

MISSION IN PAUL

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Notes

The gospel which came to Paul was a personal disclosure of Jesus Christ, a revelation of God which anticipated the glorious unveiling of his Son on the final day (Gal 1:11-12, 15-16). Paul saw God's Son as the risen and exalted one in his glory. The personal appearance of the Lord Jesus, its content was not unique to him. It was the same message which he was commissioned to proclaim among the Gentiles so that they too might be converted and brought into a living relationship with the Lord Jesus.

God had set Paul apart for his service before he was born. Echoing OT prophetic call language, he speaks of this divine separation in terms that suggest he was conscious, like Jeremiah, that he had stood in the council of the Lord and that his message was God's sure word to the Gentiles. At the same time Paul's allusions to Isaiah (49:1, 5, 6) suggest that he was chosen by God to continue the work of the Servant of the Lord. Both had been chosen from birth, both were wholly dependent on Yahweh's calling, and both had a positive ministry to Gentiles in view.

We saw in Ephesians 3:1-13 that Paul's missionary calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles was an integral part of God's redemptive plan; key theological term *mysthvrion/myste_\rion* (God's 'open secret'), which in its context showed that the salvation and unity of Jew and Gentile had always been integral to the divine intention. The OT prophets had already looked forward to the day when Gentiles along with Israelites would be embraced within the sphere of divine blessing. How this would come about—by incorporation of both Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ—had not been made known. *This* had remained a mystery until the time of its fulfilment and Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles and first steward of this mystery, had the privilege of unfolding its wonder.

The goal of the Paul's missionary task which has been explained in cultic terms is further described in relation to Christ's lordship over the new people of God, that is, '*for the obedience (uJpakohv/hupakoe\)* of the nations' (v. 18). This important expression denotes not simply the conversion of the Gentiles or their coming to faith, but also their constancy in Christian conduct. Paul looks not only for the Gentiles' acceptance of the gospel, but for their growth in Christian maturity and perfection as well.

The theme of Paul's total involvement in the gospel runs like a scarlet thread throughout the letter to the Romans, from the first verse to the concluding doxology. From the time of his conversion and calling on the Damascus road, when God set him apart for the gospel, it became the dominant and determinative focus of his whole life. Paul also knew that God was powerfully at work in the gospel, leading men and women to salvation. This authoritative message, as we have seen in so many different ways, was inextricably linked with God's redemptive purposes. Indeed, one could almost identify that gospel with the saving purposes of God. Paul was thus wholly committed to the kerygma, *not simply* because of his own conversion and calling by God to minister to Gentiles, *but also* because of the essential place of the gospel in salvation history.

Paul's missionary activity, as we have seen, was part of a larger whole.

Paul's overall stance of making himself a slave (ejdouv\wsa/edoulo\sa, v. 19) was paradigmatic for the Corinthians. As one who was free, he was living in conformity with the example of his Lord and thus showing a truly Christian life-style. He followed the servant model of his Master (cf. Phil 2:7); let them and other Christians do the same.

The salvation of men and women was Paul's goal (1 Cor 9:19-23). His earnest desire was to win Jews, Gentiles and weak Christians, that is, to save them completely so that they would be pure and blameless at the second coming. The Corinthians' ambitions, and ours too, should be the same.

according to Ephesians 6 all Christians are involved in a spiritual warfare in which they are to *stand firm* against the onslaughts of the evil one by resistance and proclamation. The

believer is boldly to make known the gospel of salvation in and through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit.

The gospel was dynamic, even explosive, and could not be contained. It was making its triumphal progress throughout the world, including Philippi, and the Christian residents of that city were caught up in its onward march. Even Paul himself was carried along by this powerful message: at 1 Thessalonians 1:5, instead of telling his readers, ‘we came with the gospel’, he states, ‘our gospel came’; it was like a person with an authority of its own leading the apostle along. One might compare the Lucan summaries in the Book of Acts where powerful, personal activities are ascribed to the word of the Lord: so at 19:20 it is said to have grown mightily and prevailed.

When he refers to the fulfilment of the divine purposes, instead of focussing on what men and women are doing, he regularly highlights this powerful advance of the kerygma. An important reference in support of this is 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, where the apostle requests his Christian friends as follows: ‘brothers and sisters, pray for us’. The content of the petition is not that Paul and his colleagues may speak the word boldly and clearly, though he might well have requested this (cf. Eph 6:19; Col 4:3-4); rather, it is that ‘the word of the Lord may *run* (lit. *trevch//treche*) and be glorified, just as it is among you’. Paul and others will be doing the preaching but the stress is on the dynamic march of the *eujaggevlion/euangelion* itself. (In fact, the apostle has gone out of his way to make this point emphatically, for in v. 2 he swings back to the first person plural subject, ‘and that *we* may be rescued from wicked and evil people’.) Even in Philippians 1 the bold speaking of the word of God by believers in Rome is explained in terms of the gospel’s progress (*prokophv/prokope*). It is the divine work that the apostle consistently stresses and, although the evangelistic endeavours of Christians are mentioned from time to time, Paul regularly focusses on the ultimate source, namely, God’s powerful saving action in the kerygma. In our view, this explains the relative paucity of references to Christians engaging in evangelism.

A cursory glance at Paul's letters quickly reveals that the apostle understood his missionary activity to Gentiles within the context of an OT expectation in which the Gentile nations would on the final day partake of God's ultimate blessings to Israel. He recognized that his mission was part of a larger whole, namely, 'the Divinely superintended eschatological ingathering of the nations of OT expectation'.

OT texts of a universalistic kind were frequently used by Paul, particularly in relation to his apostolic ministry of the gospel with its missionary outreach. God was bringing to himself through the preaching of the gospel a new people comprising not only Jews but also Gentiles, and this was in fulfilment of Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 (in Rom 9:25-26). The rapid progress of the Gentile mission over against the slow response among Jews fulfilled the prophetic words of Isaiah 54:1, 'Sing, O barren one who did not bear . . . For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married' (Gal 4:27). Paul's own outreach to those who had never heard the gospel was a fulfilment of OT expectation (Isa 52:15 in Rom 15:21), while he claims in an extended argument at Galatians 3 and Romans 4 that the Abrahamic promise, 'in you shall all the nations be blessed' (Gen 12:3), is now being fulfilled as Gentiles turn to Christ. The presence of Gentiles along with Jews within the one worshipping community was both a confirmation of the promises given to the patriarchs and the occasion for Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy (Rom 15:1-13); the OT quotations strung together in vv 9-12 show that in Christ God had opened up his covenant promises to Gentiles.

Paul understood his missionary calling to the Gentiles as part of a larger purpose, namely, God's salvation historical plan in which those who were formerly without God and without hope would participate in the covenant promises to Abraham and his seed. That magnificent, divine plan was even now being brought to fulfilment as Paul proclaimed the gospel of Christ to them.