

Romans 15:14-33

Paul's Personal Commendation

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 14

Paul voices his impression and conviction that the church at Rome has reached a certain level of spiritual independence and maturity.

"Goodness" means kindness, generosity of heart.

"Knowledge" means insight in God's truth.

Verses 15, 16

"Quite boldly": quite daringly. Paul can understand that the church at Rome may feel that he has taken quite a liberty in admonishing them (for instance about the relationship between the strong and the weak) without knowing the situation personally, since he had never been in Rome. But he believed that, as a servant of Christ and office bearer, he was authorized to do so, for it was his task to present the Gentiles as an offering pleasing to the LORD.

Verses 17, 18

However, Paul does not boast in his own work, but in what Christ himself has done through his service.

"Signs and miracles": these two are often mentioned together (see Acts 2:22; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 12:12; and Revelation 13:13).

"Miracles" are miraculous, supernatural occurrences which cause those who see them to be filled with awe and wonderment. At the same time, they are signs pointing to him who did them. The miracles are signs of God's power, the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles did not do those "signs and miracles" as feats of their apostolic power, in order to amaze the people and so get them to follow them; rather, they performed them in the power of Christ to confirm the Word of the preaching, to show how the Saviour of the world takes hold of life unto salvation, in word and deed.

Verse 19

"From Jerusalem": Paul mentions Jerusalem as the centre and starting point of the New Testament church for the spreading of the gospel over all the then-known and populated world (cf. Galatians 1:18ff.; 2:1ff.). His official installation and confirmation took place in Antioch (in Syria, on the river Orontes).

"All the way around to Illyricum": Illyricum is the northwest part of the Balkans, comprising present-day Albania and part of Yugoslavia. It does not say that Paul has been in Illyricum, for it says: around to Illyricum, that is, to the borders of that region. Later, he sends Titus to that territory (2 Timothy 4:10; Dalmatia was sometimes part of Illyricum). Things may be clearer with the aid of a map!

Verses 20, 21

Paul did not want to "evangelize" where others had already proclaimed Christ. He did not want to build on another man's foundation, but he wanted to be a "pioneer": for all people must hear the gospel! Hence the quotation in verse 21 from Isaiah 52:15. He wanted to "plant" (plant the church) and leave the "watering" (further care) to others (1 Corinthians 3:6). For that reason he had not been in Rome yet, where others had founded the Christian church.

Verses 23, 24

In evangelizing, Paul used the following method: he chose large cities as centres from which the gospel could fan out over the surrounding countryside (see 1 Thessalonians 1:8). Paul thought in provinces: the "occupation" of Thessalonica, for example, to him represented all of Macedonia (northern Greece), since Thessalonica was its centre. In his time, Joshua followed a similar strategy: he went through Canaan through the hill country and left the plains alone. They had to be conquered later (see Judges 1).

"Assist me on my journey": this was an important service rendered by the congregation to the travelling mission workers (Acts 15:3; 1 Corinthians 16:6,11; 2 Corinthians 1:16; Titus 3:13). Part of this "assisting" was the prayer of the congregation, seeing them off, sending guides with them, and providing supplies.

Verses 25-29

But before Paul can go to Rome he has to take the collection of the churches in Macedonia (northern Greece) and Achaia (southern Greece) to Jerusalem. Through various circumstances (the exact causes are unknown) they had become needy there (see also 1 Corinthians 16:1 and 2 Corinthians 8:19,20 about this collection). Needy churches ought to be supported by richer congregations. That is also the rule in Reformed churches. Paul gives the reason for this help: now that the Gentile Christians have received the spiritual blessings of salvation via the Jewish Christians, these Gentile Christians ought to help the needy Jewish Christians with material support. It is still a moot question whether Paul ever went to Spain. If he did it must have been after he was released from jail in Rome (see Acts 28). In any event, we see here how the apostle, urged on by the Holy Spirit, is "possessed" by a passion to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. At the time Spain was considered to be the westernmost part of the then-known Roman world.

"Saints" (v. 25): not "sinless", but people who are set apart from the world and consecrated to the LORD to serve him.

"The full measure of the blessing" (v. 29): the preaching of forgiveness of sins, joy, peace, salvation. In short, Paul brings the proclamation of the full riches of salvation.

Verses 30-32

Paul does not look forward to the journey to Jerusalem, and therefore he expressly asks for the prayers of the congregation. As is shown later, his fear was not unfounded (see Acts 21ff.). "The unbelievers in Judea" are the unbelieving Jews.

The apostle's second concern was whether the church at Jerusalem would accept the collection with joy and thankfulness. This fear was also not unfounded, for in Acts 21 we hear nothing about the handing over of that collection! Apparently it was done only "in passing." Did it not merit a word of thanks? James and the others in Jerusalem were more concerned with something else: before all else they wanted to bind Paul to Jewish ceremonial laws and rites! And thus the reason for Paul's journey, handing over the collection, was forced into the background and ignored. Paul did eventually get to Rome (Acts 28), not as a free preacher of the gospel, but as a prisoner in the Lord. It was not the way he had hoped and prayed for.

Verse 33

This passage ends with an apostolic blessing. For "amen", compare Heidelberg Catechism, A. 129. According to some this concludes the letter, but more about that in the next section.

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