

CHAPTER 1

GOSPEL OF GOD

INTRODUCTION TO ST. PAUL AND THE ROMANS

Antioch in Syria became the first major center of Christian worship beyond Palestine. Here, for the first time, members of the Community were called Christians. To the newly established community at Antioch the Church leaders at Jerusalem sent Barnabas as an official representative. After Barnabas assessed the needs of the Church there, he went to Tarsus searching for Saul, a one-time great persecutor of the Church who had been converted to Christ Jesus some ten years earlier. *"Once he had found him, he brought him back to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and instructed great numbers"* (Acts 11:26).

The Holy Spirit destined Barnabas and Saul to become the first missionary team formally sent by the Church into a pagan field (See Acts 13:2-3). The newly formed missionary team went to the island of Cyprus, about a hundred miles west of the mainland. There Saul preached his first sermon to a Gentile pagan--the Roman governor Sergius Paulus. *"...He believed, so impressed was he by the teaching about the Lord"* (Acts 13:12). From this moment the author of Acts refers to Saul by the Roman name of Paul. This subtly indicates that Saul's apostolate to the Gentiles has begun. The Risen Lord had revealed to Ananias about Saul: *"This man is the instrument I have chosen to bring my name to the Gentiles and their kings"* (Acts 9:15).

APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

Now under the leadership of Paul, the missionary team returned to Asia Minor. Acts records the missionary activities of Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe--four cities of southern Galatia. The missionary technique used by Paul was to arrive at the synagogue service on the Sabbath. As itinerate preachers, Paul and Barnabas hoped for an invitation to address the congregation. In Pisidian Antioch the leaders of the synagogue sent this message to them: *"Brothers, if you have any exhortation to address to the people, please speak up"*(Acts 13:15). Acts presents a summary of Paul's sermon in the synagogue.

Paul, like Peter, preached the remission of sins through Jesus and the sanctification flowing from Jesus Christ as being beyond the sanctification of

Mosaic Law. Paul preached salvation through faith: *"In him, every believer is acquitted"*(Acts 13:39). The sermon delivered by Paul differed from that given by Peter in that Paul emphasized salvation for Jew and Greek alike through Jesus Christ. Paul subtly lowers all barriers. Many Jews—Christian and non-Christian--were not about to accept Paul's teaching that *"there does among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ, you are the descendents of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised"* (Gal. 3:28-29).

At Pisidian Antioch the Jews did not refuse to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but they rejected the doctrine of the universal salvific Will of God. They could not accept that the Messiah could bring salvation equally to Jew and Greek. Acts implies that this refusal of the Jews to share salvation with the Gentiles led them to reject a Messiah who offered such salvation. Paul's awareness of this truth was a moment of spiritual crisis in his life. It was a historical moment in evangelization. It was at this moment that Paul proclaimed: *"The word of God has to be declared to you first of all but since you reject it and thus convict yourselves as unworthy of everlasting life, we now turn to the Gentiles"* (Acts 13:46).

DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

Obstacles to Paul's ministry came first from Jews who rejected the gospel message. Later opposition would arise within the Church itself among certain converted Jews who insisted all Christians must become Jews. Jesus' first disciples experienced themselves as Jews. They intended no break with the Jewish religion. Only time, experience, and the Holy Spirit taught the Church that you cannot put a new patch on an old garment. You cannot put new wine into old wineskins.

The first real crisis developed when Peter baptized the pagan centurion Cornelius and his household, and ate with them. Peter was forced to defend his actions before the Christian Community at Jerusalem. Some among the circumcised took issue with Peter's actions. Certain members of the Pharisaic party who had converted to the Church maintained that a Jew who entered must not only be baptized, but also circumcised in order to be saved. This implied they must observe the Mosaic Law in order to be saved.

