

Purpose

BELIEVERS ARE TO BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT MAKING
CHRIST KNOWN TO ALL PEOPLE.

I grew up in an evangelistic Southern Baptist church. All the church's evangelistic activities and programs reflected an intentional effort to tell as many people as possible about Jesus. The church saw these actions as their faithful response to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). Growing up in such a church, several truths became evident to me.

First, sharing the gospel through personal witness is a basic responsibility of every believer. Some will be better at it than others. Some can even be recognized as having the gift of evangelism. But all believers have a personal story to tell about how Jesus has changed their lives. And part of maturing as a believer involves becoming increasingly comfortable and competent at telling that story to others.

Second, fulfilling the Great Commission is too large a task for any church to accomplish on its own. Reaching “all nations” requires the joint effort of all believers as they share the ministry assigned by Jesus to His disciples.

Third, human effort alone will fall short of accomplishing God's plan. The presence of the Spirit of God is required to encourage, enable, guide, and empower the church. Also, it is the Spirit of God who draws, convicts, and ultimately transforms those who hear and receive the gospel.

Finally, the power of prayer should never be neglected or underestimated. Prayer connects the Christian soldier to his or her Commander (Eph. 6:18-20). Prayer reminds us both of our dependence and of our victory. Prayer guides the believer and impacts the lost.

As Paul approached the conclusion of his letter to the Romans, he shared his travel plans. He wanted the Roman believers to share his passion for evangelizing the Gentile nations. He reminded them that their shared effort could only succeed through the working of the Spirit. And he pleaded for the prayer support he needed to guide and strengthen him in the difficult ministry to come. Paul's requests remind us that we need the same things as we engage in the ministries to which God calls us. So, let's read these final sections of Paul's letter with the intent of learning from his experience and applying the lessons as we serve.

Romans 15:14-16:27

Paul reprimanded the strong in the Roman church for looking down on the weak, and the weak for judging the strong. Even good churches can have their problems. Even good people can behave badly on occasion. Paul's reprimand directed at the contentious was tempered with praise and hope. He intended his comments to encourage them to reconsider their actions and restore the peace and harmony of their fellowship (15:5-6). He believed they were capable of recognizing the problem and changing. His prayer for them was that God would make their fellowship a place overflowing with joy, peace, and hope (v. 13).

Paul's optimism and encouragement was based on the power of the Spirit and the truth of the gospel to effect believer's lives. Good people, intent on growing in the Lord and serving God, can work through problems and come out wiser on the other side of disagreements. As they grow in the Lord, they can learn what really matters and set aside disputes over things that are not central to the gospel. And Paul wanted the Roman church to be a healthy, gospel-centered fellowship. He wanted this for their sake. But he also needed them to be a healthy church capable of serving as a base for extending his ministry into the western part of the Roman Empire (vv. 20,23-24).

Paul had confidence in the church. He was sure that they were good people capable of resolving their conflicts (15:14; 16:17-18). He also knew and respected a good number of people in the fellowship, several of whom had already aided him in the advance of the gospel (16:3-15). With their help and by the power of God, Paul was confident that he would make it to Rome and continue the ministry to which God had appointed him.

Joint Ministry (Rom. 15:14-16)

Paul understood both the weak and the strong in the Roman church were doing their best to serve the Lord. They were acting in line with their consciences. Although Paul found it necessary to urge some in the church to be more loving and to maintain the unity and peace of the fellowship, he still respected them enough to want them as ministry partners.

VERSE 14

My brothers and sisters, I myself am convinced about you that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

Paul assured his **brothers and sisters** that he was **convinced** that they were a good church. Paul balanced his correction of the church (14:1-23) with the affirmation **you also are full of goodness**. The word *goodness* refers to high moral character but also a concern for the welfare of others. Describing them as *full of goodness* means that this was a consistent characteristic of the fellowship. While some in the church needed a reminder to treat others with love and respect, Paul clearly considered this the anomaly and knew that the church as a whole was a family that cared about the welfare of one another.

