

Notes on Romans 15

This is a synopsis with minor modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

3. Mutual welcome as all praise the one God in the Messiah 15.1-13

As with the previous paragraph (14.13-23), the present one seems to say the same thing from two similar angles in two segments (15.1-6,7-13). Both open with a command relating to the discussion of Rm 14; both continue with a statement of what the Messiah has done; both support and develop this with Scripture; both declare that this supplies 'hope'; and both conclude with the united praise of the one God. Since this passage constitutes the final climax of Romans, we should hardly be surprised at this formal, almost formulaic, repetition. The immediate point may be the practical one about mutual welcome across boundaries of custom and conscience, but the underlying message Paul wants to convey is about glorifying God in the united worship of Jew and Gentile together in the Messiah.

This paragraph, in fact, is a triple conclusion.

- It draws together the threads of 14.1–15.13, summoning the strong to support the weak, so that together they may praise God.
- In the context of 12.1–15.13, it insists on the same humility ('not thinking of yourselves more highly than you ought') that we find in 12.3-8, and returns to the note of worship and praise with which 12.1 opened: the worship of Israel, God's people, with all the world now joining in.
- And in the context of the whole letter from 1.1 onward, it celebrates the fact that through the good news of Jesus, the risen Messiah, the world's true Lord, Jew and Gentile come together in God's single family, demonstrating his covenant faithfulness.

We heard strong echoes of 5.1-5,17,21 in Rm 14, and we hear strong echoes of Rm 3-4 and 9-11 in Rm 15. In the united praise of God, that human and Jewish failure that Paul spelled out so graphically in 1.18–2.29 is reversed. The praise of God is the resolution of the root problem of humanity: not giving praise or honor to God. Throughout this passage, Paul returns to the primary theme of God's good news, attested in the Scriptures, concerning his Son, whose Davidic Messiahship is declared in his resurrection from the dead. Indeed, as is fitting in such a dense summary, the good news events themselves, the death and resurrection of the Messiah and his installation as Lord, are told again through Scripture. They are applied to the point in hand, but also allowed to resonate in tune with everything that has gone before (15.3, 8-9, 12).

The first subparagraph (15.1-6) approaches the practical point negatively: Don't please yourselves, because the Messiah didn't please himself (15.23). The second (15.7-13) says the same thing positively: welcome one another, because the Messiah welcomed you (15.7). The closing blessing for each section (15.5-6 and 15.13) draw together the themes of patience, encouragement, hope, joy, peace, faith, and the power of the Holy Spirit, again summarizing and echoing 5.1-5. Allow 'justification by faith' to produce 'fellowship by faith', and you will know the peace, patience, joy, and hope that the Spirit brings.

But here, unusually, he adds a note, as though reflecting on the many-sided exposition of Scripture he has offered in this letter. The Scriptures, he says, were given to us to be the means of patience, encouragement, and hope—in other words, the very things God promises, the very things the Holy Spirit puts powerfully into effect. Scripture, it seems, is a means by which God works in the

church; in Pauline language, as well as in later technical theology, it is a means of grace. The present passage exemplifies the principle it states: the crescendo of scriptural quotations in 15.3,9-12 lead the eye up to the source and ground of Christian faith and hope, the Messiah himself, risen to rule the world. So the letter comes full circle, back to Paul's original self-introduction as the servant of God, the apostle of the Messiah and his gospel. This leads him naturally to 15.14-33, where he sketches in, as the letter moves toward its close, his plans for completing his apostolic task.

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**a. The Messiah leads the way,
'not pleasing himself' 15.1-6**

Two commands summarize the previous discussion: the strong (including Paul himself) are under obligation to 'support' the weaknesses of the powerless. 'The failings of the weak' (NRSV, NIV) is hardly correct; Paul has not suggested that 'weakness' is a 'failing' and to pull the text that way is to slant his argument.

the word translated 'failings' is the word for 'weak' (*asthenes*) throughout the previous discussion, and the word 'weak' is (*adynatos*), a word Paul elsewhere only uses in 8.3.

Better to see, now, a subtly new point: 'these 'weaknesses' I have been speaking of— the people who possess them are 'powerless'. They are who they are, and at the moment they can't help it. Thus we who are 'strong' have an obligation to support and help them'.¹ This gives the main verb of 15.1 the meaning it has elsewhere in Paul: *bastazein* does not normally mean 'put up with' in the sense of 'be prepared to tolerate,' but, more positively, 'support, help' (Gal 6.2), or 'carry' (Gal 6.5). The strong must help those who, through their own current powerlessness, have these 'weaknesses'. They must support and encourage them, not browbeat them with demands for more 'strength' than they can presently muster.

