

BREAKING NEW GROUND

By SCOTT GRANT

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam set out on a mission to save the Shire, their home. As the two friends are leaving, Sam suddenly stops.

“This is it,” he says.

“This is what?” Frodo answers.

“If I take one more step, it will be the farthest away from home I’ve ever been.”

Frodo puts his arm around his friend and says, “Come on, Sam.”

Then the two resume their journey. In order to save the Shire, the two hobbits had to enter new territory. Their journey would take them farther away from home than they had ever imagined. The story is powerful on many levels, but if the two friends shrink back, there’s no story. They must break new ground.

As individuals and as a church, we might ask ourselves: Does this story attract us? If it does, then we should find ourselves drawn to Romans 15:14-33 as well. There we read that the apostle Paul wants to break new ground and that he wants the Roman church to join him in his venture. Indeed, for Paul’s dreams to be realized, he needs the church to dream with him. Entering unknown territory, however, means facing unknown dangers, as Frodo and Sam’s fellow hobbit Bilbo observes: “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.”¹

Romans 15:14-33:

¹⁴And 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. ¹⁵But 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, ¹⁶to 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. ¹⁷Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. ¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹in 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. ²⁰And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation; ²¹but as it is written,

“THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE,
AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND.”

²²For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; ²³but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you ²⁴whenever 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—

²⁵but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. ²⁶For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷Yes, 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. ²⁸Therefore, 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. ²⁹I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. ³⁰Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, ³¹that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; ³²so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. ³³Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

Paul the dreamer

Since Romans 12, Paul has urged his readers to be “good” in their dealings with the surrounding world and more particularly in their dealings with each other. Now he almost apologizes for such instruction, acknowledging his conviction that the Roman believers are full of goodness. Their minds are being renewed by the Holy Spirit so that they are able to obey the will of God, which is good (Romans 12:1-2). As such, they have the knowledge they need to instruct each other concerning acceptance of one another despite cultural differences.

Nevertheless, Paul felt it necessary to impart to the Romans his understanding of both the gospel and its implications, boldly challenging Jews and Gentiles to love each other and glorify God together. He sees this letter as congruent with his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, not only because the Roman church is mostly Gentile but also because the letter is preparing the way for him to take the gospel to Gentiles in Spain. He serves among the Gentiles so that he, like a priest, might offer them to God and that they might be deemed acceptable in view of the presence of the Holy Spirit among them.²

Paul can boast “in things pertaining to God,” which concern his priestly ministry to the Gentiles (Hebrews 2:17). His bold letter will only be received if its recipients believe it was authored by an authentic apostle, particularly inasmuch as he didn’t plant the Roman church. Paul needs to be, in a sense, boastful, claiming to speak and minister with the authority of God. He won’t, however, boast of anything he’s accomplished, only of what Christ has accomplished through him. Moreover, he’s only concerned with accomplishments that mark him out as an apostle to the Gentiles so that he may win a hearing with the Romans and their support for his ministry. The “boasting” we do must only concern what Christ has accomplished through us in order to win a hearing for Christ. Paul’s Spirit-empowered preaching of the gospel, authenticated through signs and wonders such as healings, has won Gentile converts throughout the eastern Mediterranean, so much so that he believes his work in that region is finished.³

In the interest of the expansion of the gospel, he has aspired to preach and plant churches only where Christ is not recognized as Lord. Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song, which has informed Paul’s understanding of the gospel, has also nurtured his understanding of his ministry: He wants those who haven’t heard of Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, to believe in him (Isaiah 52:15). He also wants the Romans to recognize that his ministry has biblical support.

Paul's new dream: Spain

Paul has not yet visited Rome because Christ is already named there. Now that he has finished his work in the eastern Mediterranean, he envisions visiting Rome on his way to Spain. He hopes to enlist the support of the Roman believers for his ministry to Spain and to find rest in their presence. Paul apparently hopes that the Roman church will serve as his base for ministry in the west just as Antioch served as his base in the east. In this letter, he has carefully presented his understanding of the gospel in order to unite the church under the lordship of Christ. If the Roman believers sanction ethnic division, they haven't embraced the implications of the gospel, and they will be in no position to support Paul in his ministry to the western Mediterranean. In fact, they may well find themselves in disagreement with Paul.

