

Romans 15:23-33 A vision for future mission

Introduction

Christians can have a problem sometimes in knowing how best to plan their lives in accordance with the revealed will of God. There are some ultra-spiritual people who want direct revelation for the minutiae of daily life. A person whom I knew briefly a number of years ago, but unknown to any of this congregation, took such an approach; He struggled to hold down a job loosing each one he got with a few weeks. On one occasion while working in the building trade he was on a site with others working on the outside of a particular building some on the ground level and others one floor up on scaffolding. The boss asked him to go up the ladder to the first floor to work this particular day but a little time later found him still at the bottom of the ladder praying for guidance from God as to whether this was the right way to go! Now it is easy to say this is missing the point. We recognise that in the ordinary affairs of life God expects us to use our common sense. If you were asked to do something that appeared to be illegal or unethical then you might be wise, graciously, to ask for clarification as to what was appropriate in that context. However, in our choices in our every day lives there are many decisions we have to plan carefully, sometimes at the time and on other occasions quite a while in advance.

In the Lord's work there are believers who are convinced that planning ahead of time is restricting the Holy Spirit from directing His people in our witness for Him. I have still to grasp why this is the case when God is One who knows the end from the beginning and everything in between! God is a God who has planned out world history not least with reference to the salvation of His people and the first and second comings of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Therefore, if God draws up plans for future years it is perfectly rational to assume that He can direct His people to do the same. This will never mean that plans do not change in the light of new information but it is far better to operate with the best plans we can produce and go forward with them until it becomes clear that a change of emphasis is required. In this passage of Scripture Paul is setting out the plans he has for the next few years of his ministry. If he is a free man and events unfold as he expects then this is the plan of action over a good part of the next decade of his life. We know from our reading of other parts of the Bible that this was not how things worked out, but the factors involved in preventing Paul from carrying out some of the things he had hoped to do were outside his control. Some times the changes outside our control are frustrating and we wonder why Lord did you allow things to take place (or not take place) in this way? However, the general principle by which we live as Christians is to go forward with the information and plans we believe God has guided us to follow until He reveals to us a new direction in which to go. Paul certainly had that on a mission trip in his native Turkey, recorded in Acts 16:6-10: *Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* In the life of Paul we see very clearly an individual who carefully planned out his time to be as productive as possible in the work to which God had called him. Yet as here in this example recorded in Acts 16 he was willing to change course when God prompted him to make significant changes. This it is reasonable to assume is a helpful course of action for us all to follow as we serve Him too in our generation. What were Paul's plans? What was he intending to do in the late 50sAD?

1. His plans to visit Rome (Romans 15:23-24)

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to visit you,²⁴ I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and that you will assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

(a) **Work completed (Romans 15:23a)** *But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions...* It is astonishing to us to grasp just how much Paul had accomplished in the first twenty years of his Christian service. His clear vision as a pioneering missionary church planter was to establish congregations in the major towns and cities of each province of the Roman Empire and then expect the newly constituted congregation to take responsibility for evangelism and future church planting in that district of Turkey, for example. His conclusion was that this initial project working through Syria, Turkey and Greece, parts of Albania and what used to be called the southern parts of former Yugoslavia had been completed. There is an appropriate time for marking our successes and those of other people. There are milestones in our personal lives, birthdays and anniversaries, for example, but also those in a congregation's life or that of a family of churches. One of the monuments I have visited before in Geneva is the 100 yard long Memorial to the Protestant Reformation, in particular that associated with the Reformed Churches and the associated moves towards more democratic forms of governance. This magnificent spectacle was erected in 1929. It recognises individuals from not just Switzerland, but also England and Scotland, Hungary and the United States of America. There is a place for pausing and saying thank you to God for what each of us individually and collectively has accomplished. I thank God for those who have faithfully served in past days in this church to enable us to enjoy the blessings we are experiencing today. We in turn will have a duty to pass on a legacy and a spiritual heritage to the younger people in our midst and others who will join them to serve the Lord here when we have passed on.