In doing this, the 'strong' must not seek their own advantage, must not 'please themselves'; as we saw in 12.2, this is the alternative to 'pleasing God'. Instead (15.2), everyone must please his or her neighbor, with a view to their good and to the upbuilding of the community.² This is, clearly, what the love spoken of in 12.3-13 and 13.8-10 looks like at street level. It is the principle Paul

himself adopts in contentious matters (1Co 10.31-11.1, a passage quite close to this one).

This principle derives from the Messiah himself (15.3). Paul draws on Ps 69.10 (68.10 LXX), taking it for granted that this great poem of the suffering and vindication of the righteous Israelite found its ultimate embodiment in Israel's Messiah and his crucifixion.³ This, he says, shows that the Messiah 'did not please himself'; he assumes, too, that his hearers are familiar with the basic story of Jesus, even though the gospels have not yet been written. 'Not pleasing himself' is, of course, a remarkable understatement when we consider (as Paul could and did elsewhere) the shame and horror of the cross. But it makes the point Paul needs for the moment, while beginning to sketch for the last time the story of Jesus that will reach its climax in 15.12.

By way of somewhat oblique explanation (*gar*) of this exegesis of the psalm, Paul states that the Scriptures in general ('whatever was written in former days,' NRSV) were written for our instruction, so that through patience and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Echoing 5.1-5, this ascribes to Scripture what is effected through the Spirit on the basis of God's work of justification. Granted the theme of Rm 14, and the way in which it seems to be continued in 15.1-2, we might have expected here, on the one hand, a more specific reference to the community being built up through mutual support and readiness to give up one's rights and cultural preferences, and on the other hand a more explicit comment on the Messiah's death in relation to achieving that end. Paul, however, already has his sights on the major themes of his conclusion, and it is in the light of that larger picture that the intermediate goal of united worship will become a reality. The Scriptures, and their interpretation of the Messiah's suffering, give God's people hope; and in that context (15.5-6) they will be able to think the same way and to glorify God together. What they need for the present is not simply willingness to do what Paul has said in 14.1-15.2, but patience and encouragement; and that is what Scripture provides (cf. 1Mc 12.9), especially once they learn to see the story of Israel as devolved onto, and fulfilled by, Jesus the Messiah.

In 15.5-6, Paul turns his thoughts into prayer, the first time he has reported a prayer in relation to the Roman church since 1.9-12, where the theme of mutual comfort

¹ NJB's 'susceptibilities of the weaker' still misses the underlying point, as does NEB/REB's 'the tender scruples of the weak.'

² The NRSV and the NIV both make 'upbuilding' relate simply to the individual neighbor, but in Paul the word refers to the building up of the whole community.

³ For this understanding of the Messiah as the 'pray-er' of the psalms, see R.B. Hays, 'Christ Prays the Psalms: Paul's Use of an Early Christian Exegetical Convention,' in *The Future of Christology: Essays in Honor of Leander E. Keck*: ed. A.J. Malherne and W.A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 122-36. The other half of the same psalm verse is quoted in reference to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple in John 2.17.

was likewise prominent; he is consciously coming full circle. His prayer is that 'the God of patience and comfort' will give them a united mind (lit., 'to think the same thing among one another according to the Messiah Jesus').⁴ This is Paul's regular appeal, whether or not he thinks a church is actually divided (see Ph 2.2-4, which, in company with 2.5-11, bears close comparison with Rm 14.1-15.13 as a whole). The object of coming to a common mind (*homothymadon*, a word found frequently in the early chapters of Acts (e.g., 1.14; 2.46; 4.24; 5.12; 7.57), is thereby to come to a common worship, literally 'with one mouth'. The object of this worship, as we might have guessed from the intricate christological dance of the previous chapter, is the God who is now revealed in relation to the Lord: 'the God and father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah' (see, e.g., 1Co 8.6; 15.28; Ph 2.11).

b. Welcome one another, because the Messiah welcomed you 15.7-13

The final paragraph of the letter's theological exposition, like the final paragraph of the great central Rm 5-8, is a great coda of praise and celebration but without any loss of theological poise. Paul opens with the repeated instruction from 14.1, only this time as a command to any and all parties within the church: welcome one another, therefore ('therefore' [*diō*] picks up the entire previous argument). Here, as in 15.3, the Messiah's action is the crucial basis and model for what the church must now do. The Messiah, as he says in the next verse, is the one in and through whom God's promises to the Jewish ancestors are fulfilled; and this short paragraph is framed at its further end also by a celebration of the Messiah's work on behalf of the whole world (15.12). The final clause of the verse, 'to the glory of God,' has in view the glorifying of God in praise and worship that is the subject of the rest of the paragraph. Thus, although the Messiah's welcome is undoubtedly also glorifying to God, this clause goes more directly with the command to welcome one another: 'just as the Messiah welcomed you, so you should welcome one another in order that God may be glorified'. The verse forms a typically Pauline paragraph-opening, containing the various elements that will then be developed.