However, there remains one crucial task in the east. Gentile believers in Macedonia and Achaia have made a contribution to relieve the suffering of poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. When Paul began sharing the gospel with Gentiles, leaders in Jerusalem asked him to be considerate of poor Jewish believers (Galatians 2:10). Paul, being eager to comply, is carrying the Gentile contribution with him to Jerusalem. Gentiles have contributed in appreciation for the Jewish origination of the gospel. Gentiles who recognized that they are "indebted" to Jewish believers and who make a contribution on their behalf are fulfilling Paul's words in Romans 13:8: "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another, for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." Only after completing his God-ordained work in the east would Paul then be able to visit the Romans "in the fullness of the blessing of Christ."

If we are rich, and most of us are rich by the world's standards, we must find ways to express our solidarity with believers who are poor. How we spend our money, of course, says something about what we value—and whether we value the poor of the earth.

The task of delivering the contribution to Jerusalem is fraught with peril. Both Paul and the gospel are at risk. Paul draws on the prayers of the Roman believers and invokes the Father, Son and Spirit. Some "disobedient," or unbelieving, Jews want to silence Paul for preaching Jesus as the Messiah. Also, it's also an open question whether the Jewish believers will accept the contribution of Gentiles. Accepting the Gentile contribution would mean accepting the Gentiles themselves. For Paul, such acceptance would signal the unity of Jews and Gentiles under the lordship of Christ. It would also mean that Paul would come to the Romans in joy for the success of both his mission and their prayers. Paul's passion for the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ reminds us, once again, of the importance of unity in our own setting.

As it turned out, Paul's appearance in Jerusalem caused such a riot among the Jews that the Roman authorities arrested him. Yes, God delivered him from those who were disobedient in Jerusalem, and yes, he would come to Rome, but not for three more years, and under armed guard (Acts 21-28). Paul must have wondered what kind of reception he would receive from the church in Rome after writing his "bold" letter. When the believers heard that he was on his way, a number of them set out to greet him, some traveling more than 40 miles to do so. Suffice it to say that the sight of his brothers in Christ on that day filled him with joy (Acts 28:15). Did the Jewish believers in Jerusalem accept the contribution? We don't know. Did Paul ever make it to Spain? Again, we don't know. We do know, however, that he lived adventurously.

Breaking new ground as an individual

Paul “aspired” to something. We might ask ourselves what we, as individuals, aspire to. As we see in this passage, the scriptures played an important role in forming his aspirations. Where do your God-inspired dreams come from? We would do well to let the scriptures shape our aspirations. If the scriptures give shape to your dreams, you will know, in times of doubt, that they have biblical support. Often, God speaks to us through particular passages when they activate deep desires.

Two verses, in particular, have shaped me vocationally. The first is Mark 6:34: “When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.” This verse first got my attention when I visited Bulgaria in 1992 and met so many people who loved God but didn’t know his word. There have been times since then when I think I should be less devoted to studying the scriptures and more devoted to other needs, but this verse reminds me that teaching the scriptures is a ministry of compassion. The other verse is 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” This verse resonates with how I want to teach the scriptures. I want to do so in a way that reveals God’s glory in the person of Christ. Both of these verses have shaped my aspirations and have anchored me in my vocation.

None of us is called to be Paul. Indeed, none of us is called to be exactly like anyone else. Nevertheless, we should be able to relate to him a general sense, in his desire to follow Jesus, and perhaps we can relate to him in specific ways as well. Just as Isaiah shaped Paul’s aspirations, perhaps Romans 15:14-33 can shape our aspirations.

Paul was a Jew, but God turned him into the apostle of the Gentiles. Is there something in you that wants to break out of some comfortable enclave, be it ethnic, generational or vocational? If you find yourself being involved only with people who are like you, you may want to consider whether God is calling you, like Paul, to break out of that box. At first, Paul thought it best that he preach among his countrymen, but the Lord told him, “Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21). Is God telling you to “go” in some way as well? I don’t speak with the authority of the Lord, but I often tell young adults in this church, in so many words, “Go, for I will send you far away to the children’s and youth ministries!” They not only get stretched in these ministries, they also get more involved with their church.