Paul also affirmed them as a people **filled with all knowledge**. *Knowledge* in this context is specifically an understanding of Christian spiritual truths. As important as knowledge is, it must be partnered with loving behavior for the church to reap its maximum benefit (1 Cor. 8:1-3). A people of high moral character who care about one another and who have a mature grasp on spiritual truths are also **able to instruct one another**. Paul directed this comment to the church as a whole. As each person walks with the Lord and interacts with others, each one has the capacity to share insights and encourage godly behavior. The need to *instruct* one another also implies that the church is not perfect and must continually support and encourage one another to grow in godliness.

VERSE 15

Nevertheless, I have written to remind you more boldly on some points because of the grace given me by God

Nevertheless, even considering Paul's high regard for the church, he had **written** to them. He wrote to **remind** them of truths they already knew. Even the mature need periodic reminders of the truths of the faith (chaps. 1-11) and the behavior that should result (chaps. 12-16).

Paul wrote **boldly on some points**. The apostle had not founded the church, had not visited it, and some in the church might have said he had no authority to instruct them. But instruct them he had and done so **because of the grace given him by God**. Paul was called as an apostle by the grace of God (1:5; 12:3), and he wrote to the church boldly, not out of arrogance or presumption but out of faithfulness to the gifting given him by God (Acts 9:15).

VERSE 16

to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, serving as a priest of the gospel of God. God's purpose is that the Gentiles may be an acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

God had called Paul **to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles**. Paul wrote not in his own authority but as one serving Jesus Christ by bringing the gospel *to the Gentiles*.

Paul evangelized the Gentiles so that they would **be an acceptable offering** to God and be **sanctified by the Holy Spirit**. The term *offering* refers to a voluntary gift. Paul preached so that the Gentiles might voluntarily present themselves as a people *sanctified* or dedicated to serving of God by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul wrote to aid the church in Rome. But he also wrote to gain their assistance as he took the gospel to Spain (vv. 22-32). The church in Antioch of Syria had served as Paul's sending church and base of operations as he ministered in the eastern half of the Roman Empire—from Jerusalem to Illyricum (v. 19). Now he was seeking a base of operations for ministry in the western half of the Roman Empire.



Explore Further

- Reflect on your own church, focusing not on its problems but its potential.
 - Pray about how you as a group might partner together in your efforts to accomplish the ministry God has placed before you.
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Spirit's Power (Rom. 15:17-21)

Goodness and knowledge prepare believers to serve as partners in the sharing of the gospel. These also prepare believers to instruct one another in the faith as the church lovingly nurtures its members (v. 14). But mature believers should also understand that serving God's purposes also requires the powerful working of the Holy Spirit within them.

VERSE 17

Therefore I have reason to boast in Christ Jesus regarding what pertains to God.

Paul did not claim credit for the amazing ministry that had converted Jews and Gentiles and planted churches throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire. But he did have **reason to boast**. *Boast* refers to taking pride in someone or something. While boasting can be done falsely or without just cause, Paul's pride was **in Christ Jesus**. All that he had done in service to Jesus and the transformation of the persons he ministered to was accomplished by the power of Jesus, not by Paul.

Clarifying even further, Paul stated that his boast in Jesus was **regarding what pertains to God**. The phrase is unusual, but means something like boasting "in my service to God" (NIV) or being proud "of my work for God" (ESV). Paul's service to Jesus, as a Christian and as an apostle, was directed at serving the will of God and accomplishing the objectives that God placed before him. If ministering to Gentiles, then he did that to the best of his ability. If going to Jerusalem, he went without hesitation even if others might try to dissuade him (Acts 21:10-14). And if God's will took him to Rome and then Spain or if God had other plans for him, Paul would do that work because above all his determination was to honor *what pertains to God*.