What is this messianic 'welcome'? Paul explains (*legō gar*, 'for I say') with a complex statement of what the Messiah accomplished (15.8-9a), reminding us of the dense messianic formulations that stand at the head of the letter as

a whole (1.34) and of chaps. 9-11 (9.5). (There are other echoes as well: glory, promises, patriarchs, and Messiah are four of the eight privileges listed in 9.4-5). Paul intends to explain the messianic roots of the specific appeal of 15.7, and to sum up the entire letter.

The heart of the statement rephrases one of Paul's central presuppositions, which has proved difficult for theologians and exegetes alike to come to terms with: it is by bringing Israel's history to its climax that God, through the Messiah, has opened the way of mercy to all the nations. It is not that God has done one thing for Jews, and another thing for Gentiles; God has designed mercy for all (11.28-32), but as 9-11 made clear, his purpose with Israel always had the Gentiles in mind, and his purpose with Gentiles was always that they would come in to the fulfilled, returned-from-exile Israel. This, indeed, is what Paul takes the scriptural quotations he's about to produce as saying. Thus 15.8-9a should be read as follows: The Messiah became a servant of the circumcision (i.e., of ethnic Israel) in order to confirm God's truthfulness.⁵

The mention of God's truthfulness sends our minds back to 3.4.7 ('Let God be true, though every human be false... If God's truthfulness abounds through my falsehood to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?' [my translation]), where it is closely correlated with God's faithfulness and righteousness: Paul has the ancient promises in mind once more. But, here as there, these promises were never simply for ethnic Israel; nor were they divided, with one part belonging to Israel and the other to the nations. The promises were both *to* Israel and *through* Israel to the world.⁶ This means that we should probably take the next two clauses as both parallel and consequential: the Messiah became a servant (a) to confirm the promises to the patriarchs and (b) so that the Gentiles might glorify God for mercy— but the inclusion of Gentiles is precisely one of the central patriarchal promises Paul highlights, not least in chap. 4. The statement is dense because, as well as summing up the entire exposition of God's righteousness, echoing chapters 3-4 and 9-11 in ways too many and complex to enumerate here, Paul is still conscious of making his final appeal to the community. The Messiah became a servant of the circumcision— so you Gentile Christians should love and serve your Jewish brothers and sisters in the Messiah,

⁴ The NIV's 'a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus' manages to paraphrase out Paul's sharp meaning at both ends of the clause; Paul is talking about how they are to think, not just feel (as 'a spirit' suggests to today's hearers); and 'according to the Messiah,' granted 15.3 and the whole epistle, is more than simply 'following,' however high a theology of discipleship we may have.

⁵ Granted Paul's use of Isaiah 40-55, it is not entirely fanciful to see a reference to the Isaianic 'servant' here, though the word Paul uses (*diakonos*) is very rare in the LXX, where the 'servant' is referred to as (*pais*). This, however, could have been problematic for Paul, since *pais*, which basically means 'child' would hardly have done in the present context.

⁶ There is an echo here of Mi 7.20, which sets up several relevant resonances when read in the context of 7.7-20 as a whole.

and not look down on them; and this was in order that the Gentiles should join with God's ancient people in united praise— so you Jewish Christians should celebrate the fact that you have people of every race joining with you in the messianic community.

The two clauses thus play out the intertwined results of the Messiah's work (while at the same time underscoring the early Christian awareness of the fact that Jesus himself had concentrated his work on ethnic Israel, not in order to exclude Gentiles permanently but because the way to save the world was to complete Israel's destiny; cf. Mt 10.5-6; 15.21-28 and par.; Jn 4.22-26). 'Confirming the promises made to the patriarchs' sums up chaps. 4 and 9, and concisely catches the central meaning of 'God's righteousness,' the major theme of the letter. Nor was this simply a matter of some unfinished business on God's part, a few promises left unfulfilled that had to be dealt with if only to avoid the charge of unfaithfulness; these promises encapsulated the single, unalterable divine saving plan for the whole world, and confirming them through the Messiah's servant ministry was the heart of God's intention.

Thus the second, and consequent, result of this ministry, 'that the Gentiles might glorify God for mercy,' follows both in the logic of the divine plan (and of the messianic achievement) and in the logic of Paul's appeal to the community.⁷ The gathering of the Gentiles into the one people of God, not by works of Torah but simply by faith in God's saving action in the Messiah, results in united praise. In other words, this is where what might look like two different themes in 3.21-31 (God's saving action in Jesus' death resulting in justification by faith, on the one hand, and the coming together of Jew and Gentile on the other) are finally revealed as one and the same. This was what the Messiah's servant work was about all along.