God called Paul to be a pioneer. Likewise, he calls some today to be pioneers. He also calls some to take the gospel to places where Christ isn’t named and to plant churches where there are none. At the very least, however, Paul’s story should inspire us to break new ground in our own lives. Do you feel that life has become a little too predictable? Maybe some of us have grown too comfortable with following Jesus in the Silicon Valley. Is there something within you that wants to live at least a little more adventurously? Is there something new that God would have you do for him? Maybe it feels a little risky and a little beyond your capacity. Breaking new ground will sometimes require us to explore the dark territory of our own hearts, where wounds fester and fears reside.

Paul’s life was in constant danger, but he deemed the gospel worth the risk. God sent him out with a dangerous and preposterous message: that an apparently insignificant

Jew had been raised from the dead and was now Lord of the world. The task was beyond Paul, but not beyond God, who accompanied the message with signs and wonders. Whatever you try, and wherever you go, God will be with you. If you supply the faith, he'll supply the power. He'll even help you with the faith part, too. A desperate father told Jesus, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Jesus helped him.

Maybe we don't know God well because we don't find ourselves in places where we need him. Paul knew he needed God because he walked a dangerous path where the chances for survival and success were nil apart from the protection and power of the Holy Spirit. Living more adventurously might persuade us to draw near to God, depend on him and see him in new ways.

Maybe we don't know our brothers and sisters in Christ well because we don't find ourselves in places where we need them. Paul knew that he couldn't walk the path that God called him to alone. He needed others to support him, pray for him and travel with him. He wrote the letter to Romans because he needed their support and their friendship for his mission to Spain. Living more adventurously might bring about deeper and new relationships as we discover not just that we want to know people but that we need to know people. If you decide to embark on a new and risky path, enlist some people who will support you and pray for you. These brothers and sisters will be for you a base and a place of rest.

In thinking about breaking new ground, we must also be concerned with finishing what we've started. If you have the sense that God is calling you to do something, keep doing it until you have the sense that he's called you to stop doing it. Paul had God-ordained work to do in the western Mediterranean. He dreamed of planting the gospel elsewhere, but he wasn't going to leave for Spain until the work was finished. When we start something new we want to do so "in the fullness of the blessing of Christ."

It is worth noting that Paul didn't envision Rome, the seat of worldly power and the most important city in his world, as a destination but as a stopping-off point. Paul knew what he was about: preaching the gospel where Christ hadn't been named. That meant, at a certain point in his life, heading for the backwaters of the empire. His ego didn't need the big city or its bright lights. Praise God that he calls some to high-profile positions. Let's just make sure we're listening to God and not to our egos. Let's also be aware that if we make it to the big time, so to speak, the bright lights can melt the best intentions.

So maybe you dream about following Jesus on a new path. Maybe you take steps down this new path. But things don't turn out the way you envisioned them. Maybe the dream turns into a nightmare. Paul dreamed of going to Rome that he might go to Spain, but he only made it to Rome under armed guard, and there's no evidence that he ever made it to Spain. By all appearances, the dream collapsed. Was he wrong to dream it? Because he dreamed of Spain, he wrote a letter to Rome. We don't know what happened to the dream of Spain, but we know what happened to the letter to Rome. It made its way to Spain, where people are poring over it today. It made its way all around the world. It may be the most influential letter ever written. If your dream turns into a nightmare, it doesn't necessarily mean you were wrong to dream it. Simply following it may be the thing God uses for his glory in a way that you couldn't have imagined. If you have a strong sense of what God wants you to do, praise him for it. But don't think that you can even begin to know the glory he will bring to his name through you.

