

Chapter 1

Paul's mission

Early in the sixth decade of the Common Era, Paul, an itinerant missionary of the Christian movement, was in Corinth, mapping out his own contribution to what he saw as the last stage of God's plan for humanity. He looked simultaneously east and west. He wanted to press on to Spain, to preach the gospel where it had not yet been preached, but first he had a crucial mission to fulfil to the East: he was to take an offering from his Gentile churches, as well as representative Gentile converts, to Jerusalem (Rom. 15: 23–9; for the travelling companions, see 2 Cor. 8: 16–24). While preparing for his journey, and waiting for his ship, he wrote ahead to a way-station *en route* to Spain: the church at Rome. He intended to prepare them for his arrival by sharing with them his message, and he also asked for their support – both their prayers that his trip to Jerusalem would be successful and aid, probably monetary, for the trip to Spain (Rom. 1: 11–15; 15: 24; 15: 30 f.).

His mind, however, was still filled with conflicts that lay behind him, casting their shadow over his trip to Jerusalem – a trip that filled him with apprehension. He asked the Romans to pray that he would be 'delivered from the unbelievers' and also that his service for Jerusalem would be 'acceptable to the saints'. That is, he anticipated danger from non-Christian Jews, and he feared rejection by the Jewish members of the Christian movement. His career up to then had been full of contention, including confrontation with prominent followers of Jesus in

Jerusalem. As he thought about meeting the Jerusalem disciples, he rethought his past conflicts, and he considered how he could best state his case. Since his career in Asia Minor and Greece was over, he also paused to reflect on the overall progress of the Christian gospel, and he speculated on how it would all turn out.

He wrote all this up: both his argument against other Christian leaders on disputed issues (the continuing validity of the Jewish law; the place of Gentiles in God's plan; the maintenance of high standards of behaviour if the law were given up) and an exposition of the divine plan itself of God's intention for both Jews and Greeks, and of his own role in that plan. He sent what he wrote as an introductory letter to Rome. The letter eventually became one of the most influential documents of Western history, the Epistle to the Romans. It began, however, as a quite particular letter, set in an identifiable context, and discussing concrete problems and plans.

Paul We learn, first, who Paul thought he was. This is absolutely crucial for understanding the controversies of his letters, and it is also the easiest point of entry for understanding his theology: his theology was bound up with a view of himself and his role in God's plan; it was not, perhaps, determined entirely by his self-perception, but certainly not separable from it.

Who was he? He was the one who would fulfil the expectations of the prophets and perhaps of Jesus himself: he would bring the Gentiles to worship the God of Israel. This assertion, which appears several times in the letter, is emphasized at the beginning and the end, where it would make most impact:

[I] have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith . . . among all the Gentiles, including yourselves. (Rom. 1: 5f.)

I have often intended to come to you . . . in order that I may reap some

harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians [that is, to all Gentiles], both to the wise and to the foolish: so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (1: 13–15)

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles: Since I am apostle to the Gentiles . . .
(11: 13)

In Chapter 15 the point of Paul's definition of his role becomes clearer. He writes that Christ himself was 'a servant to the circumcised' partly to redeem God's promises to the patriarchs, but partly in order to bring the Gentiles to glorify the God of Israel (15: 8 f.). He, Paul, is the one who is seeing to this. He is 'a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles', carrying out 'a priestly ministry' in the service of the gospel of God, in order that 'the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable' (15: 16). Only about this will he speak: what God has done through him 'to win obedience from the Gentiles' (15: 18).

These verses in Romans 15 show not only that Paul thought of himself as emissary to the Gentiles, but that he thought of himself in this way within a given context: a context both in history and, more important, in God's plan. God planned it in advance: he sent his Son partly in order to bring in the Gentiles. In converting Gentiles, Paul had been fulfilling a 'priestly' ministry, and he was now bringing them as an 'offering' to Jerusalem, where the temple was. We know from what world-view, or view of saving history, that comes. It is the long-held Jewish expectation that, in the final days, Gentiles would come to worship the God of Israel. They would come to Mount Zion bearing gifts, or offerings, and they would come bringing themselves to serve God. This is the second half of a standard Jewish expectation about the end: God would first restore Israel, and then Gentiles would come in. In chapter 15 Paul quotes a catena of passages from the Jewish Scripture which express the hope that the Gentiles will come to worship the God of Israel. Paul saw himself as the agent of this, the second half of the

divine plan. His job description was this: Apostle to the Gentiles in the Messianic Era.

To bring into full relief how he saw his task, we must note how he depicted his responsibility for Israel, the way in which he saw his mission as contributing to the first half of the overall plan. Peter and others were responsible for persuading Jews to be disciples of Jesus (Gal. 2: 7), but they had not been very successful. Paul saw his own work among Gentiles as contributing only indirectly to the winning of Jews. He 'glorified' his own service as apostle to the Gentiles, 'so that, perhaps, I may make jealous my kin, and I shall save some of them' (Rom. 11: 13 f.). The theme that Israel would be brought to Christ indirectly, after the Gentile mission and because of it, appears twice more in Romans 11, in verses 25-6 and 30-1. This reversal of sequence - first the Gentiles rather than first the Jews - will occupy us later, in Chapter 11, and here it need be noted only that Paul saw his own role in the light of biblical promises about the entry of the Gentiles into the people of God in 'the last days'.

