory and beauty of God is most visibly manifested in the worship and joyful obedience of diverse and dissimilar people. When we stand around the throne of God after the return of Christ and there worship Christ with people from every nation, tribe, people and language, then will the supremacy and greatness of the only true and living God be most visibly displayed.

16. What are you doing to promote God's glory among the nations of the world? What are some things you can do? What are some things we as a church can do?

The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus is always the primary work of the church because it is the means by which the greatness of God is manifested.