

Sermon for Sunday, January 30, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
Traits of a Gospel Ministry
Romans 15:23-33

Paul's comments in Romans 15:23-33 allow us to consider several traits of a gospel ministry. Healthy churches will have goals like his. We will see that Paul ministry is first, purposeful; second, full-orbed; and third, driven or empowered by prayer.

1. Gospel Ministry is purposeful

God called the apostle Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. More specifically, Paul had a pioneering ministry. God called him to preach Christ where his name, his nature and work had been completely unknown until Paul arrived. To fulfill that mission, Paul had traveled throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire, preaching in the largest and most influential cities, traveling major roads and through the great ports. He would preach, often for a short time, establish churches, and let the gospel radiate from them.

After some years, Paul declared that his pioneering work was complete. Therefore he wanted to go west, to Spain, to parts and peoples unknown. It did not serve Paul's mission to go to Rome to teach, for he never aimed to build "on someone else's foundation" (15:20). But he could stop by Rome on the way west. Therefore, he said, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little" (15:24). After what he expected to be a short trip to Jerusalem, he says, "I will go to Spain and visit you on the way" (15:28).

It is no longer possible for a contemporary church to have a mission as specific or unique as Paul's. Jesus gave every church the same essential mission, which he gave the apostle's in his final charge: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). This summons to gospel, discipleship, and obedience is common to all churches.

Yet churches can have a specific focus. Churches should minister where they are. Our primary presence is in Clayton, a city with few churches and a distinct character. It's a city with a research university, a strong commercial district, and major hospitals and medical research nearby. Naturally, we hope to minister to everyone, but these are the traits of our location and we want to reach our neighbors.

Churches also have a history, picking up traits over the years, often unexpectedly, in God's providence. Central experienced a string of tragedies from 1991 to 2001. One senior pastor died of cancer at a relatively young age. Another had a terrible accident and committed suicide a few months later. Another was dismissed for moral failures. There were other hardships. Today's pastoral staff has a number of people who know brokenness all too well. Is that an accident? Among our pastors we have a man who is a recovering drug addict and alcoholic? Another pastor's first wife tragically and unilaterally abandoned him? Another pastor grew up in a verbally and physically violent home? Another has endured many premature deaths in his family and serious illnesses in his children? I could continue. Yet here we are in a beautiful building, a stable church, full of men and women who know how to achieve.

In God's providence, therefore, this has become a church where it is safe to look good and be broken. We are broken achievers. It's safe, here, to look like a stable achiever and feel like an unstable failure. Many of us fit that mold. We understand it and we accept you. Many have found healing here and you can too.

2. Gospel Ministry is full-orbed – a ministry of word and deed

Paul had a life goal, but he was no monomaniac. He had more than one cause. He focused on one aspect of gospel ministry, yet he knew that the gospel affects all of life. So while Paul wants to go to Spain, he will first go "to Jerusalem, in the service of the saints there."

We read about this collection in Acts and several of Paul's letters (Acts 20:3, 16, 24:17; Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9). "The saints" in Jerusalem were probably poor due to a famine (predicted by Agabus the prophet in Acts 11:27).

Churches through Macedonia and Achaia contributed. Acts 20 names churches in Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe and hints that Corinth, Ephesus, and Philippi joined. Paul took leaders from these cities too. There is Aristarchus, whose name means "best ruler," a popular name among aristocrats. There was Secundus, whose name means "second" and labels the second-leading slave in a great house. So people of every social class, from many churches, helped relieve the famine in Jerusalem.

Paul traveled 1,000 miles to deliver the collection he promoted (cf. 2 Cor. 8-9). It was a symbol of the unity of Jewish and Gentile churches. It was both a duty and a pleasure for Gentile churches to help the mother church in Jerusalem. "For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings" (Rom. 15:27).

Paul wants (literally) to "seal this fruit" in Jerusalem before going to Spain (15:28). That is, he wants to present the gift and ensure that the Jewish Christians understand it as a sign of church unity. He will visit Jerusalem "in the full measure of the blessing of Christ," then continue his ministry to the West (15:29).

Events did not unfold exactly according to Paul's plan. He delivered his gift in Jerusalem, but was arrested soon afterward. He spent over two years in jail, before he was tried – and apparently acquitted – in Rome. Clement, a church leader from around 95 A.D., says Paul eventually did reach Spain.¹ But he risked his primary mission – preaching the gospel – for the sake of hunger relief.

The lesson is that no matter how much focus we have, true ministry is multi-faceted, as broad as life. It involves words and deeds. Paul was a man of words and yet he showed mercy in deeds. We must do the same.

Some love to talk, others love to act. We could even divide ourselves this way: doers and talkers. But whichever we prefer, whether we lean toward words or deeds, talkers must also act, and doers must be ready to explain themselves. Let's back our words with deeds, and let's use words to explain our deeds.