Paul considered this teaching to be heretical and he hotly contended against those who fostered it. Paul maintained that Gentiles had only to believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized in order to receive the grace of salvation. Paul's enemies sought to discredit his teachings by casting doubt on his authority to

teach. They personally attacked Paul on the grounds that he was neither an apostle nor did he possess authority from Jerusalem to preach. They even went further by imputing base and evil motives to him for preaching the gospel.

Some men of the circumcision party even reached into the Churches in Galatia. They won certain Galatians over to their cause. These disciples sought to "judaize" the rest of the Christian community. When the news reached Paul he immediately wrote a letter refuting the charges, and defended his position on salvation. Some scholars hold that the letter was the first draft of his teachings, conceived in controversy and later developed and perfected in the letter to the Romans. Indeed, some thoughts expressed in Romans only find their clarification in the letter to the Galatians.

The conflict within the Church resulted in a council being held in Jerusalem around 50 A.D. to settle this matter so vital to Church doctrine and unity. At this council, Peter definitively defined the Church's Doctrine: *"Our belief is rather that we are saved by the favor of the Lord Jesus and so are they"* (See Acts 15:4-11).

The Council of Jerusalem settled the question about Gentile Christians. Nevertheless, many Jewish Christians, particularly those living in Jerusalem, still believed in the necessity for Jewish converts to observe the Mosaic Law in its entirety. Only time and circumstances brought about a complete separation between the Christian Church and the Jewish Religion. With the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. temple worship ended. Following the Roman conquest of Israel, the Pharisees gathered at Jamnia and made a concentrated effort to maintain the purity of Judaism. Jewish Christians were forced out of the synagogues.

Therefore by the end of the first century the separation of the Church and the synagogue had been completed. Long before this would come to be, Paul had already given the theological reasons for the separation in his letter to the Romans.

LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Why did Paul write a letter to a Christian Community unknown to him? Paul recognized Rome as the center for world evangelization. He viewed his mission in the East as finished. His eyes now turned towards the West--beyond Rome to Spain. As Antioch had been his home base in the East,

Rome would become his base of operation in the West. After a brief visit to Jerusalem, Paul intended to go to Rome. He desired to favorably influence the Church at Rome. Sending the Church a clear and concise explanation of the gospel he preached could possibly ensure a favorable reception. At least his position would be clear and they would know where he stood.

In the relatively quiet and peaceful months around the year 57A.D. in Corinth, Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans. Martin Luther held that this letter set forth the Gospel more clearly than any other writing in the New Testament. Over the centuries this work has been equally admired and misinterpreted.

In studying Romans it is important to know what Paul actually desired to express. We must remind ourselves that it was composed almost two thousand years ago--in a world of thought much different from our own. We have a two-fold work to do: to discover, as exactly as possible, Paul's own conscious awareness as expressed in words and terms used in 58 A.D., and secondly, to see what bearing these teachings have upon our own times and lives today. Krister Stendahl says: "Seek ye first the original meanings--and all these things shall be yours as well."

Paul's ideas are presented in the informality of a letter following the style of letter writing of the time. Nevertheless, the contents of the letter reflect one great theme, clearly and comprehensively conceived. The theme itself finds expression in these words: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation, the Jew first, then the Greek. For in the gospel is revealed the justice of God which begins and ends with faith; as Scripture says, 'The just man shall live by faith'"* (Rom.1:16-17).

PAUL'S SELF-IDENTITY

As customary at the time, the author of the letter identifies himself and then recipients of the letter. Paul's own personal identification is rather lengthy. He projects a definite image of himself to the Romans. Paul declares himself to be the *doulos* (slave) of the king whose only crown had been made of thorns--Christ Jesus. Paul establishes his identity in relationship to Jesus Christ. By a picture of contrast--Paul the slave, Jesus the Lord--Paul humbly presents himself before the Romans to be nothing of importance in himself. What there was of importance and power within him was attributable not to himself, but to his relationship with Jesus Christ. He

quickly identifies his importance to the Church at Rome as *“called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God ...”* An apostle was a person sent on a mission as the ambassador of another. The apostle acted for and in the name of the person who sent him. Paul viewed himself as an apostle in the same sense as he had expressed in his letter to the Galatians: *“...an apostle sent, not by men or by any man, but by Jesus Christ and God his Father who raised him from the dead” (Gal.1:1)*. Paul claims his apostolic authority came directly from God--an authority recognized by the "acknowledged pillars" of the Church--James, Cephas and John (See Gal. 2:8-9).