In 15.9b-11, Paul celebrates the theme of united worship with three biblical quotations, preparing the way for a final quotation (in 15.12) that sums up the entire letter. The opening citation from Ps 18.49 (17.50 LXX), when read in the wider context of that psalm, is intended not simply as a messianic prophecy now fulfilled, but as a statement of the embodiment, in Jesus the Messiah, of the pattern of suffering and vindication through which (as the next verse says) God's salvation and mercy are poured out, not least 'upon God's Messiah, to David and his seed for ever' (Ps 17.51 LXX). The citation thus ties in both with the mention of mercy in the earlier part of 15.9

and with the explicitly Davidic statement in 15.12, while itself making the central point that the Messiah himself, understood as the one praying in this psalm, is standing there, surrounded by Gentiles, singing God's praises.⁸

For the second citation Paul returns to Dt 32 (cf. 10.19; 12.19). Here the Septuagint comes to his help; the Hebrew text simply says 'Praise his people, you nations,' but in the LXX of 15.43 this has become 'Praise, you nations, with his people,' giving Paul not only further grist to his present mill but enabling him thus to tie in this passage with the deuteronomic theme that was so important in Rm 10. He then reverts to the psalter, finding in Ps 117.1 a classic invitation to the whole world to join in the praises of Israel's God. This, after all, was and is the challenge of Jewish monotheism: that the God of Israel was the creator, the God of the whole world, and that therefore the other nations, though presently stuck in idolatry, ought eventually to come to recognize and worship the same God that Israel worshipped. How this would happen remained an almost complete mystery in the ancient Scriptures. It has been Paul's theme throughout Romans that it has now been accomplished through the Messiah and by the Spirit.

It should be no surprise, then, in 15.12-13, that as his last quotation Paul chooses, with great care, a passage from Isaiah (11.10) that says exactly what he wants to say at the climax of 14.1-15.13 and at the same time completes the circle begun in 1.3-4. The Gentiles will come to hope in the Davidic Messiah, the 'root of Jesse' (for 'root of Jesse' as a title for the Messiah, see Rv 5.5; 22.16); he is the one who 'rises to rule the nations'. The echo of 1.4 should leave us in no doubt that Paul intends a reference to Jesus' resurrection. This is what constituted him as Messiah and Lord of the whole world. Once again the wider context of Paul's citation fills in the depths of meaning he has no space to spell out: Isaiah speaks here of God's purpose to renew the whole created order, and to gather the remnant of Israel, together with the Gentile world, into the one community of salvation (Isa 11.1-12.6).⁹ The idea of a risen Messiah 'ruling the nations' is, further, packed with explosive political implications, especially in a letter to Rome whose own emperor claimed to rule the nations. Paul, we may suppose, has had this verse of Isaiah in mind throughout the whole letter, waiting to produce it as the final move in his entire argument.

⁷ The change of subject is grammatically harsh but scarcely impossible for the Paul who, precisely in his dense summaries, was capable of all sorts of shortcuts in his Greek.

⁸ See R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 70-73; Hays, 'Christ Prays the Psalms,' 134-35.

⁹ Hays, *Echoes*, 73.

The note that comes through is 'hope,' as in 15.4. We might have expected to speak of 'love' in concluding a passage about mutual welcome in Christ, or of 'joy' in a passage about praise. But he is not careless. He is reinforcing the point in 15.13, referring to God as 'the God of hope' and praying that his readers may 'abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'.

And hope was, of course, a major theme of Rm 5–8, and echoes of that section, and of its summary introduction (5.1-5), abound here. Throughout its struggles to live as one community despite cultural and ethnic differences, what the community needs is precisely the perspective on their present life that's supplied in 12.2 and 13.11-14: in other words, in order to be the people they are called to be in the present, they need a constant and lively sense of God's promised and assured future. That, perhaps, is one of the reasons why Rm 12–13 were shaped as they were, framed by the eschatological hope: they were designed to provide the right basis for an appeal that would itself depend on the hope that one day Jesus Christ would be seen and acknowledged as Lord of all (14.11; 15.12). Thus the line of thought that runs from God's promise-keeping in 15.8 to God's gift of hope in 15.13 ('you can trust this God,' Paul is saying; 'remember what he's already done in the Messiah!') is what he believes the community should remember as it lives within 'the present world,' Caesar's world, in the faith that Jesus is already Lord because God raised him from the dead, and that soon every knee will bow at his name.

