

## Romans 15:14-22 Concluding remarks

In this passage Paul makes some concluding remarks, and we may have reason to think it is less interesting than other passages. However, everything in God's word is there for a reason, and often those parts which seem more less interesting contain amazing nuggets of truth. That is true of this passage.

In Romans 1:11 Paul expressed his desire to visit the congregation at Rome. Now he explains why he been unable, thus far, to visit them (Romans 15:22).

Letters written to parents, or children, or a partner will be very different in tone and expression. The fact that Paul had never met most of the congregation at Rome may be this accounts for the more general nature of Romans, compared, for example, with Paul's letters to the Corinthians. And sometimes, having written a letter, or more likely these days an email, we send it, but then anxiously wonder if we have put things the right way. Something like this is going on in Paul's mind when he says, *But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder* (Romans 15:15). Has Paul, like an anxious parent who has disciplined their child, gone too far, he wonders? He feels the need to reassure the congregation at Rome, that he does not consider them to be immature. He does not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. He says, *I myself am persuaded about you, brothers* (Romans 15:14 NB the same word, *persuaded* is used in Romans 8:38-39.) He does in fact has a very high level of confidence in this congregation: *that you are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another* (Romans 15:14). Note that, *all knowledge* is a bit of a hyperbole (cf my suitcase weighs a ton.) Paul means that he is confident that they are sufficiently grounded in the truths of the gospel to function as a community and able to instruct one another. In other words, they had competent 'lay' ministry, which is something every church needs, especially smaller Baptist churches unable to afford a pastor. This is not necessarily about going to college (even though this can help,) but it is first about being *filled with goodness*. Competent lay ministry is exercised by people who are mature in character (Romans 5:2-3). They have been in the discipleship school of life, following Jesus, for a good many years, developing Christian maturity. This kind of maturity doesn't develop overnight.

Paul adds that he has written *by way of reminder*. We may read the Bible or listen to a sermon, and much of it is new for us. But Paul's exhortations were not new for the Roman believers; it was a reminder. We need reminding constantly, through daily Bible reading, house groups and weekly church attendance, because we are so prone to forget (Proverbs 4:5). We should never consider a reminder or hearing things we have heard before as demeaning, because God can always use His word to speak to us in new ways. It is good and should be expected that we be reminded, for *he is our life and length of days* (Deuteronomy 30:20).

But what was Paul's justification for writing at all, considering he didn't know this congregation? He clearly felt the need once more to explain his ministry, as Apostle to the Gentiles. He explains this using language connected to Temple worship (cf Romans 12:1-2).

**Romans 15:15-16** *because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*

This begs the question, are ministers of the gospel priests? To answer this question requires a bit of explanation is required. A priest (from a biblical perspective) is an intermediary between God and

man who offers sacrifice to make reconciliation. In this sense ministers of the gospel are obviously not priests. But what does Paul mean by describing his service (ministry) as a *priestly service*?

In the Bible there are just two legitimate priesthoods (and the Catholic priesthood isn't one of them.) There is the Levitical priesthood, where Aaron and his descendants were the High Priests. And there is the priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. In the book of Hebrews Jesus is identified as the great High Priest in the order of Melchizedek who reconciles man to God through the sacrifice of Himself on the cross. So, we have an earthly priesthood (the Levitical priesthood) and an heavenly priesthood (the Melchizedekian priesthood). The key is that the earthly priesthood is a pattern of the heavenly priesthood (Exodus 25:9).

If Paul considered himself to be literally a priest, it could only be as a Levitical priest. This is impossible since Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin. But he is only using the language of the Levitical priesthood in a metaphorical way to describe his service to Jesus our heavenly High Priest. Paul regards himself to be *like* a Levitical priest who served and helped the Aaronic High Priest. And he considers the Gentiles to be *like* the Levitical offering in that the offering had to be without blemish ... the Gentiles were being offered to God *acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit* (cf Romans 6:22). It almost goes without saying that the Gentiles were not a literal offering, because they were neither animals nor slaughtered! In the same way, Paul was not literally a priest. The whole concept of a Christian priesthood is rooted in replacement theology - i.e. the idea that the Christian priesthood has replaced the Levitical priesthood. But a Christian priesthood simply does not exist in the Bible, and church leaders are described using other terminology, such as pastor, elder and deacon.

However, Paul's service was a priestly service in that he was in service to our High Priest in heaven, Jesus. This priestly service is not limited only to those in full-time ministry, but includes all believers, as a priesthood of all believers (Exodus 19:6, 1Peter 2:5-6).

For Paul, all the glory goes to God! (Romans 15:17). Paul had remarkable success in his ministry (see Acts 19:10). But he doesn't take credit for himself but understands it is God's work (see Jeremiah 9:23-24). Personally, I can't imagine the "Apostle Paul Evangelistic Crusade". He dare not venture to speak *anything* except what Christ has achieved through him *by word and deed* (Romans 15:18-19). It was not only his teaching, but his life that leads the Gentiles to obey God.

We live in a multimedia world with thousands of Christian voices? How do we know which one to believe? We have two guides, first the plumb line of Scripture, and second the testimony of the life, as Jesus said, *by their fruits you shall know them* (Matthew 7:20). Is the minister in it for the prestige or attention, or motivated by serving God and His people?

Paul mentions that his ministry was authenticated by God with signs and wonders (Romans 15:19). This was particularly important as Paul was a trail-blazer in his ministry to the Gentiles. But signs and wonders are not the primary sign of an authentic ministry (Matthew 7:21-23), even though God does give signs of his mercy and presence, for example, through healing, and this can be a great encouragement to our faith. Paul's ambition was always to preach Christ where He was not known (Romans 15:20), and it was this that had kept him from visiting Rome. He very much desired to visit Rome, but other priorities had been pressing. This can also be true for us. We may even have God given desires, but somehow circumstances haven't come together to make it possible. So it has been important to continue serving God where we are.