

I. **Salutation and Introduction** (1:1-17)

As noted in the previous introductory section, Paul's epistle to the Romans is constructed upon the central theme of the gospel. This is evident first of all from the content and logical development of his argumentation throughout the letter. But even more, the theme of the gospel bookends the epistle, so that Paul's developing argumentation *presupposes* this theme and is also *summarized* by it (cf. 1:1-4, 14-17 and 16:25-27).

A. **Prescript** (1:1-7)

Given the centrality of the gospel to the Roman epistle and the thoroughness with which Paul addresses this theme, the structure and breadth of his prescript are not at all surprising. As Romans is the longest of Paul's letters, so also is its prescript. And as the gospel is central to the overall content and purpose of the epistle, so it is central to Paul's introductory statements.

The prescript constitutes an extended salutation in which Paul identifies himself as the author of the letter and the Roman believers as its recipients. What is noteworthy is the way in which Paul introduced himself and identified his readers. *In both instances their respective identities are defined in terms of the gospel.* That is, Paul was concerned to present himself not in terms of his personal identity or even his apostleship per se. Rather, he presented himself as he stood in relation to the gospel. So also it was with his readers; they were not simply specified as the church at Rome, but as the "*called of Jesus Christ*" in whom God had brought about "*the obedience of faith.*" Their identity in Paul's estimation was inseparable from their **faith**, and, by implication, their faith presupposed and was directed toward the *gospel*.

1. **Paul's Self-Identification** (1:1)

Toward the end of introducing himself to his readers, Paul first identified himself by name and then proceeded to characterize himself in terms of three distinct yet interrelated aspects. In each instance his self-characterization places him in relation to the gospel, identifying him in relation to Christ Himself, the office to which Christ had called him, and the purpose of his calling.

a. Bond-servant of Jesus Christ

This aspect of Paul's self-presentation was fundamental to the way in which he viewed himself, so that although it is present only in the prescripts of Philippians and Titus, it is implied in the others and is a consistent theme in his writings (cf. Romans 1:9; 1 Corinthians 9:16-17; Galatians 1:10; Colossians 1:3-7, 4:7). Paul was who he was according to the will of God, which will had been revealed to him in Christ's own calling and commission. The one who had lived as a persecutor of Jesus Christ and His Church had, at the appointed time, been called out and commissioned as His servant (cf. Acts 9:1-16, 22:1-15, 26:1-20).

Some have noted that this title harkens back to the common Old Testament concept of *servant of Yahweh*. Although many individuals were referred to as servants of Israel's God in the Old Testament, only a few were given the specific title, "the servant of Yahweh."

- It was used repeatedly of *Moses*, particularly in the book of Joshua where it occurs fifteen times (Deuteronomy 34:5; Joshua 1:1, 13-15, 8:30-33, 11:12, 12:6, etc.).
- Later it was appropriately ascribed to *Joshua* himself (Judges 2:8).
- Finally it was ascribed to *David*, the great king of Israel and man after God's heart (Psalm 18:1, 36:1).
- Subsequent to those referents Isaiah extended the title, *servant of Yahweh*, to Yahweh's covenant son *Israel* (Isaiah 42:1-19, 43:1-10, 44:1-2, 21, 45:1-4, 48:20). That designation was intended to illumine Israel's role in salvation history as the progenitor and historical type of the *Messiah* who is the true, epitomizing Servant of Yahweh; the Lord's true and faithful covenant Son "Israel"; His singular Servant and appointed Redeemer of Israel (Isaiah 49:1-9, 50:1-10, 52:13-15, 53:1-12).

While it is not possible to know for certain that Paul was drawing upon this Old Testament title, it is hard to believe that a man so steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures could ascribe to himself the designation *servant of Christ Jesus* (as also *servant of God*) without calling to mind the idea of *servant of Yahweh*. What is certain is that he viewed himself as Christ's bond-slave according to the purpose, will, and power of God.

For this reason Paul's sense of himself was at the same time that of *great dignity and privilege* as well as *lowliness and humility*. He stood in the legacy of Moses, Joshua, and David as an appointed servant of God's will and work among men and yet his life was not his own; he was a slave of his Master. And although Paul's status as a bond-servant was bound to his unique apostolic calling, *every Christian stands in the same dignity, privilege and lowly subjection as a fellow bond-servant of Christ* (Romans 6:1-18, 7:1-6, 14:1-18; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 7:20-23; Ephesians 6:5-6; Colossians 3:22-24; etc.).

b. Called Apostle

Almost without exception English translations render this Greek phrase as "called to be an apostle." Though this translation adequately captures the sense, the adjective *called* is connected grammatically to the noun *apostle* as an attributive. Hence the literal sense of the expression is *Paul, a called apostle*. This self-characterization identifies Paul's apostolic *office*, and more specifically explains the framework within which his status as Christ's bond-servant existed.