God called and set apart Paul as an apostle to proclaim the gospel of God. The *gospel* means "good news." Paul must proclaim God's "good news" who is Jesus Christ. This Gospel is not a new proclamation in the world. The Old Testament foretold it through the mouths of the prophets. Paul proclaimed the gospel concerning God's Son *"who was descended from David according to the flesh but was made Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."*

Paul states the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. As stated here, it does not reflect Paul's full understanding of Jesus. Paul believed Jesus to be the divine Son of the Father prior to the resurrection. To the Galatians he had said: *"But then the designated time had come, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law, to deliver from the law those who were subjected to it ..."(Gal. 4:4-5)*. What the formula quoted by Paul in Romans expresses is that the Son of God appeared on this earth clothed in the lowliness and weakness of a human being. But from the moment of the resurrection the Son of God put aside lowliness and weakness and clothed himself in glory and in the fullness of power.

Not only is Paul commissioned by the Risen Lord to spread the "good news," but the Lord designated the people to whom he must bring the gospel--the Gentiles. Paul subtly implies that the Christians in Rome fall under his jurisdiction-"among whom are you who have been called to belong to Jesus Christ." The letter he writes comes with God-given authority to all in Rome.

CHRISTIAN VOCATION

Paul views his apostolic task not only to speak the name of Jesus but also to bring all the Gentiles "to obedient faith." Faith for Paul implies obedience, and disobedience indicates disbelief. Those who truly have received in faith the Person of Jesus will consequently obey Jesus. Through obedient faith

believers become the "beloved of God. " They have been incorporated into Jesus Christ of whom the Father said: *"This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests"* (Lk. 3:22). Paul confirms that by saying each Christian-"the beloved of God"-has a vocation to be called a saint,"called to holiness"(See Rm. 1:7).

THE SPIRIT OF PAUL

Paul had an eagerness to preach the gospel. No spirit of spiritual sloth possessed the soul of Paul. His words breathe his personal love for the Will of God. The love that consumed his life identifies him more than anything else as a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. One sees in Paul evidence of that same love of which the evangelist John wrote: *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him"*(Jn.3:16-17).

The genuineness of Paul's love of God becomes evident in the love expressed for others. Respect is a genuine element of love, and Paul demonstrates his respect for the Romans. *"I give thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is heralded throughout the world."* He does not intend to bring faith to them, but to enrich their faith. Perhaps nothing better expresses Paul's sensitivity to the needs of others than when he tells the Romans that he does not intend to come only to give, but to be enriched personally by his communion with them. People have an equal need to receive love and to give love. *"Rather what I wish,"* writes Paul, *"is that we may be mutually encouraged by our common faith"* (Rm. 1:12).

The spirituality of Paul's love is revealed when he tells the Romans that although he has never had the joy of meeting them and sharing with them in body, nevertheless, he has been constantly united with them in prayer. Paul likewise prays about his own desire to go to Rome. He realizes that even holy and loving ambitions must be submitted to the will of God, *"always pleading that, God willing it, I may at last find my way clear to visit you"* (Rom.1:10),

The universality of Paul's mission and love is revealed when he writes to the Romans: *"I am under obligation to Greeks and non-Greeks, to learned and unintelligent alike"* (Rm.1:15). Paul confesses that all men have a claim on his love: the cultured and the uncultured, the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish, the intelligent and the ignorant, the good and the bad. Again he reflects the compassionate love of the Father who lets His sun shine and His rain fall upon all alike. Paul loved not only the lovable

and the unloved-but much more--Paul loved the unlovable for such love alone is Christ-like.

