

C. Paul and the Gospel (1:16-17)

Paul's longing to come to Rome was born out of his apostolic mandate and burden, namely to bear witness of Christ throughout the world and so bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles. But this work in the gospel was to him more than simply evangelizing the heathen; *Paul believed that the ministry of the gospel was absolutely necessary to the establishment, encouragement, and strengthening of the saints in their faith.* He was eager to preach the gospel to the Romans not because they did **not** know Christ, but because they **did**. Paul's desire was that they should be established and encouraged together with him, *each by the other's faith* (1:9-15).

It has already been observed how thoroughly the gospel permeated and defined Paul's perspective and labors. He could not even introduce himself to the Romans without presenting himself in terms of his relation to Christ and His gospel. Such was the case also with his readers: though he had never met them his consideration of them was as *called saints* who were *beloved of God* because of their participation in the gospel. Yet Paul's life and ministry did not represent sterile obedience to Christ's command to preach; *he was a man inflamed by the gospel's greatness, glory, power, and surpassing excellence.* He desired to preach the gospel to the Romans because of his unwavering confidence in its power to establish and sanctify God's people unto their final salvation:

"I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" (1:15-17)

1. In expressing his full confidence in the gospel it is interesting to note that Paul spoke negatively rather than positively. That is, he expressed his confidence by insisting that he was *not ashamed* of the gospel. This means of expression is actually far more communicative and compelling than a positive affirmation, for it more pointedly gets to the heart of the issue: *it is one thing for a person to affirm his confidence in the gospel, it is something else altogether for him to be able to insist that he has no sense of shame concerning it.* For in truth, many who openly proclaim their allegiance to and confidence in the gospel actually bear witness by their lives and interaction with others that they are ashamed of it. In terms of doctrine or theological principle they can insist that they heartily agree with Paul, while at the same time their timidity, embarrassment, silence, pragmatism, ecumenism, moralism, etc. effectively disprove their claims.
 - a. The repulsion and ridicule men express toward Christ and His gospel tend to produce timidity and even embarrassment in Christians.
 - b. As well, the pragmatic spirit of the present era often leads to the minimization and even the neglect of the pure gospel in deference to methods and messages that appear to be more successful ministerially or bring a greater "yield" for the Church's evangelistic efforts.

- c. The ecumenical pressures brought to bear by America's pluralistic, relativistic mindset also render the gospel essentially meaningless and empty it of any real power. Where the position that "many paths lead to heaven" is embraced, the message of a singular salvation by faith in Jesus Christ becomes both foolish and intolerable.
 - d. Perhaps most insidious is the influence of moralism upon the gospel. Paul grasped all too well that the principles of personal performance and the gospel of divine righteousness by free grace are mutually exclusive. To add anything of self or performance to the gospel - however minute it may be - is to separate oneself from Christ and His grace (Galatians 5:1-6). When it is understood that works righteousness is foundational to all human religious thought and expression, it is evident how thorough a threat legalism and moralism pose to the gospel.
2. Thus Paul established in the minds of the Romans the essence of true confidence in the gospel by declaring his utter lack of shame in it; though the Jews regarded the gospel as blasphemy and so stumbled over it; though it was foolishness to the Gentiles, Paul knew it to be the *power of God* (1 Corinthians 1:18-24).
- a. Specifically, he understood its power to be purposeful and directed: it is the power of God *for salvation*. As the gospel finds its focal point in the proclamation of Christ crucified, so it has its sole purpose and concern in the salvation of men. It is neither a message of social imperative nor moral reform, it is the good news of sin's conquest, forgiveness, cleansing, and the gift of divine righteousness; it is the message of a salvation that is both *present deliverance* (Colossians 1:13-14) and *final glory* (Romans 8:1-25; cf. also Colossians 1:25-27).
 - b. The power of God that brings salvation works through the gospel in everyone *who believes*. This qualifier is absolutely vital to Paul's gospel and, therefore, the entire Roman epistle. Its importance is seen first in its disclosure that the gospel *itself* does not save; it is simply a body of truth. It is **belief** of the gospel that brings salvation, and this fact reveals how it is that the gospel is the power of God: *the gospel is the ordained vehicle for mediating God's transforming power to men* (ref. 10:8-17).