VERSE 18

For I would not dare say anything except what Christ has accomplished through me by word and deed for the obedience of the Gentiles,

When writing about his work as an apostle, Paul was not seeking praise for his actions. Rather, his intent was to focus praise on **what Christ has accomplished** through him. Paul did on occasion talk about his impressive credentials but was also quick to stress that such things were meaningless in comparison to Christ (Phil. 3:4-7).

When forced to compare his abilities and accomplishments to others, he did not seek to elevate himself. Rather, he stressed the role of all ministers as servants of God (1 Cor. 4:1-6). In addition, he stressed the foolishness of boasting when everything of meaning that a Christian can accomplish is only accomplished for the glory of Christ and by the power of Christ (2 Cor. 11-12). Paul considered what others might see as his accomplishments to actually be Christ's accomplishments. His boast stressed what Christ had accomplished **through me**. Paul considered himself the instrument of God's work, not its author or its owner. What he had done in **word and deed for the obedience of the Gentiles** was God's accomplishment, not Paul's.

VERSE 19

by the power of miraculous signs and wonders, and by the power of God's Spirit. As a result, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum.

Throughout his ministry to both Jews and Gentiles, Paul asserted, God worked through him **by the power of miraculous signs and wonders**. Paul did not claim to be a miracle worker, so the *signs* and *wonders* were evidence of God's work, not Paul's power. Any boast regarding these was a boast in **the power of God's Spirit**. *Signs* and *wonders* are words commonly used in the Gospels for the miracles done by Jesus.

Wonders refers to things that astound those who witness them. Like the crowd at Pentecost, viewers may see that something amazing has happened but not understand its meaning (Acts 2:12-13). The term *sign* signifies an event by which something is known—an event that points to a truth otherwise perhaps not recognized.

Paul's ministry for the obedience of the Gentiles was also enabled *by the power of God's Spirit*. People are empowered and guided by the Spirit so frequently in Acts that some think it should be called the Acts of the Spirit rather than the Acts of the Apostles. The section of Acts focused on Paul's ministry (chaps. 13–28) is no different.

Paul's story celebrates not his own accomplishments, but the amazing work of God's Spirit. From beginning to end, the Spirit enabled Paul as he **proclaimed the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem . . . to Illyricum**. *Jerusalem* represents the beginning point of the ministry of the church and the beginning point of Paul's own story. *Illyricum* was a Roman province in the northwest of the Balkan peninsula on the coast of the Adriatic Sea. Acts never mentions a Pauline mission to Illyricum, but Paul's ministry in Macedonia (at Philippi and Thessalonica) most likely resulted in the evangelization of the neighboring province of Illyricum by Paul's converts and associates.

VERSE 20

My aim is to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named, so that I will not build on someone else's foundation,

Paul's desire was to **preach the gospel where Christ has not been named**. His burning desire was to extend the reach of the gospel into areas where it had not been heard. His intent to **not build on someone else's foundation** was not born of arrogance. Paul recognized

the importance of complementary efforts and building on the work of others (1 Cor. 3:5-15). But at the same time, Paul understood that taking the gospel to people who had never heard it was a vital part of his God-given assignment.

Paul's intent was to minister in Rome and then with their support travel on to Spain (Rom. 15:24). But first, he needed to take an offering from predominantly Gentile churches to the needy saints in Jerusalem (vv. 26-28). Paul likely hoped that such an offering, as an expression of brotherly love, would help cement the good relationship between the predominantly Gentile and the predominantly Jewish churches (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9).

After delivering the offering, Paul intended to go from Jerusalem directly to Rome (Rom. 15:28). And ultimately the Spirit would deliver Paul to Rome, but not with the timing or in the manner that Paul envisioned (Acts 21-28).

VERSE 21

but, as it is written, Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.

Citing Isaiah 52:15, Paul supported with Scripture his intent to preach the gospel where it had not previously been **heard**. His ministry to unevangelized regions was not simply an exercise in logic. It was also an act of obedience to the will of God as he understood it and as Scripture expressed it. God desires that all people should have the opportunity to see and understand the good news.