CALL TO EVANGELISM

Christians today, through the encyclical on Evangelism by Paul VI, have been called to be modern apostles. The Bishops of our country have commissioned us to reach out to the millions of un-churched and fallen away Catholics of our land. Most Christians have not responded, nor will they. Spiritual sloth possesses so many of us. Spiritual sloth is a distaste and dislike for the things of the spirit. Where there is no active concern for the spiritual and temporal welfare of others, there is no love of God, regardless of the number and frequency of our pious practices and exercises. Their Christianity is an illusion. Christians who heed the call of the Church and the Spirit within their hearts do well to learn from Paul--the greatest evangelist. Learn to pray ardently for those with whom you desire to share the "good news." Pray eagerly for the opportunity to reach them. Most of all pray that you will go forth only with a love that desires to share its gifts and be a source of strength to others--a love that knows it will receive more than it gives--a love that cannot discriminate.

LETTER TO THE ROMANS

INTRODUCTION TO PAUL AND ROMANS

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS

With the exception of your introductory lesson you will be given Scripture readings and questions for six days. You should prayerfully meditate on them and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in answering the daily questions. Do not worry if you cannot answer all the questions. The Holy Spirit may wait to give you the answer during communal sharing. Your daily meditation on these Scriptures is the important element. The questions are to aid and direct your meditation, and your answers are to add to your communal sharing.

SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

"THERE DOES NOT EXIST AMONG YOU JEW OR GREEK, SLAVE OR FREEMAN, MALE OR FEMALE. ALL ARE ONE IN CHRIST JESUS. FURTHERMORE, IF YOU BELONG TO CHRIST YOU ARE THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM, WHICH MEANS YOU INHERIT ALL THAT WAS PROMISED." (Gal. 3:28-29)

FIRST DAY: Read Summary through "Apostle To The Gentiles;" Acts 9:10-19; 2Cor. 11:22 through 12:6

- 1. To what vocation did Jesus call Saul from the moment of his conversion?**
- 2. What do Paul's sufferings tell you about the cost of discipleship?**
- 3. What message did Paul preach at Pisidian Antioch?**
- 4. What was the effect of this sermon upon the Jews and upon Paul?**

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: "Division in the Church;" Acts 11:1-18

- 1. What caused the first great internal crisis within the Church?**
- 2. Why did Peter's action scandalize certain members of the Church?**

3. What do you see was the problem in the Church?

4. How did Peter answer his critics?

THIRD DAY: Read Acts 15:1-11; Acts 21:17-25.

1. What was the argument between Paul and the "party of the circumcision"?

2. If you had lived at the time, which side would you have been on and why?

3. How was the problem resolved?

4. In your mind how does the expression, "you do not put new wine in old wineskins" express the relationship between the Church and the synagogue?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: "Letter to the Romans"

1. Why do you think Paul wrote a letter to the Romans who were unknown to him?

2. What do you think Luther meant when he said Romans set forth the Gospel clearer than any other writing in the New Testament?

3. What problems do we face today in trying to understand the true meaning of Paul's words in Romans?

4. What does the theme of this letter say to you?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary: "Paul's Self-Identity;" Rom. 1:1-6; Gal. 1:1 through 2:10

1. What kind of image does Paul project to the Romans?

2. What do you think being an apostle meant to Paul?

3. What did he believe to be the source of his authority?

4. Why did Paul feel he had a right and obligation to preach the Gospel in Rome?

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: “The Christian Vocation” through “Call to Evangelism” and Romans 1:6-15.

- 1. What do you understand by “obedient faith?”**
- 2. In what way does Paul’s spirit reveal Christian love?**
- 3. Paul described himself in relationship to Jesus as a slave. How would you describe yourself in relationship to Jesus?**
- 4. As a Christian in what way do you see yourself as being “set apart” by God?**