Paul

The last days were at hand: God's plan was nearing completion, despite the Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah. Time was so short that Paul felt that he must hurry. He considered that the few churches which he had established in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece left him no 'room for work in these regions', and he thought that, in his ministry of about twenty years, he had 'completed' the gospel 'from Jerusalem and in a circle as far as Illyricum' (Rom. 15: 19; the Revised Standard Version, rather misleadingly, has 'fully preached' for 'completed'). He may have thought that the churches that he had founded would produce evangelists who would expand the Christian mission into the hinterland (as Epaphras seems to have done in Colossac, Col. 1: 7), and certainly there were in Asia Minor and Greece many missionaries who were independent of Paul. We occasionally meet them in his letters. Apollos was not under Paul's control (see 1 Cor. 1: 12 and 16: 12); Andronicus and Junia, apparently a missionary couple, were independent of him

(Rom. 16: 7); another couple, Prisca and Aquila, seem to have worked on their own, though sometimes in collaboration with Paul (Rom. 16: 3; Acts 18: 2); and doubtless there were many others. Thus Paul may have begun to feel a little crowded. Still, the desire to hasten on to Spain also reflects his commitment to finish the task before the Lord returned.

Though in Romans 15: 19 Paul speaks of ‘completing’ the gospel in a ‘circle’, we know from the subsequent verses that, even in his own view, he had not truly finished, since he was still planning to go on to Spain. Further, the arc which he saw himself as following (from the centre of the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, curving north-west, continuing west, and curving south-west to Spain) did not seem destined to make a complete circle. It is a curious fact that in the New Testament there is no mention of a plan to evangelize North Africa, even though it was populous and had very important centres of Jewish settlement, especially in Egypt and Cyrenaica. Perhaps there was such a plan and Paul just does not mention it. To this day we do not know how or when the Christian message was brought to Alexandria, which suddenly emerged at the end of the second century as one of the major centres of Christianity. In any case, we see throughout Paul’s letters, and especially in Romans, the urgency he felt: God would not long delay. It was up to Paul and the others to cover the ground quickly, since the night was far gone, and the day at hand; full salvation was perceptibly nearer than when the Romans first came to faith (Rom. 13: 11 f.).

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But, despite the inevitable working of the plan of God, it was to take place in human history, and humans are notoriously cantankerous and frequently unwilling to fit into a grand scheme. We have already seen that when Paul wrote the letter he was very worried about the forthcoming trip to Jerusalem. It was possible that without the Romans’ prayers he would not be able to come to them with joy (15: 30-2); either the ‘unbelievers’ might harm him, or the ‘saints’ might reject his service.

He had good reason for both worries. He had already had trouble from both non-Christian Jews and Jewish Christians, as well as from non-Christian Gentiles. Not long before writing Romans, Paul had compared himself with other missionaries and had claimed that he had served Christ with

far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Cor. 11: 23-7)

Paul This includes every place as a source of danger and every group – except for Pauline Christians – as among Paul’s enemies. The punishment of ‘forty lashes less one’ was the official synagogue punishment; that of being beaten with rods was the simplest punishment at the disposal of Roman magistrates; stoning was the action of an angry mob. We may sometimes suspect Paul of rhetorical exaggeration. ‘Countless beatings’ is an instance: he promptly counts them. We can, however, accept the count as accurate.

Shortly after writing the passage just quoted (in a passage which the first editor of Paul’s correspondence placed earlier), Paul returned to his sufferings and difficulties: he had been ‘afflicted in every way, but not crushed . . . persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed’. Yet he counted these things to be an intrinsic part of his participation in Christ: ‘While we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies’ (2 Cor. 4: 8-11). Paul did not have a martyr complex. While he did not seek suffering, he endured it because he counted ‘the sufferings

of this present time' not to be worth comparing 'with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom. 8: 18).

The 'false brethren' constituted a serious problem, and danger from them probably worried him more than the punishments administered by synagogues and Roman magistrates. They were 'brethren' because they believed that Jesus was the Messiah (in Pauline terms, they had faith in Christ); they were 'false' because of what they taught. When, in Romans 15: 30, Paul asked the Romans to 'wrestle' with him in prayer, so that his service might be 'acceptable to the saints', he was really asking the Romans to pray that the members of the Jerusalem church would not be persuaded by the 'false brethren', but rather by him, and that they would agree that what he had been doing was right and that his converts were counted as belonging to 'the household of faith'.

The problem was that some Christian missionaries, and possibly some of the Jerusalem leadership, did not agree that Paul's mission was valid. There were some who preached 'a different gospel', or a gospel contrary to Paul's (Gal. 1: 8 f.; 2 Cor. 11: 4). These were worse than people who simply meted out physical punishment. Paul hurled a curse against those who preached a different gospel to the Galatians (Gal. 1: 8 f.), and he went on to wish that they would physically mutilate themselves (Gal. 5: 12). If the Galatians followed them, he said, they would be severed from Christ (Gal. 5: 4). His opponents in Corinth, who obviously were generally counted as apostles of Christ, he called 'false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ', and finally 'servants of Satan'. Their end, he said, would correspond to their deeds (2 Cor. 11: 13-15).

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This is a strange situation for one who counted his ministry a success, who could boast about his Gentile converts, who saw them as instrumental in bringing about the redemption of Israel, and who saw his endeavour in Asia Minor and Greece as being so successful that he no longer had 'any room for work in these regions' (Rom. 15: 23). What

was the trouble? What did Paul do that created enemies in every quarter, including within the Christian movement? How did he get into the position of regarding his work as successful, but of fearing that it might not be acceptable?

This question starts two lines of enquiry. One is the analysis of Paul's gospel, especially as it stood over against that of others. This leads us into the major theological parts of his work: the argument about 'righteousness by faith and not by law'; the meaning of 'life in Christ Jesus'; and so on. We need also, however, to study his career more generally, in order to understand his role in the Christian movement and the curious combination of feeling both successful and on the brink of failure. We shall take the biographical route first, following it long enough to say something about his activities and personal characteristics, before we turn to his thought, which has been the source of controversy from his day to ours.

Paul