(b) **Work desired (Romans 15:23b)** *...I have been longing for many years to visit you...* This is not a recent thing but a settled conviction in his heart. In Romans 1:8-13 he wrote: *First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.⁹ God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you¹⁰ in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.¹¹ I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong –¹² that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.* Each one of us have things we desire to do. We may even be convinced that they are God-given desires that other people have confirmed –but yet something prevents them taking place. It can be very frustrating. For example, for our teenagers coming to the end of High School and not getting a place at university for their preferred subject; it may be that you have been frustrated in applying for a promotion at work or looking to change employment, but the interviews do not produce the desired outcome. Even though in our heads we know that a place or a job may be someone else's to lose rather than ours to gain – it does not take away the sense of frustration and disappointment. It can happen in church life when we collectively pray about a planning outcome for building alterations for premises or some particular ministry issue but things appear to hit the proverbial 'brick wall'! If that is a place where you are right now or have been then 'join the club' because most if not all of us will be there at some time or other. If it happened to Paul and other more prominent Christian leaders then it can certainly happen to you and me! We must not however assume that there is necessarily something wrong with us or our application or our prayers that prevented something taking place- though that might be the case. It may be that God has something better in store for us but it has not yet been

revealed to us. It may be that it is a request God will grant later, but the circumstances are not yet right at the present time, for factors unknown to us. Or it may be that something we had set our hearts on was not for us and God spared us a great deal of heartache and disappointment by closing the door in front of us. My late father-in-law who was a highly qualified man in a number of fields applied for a College Principal's post in the institution where he worked. There was no doubt that he was the best qualified applicant of the few who sought the post. A colleague significantly his junior and less experienced was given the job. The information put out at the time of the appointment was that it was a great job with significant new opportunities to take up in the next few years. Actually it came to light that this was completely untrue. It was, on the contrary, a time of rationalisation. Budgets were to be cut. Colleagues with whom one had worked were to be told their jobs were being axed or even departments closed. Once the truth came out some months later he thanked God that he was unsuccessful with the job application. However, although in that situation the whole truth was revealed, in many other life situations we never get a clear picture of what was really going on. Is there something you need to bring to the Lord and allow Him to help you let go of some disappointment or handle your frustration at how something has not worked out for you? God knows what is on our hearts and we have to bring things to Him and trust Him to bring things to pass in His time –assuming we have done all we ought to have done as well!

(c) **Work being planned** (Romans 15:24) *I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to see you while passing through and that you will assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.* (i) **Paul's vision** Now he was looking westwards towards Italy and Spain. His intentions were not to work in Italy where other Christians had started new congregations but to go on further to Spain where Christian witness had yet to begin. Paul did not need to go to Spain via Rome. Both then and now there were quicker and more direct routes! We will never know if Paul made it to Spain. If as it is assumed by most biblical scholars that he never made it there it is still not wrong to have such an ambition –in his case to take the Gospel to Spain. If we aim low or to do nothing then we can be sure of hitting the target! But there will be no sense of accomplishment. It is far better to aim a little too high and achieve some of what we intended to do than to settle for less and have lesser accomplishments. In the Christian Church we need people who will dream dreams or have visions of what might be accomplished for God. As Baptists no-one stands out so clearly on this matter as William Carey and his passion for fulfilling the Great Commission. What a battle he had to convince other Baptists and other Evangelical Christians that this was a duty for all believers until Jesus comes again. Others went before him to the mission field even to India, but it was the Serampore Mission of Carey and his colleagues that captured the imagination of Bible believing Christians across the spectrum of Protestant Churches in the United Kingdom in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. What dreams, what hopes, what aspirations do you and I have for the work here on the two sites we own in Broughty Ferry? Will you commit to keep praying to see those visions realised? Will you keep working to see them come to pass? Its form may ultimately be very different to what anyone of us had envisaged, but that is okay as it is God's work that is being done not ours. (ii) **Paul's hope** *...that you will assist me on my journey there...* Mission work costs money. The apostle is upfront in saying that he hopes this local congregation will serve as the sponsors of the mission to Spain. Paul has never been to Rome and may have met only a few if any of the current congregation there. His letter to this Church was his means of introduction to them. God has used it to be so much more over the centuries! He also hoped to get to know them and encourage this young congregation in the Lord's work. For Paul home mission and overseas mission were two sides of the same coin. We are in this together. He knew that this was a strategically important congregation at the centre of the Roman Empire and wanted to help them grasp a vision for world mission, not just within their local area. How thrilled Paul will be in heaven

