

THE HEART OF A TRAILBLAZER

SERIES: MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM: WHY ARE WE HERE?

Danny Hall

Since we began this series, it's amazing how much the world has changed. It has entered a time of war, and what the world will be like after this war ends is the subject of much discussion. Throughout history there have been cycles of rapid change, slow change, and sometimes radical change that alter governments and cultures. But we don't know what the outcome of any sequence of events is going to be. The one steady, true thing through it all is God. The sovereign Lord wants to reach into the mess that we have made of this world and extend to hurting people everywhere the love and grace of Jesus Christ. And the one thing that we know is true of us is that God is calling us out to be a people for himself whom he is forming into the image of Christ, building us up as his body, that we might bring a message of hope, peace, and grace to a chaotic and troubled world.

Most of us have heard for many years about the call of Christ for his followers to be witnesses, both here and around the world, to his glory and forgiveness. In this message I want to do two things. I want to share one final idea related to that, and then I want to suggest some ways we can start to engage in this process of becoming the people that God wants us to be. Of course, we need God's Spirit to lead us, so we need to pray that he will accomplish it. Without God's help and blessing and pouring out of his Spirit on us, all of our talk is just empty words.

Let's read our text, Romans 15:14-29:

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written,

**“They who had no news of Him shall see,
And they who have not heard shall understand.”**

For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain--for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while--but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

In this passage Paul returns to a theme that he introduced in the first chapter, which is his desire to visit the church in Rome. In between these two references to this visit are wonderful chapters of theology about the need for salvation, who Christ is and what God has done for us in him, and how he is forming us into the image of Christ and into the people of God. All of this is Paul's way of introducing himself to this church in Rome that he so much wants to visit. Now he expands the idea of his visit to let us see his vision for his ministry, opening up his heart a little bit more to us. Let me just review a couple of important points and then zero in on an observation that is the final idea I

want to highlight in this series.

Proclaiming Christ in the power of the Spirit

As Paul reviews his ministry, one of the things we learn is that his ministry is about proclaiming the good news of Christ. In verse 19 he says that what he has been doing is fully preaching the gospel of Christ. Throughout Paul's letters and the descriptions of his life, that has been central. We have observed in this series that there are many things that you and I as followers of Christ need to be involved in--loving our world, building one another up in our faith, for instance--but central to who we are and what we do is the proclamation of Jesus. In the process of figuring out our lives as Christians, however, it is so easy for us to forget the centrality of Christ. Over and over and over again Paul reminds us that for him Christ is the center. In 1 Corinthians 2:2, which has meant a great deal to me over my years as a Christian and in ministry, Paul says, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." What motivates him is the desire to proclaim Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to say that he totally relies on the power of the Holy Spirit in this ministry of proclaiming Jesus Christ. He has just said in verse 18, "I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me...." He doesn't emphasize himself. He doesn't brag about how many miles he has traveled on dusty Roman highways, how many thousands he has preached to, how many people have done this or that in his ministry, how many churches he has started. No, he says, "I want to talk only about what Christ has done through me." For Paul is ever aware that none of what he is doing is an exercise in human effort, but it's something that God is doing in and through him. In verse 19 he talks about how he has proclaimed the message of Christ to the Gentiles "in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit." God has done miraculous things through him attesting to the truth of the message that he was preaching, but it has been the Holy Spirit who was energizing his words and his work.

This is good news for you and for me as we think about our task of loving the world as God loves the world. Sometimes we want to elevate Paul to a superhero who was made out of some material that we're not made of. But that's not true. Paul had his ups and downs and fears just as we do. He had to wrestle with problems from time to time. He lived life as an ordinary human being. So what was Paul? He was a man who was passionately in love with Christ and who relied fully on the power of the Holy Spirit working in him. And that is what you and I are called to do as we love the world and proclaim the wonderful message of hope in Christ. We are not left to our own strength, but we are empowered by God's very presence in our lives. For it is the power of the Holy Spirit who energizes us and enables us to live out those things that God has called us to do and be. What a wonderful hope!

Breaking new ground for God's kingdom

The third thing that Paul tells us about as he reviews his ministry, and the final idea I want to highlight in this series, is his constant search for ways to expand the kingdom of God. Paul has the heart of a trailblazer. Observe verses 20-21: "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written,

"They who had no news of Him shall see,
and they who have not heard shall understand."