Throughout his epistles Paul openly declared that he was a bond-slave of Christ according to the purpose and power of God. At the same time, his “enslavement” was not random or undefined; Christ Jesus had taken him captive in order to be His *apostle*.

Two things in this regard are important to note:

- 1) The first is what it meant for Paul to be an apostle. In one sense his apostleship was unique in that he was not one of the Twelve; by his own admission he entered upon his apostolic ministry as “*one untimely born*” (1 Corinthians 15:1-10). Unlike the twelve apostles who had been with Jesus from the beginning, prior to His appearance on the Damascus road there is no indication that Paul had ever met Jesus. In fact, until his commission Paul wanted nothing to do with Christ and had done everything in his power to destroy His name and His Church.

As well, the apostolic title was carried by men beyond Paul and the Twelve. A survey of the New Testament reveals that the term was used in both a technical and a more general sense as referring to a messenger or designated emissary (Acts 14:4, 14; Romans 16:7; 1 Corinthians 15:5-7; 2 Corinthians 11:1-13). This means that it is improper to view every person identified in the New Testament as an *apostle* as having the same apostolic authority or calling.

Unlike the others, Paul and the Twelve were chosen specifically by Christ Himself. And as Jesus’ designated ambassadors His apostles carried His *authority* as they proclaimed His gospel. By introducing his epistle to the Roman church in this way Paul insured that his readers understood that he was not writing to them as simply another Christian or even a teacher well versed in the apostolic doctrine. The message of his letter was Christ’s own truth and it came to them with the Lord’s authority, even as the gospel he preached was “*not according to man.*” It was not received from man, but through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

And central to the apostolic office was the stewardship of the gospel. As the prophets had served as interpreters to Israel of God’s works among them, so the apostles were appointed to be the interpreters to the nations of Christ and His work. For the most part Jesus’ life and death were unknown outside of Israel, and now His apostles were to proclaim Him to the world.

Paul’s apostleship was also unique in that he was Christ’s appointed apostle to the *Gentiles*. This is not to say that Barnabas was not also an apostle to the Gentiles, but he entered upon his apostolic ministry apart from Christ’s direct commission. Paul, however, was specifically and singularly Jesus’ own chosen instrument to bring His gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-16; Galatians 1:15-17, 2:1-9).

- 2) The previous observation leads to the second consideration raised by Paul's self-identification: he was a *called* apostle, called out and given his apostolic office, authority, and message by the Lord Jesus Himself (cf. Acts 9:1-16, 18:1-11, 22:17-21; 1 Corinthians 7:10; Galatians 1:11-12). By referring to himself in this way Paul was not setting himself above the Twelve, for they were also called out and personally set apart by Christ (Luke 6:12-16; John 15:15-16). However, since Paul was not among their number his apostolic credential was always subject to question, even among those who had been the recipients of his faithful ministry for Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-11; 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:10; Galatians 1:1-2:10). This need to constantly affirm his authority, combined with the fact that there were other apostles who had not been commissioned by Christ, made it appropriate for him to identify himself as a *called apostle*.

c. Set Apart for the Gospel of God

Paul, the slave of Christ, chosen and called by Him to be His apostle, had been called for a singular purpose: *he had been set apart for the gospel*. The calling he had received constituted the manifestation at the appointed time of the "setting apart" that had separated him while he was yet unborn (Galatians 1:15-17).

- Paul viewed his calling as a divine act of personal consecration, and his grammar reveals that *he regarded every aspect of his life from the point of Christ's calling to be defined by and understood in terms of his absolute consecration to His Lord*.
- Furthermore, Paul's consecration was "*for the gospel of God*." He had been set apart *unto* the gospel, and the best way to understand this phrase is that Paul regarded the gospel - in its *truths* as well as its *discharge* in preaching - as the goal or object of his separation.
- It is worth noting also that Paul referred to this gospel as the *gospel of God*. Elsewhere Paul speaks of the gospel in relation to Jesus Christ (Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, 9:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8), although it is not uncommon for him to use the present phrase (Romans 15:15-16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-9; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; etc.).

Given that the phrase, *gospel of God*, is not unique to either this context or the Roman epistle, it is unwise to overly presume upon its use here. At the same time, Paul immediately qualifies it in a *redemptive-historical* treatment that sets the stage for the perspective of the entire epistle (1:2-5). For rather than addressing the gospel first in terms of Christ and His atonement, *he traces it back to the proclamation of Israel's prophets and the promise to David recorded in the Old Testament*. In this way he insists that the gospel is first and foremost the gospel of *Yahweh*; the gospel that did not originate with Calvary, but spans the length of salvation history.