By this seemingly insignificant declaration Paul introduced what is the very marrow of the gospel, namely *salvation by faith*. For the balance of the epistle he will continue to develop this truth as one of his central themes, showing how it displays and exalts the greatness of God. For the doctrine of salvation by faith, when properly understood, spotlights the triune God as the powerful, gracious *giver* and shows man to be merely a dependent, impotent *receiver*. The principle of faith reveals and exalts the absolutely **unilateral** nature of salvation.

The doctrine of salvation by faith stands as the gospel's point of uniqueness among all other forms of religious thought. Further, it is this uniqueness that explains the universal rejection of the gospel. For every religion finds the obtainment of its spiritual ideal in human understanding and effort, whether that ideal is enlightenment, nirvana, personal deification, a heavenly home, or temporal security and well-being. *Man's innate pride and self-centeredness operating within the framework of his nature as divine image-bearer insure his religious legalism.*

Regardless of whatever specific form his religion takes, man's religious conception will always have himself as its point of reference and basis of confidence. Thus the gospel, with its message of salvation obtained solely by *looking to and trusting in another*, is not only foreign to human conviction, it is foolish and even repugnant to human sensibilities.

- c. Because the gospel addresses the spiritual need of fallen man and its sole provision, it is necessarily universal in its pertinence; it is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes, "*to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" The ethnic particularism of God's previous interaction with men had, in Christ, yielded to the reality of a global, covenant people. Those who were until then "*excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*" had been "*brought near by the blood of Christ*" in such a way that "*the barrier of the dividing wall*" had been broken down and the two groups - Jew and Gentile - formed into "*one new man*" (ref. Ephesians 2:11-3:7).

Yet Paul also recognized that the universal pertinence and power of the gospel stood parallel with an aspect of *particularism*: the gospel was to the Jew *first*. This distinction is unfolded in depth by Paul in chapters 9-11, so that at this point it is sufficient to make the following observations:

- 1) There is an obvious *chronological* priority of the gospel with respect to the Jews, for they were the first to receive it and be converted through it after the outpouring of the Spirit. The Church in its earliest stage was a Jewish entity (ref. Acts 2:1-47, 8:1).
- 2) But it seems apparent that Paul meant more. Certainly his treatment of the Jew-Gentile issue in relation to the gospel later in the epistle leads to this conclusion. As well, throughout Paul's writing he spoke of the priority of the Jews by virtue of their covenant history and privilege (cf. Romans 3:1-2, 9:1-5; Ephesians 2:11-12; etc.) God had given to Israel the immense privileges associated with the patriarchs, the theocracy, and the prophets. Beyond that He had been pleased to clothe His Son with humanity drawn from the line of Abraham's physical seed.

- 3) Given ethnic Israel's historical and covenantal place of priority in God's redemptive promises, it was necessary that the gospel come first to them in fulfillment of those promises. Even as He acknowledged that "*salvation is from the Jews,*" so Jesus Himself insisted that He was sent to "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" Likewise, John would later affirm that "*He came to His own*" (Matthew 10:5-6, 15:22-24; John 1:11, 4:19-22). For two millennia the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had waited expectantly for the promised coming of Messiah and His kingdom, and the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to them meant that Messiah would come first to the house of Israel. Thus Zechariah could proclaim: "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David...*"
3. Paul's insistence that the gospel is the power of God for salvation has been seen to affirm not that the gospel is *itself* God's power, but that it *mediates* His power through faith in its truths. Yet this understanding still leaves unanswered several key questions such as:
- *What is the nature of this salvation?*
 - *How is it that faith can save?*
 - *What is there about the gospel itself as well as faith in its truths that addresses the problem of human unrighteousness and alienation?*

These questions, and many others, are answered by the way in which Paul *conceived* the power of the gospel. Simply stated, the gospel mediates the power of God by revealing His righteousness: "*For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'*"

Paul's assertion is this: the gospel is the power of God for salvation in the sense that in it, alone, God's righteousness with respect to salvation is *manifested*, *interpreted*, and *appropriated*. Thus his point was not that the gospel simply contains spiritual information for men to comprehend. Paul's redemptive-historical perspective and the present context make it evident that he viewed the gospel as itself being a point of fulfillment. *Because the gospel message concerns eschatological fulfillment of divine promise, the gospel's very existence is a point of fulfillment in the upward movement of redemptive history.* God's great promise throughout the ages was that the day was coming when His righteousness would be uniquely manifested in the world in the judgment and destruction of the present, corrupt order of things and the ushering in of a new creation defined by everlasting righteousness and perfection. The gospel substantiates and makes known that the promise of this manifestation of righteousness has been fulfilled.