In all this, however, you may be wondering what you have to offer. If it seems hidden from you, perhaps it's hidden by your fears but findable in your past. I can see, in surveying the years of my youth, that God meant me to work with words. In particular, I remember a story I wrote in first grade that the teacher and my parents praised. Listen to Emmet Fox:

But how is one to find his true place in life? Is there any means whereby you may discover what it really is that God wishes you to do? You may feel inclined to say: "Even if it be true that God has some splendid thing that he wishes me to do, and to be, how can I possibly find out what it is?" Perhaps you may even be tempted to add: "I am a very plain everyday sort of person; my circumstances are extremely restricted; the conditions of my life are just drab commonplace. How then can there be something wonderful, beautiful, splendid awaiting me? Or, even if there were, how could I possibly get to know it?" And the answer is Divinely simple—Already in your past life from time to time, God himself has whispered into your heart just that wonderful thing, whatever it is, that he is wishing you to be, and to do, and to have. And that wonderful thing is nothing less than what is called Your Heart's Desire. Nothing less than that. The most secret, sacred wish that lies deep down at the bottom of your heart, the wonderful thing that you hardly dare to look at, or to think about—the thing that you would rather die than have anyone else know of, because it seems so far beyond anything that you are, or have at the present time, that you fear that you would be cruelly ridiculed if the mere thought of it were known—that is just the very thing that God is wishing you to do or to be for him. And the birth of that marvelous wish in your soul—the dawning of that secret dream—was the Voice of God himself telling you to arise and come up higher because he had need of you.⁴

God isn't asking you to do something that's completely alien to you. He's not asking you to be a Martian. He's asking you to be you. And it takes courage to be you, to answer God's call, when those around you have different expectations for you. For many of us, breaking new ground means being ourselves. The prospect of striking out in a new direction seems so intimidating that many of us remain paralyzed. To counteract fears, take a small, non-threatening step in a new direction. One small step makes it easier to take another small step. Before you know it, you're moving in a new direction. In *The Lord of the Rings*, it became easier for Sam to move forward after he took a small step into new territory.

Breaking new ground as a church

As a church, what do we aspire to? Just as the scriptures formed Paul's individual aspirations, the scriptures must form our collective aspirations as well. God has spoken powerfully through the scriptures in the history of this church. We must keep searching the scriptures and keep listening for his voice that we might hear him speak to us today. Biblical exegesis is at the heart of what it means to listen to God. Let us never conclude that we have heard everything that God has to say to this church through the scriptures. The word of God doesn't change, but it's also alive. The times change, so God speaks

distinctively in different eras through his unchanging word. If we won't let him speak to us in fresh ways, our relationship with him as a church will grow stale. Today is not yesterday. So, we keep digging into the scriptures here. Lord, please speak to us today!

Paul almost apologized for writing "very boldly" on "some points" to people who were able to instruct each other. If I have preached boldly on some points, it's because I have endeavored to faithfully relate Paul's words to our church. The scriptures not only comfort us, they challenge us. Just like the Roman church, however, you are "full of goodness" and "filled with all knowledge." Your minds are being renewed by the Holy Spirit so that you are able to receive God's word and instruct each other. I know you're able to do this because many of you have instructed and challenged me.

God has spoken powerfully through Paul's letter to the Romans for almost two millennia. Has God spoken through Romans to Peninsula Bible Church in 2007? How might we respond to Paul's challenging words? Most importantly, I believe we must unite under the lordship of Christ, accept one another and glorify God together. We must unite so that we're able to follow our Lord wherever he leads. Paul hoped for unity in the Roman church so that it could send him out with the gospel. Unity in itself glorifies God, but it also helps the church think beyond itself. Perhaps, through the book of Romans, the Lord is calling us as a church to think beyond ourselves and bring to the world the good news that Jesus is Lord.

If the Lord called Paul to break new ground, would he call us as a church to break new ground? If the Lord called Paul to live adventurously, would he call us as a church to live adventurously?

At the very least, we can support individuals in our midst who are committed to bringing the good news to the world. We can nurture dreamers like Paul. As a church, we support 20 missionaries. If you are not doing so already, consider supporting at least one of our missionaries with your prayers and finances. Whether these folks are ministering locally or in far-off places, they are on the front lines in the battle for hearts and minds. Just as Paul needed the Roman church, they need our church. Let's be a church that both raises up and supports individuals to take the gospel to the world, both across the street and around the world.