Paul understood that God's desire was that His people should act to accomplish His will. Paul intended to play his part in the divine plan for the spread of the gospel. Believers today should demonstrate the same faithfulness, and they too can be assured that the Holy Spirit still empowers His people to share the gospel.



Explore Further

Read "Holy Spirit" on page 759–761 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Reflect on the various ways that the Holy Spirit guides and empowers the people of God. How does the Spirit help believers faithfully share their faith with others?

Focused Prayer (Rom. 15:30-33)

Paul explained his plans to the church at Rome. But he also knew that opposition could interfere, and human plans could be thwarted. As a result, Paul depended on the power of prayer and God's ability to guide him even in difficult times and down unexpected paths.

VERSE 30

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in prayers to God on my behalf.

Paul shared his travel plans with the church (vv. 22-29) but did not assume that everything would go as planned. Recognizing his need for divine guidance and protection, he appealed to the church for **prayers** on his behalf. Paul frequently requested prayers to aid his mission. For example, he asked fellow Christians to pray for boldness in proclaiming the gospel (Eph. 6:19). He asked them to pray that a door to witness might be opened (Col. 4:3). And he asked for prayers that the word of the Lord would be honored (2 Thess. 3:1).

The urgency of Paul's request is implied by the statement **I appeal to you** and by the addition of **through our Lord Jesus Christ** and **through the love of the Spirit**. In effect, Paul was asserting that the need he was about to share was so important that both their submission to the lordship of Jesus and their embodiment of God's love should compel them to aid him through their prayers.

The difficulty of Paul's planned ministry endeavor comes to light by his request that they **strive together** with him in prayer. The term was used of mutual effort, but also of fighting alongside someone. In no other letter did Paul use this word in the context of prayer.

VERSES 31-32

Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, and that, by God's will, I may come to you with joy and be refreshed together with you.

Paul requested prayer for three desired outcomes. First, he urged the church to pray that he would **be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea**. The word *rescued* is the same word Jesus used in the model prayer instructing the disciples to pray that they be "delivered" from

evil (Matt. 6:13). Paul had already faced opposition and even death threats from Jews who rejected the gospel and were determined to stop its spread in any way necessary (Acts 9:28-30).

Second, Paul requested that the church pray for his **ministry to Jerusalem to be acceptable to the saints**. Paul was praying that the offering he was carrying from the Gentile churches to the needy Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would be received favorably.

Third, Paul sought prayer that he might ultimately make it to Rome with **joy** and **be refreshed** together with the believers. The events that ultimately took Paul to Rome were certainly not what he expected. Beatings, threats of violence, multiple trials, and shipwreck all conspired to stop him (chaps. 21-28). But the Spirit of God ultimately delivered the apostle to Rome where for two years he preached and taught “with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:30-31). While the route was unexpected and the time frame longer than anticipated, still the church’s prayers were answered.

VERSE 33

May the God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

After requesting prayer for himself and his ministry, Paul expressed his prayer for the church at Rome, that **the God of peace** would be with them. *Peace* conveys both the absence of conflict and a state of well-being. While it is God’s gift, it also must be received and nurtured by the faithful (2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23). Paul knew the power of prayer. He prayed for the church and sought prayer to support his ministry. Answers to prayer fill the pages of Acts and should inspire all believers to pray for the spread of the gospel, the growth and health of the church, and the working of God in our midst. May we, like the Roman believers, be blessed by the presence of the God of peace in our midst and active in our fellowships and our ministries.