Hope itself is sustained by the 'joy and peace' with which the God of hope will fill the community. Here are the notes we expected: 'joy' is to be experienced in the glad worship of God, and 'peace' is to be known within the combined, united community (cf. 14.19). And all is sustained by the power of the Spirit, the power that raised Jesus from the dead (8.10-11) and is even now at work among those who form his one body.¹⁰

We have come to the end of Paul's theological exposition, but we should continue to learn to tell, as Paul did, the story of God, the world, Israel, Jesus, and ourselves so as to bring out its full flavor. Note how, when Paul came to sum up the whole letter in this last paragraph (15.7-13), he did so with a compressed narrative in which all the elements of the longer stories he tells from time to time are present, selected of course for the needs of his current argument but nevertheless reminding us of

¹⁰ Cf 1.4, 16; 5.5; 8.1-11,12-27; 12.3-5; 15.19; 1Co 2.4-5; 6.14; 12.12-13; 2Co 13.4; Ep 1.19; 3.20; Ph 3.10; Col 1.11; 1Th 1.5; 2Th 1.11.

the fuller story he could have told, and does tell elsewhere.

As long as we reduce Christianity to slogans, 'doctrines', 'prophecies', or rules, rather than seeing it primarily as the great story of what the one God has done, through the one Lord, for the one world, we will never understand what the Scriptures are about, or be able to recapture the excitement and many-sidedness of Paul's writing in particular.

'Narrative' readings of Paul and of the rest of the Bible are not just a fad. They are on to something. When we want to understand who God is, what the gospel is, and what our task in the world now is, the foundation for that understanding is the narrative within which the different elements make themselves at home. Revealingly, the two elements of the narrative that much post-Enlightenment thought has screened out, but that a Pauline telling of the story can never forget, are the Israel dimension and the Caesar dimension. The inalienable Jewish roots of the gospel, and the inevitable confrontation with pagan empire, are embedded in Paul's narrative here and elsewhere, and only when today's church comes to terms with both will it become truly faithful to Paul's vision.

C. Matters at Hand 15.14–16.24

Even when discussing in more relaxed mode his recent apostolic work and his future plans, Paul still draws on the story of God, Messiah and world, and still appeals to Scripture to explain what God has done and is doing.

1. Paul's ambassadorial travel through Rome to Spain 15.14-33

Having brought his main work to a close, Paul now discusses in more relaxed mode his recent apostolic work and his future plans. But he is still drawing on the same controlling story of God, the Messiah and the world, still appealing to Scripture to explain what he has done and is doing, and still teasing his audience ancient and modern with compact and allusive prose.

Rm 15.14-33 is in fact one of the longest discussions Paul gives anywhere of how he conceives his apostolic work, and why he has made the decisions he has (the other major treatment would be 2 Corinthians as a whole). Coming to a church he had neither founded himself nor previously visited, but where several of his colleagues and co-workers now lived, he was aware of a need to prepare the ground and explain what he was hoping to achieve. The Roman church in this period consisted of perhaps a hundred people in a city of a million. There was certainly room for an apostle and evangelist

to do some work! However, Paul is keen to stress that he wants to use Rome as a base for further work in the western Mediterranean, going all the way to Spain; and this gives us a further clue to the purpose of the letter—namely, that if the Roman church is to support him in this work it is vital that they understand the inner dynamic and perspective of the gospel as he announces it.

The passage divides into two, each part dividing again:

- (1) Intention to complete his earlier apostolic work by traveling via Rome to Spain (15.14-24);
 - (a) Recent apostolic work as the reason for writing the letter (15.14-21);
 - (b) his intention now to come to Rome and thence to Spain (15.22-24);
- (2) Forthcoming visit to Jerusalem (15.25-33);
 - (a) taking the collection to Jerusalem (15.25-29);
 - (b) requesting prayer in relation to that visit (15.30-33).

1. Intention to complete his earlier apostolic work by traveling via Rome to Spain 15.14-24

a. Recent apostolic work as the reason for writing 15.14-21

Rm 15.14 picks up where 1.15 had left off: now at last, in the light of everything he has said, Paul can explain why he's coming to Rome. Some have suggested that this verse is ironic— that Paul was actually writing because he knew of serious doctrinal problems in the church— for instance, that they didn't really understand 'justification'. But there's no reason to suggest that this verse, or its predecessor at 1.8, is other than serious. Paul knows several Christians in Rome, and is confident that they're not off track. His verb *noutheteō* can imply 'warn,' 'admonish,' but its neutral meaning is just 'instruct' or, literally, 'put in mind'. Paul didn't need to write because people were in bad shape, but because he needed partners— and they needed to understand in detail where he was coming from. This is not to say that there were no problems in the church (cf 11.11-32 and 14.1–15.13), but only that he didn't regard them as compromising its basic integrity.

