

Real gospel passion

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to read from verse 14, right through to the end of the chapter, but our verses this morning, really our verses 14 to 24. Before the summer we concluded the first half of chapter 15, that final section of application of the gospel in chapters 14 and 15, which really ends the main exposition of the epistle.

We're now back to what I call the letter envelope. Remember right at the very beginning, the opening verses in chapter 1, and these final verses are like the brackets that hold the main, or the bits of bread, if you like, that hold the main meat of the sandwich of the letter to the Romans.

And as always, it's in that beginning and end that so often you get the purpose of writing and some of the specific detail that helps us to see just the relevance of this letter for the church there in Rome, and therefore for the church here today.

So verse 14 then of chapter 15, Paul says, I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled or fulfilled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

But, on some points, I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given to me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable or well-pleasing, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 3 4] In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud, to boast of my work for God, for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, to bring the Gentiles, the nations, to obedience by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have fulfilled, literally it just says, I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ.

And thus, I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, those who have never been told of him will see, those who have never heard will understand.

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you, in passing, as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

Present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it.

Indeed, they owe it to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed all this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

[3 : 1 2] I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.

May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Amen. May God bless his word to us. Well, turn with me, if you would, to the passage we read there in Romans chapter 15, page 949 in the Church Bibles.

And this last little section of the book where it seems to me Paul is speaking very clearly to the Church about a calling that is shaped by grace.

And in these particular verses, focusing on what it means to share real gospel passion, a church that shares the real gospel passion of the apostle himself.

Coming back to our studies in Romans today after a summer break, and these will be our last few studies. And already, I think it's fair to say, we've mined a very great deal out of this extraordinary letter.

[4 : 40] Not just about the depths of the riches of the gospel of God, which, of course, this letter is full of, but also I think about how practical this message is for the life of the church, and what it really means to be a true gospel church.

And we've not finished yet, not quite. Although the main exposition concludes, as I said, at verse 13 of chapter 15, the remaining verses bring us back to this, what I've called the letter envelope, the packaging, as it were, the beginning and the end of the letter, that gives us so many clues as to the treasured contents inside.

Rather like the handwriting, perhaps, or the bits and pieces written on a letter that comes through your door. You see it, and you know what's going to be inside. I got a letter recently with a big ER2 on it, and a postmark from Buckingham Palace.

So I had a fair idea of what was going to be inside and who it was from. And that's really how it is with Paul's letter here. Paul's envelope, the first 15 verses or so of chapter 1, and then this last part of chapter 15 and chapter 16, is covered with clear hints about why Paul is writing this letter.

His great aim throughout the letter is that God should be glorified through a church humbly united together by the gospel of grace and living utterly together for the gospel of grace, sharing with Paul in the great task, which is the mission of that gospel to the world.

[6 : 15] So Paul begins the letter right back in chapter 1 by talking about his apostolic calling, which is to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations.

If you look at the very last sentence of the letter in chapter 16 at the end, he's turning again to the very same thing. The gospel going to all the nations to bring about the obedience of faith.

And if you look at our passage today, you'll see that also that's very much at the heart of it. Verse 18, bringing Gentiles to obedience by word and by deed.

So although, as we've seen from chapter 12, verse 1 onwards, and perhaps especially in chapters 14 and 15 already, there were clearly issues that had to be dealt with in the church in Rome, especially issues relating to the baggage that believers bring with them into the church from their former life, from their former ways, from their different backgrounds and cultures and so on.

And especially in this case here in Rome, the difficulties that arise with believers from Jewish backgrounds and Gentile backgrounds. Although there were issues, problems if you like, that had to be addressed and dealt with in the church, just as there are in any church, nevertheless, it was not primarily problems in the church in Rome that caused Paul to write this letter.

[7 : 37] Look at verse 14 of our chapter. It's a quite genuine verse. Paul is saying this was primarily a good church. He's quite clear. He says, in his view, they're full of goodness.

In other words, they were a church being shaped by grace, full of the genuine love that he speaks about in chapter 12 and so on. That was present. They were, he says, filled or fulfilled, literally, in all knowledge.

He doesn't mean they know everything, of course not, but he means that there are people fulfilled with the knowledge of the true gospel. And therefore, they are growing in faith and in strength, so that he says they're able to instruct one another, to teach one another in the faith.

They're a strong church. If you remember back to chapter 1, verse 8, he says they've got a worldwide reputation for that. So this letter is not primarily occasioned by their deep problems in their church fellowship.

Not at all. This letter is primarily written because of Paul's great passion and Paul's great priority. The passion and the priority of mission of the gospel to the whole world, to all the nations, to bring all peoples to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 59] And it's occasioned by his desire that that church in Rome should share with him in partnership in that great aim. See, he knows that although their life as a church may be fulfilled, their work is far from finished.