That is what we aim to do at Central. Our words begin with the gospel, which we can address from a personal perspective today.

¹ Apost. Fathers 1 Clem. 5:7.

Gospel ministry

A woman who is part of our church family grew up in a perfectionist family. Her parents expected the highest possible performance from straight A grades to perfect performance on the violin. From the beginning she brought home nothing but A's. But that didn't seem like enough. Her parents permitted almost no mistakes on daily assignments or tests. If she brought home a paper with more than one or two mistakes, her parents shamed and scolded her.

One year she started hiding her imperfect papers in her school desk. Somehow she couldn't throw them away, but she was afraid to bring them home to her parents. The pile grew. Finally, the incriminating record of her errors became unbearable and she brought everything home at once. When she presented the papers, her father yelled at her, shamed her, and accused her. Again and again, her parents asked, "Why did you miss this question? And this question? And why did you deceive us?" It was so terrible that she could neither move nor reply.

That night, the little girl lay in bed and vowed that she would never let that happen again. No one would make me feel so terrible about herself. The solution was simple: she had to be perfect. This was her theme in academics, in music, with her sisters and her friends. She even took up archery because of the appeal of the perfect bull's eye. She "had to be the perfect daughter, the perfect big sister, the perfect friend, the perfect violinist." Whatever the role, she would fill it perfectly. Whatever the expectations, she would find and exceed them. She lived by this principle: "Figure out the rules and play to win." So she became addicted to accomplishment and to pleasing people. The motive was self-protection and self-justification. If she never failed, her value as a person was secure.

When she finally heard the gospel, she was ready for it: All are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. We are imperfect and broken, yet the perfect and holy God loves us and receives us, apart from works, if we repent and believe. Yes, she believed that message! And she searched and found churches where she could go deeper in that gospel. Now, she's going deeper with us. I hope you do too.

Community and discipleship

Every church aims to follow Jesus' command to "make disciples." We make disciples in public worship as we all gather to worship God in song, prayer, and liturgy. We also come to hear God's word together. Yet true growth requires that we work, pray, and study together in smaller groups. That is what Paul means when he says the Roman Christians were "full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (15:14). Not everyone can teach in public but anyone can teach a good friend, one-on-one or in a small groups.

I recently spoke to a young woman who has a good life. She has lots of friends, she is happily married to a good man, she is talented and respected, and has a solid job. Yet she feels unhappy. She cries out, "What is wrong with me? Why this season of groundless discontent?" It's an honest and important question. There are no easy answers. Yet even if someone had an answer that is the kind of question we must work out together, in community, over time. We need each other for that.

Mission

A couple months ago I mentioned a one-time need for funds to print a book for Eritrean refugees living in Sudan who are making valiant efforts to provide pastoral training for their own refugee populations. Pastor Abraha heads up an underground Bible college for training church leaders. He spent

seven years in prison in Eritrea for his faith. He is the pastoral leader of thousands of refugees in Sudan. Listen: it's so bad in Eritrea that Christians are fleeing to Sudan for relative safety. Now it's time to start training leaders. Pastor Michael Abraha had already translated training materials into Eritrean and by faith was awaiting means to get them into print. Central Presbyterian Church heard about the need, announced a one-time collection without fanfare for his translation project. You gave almost \$5,000 and now the books are being printed and distributed to help these poor brothers and sisters. Someone wrote, "I hope... Central knows how much this gift is appreciated and what a difference it is already making as a witness... in a real hardship area for God's people."

On the theme of giving to missions, late in 2008, Central was about to launch a capital campaign, designed to offer space for fellowship, youth, classrooms, mid-sized gatherings, and parking. The campaign had a significant missional component, for work in St. Louis and around the world. Days before the launch, the stock market crashed and the worst recession of our lives struck, so that we had to delay the campaign indefinitely. Nonetheless, we decided to give to our missional causes, including our school, which was growing and was virtually out of space.

So we gave money to establish safe houses for Muslim converts to Christianity (Eagle's Wings" home for girls in Albania with EPC missionaries, the McCaskills). We gave to Jubilee Ministries to rehab houses here in St. Louis. We gave funds to plant churches in Manipur, India with the India Presbyterian church, led by the Tombings. The Tombings are bold, talented, Spirit-blessed indigenous leaders who trained in St. Louis at Covenant Seminary. They have started dozens of churches despite constant threats and persecution. We also gave funds to start an online seminary in China with indigenous leaders supported by Central.

At the same time, we gave a large house and funds for renovation so our school, Central Christian School, could continue its growth. For six years, the Lord has blessed our children, our teachers, and our headmaster, Josh Crane. More and more children of Central attend there. We also reach into the city in all its racial, social and economic diversity. About thirty-five percent of our students are from minority homes. Our diversity also covers diverse learning styles and abilities.