Paul's own view of the letter he is now completing is that it is a 'reminder' (15.15). He does, after all, say at various points 'You do know, don't you?' and we'd be wrong to treat all these as merely rhetorical (e.g., 6.3; 7.1). He has put things, he says, with a degree of boldness, a statement no reader of Romans is likely to dispute.¹¹ Once

¹¹ 'In part' (*apo merous*) could modify 'quite boldly'— i.e., 'a certain degree of boldness'; NRSV and NIV take it with 'wrote,' to mean

again, as at 1.5 and 12.3, he invokes his own unique vocation, this time to explain what he's been doing in recent years (see too 1Co 3.10; 15.10). We are familiar— despite all attendant historical problems— with the story of Paul's missionary journeys from Acts and from Paul's letters themselves, and we know about modern-day missionaries who travel the globe— but Paul cut a very strange figure in the ancient world, a wandering Jew talking, arguing, suffering, praying, celebrating, making tents, traveling, cajoling, weeping, staying in one place for a day and in another for a year, always talking about God and the Messiah, about Jesus as Lord, about the resurrection of the dead. He was like a wandering philosopher, but without many of the accoutrements and with a very different message. He was like a Jewish apologist, but the communities he founded and the company he kept, not to mention the message he brought, though soaked in Jewish Scripture from start to finish, were nothing any Jew had ever dreamed of before, and not something many cared to hear. What was he up to, and why should a self-respecting community in Rome take him seriously?

No doubt many of Paul's friends in Rome could and did speak for him. But his own explanation is striking: he has been a cultic minister of the Messiah with special responsibility for the Gentile world. He has been working in the priestly service of God's gospel. His task has been to ensure that when the sacrificial offerings are brought before God— the sacrificial offerings that consist precisely of the Gentile world itself!— they are pleasing to God because they have been made holy by the Holy Spirit. This sudden rush of sacrificial and cultic imagery can hardly be accidental; it is not, it seems, one metaphor taken at random. Paul is after all on his way to Jerusalem to bring a highly significant, and hence contentious, gift of money (see below); the thought of going up to the Temple, like a Diaspora Jew going on pilgrimage, is clearly in his mind. But he is talking about more than a single trip or a single gift. He is talking about his entire vocation, to gather up the Gentile world and present it as a surprising but appropriate offering before the world's creator and its rightful Lord.

This is not the only time that Paul uses sacrificial and priestly language to describe his apostolic vocation, but it is the fullest and most striking such occurrence (see too Ph 2.16-17). He has already spoken of Christian obe-

'wrote on some points'. It's perhaps preferable, to see it as modifying 'as reminding you'. Part of his intention has been to remind, without saying what the other part of his intention was. He is most likely acknowledging that for some hearers it has been more than a reminder. KJV takes it with 'written': 'written the more boldly to you in some sort'.

dience itself in these terms (12.1-2), and since he has just alluded to 12.3 as well (the grace given him in apostolic vocation) we may take it that he sees this as a fuller statement of the way he himself must fulfill the more general instruction he summarized there.

So this is the claim he makes in the Messiah when it comes to his priestly service 'concerning the things of God' (15.17; the priestly overtones of the latter phrase [*ta pros ton theon*] are underlined by the parallel with Hb 2.17). Though Paul can speak of his only 'boast' as being 'in the Lord' and in his cross (1Co 1.31; cf. 2Co 10.17; Ga 6.14), he can in fact, as in the next verse, speak also of 'what God [or the Messiah] has done through me,' and, in consequence, of his beloved churches as his 'boast,' his 'joy,' or his 'crown' (1Th 2.1 920; 3.9; Ph 2.16; 4.1). It is because of this 'boast' that he has felt not only able but obliged to write the letter.¹²

He explains this (*gar*) by speaking of what the Messiah has accomplished through him (15.18-19a). 'I will not dare to say anything of what the Messiah has *not* accomplished through me'— in other words, 'I wouldn't dare to tell you any stories that aren't strictly true'. He then mentions swiftly the word and deed, the signs and wonders, and the power of God's Spirit.¹³ Paul does not often mention it, but he clearly assumes that powerful deeds, particularly healings, were part of his gospel ministry. This is his regular *modus operandi*; it has led him by strange paths, but his boast is that he has been faithful to his commission.

The result is an astonishing claim: to have announced the gospel message of the Messiah from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Albania). We have no record, in Acts or in Paul's letters, of a trip that far north, though Philippi and Thessalonica are in Macedonia (northern Greece), south of Illyricum. But before Paul began, neither Asia Minor nor Greece had heard of Jesus of Nazareth; by the time he was writing this letter, there were little communities all over that part of Caesar's empire (and it was a very significant part of Caesar's empire, including many centers of the new imperial cult) in which Jesus was being celebrated as the risen Messiah, the world's true Lord. And if he was a 'young man' when Steven died (Ac 7.58), he was no more than 40 years old when he was writing this!