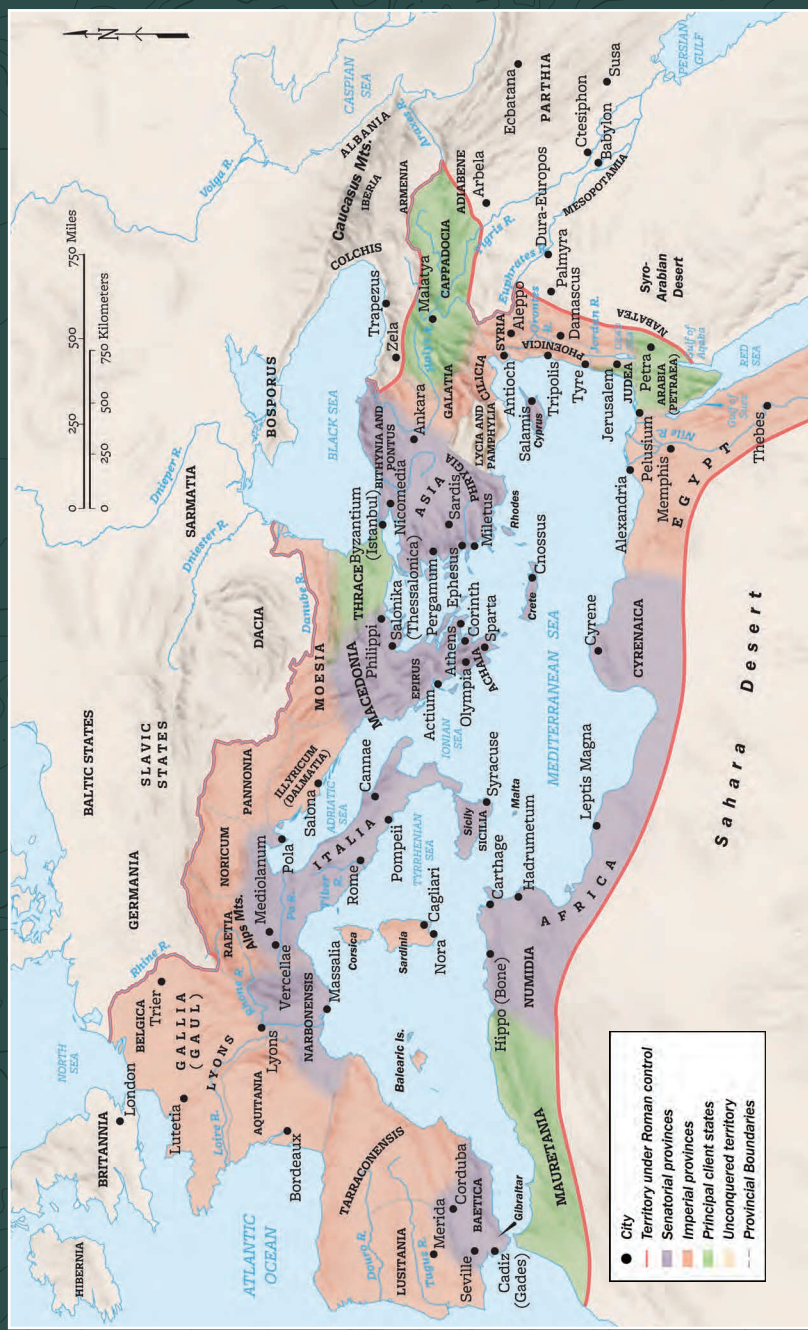


Explore Further

Read Acts 20-28 with Paul’s three prayer requests in Romans 15:31-32 in mind. Do you think God answered the prayers in the way that Paul hoped He would? Give specific examples. Think about the ministry challenges that you and your church are facing, and pray that God will provide for you just as He provided for Paul.

The First-Century Roman Empire

"The First-Century Roman Empire" is adapted from "The Roman Empire in the Age of Augustus" in the Holman Bible Atlas (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), p. 196. Used with permission.



ROMANS

In some ways, we live in a world defined by sound bites and social media posts. We condense key events of our days down to 280 characters or to quick videos that are here today and gone tomorrow. While brevity can be a good thing, our obsession with what's temporary also runs the risk of trading genuine substance for empty cliches. In his letter to the Christians at Rome, Paul rejected flimsy theology. His systematic and logical explanation of the gospel left no doubt about the world's need for a Savior and our responsibility as Christ followers. By studying his words to the Romans, we can gain a better understanding of who God is, what God does, and the impact it should have on our lives each day.

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