In these two verses Paul powerfully lays out his vision. He wants to go where Christ has not been named. Naming Christ does not simply mean mentioning his name. It means owning his name, honoring his name for all it's worth. Paul is talking about going where there is not already a community of believers. He wants to go into new places where Christ is not honored, break new ground, and expand the kingdom of God.

That beautiful quote in verse 21 is from Isaiah 52:15b at the beginning of the Suffering Servant song:

"For what had not been told them they will see,
and what they had not heard they will understand."

Just ahead of this verse God says he wants to sprinkle many nations with the message of the Suffering Servant. That is the idea Paul has in mind. He wants to go out and sprinkle the nations with the good news of Christ.

This passage also reveals that Paul is very practical. He has a plan in addition to his heart's desire. He says, "I'm coming to Rome, and although I do want to encourage you and teach you, what I really want to do is set up a base of operation so I can go to Spain and take the gospel to places where no one has gone yet." He thinks strategically and prays about what places God might be leading him where the gospel has never been preached.

What I want us to take away from this is simply that God wants all of us to have the heart of a trailblazer, to ask him, "God, what role can I have in expanding your kingdom?" Paul never quit thinking about that, longing for God to thrust him out into new places. He planned for it, prayed for it, and went for it.

What does that mean for you and for me? On one level it means the same thing it did for Paul. We all must open ourselves up and say, "God, is there some part of your world where Christ is not named, where the light of the truth of the gospel has not gone, where you are calling me to go?" God sent me and my family out into an area of the world that was very different from where I grew up, and I had the privilege of serving him there for a while. God richly blessed those years. God has done that over the years with people in our church, and may continue to call out some from this church who will go to the ends of the earth with the gospel.

But that probably won't be true for most of us, so how might we apply this truth even where we live right now? I can suggest a number of ways.

To begin with, we need to realize that we live in a dark world, even though Christianity has been a part of our culture for most of our nation's history. None of us can look at the environment we live in and honestly say this is a Christian place. We live in a post-Christian nation in which the reality of vital relationship with Christ is becoming less and less honored, and the idea of the need for the transforming grace of God less and less accepted. The ravages of sinfulness have caught up with us in so many ways. A lot of people are hurting. Perhaps you are a student at a university where the name of Christ is not honored. Perhaps you work at a corporation where most if not all of the people you work with day by day do not know the transforming grace of Christ. Perhaps you are one of only a few believers in your family. All around us are areas of our life where there is darkness, and one of the ways you and I need to apply this idea of having the heart of a trailblazer is to pray that God will show us these areas, show us where he wants us to go where Christ is not named, not honored, not known, and give us a heart that never stops asking to whom we can reach out, bring his love, and proclaim his message of forgiveness.

Now I'd like to offer some suggestions on how we can get started on this process we have been talking about throughout this series, of becoming the people God wants us to be. He has called the followers of Christ together as a body, a worshiping community. That's why we come together to praise and honor God, to lift up the name of Christ together, to enjoy the fellowship of God together. So as a worshiping community, what opportunities do we have to fully engage with the things that we have been talking about? There is a path to growth.

Growing together as the body of Christ

To start off, we want to be a welcoming church. New people are coming in all the time; maybe you yourself are relatively new. After the point of initial contact with our church, we want people to get involved, get connected to this community. We want people to move on from simply being welcomed to growing and developing in their faith in Christ, and not just remain babes in Christ, or remain stagnant. We want people to continue to grow in Christ until they are leading in ministry themselves.

Growing has two parts to it. An actively growing Christian first of all needs to be equipped. So we want to be about equipping and discipling and training people in their walk with Christ and in their ministry. But growing in Christ is not just about learning things. Learning, as I have mentioned before in this series, is for a purpose, which is serving. And as the people in this community serve together, they grow more and more mature in Christ.

Let's look at these three areas in a little more detail. Recently I heard a story of someone who came to our church and said they had been here for three months before they ever really got to meet anybody. That's a tragedy! But the

idea of welcoming people is much larger than this. We want to provide entry points for people. Some people are new believers, and some are not believers yet. They are seeking out the message of Christ, and they have questions they'd like to have answered. We want to provide opportunities for new believers to grow and be grounded in their faith, and we want to provide classes or other opportunities for seekers to come and ask their questions and hear about who Christ is. And some who are already Christians and walking with the Lord may have just moved into our area, so we want to have newcomers classes or other opportunities for them to understand who we are and how they can get involved. We are in the process right now of developing curricula and opportunities for all of these things to happen, and some of these things that are already in place are being re-evaluated.