So among his aims, he says (15.20), is to announce the gospel in places where the Messiah had not been previously named. Conscious of being a 'builder,' he did not

wish to go to work on someone else's foundation.¹⁴ In coming to Rome he is indeed visiting a church founded by someone else. Whether this was Peter, and if so whether he was anxious to avoid any suggestion of conflict between them, following the conflict in Ga 2.11-21, we actually can't say. But the point is stated in terms again of the Isaianic Servant theme that Paul has drawn on earlier in the letter (e.g., 10.15-16).¹⁵ Isaiah 52.13-15 spoke of the servant being announced before nations and kings, startling them with the strange message. Paul has already seen that effect wherever he has gone; but he has also seen people come into glad submission to the Servant-Messiah (the citation serves to explain 15.19-20).

b. Intention to come to Rome and thence to Spain 15.22-24

And so— to Spain! This proposal was bound to come as a surprise. All roads led to Rome, and the church there might well have supposed that once the apostle had reached the great capital he would stay. But Paul has his eyes on a different target. The prophets in whose works he had steeped himself spoke of the faraway coastlands and islands coming to hear of the one God, of their true Lord (Isa 11.11; 41.1; 42.4,10; 49.1; 51.5; 60.9; see also Ps 65.5-8). As a Roman citizen, he was able to use his citizenship to travel within the Empire, and since Rome was itself the capital of much of the world it made sense to go there, following his apparent strategy of taking the gospel to central points and letting it do its work from there. Seemingly the logical next step would be to complete the whole circuit of the north side of the Mediterranean Sea. The southern side, too, was a busy center of Roman culture, from Egypt through Libya and Cyrene, including the important province of Africa itself (the prominent tip of contemporary Tunisia, opposite Sicily, centered on Carthage). Perhaps Paul intended to make the return journey from Spain along the southern shore. We don't know. We have no evidence that he ever got farther than Rome, even though later legend did its best to fill in the gaps and have him complete a Spanish mission and return to Rome a second time, there is no compelling reason to accept this.

For the moment he makes three points:

1. This tireless program of activity explains why he has taken so long to come to them (cf. 1.13). Else-

¹² NIV's 'glory' avoids the apparent self-claim at the cost of Paul's resonances and underlying meaning.

¹³ Compare 1Co 2.4; 2Co 12.12; Ga 3.5; 1Th 1.5; and the various scenes in Acts, e.g., 14.8-18.

¹⁴ See also 1Co 3.10-15; 2Co 10.15-16. His use of this metaphor is not uniform. In 1Co 3.11 he declares that there is only one possible foundation— Jesus the Messiah— and in the same passage he says that other people are building on his foundation.

¹⁵ Noting how appropriate it was to pick a text that spoke of people far away, out of earshot as it were, coming to hear the good news.

where he can speak of ‘Satan hindering him’; there is no mention of that here, but rather of fruitful work for the gospel (1Th 2.18; cf. the Holy Spirit’s hindering in Acts 16.6). He has longed for many years to come to them; now at last he can. (Or so he thought.)

2. His aims for the eastern Mediterranean have been fulfilled; he no longer has any room for new work. This sounds extraordinary, given the tiny number of Christians we must envisage compared to the population in general; but Paul thinks of himself as a church-planter, and once he has established churches in the major centers of population and culture, they do the continued evangelism in their neighborhoods. So, with Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens possibly, and Corinth established— not without difficulties and anxieties!— he it’s time to move on.
3. He wants Rome to be his base for further operations all the way to Spain. Rm 15.24 does *not* say that Paul intends to stamp his own apostolic authority on the Roman church, or to take over its leadership. Rather, he hopes to be refreshed in their company for a while (*apo merous* is temporal, not partitive; Paul is not saying that he hopes they will refresh some parts of him).

2. Forthcoming visit to Jerusalem 15.25-33
a. Taking the collection to Jerusalem 15.25-29

With a sense of foreboding that emerges at the end of the chapter, this leads Paul to the task at hand. He didn’t know, writing this letter, that his trip to Jerusalem would indeed nearly cost him his life, and that it would be years, not weeks, before he would arrive in Rome (see Ac 20-28). All he knows, at the moment, is that he has put his hand to the plow, at considerable personal risk and cost, and must not turn back. He has been organizing a collection of money, throughout the churches in the Greek world, to take to the poor church in Jerusalem, whom he here refers to simply as ‘the saints’ (15.25-26). Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaëa have contributed generously— we can see that process going on, with painfully tactful hints and suggestions, in 1Co 16.1-4, and especially in 2Co 8 and 9— and now he must take the money as a gift to Jerusalem. This is likely in long-term fulfillment of the promise in Ga 2.10: the Jerusalem leaders asked Paul and Barnabas to ‘remember the poor,’ meaning not poor people in general but the little and poor church in Jerusalem itself. We may compare Ac 11.27-30, where the Antioch church sends Paul and Bar-

nabas to Jerusalem with famine relief. The Paul of Ac 24.17 refers in one of his Roman hearings to his having brought ‘alms and offerings to my nation’.