These children get an excellent education and a Christian education, at a fraction of the total cost of private schools, without the bureaucracy of public schools. Every thought is taken captive to Christ. Every sphere of life is seen in light of God's truth and the tender reign of King Jesus. Our school has something to offer the world. It is a life-giving force in the community and God's kingdom.

This year we are restoring one part of our campaign by raising money, making plans, and gaining permission to build a parking lot next to our church. A parking lot isn't exciting. It's infrastructure. Like roads, parking lots do nothing by themselves; they are a means by which other things happen. Infrastructure isn't exciting, but it is essential to our ministry.

The city of Clayton has, for some time now, steadily restricted and rescinded our freedom to park in our neighborhood. We depend heavily on parking lots near us that could be sold and lost to our use at any time. The problem is most acute during weekdays. A parking lot gives us enough space for all our midweek discipleship groups for men and women, our gospel transformation classes, and our ministries of prayer and of mercy. Like our building, a parking lot is a tool for ministry.

There is a reason why the city restricted our parking. We have more people in the street than we did in the past. Ten years ago, we had one mid-week ministry of size: a women's study on Tuesday mornings. Today, we still have that ministry, but we also have a large women's ministry on Friday, and a sizable

men's ministry on Thursday, not to mention medium-sized groups meeting on Mondays and Wednesdays. Equip Central on Wednesday nights typically has 350 people. There are smaller gatherings for prayer, missions, and discipleship. I understand why the city gets irritated, why neighbors wish we would wither a bit. The need for parking is a sign of life.

Lord willing, the lot will cover all week-day parking needs, most of our need for Wednesday nights and Trio and will greatly ease parking for morning worship. Because there have been accidents along Hanley Road, I'm thankful that there will be less need for seniors and small children to cross the road.

To support our work here and throughout the world, our church needs a place to gather with reasonable expediency. Then we can make common cause for God's kingdom. I don't say Central is the greatest church. I don't subscribe to the myth of uniqueness. But we have something distinct to contribute in this city, this world.

3. Gospel Ministry is driven, empowered by prayer 15:30-33

Because gospel ministry is empowered by prayer, Paul asks the Romans to pray for him, just as he always prayed for them (1:9). Prayer is triune. It is to the Father, through the name of the Son, by the love of the Spirit – that is, the love the Spirit creates (15:30a). Prayer is work. Paul asks them to "join me in my struggle by praying" (15:30b). Paul doesn't say he struggles with God, men or powers. It seems that prayer itself is the struggle. We must pray urgently and persistently.

He asks them to pray for two things: that unbelievers would not thwart his gift and that believers would receive it. First, he prayed "that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea" for some hoped to kill or at least arrest him (15:31a). While he was ready to suffer, he hoped God would spare him (Acts 21:13). Second, he hoped the church would receive his gift - as a sign of the solidarity of Jews and Gentiles in the gospel he proclaimed. He knows gifts aren't always received as they are intended.

If Paul's mission to Jerusalem succeeds, then he can travel to Rome. He prays that "by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed" (15:32). Whatever happens in Jerusalem, he hopes for an encouraging welcome in Rome, on his way west.

The little phrase "by God's will" is essential. In fact, Paul's prayer was not answered in the way he wished. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, to deliver the gift, he was falsely accused, beaten, arrested, imprisoned for two years, and finally tried in Caesar's court. He came to Rome as a prisoner, not a missionary. This takes us to one of the problems of prayer: Paul prayed something that was holy and good, helpful to others, not himself, and he did not receive it.

Some requests are perfectly moral, yet God does not grant them: Paul asked for relief from the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10). David asked God to spare the life of his infant son (2 Sam. 12:13-23). Jesus even asked the Father if he might be spared the agony of the cross (Matt. 26).

If even Jesus and Paul prayed "by God's will" we certainly should do so too. But we seek God's will in two senses. John says, "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). Yet James says that if we ask selfishly, with wrong motives, God will deny our request (Jas. 4:1-3).

There are two principles here: First, we must always pray according to God's moral will, as revealed in his law. So all prayers must conform to God's moral will. We always pray that God will empower us to do what is morally right.

So then what does Paul's life look like? What does a good church look like? There are some things that are undeniable. We should have the same general purpose to proclaim, to believe, to uphold the gospel and to make disciples. We can have particular purposes and goals that recognize who we are, what we are made to be, our history is, what our training is. We pursue those as best we can. And yet we don't pursue them blindly or exclusively. We say, "Lord I have my goals but I also am a man or woman of speech. But I also want to do, put me around people who are doers. Let me not simply pursue my own agenda. Let me be full-orbed." As we pursue our goals individually and corporately as a church may we present them seriously and earnestly to God and say, "Lord this is what we want and this is what we aim for and yet you are God and I am not, Thy will be done."