To be a church where people are growing, we need to equip people in Christ. And there are all kinds of opportunities to be equipped here: Sunday School classes, discipleship groups, home fellowship groups, service training in which we help people develop skills for certain kinds of ministry projects, and outreach training in which we provide opportunities for folks to learn better how to share their faith with others. And of course people can be involved in more than one of these.

There are a number of ways for people to begin to serve at our church and thus continue their growth. The Impact ministry is designed to help people connect with others in our body, across generations and demographic groups, in order to find a place of ministry. There are opportunities to help in all kinds of ways from doing practical things to going on missions trips. There are ministries in our church like the worship team and just caring for one another. And we are in the process of brainstorming and praying together about different kinds of outreach events and programs we can have to spread the love of Christ in our community, all of which are opportunities to serve. These are just a few suggestions.

Finally, we want people to move on to become leaders. That doesn't mean holding an office in the church, it just means being able to influence and help other people along in the process. There are many ways we help people become someone out in front leading the way. We have an internship program in which a lot of people have been disciplined and trained in ministry. We encourage people to start their own discipleship groups and home groups. One of the great things about being at this church is that you don't have to wait for someone to tell you what to do. Volunteer to teach a class. Become a visionary and start a ministry. You need to follow the Holy Spirit. When God puts a ministry in your heart to start, we want to help you and equip you, but we encourage *you* to go out and take some risks, trust God, and blaze a trail through new territory for others to follow.

Practical steps

This naturally leads to the question, what do I do about all this? Let me offer some suggestions in four specific areas:

- How to get to know people.
- How to grow in your faith as a follower of Christ.
- How to start serving the body.
- Opportunities to serve in the community and abroad.

How to get to know people: If you are new in this church, look into the home groups. We have a flier that lists contact people if you'd like to get connected with one of those. Second, inquire about life stage ministries--college, young adults, moms, and so on. Finding people who are in the same life stage as you may be a good way for you to get to know people. Ask about opportunities to serve alongside others. And finally, inquire about one of our welcoming classes. We are still developing the seeker and new believer classes, but we do already have a newcomers class. It's a four- or five-week class that will help you get oriented at PBC.

If you've been around for a while, there are additional ways to get to know people. Take time to meet some new people on Sunday morning. Don't just rush in and rush out; look around and introduce yourself to someone. Invite someone new to lunch after church. When Ginger and I first moved to Vienna, in the international church we attended there was a woman who cooked a huge pot of soup every Sunday morning and left it simmering on the stove during church. At church she and her family would find all the newcomers and invite them home for lunch. We got invited when we first started attending there. It was such a creative way to get to know people. You can also

volunteer to be a part of the welcoming team, which we are trying to expand.

How to grow in your faith as a follower of Christ: Inquire about how to get involved in a discipleship group. Ask about getting involved in a home group. Inquire about the life stage ministries. Almost all of these ministries have discipleship components. Check out some of the Sunday morning classes and midweek meetings, such as the women's Bible studies or the men's breakfast. There are all kinds of opportunities for you to grow in your faith.

How to start serving in the body: Keep an eye on the Needs section of the bulletin each Sunday. Perhaps you can meet some of those needs. That's a great way to start serving here. Inquire about how to assist our deacons, a wonderful group of people who are involved in meeting needs in their respective communities. Find out who they are and ask how you can help in your own community. Tell one of the pastors or elders or someone you know in leadership that you want to get involved; we can help you. Inquire about helping with one of our ministries, all of which are always needing people. There are all kinds of opportunities out there in the children's, junior high, and senior high ministries, as well as the worship team, greeters, ushers, and food service, to name a few.

Opportunities to serve in the community and abroad: Invest in a friend, a neighbor, or a co-worker. Sometimes we think we need to be involved in some sort of formal ministry, when what God is really calling us to do is just share the love of Christ with our neighbors and the people in our family. Or find out about the Impact ministry. There are all kinds of opportunities for you to get involved in our community and abroad: Green Pastures, Crisis Pregnancy Centers, the R&R Ministry, New Creation Home. Inquire about missions trips. PBC is involved more and more in missions opportunities. Finally, start a ministry! Follow the Holy Spirit and reach out.

In Acts 2:44-47 there is a wonderful description of the early church. It tells us they were devoted to the teaching of the apostles. They shared everything together. They prayed together. They worshiped together. They cared for one another. And what happened? The Lord added to the church daily. There were people coming to Christ all the time. This is what we want to pray for God to do in our midst.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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