The collection was much more than to alleviate poverty. It was part of a reciprocal action of Jews and Gentiles, to be understood on the larger map sketched in Rm 3-4, 9-11, and 14.1-15.13. Gentile Christians are in debt to Jewish ones: they have come to share in their spiritual blessings, so it is only right that they should minister to them (the word is *leitourgēsai*, cognate with Paul’s ‘liturgical’ language about himself in 15.16, although the word is not restricted to religious contexts) in ‘fleshly’ (*sarkikos*, often translated ‘material’) things. But there is more going on than simply balancing things out. The collection is a vital sign of unity between the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (where tensions with the pagan authorities were rising and fierce zealot nationalism brewing) and Gentile Christians in the wider world. For Gentiles to give money for Jewish Christians was a sign that the Gentiles regarded them as family; for Jewish Christians to accept it would be a sign that they accepted Gentiles as family. The collection was thus designed to accomplish exactly what Paul had been urging in 14.1-15.13. Some have said that Paul’s coming with the collection would be a new version of the long-prophesied pilgrimage of the nations to Zion, but Paul is thinking here of the effect on the Christian Jews in Jerusalem, not on the non-Christian ones in Rome. All he says about unbelieving Jews is that he prays to be delivered from them, not that they will suddenly see the light as a result of his labors. The Jerusalem journey, however important, is essentially a detour. He has a task to complete, and as soon as it is done he will be on his way to Rome.

Paul’s language for ‘completing the task’, literally translated, is ‘having sealed this fruit to them’. To ‘seal’ something is to complete it with all due legal formality. That is the last thing he will do— so far as he knows at present— before coming on, via Rome, to Spain. And (15.29) he has quiet confidence in God (not in himself) that, when he comes, ‘the blessing of the Messiah’ will accompany him as it always has before.

As with the journey to Spain, we do not know exactly what happened when Paul tried to deliver the money in Jerusalem. Acts, which goes into great detail about that visit, does not mention the money except as part of Paul’s speech to Festus (24.17). But the visit, clearly, was anything but a detour. According to Acts at its most detailed, Paul was beaten up, nearly lynched, put on trial before the high priest, then before successive Roman governors, and kept in prison for two years or more before finally appealing to Caesar, and so getting to Rome courtesy of an armed escort to stand trial in the capital.

This was not, perhaps, what he had in mind in 15.28; but, being Paul, he went with it.

**b. Requesting prayer in
relation to his journey 15.30-33**

Aware of the dangers he faces, he concludes with a request for prayer (15.30-33). The request itself is made with a solemn formality: 'through our Lord Jesus the Messiah, and the love of the Spirit'. The prayer itself will be a struggle: 'wrestle together with me in prayer to God on my behalf'. He encourages them to pray first that he will be snatched out of the hands of unbelievers in Judaea (he is under no illusions as to his reputation as a traitor to the nation, the Torah, and God); second, that his ministry will be acceptable to God's people— that is, to the Christian Jews in Jerusalem. He envisages this as a difficult and dangerous time, and he speaks of coming on to Rome afterward (15.31) almost as if he were planning a holiday in order to recover from it. He wants to come to them in joy, through God's will, and be refreshed with and by them. Knowing how the story actually turned out, we can only look in awe at the faith and hope of the man who could dare such things.

The letter's main content is complete. Paul adds (15.33) a brief blessing— this time invoking 'the God of peace'— and moves on to personal greetings.^{16,17}

¹⁶ On 'the God of peace,' see 2Co 13.11; Ph 4.9; 1 Thess 5.23; Heb 13.20; cf. 2 Thess 3.16: 'the Lord of peace'. The range of contexts suggests that this was a frequent early Christian title for God, though the communal peace Paul seeks to inculcate in the present section makes it particularly appropriate here.

¹⁷ One very early manuscript, P⁴⁶, dated around 200 AD, inserts the concluding doxology of 16.25-27 at this point, before continuing with what we call 16.1-23 and then concluding abruptly. This interesting detail (not the only oddity in that ms.) is actually the tip of an iceberg. It seems likely, though, that Paul would have written a fitting doxology rather than allowing the letter to stop short with a brief blessing such as 15.33 or the spurious 16.24 (see below), so we can regard the doxology as original, and as originally coming at the end of the letter, and we will treat of it there.