to hear how others in successive generations have taken on the responsibilities he carried in the first generation of the Christian Church. We must always remember that our smaller contribution is part of something so much bigger than we ever envisaged for the Lord. Do you need to stop and reflect on that?

2. His plans to visit Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-27)

(a) His current task (Romans 15:25) *Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. One of our core Baptist convictions is both the autonomy and interdependence of local congregations. That is, each local church is responsible under God for conducting its own affairs; yet we are accountable to sister congregations to serve the Lord together at home and abroad to extend His kingdom. In the New Testament churches like that at Corinth that wished to do their own thing with no regard for other causes around them were not commended. Paul had to remind the wealthy Corinthians about their responsibilities for Christians in need in other places. He wrote these words in I Corinthians 16:1-4: Now about the collection for the Lord's people: do what I told the Galatian churches to do.² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.³ Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.⁴ If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.* Paul never lost sight of the wider work and witness in the First Century Church. In his earliest years in service he was hot-headed and it must have taken a lot of grace on Barnabas' part to help him see the bigger picture and how we work out a gospel of grace. We might ask where did this vision for sharing with the most needy come from? It was intrinsic to their faith and practice in the Jerusalem Church. In Acts 4:32-36 it states: *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all³⁴ that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'),³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.* Then some years later the Antioch congregation heard of a famine in Judea. Luke records their response in Acts 11:27-30: *During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea.³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.* Our practice of aid appeals at particular times of crisis, like the one this month for Nepal following the earthquake is something that is intrinsic to the gospel. We share because it is a natural part of the D.N.A. of Christian discipleship.

(b) His mission partners (Romans 15:26) *For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem.* If the Corinthians had little thought for their fellow believers in need, the exact opposite was true of the Christians in Macedonia. What a vision they had for mission. They had little in the way of material resources, but even out of that minimal amount they were committed to supporting work in other parts of their own country and beyond. We are rightly convinced of the need to support the Scottish Baptist Fund, the home mission fund that supports a variety of mission and ministry projects at home and overseas, together with our mission partners overseas, including the Baptist Missionary Society. What a witness these Philippian Christians were. Paul wrote: *Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and*

receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough (Philippians 4:15-18). The world has changed in many ways culturally and in matters of technology, but the core Christian values and convictions we profess will never change –if we are faithful to the Lord we claim to follow.

(c) **A biblical principle** (Romans 15:27) *They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.* Now Paul has spoken about giving to needy brothers and sisters in general, but now goes beyond it to make a specific point with respect to the importance of Jewish mission. One of the real blessings of the Evangelical Revival in the Nineteenth Century was a transformation in our attitudes to the Jewish people. For the best part of fifteen hundred years, with a limited number of glorious exceptions such as Oliver Cromwell and some of the Puritans and early Nonconformist Christians the attitude of Christians to the Jews was racist and was based too often on religious hatred. The contrast between what the Bible teaches on this subject and what was being lived out was a vast gulf. Once more key Protestant and Evangelical leaders rediscovered the holistic biblical Gospel that included a love for the Jewish people and a love that included sharing the good news of Jesus with them in a gracious Christ-like manner. They also grasped as Paul teaches in Romans 9-11 that God has not finished with the nation of Israel, with the Jewish people as a whole. It was these key Christian leaders and Christian politicians of similar convictions that led to the Balfour declaration of 1917 in which the historic declaration was made of support for a Jewish homeland, which finally became a reality in 1948. The total number of Jews in the world is small, not just because of the holocaust, though that was part of it. However, we have a duty, Paul reminds us, to give to work amongst the Jewish people. We have been supporting **Christian Witness to Israel** for some years, an agency that has consistently maintained clear biblical standards in this matter. Then and now the same principles apply in sharing in this case with the people from whom the Gospel first came, 2000 years ago.