Chrissy Tsai, one of our missionaries, is a dreamer who was nurtured here. Not long after she graduated from college, she began dreaming of East Asia. Here's what she says about what the support this church means to her:

Without the prayers and financial support of my PBC family, I could never have come here to East Asia as well as be sustained here. PBC was the church family in which my spiritual life started sprouting up—the family that sent me out on my first summer project in '98, then for my two years as a short-term volunteer and finally as full-time staff with Campus Crusade for Christ as a long-term overseas. You can't imagine the trepidation and uncertainty when I was just starting out, and still God kept moving me up another notch in commitment (and my financial support goal). But at every stage, through various people and small groups at PBC, I was able to see God come through utterly faithfully. I have seen the body—my family—at work, just as he designed it. And while I have been on the field, where the task is far too big, prayers and encouragement through e-mail have had a significant part in sustaining me here and helping to fight the battle. There have been certain days and moments when I just knew someone was

praying for me and God's work. When I think of the prayers and support that have been given, I thank the Lord and pray in turn that he would shower his blessings and love on you.

We need each other

As an individual who was following the Lord, Paul couldn't thrive without the church. As individuals, we can't thrive without the church. If we want to follow the Lord, we need the support of a spiritual community. It is also true, of course, that the church can't thrive without individuals who are growing, following Jesus and inspiring the rest of us. Individuals need the church, and the church needs individuals. Paul in Romans 15:14-32 showcases the symbiotic relationship between the individual and the church.

Remember *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo and Sam had to make an impossible trek to throw a ring with seductive powers into the fires of Mount Doom. To succeed, they needed each other. Furthermore, their relationship deepened because they needed each other. Frodo looks like he's the hero, but it becomes increasingly clear that he needs his buddy Sam. The ring is Frodo's to carry, but he's too weary to make the final assault on Mount Doom. It looks as if their journey has come to an end only paces from the finish. Earlier, when they first set out, Frodo told his hesitant friend, "Come on, Sam." Back then, Sam needed Frodo. Now Frodo needs Sam. So Sam musters up his last ounce of strength and says to an exhausted Frodo, "I can't carry the ring for you, but I can carry you." He puts Frodo on his back and carries him up the mountain.⁵

Boise State, a small school, was matched against perennial power Oklahoma in this year's Fiesta Bow. Facing fourth-down-and-18 near the end of the game and needing a first down to stay in the game, Boise State eschewed going for a first down and instead tried for a touchdown with a risky, rarely used "hook-and-ladder" play. Amazingly, it worked, sending the game into overtime. Trailing by a touchdown in overtime and facing fourth down again, the team tried another risky play, the rarely used halfback option. A running back, not the quarterback, completed a pass for a touchdown, and not to a sure-handed receiver but to a lineman, catching Oklahoma by surprise again. Instead of going for the easy one-point conversion, which would have tied the game again, Boise State went for the more difficult two-point conversion. If Boise State scores, it wins the game. If it fails, it loses. The team tried another risky play, a never-before-seen variant of the archaic, never-used-anymore "Statue of Liberty" play. It worked, ending one of the most exciting college football games ever. Still, the excitement wasn't over. After all, there are more important things than a football game. After the game, Ian Johnson, the player that scored the winning points, went to sidelines and proposed to his girlfriend, one of the cheerleaders. She said yes, of course.

Every once in a while, you have to take a shot at the end zone. In other words, let's trust the Holy Spirit that we might break new ground.

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¹ *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, © MMIII by New Line Productions.

² Paul may have in mind Isaiah 66:18-20, which predicted that God would send some Jews to the nations, including Tarshish (Spain), who would be offered up to the Lord.

³ God’s “signs and wonders” through Moses helped liberate Israel from Egypt, a Gentile nation (Exodus 7:3). Now God’s signs and wonders through Paul are helping to liberate the Gentiles from sin and death.

⁴ Emmet Fox, *Your Heart’s Desire*, 1961, DeVors & Co. Publishers.

⁵ *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, © MMIII by New Line Productions.