3. **His plans to visit Spain** (Romans 15:28-29)

²⁸ *So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this contribution, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way.* ²⁹ *I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.* From Old Testament times the trade route to Western Europe from the Middle East was by ship from Tyre in modern-day Lebanon. The Phoenicians from Tyre had established a colony at Cadiz in Spain many centuries before the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Colonists from Carthage (modern-day Tunisia) as early as the Third Century BC founded New Carthage on the Spanish coast, but by the late Third Century BC the Romans under their north African general Scipio Africanus had taken over all these colonies so that by the time of Emperor Caesar Augustus a significant proportion of modern day Spain was thoroughly Romanised in culture [C. Cranfield, *Romans*, Vol.2, pp. 768-769]. In the same way as British Protestant missionaries in the second half of the Nineteenth Century viewed the expansion of the British Empire as an opportunity to take the Gospel into new places with easier travel greatly diminished security risks so it is likely Paul saw the expansion of the Roman Empire in the same way. In fact for much of the first half of the Nineteenth Century the key figures in the British establishment strongly resisted missionaries going into their overseas territories because they were concerned that the missionaries might challenge some of the ways they were treating the native populations. Certainly Rome was ambivalent at best to the Early Christian missionaries like Paul, a citizen –which was crucial, but on occasions and certainly by the end of the First Century AD had become decidedly hostile to the small but growing Christian movement. The Christian missionaries had the best part of fifty years

to travel with the good news of Jesus around the Empire before the serious, as opposed to sporadic, waves of persecution began. It was about taking opportunities when they come. In our generation 1989 saw the collapse of the Iron Curtain which provided freedom to travel and greater liberties in many countries than had been known for generations. It was in the light of these new opportunities that the European Baptist Federation set up the Indigenous Missions Project to fund church-planting efforts throughout eastern Europe and other former Soviet Republics. The same principle applies to home as well as overseas mission. We have to take opportunities as they arise because we might not get them again. Paul had a vision for mission seeing the potential opportunities for evangelism in the Roman Empire better than anyone else of his generation. Johann Gerhard Oncken, the equivalent of Charles Spurgeon amongst European Baptists in the Nineteenth Century, had a similar approach to evangelism as Paul and his mission teams. From barely a dozen individuals at the start in Hamburg the people he led to Christ and trained as missionary church-planters went all over Europe and Scandinavia establishing churches so that by the time he died their numbers had risen to around 100,000 committed disciples of Jesus and a generation later to approximately one million. Then and now it is essential to plan ahead for what might be accomplished for the sake of Christ both in our community and in places further away at home and overseas. A Christ centred people will have a passion for making Jesus known and taking His wonderful Gospel to those who need to hear it.

4. **His plea for prayer support for his work** (Romans 15:30-33)

(a) **The principle** (Romans 15:30)³⁰ *I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.* Praying for one another in all kinds of mission work is a red line issue for us. There are many places around the world where we will never go except through prayer. It is easier to pray for work at home and for individuals we can see, but please may we never neglect to pray both in public and in private for both our link missionaries and other missionaries and their societies overseas.

(b) **Pray specifically where possible** (Romans 15:31-32)³¹ *Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favourably received by the Lord's people there,*³² *so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed.*³³ *The God of peace be with you all. Amen.* Paul's letters, in a number of cases, in the first instance, might be seen as missionary news and prayer letters encouraging people to be faithful in their belief and practice wherever they may be; to join in prayer for him and his co-workers on the front line of new mission fields. May God help us to do our part in prayer and in service as we seek and then implement the vision for future mission they Lord may lay on our hearts for the communities amongst whom we work, for Jesus' sake Amen,