It's only just begun. They have a calling to share in the great task of which the apostles, like Paul, were laying the foundations. They share in a calling that is shaped by grace, as indeed does the whole of the true Christian church in all the world.

And that's why he writes this letter, if you look at verse 15. They're a good church. They're a fulfilled church. They're a rounded church. But, he says, Paul writes boldly.

And that's because any church, however good, can very easily begin to settle down on its laurels unless it remains caught up in that onward thrust of the apostolic mission, which is not yet complete, not in Paul's day, and not yet in our day either.

And that's why we as a church need that but in verse 15, don't we? Here we are as a church in a striking city center location, just as Rome was, no doubt.

[10 : 15] Maybe we are full of good things, full of knowledge, full of teaching of others. I hope so. But, there must be more, says Paul. There must be real sharing in the apostolic mission, which is still ongoing.

And so, there must be a real sharing in Paul's real gospel passion. The passion of a church that is being truly shaped by grace.

And that's what this passage in verses 14 to 24 of Romans 15 is all about. Note the prominence in the later verses of the word you. You, the whole church.

You, the whole church, says Paul. You have a calling with me in all of this. Look at verse 24. I'm going to be helped on my way to Spain by you. Verse 28.

I will leave for Spain by way of you. Or verse 30. I appeal to you, he says, to strive together with me in prayer and so on. You see, there's a real partnership in mission that Paul's speaking about here, of the whole church.

[11 : 24] And that's why Paul writes, he says in verse 15, and boldly to remind the Romans, and to remind us also, of what it means to be a truly apostolic church, in partnership with not just the apostolic doctrine, but also with the apostolic calling, building on their foundation so that the gospel will powerfully continue to reach those who have not yet named the name of Christ.

And that's the true gospel passion, without which any church, no matter how knowledgeable it may be, will cease to be truly apostolic.

And eventually, therefore, will wither and die, because it's no longer of any use to God. But to keep that true apostolic passion means that we must remember two things.

And that is what Paul lays out so clearly in these verses. First, that the church shares the apostolic privilege. That we are, and we have, a priestly service of worship, offering to God people from every nation, for his glory, and indeed for his great delight.

We share that priestly service of worship, and therefore, we share also in the apostolic priority, and we must do, which is a pioneering witness, offering the gospel of God among people who have not yet heard of Christ, and have not yet bowed the knee to him.

[12 : 59] And if you look, you'll see that verses 14 to 19 focus on this privilege of priestly worship we share in, and verses 20 to 24, on the priority of pioneering witness that we therefore must share in as well.

So let's look first at verses 14 to 19, where Paul lays out the apostolic privilege. The church, he says, has a real partnership with him to share in the priestly service of real worship.

The worship that is truly pleasing, acceptable, well-pleasing to God. Real worship, true spiritual worship, is not just offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

It is that. We saw that in chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. But it's also offering others to God as total outsiders become obedient to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's the offering, Paul says, that God delights in. That's the offering that God wants more and more. That is true worship that delights the heart of God. Verse 16, do you see?

[14 : 06] Offering the Gentiles, pagan outsiders, who are now sanctified, who are made holy by the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what even a good and a solid and a teaching church needs to be reminded of, says Paul.

It's easy, you see, to be good and solid and evangelical, but comfortable. But no, says Paul, it's not good enough to just have the gospel precepts in your mind.

You've got to have the gospel passion in your heart. And Paul wants to fire the hearts of the church to share his passion by reminding them what the church's privilege really is.

And it is nothing less, he says, than a priestly service direct to God himself, offering to God himself the things that truly delight the heart of God.

That priest, you remember, in the Old Testament were those who had the privilege, only those who had the privilege of entering the temple, entering the holiest place where God himself manifested himself.

[15 : 12] They were able to commune with God. They offered to God pleasing sacrifices to delight the heart of God. And Paul here deliberately uses this priestly language of our worship in Jesus Christ.

Remember in chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, he said that we offer real spiritual worship to God as we offer living sacrifices of ourselves, our own lives, as we live obediently and humbly in holiness in response to God's grace.

We're being transformed. We're being renewed by the gospel of Christ. That's an offering of real worship to God. And here in verse 16, do you see?

It's very striking. He uses exactly the same priestly language about offering the lives of others to God as they bow the knee to him. Paul says he's a minister.

He's a priestly servant, that word means. In the priestly service, he says, of the gospel of God, bringing an offering of Gentiles, of pagan outsiders from all nations, but now acceptable, or well-pleasing to God, because they too are sanctified.

[16 : 24] They're made holy by the Spirit of God. That's the promise that God gave to Abraham way back at the beginning, that he would be the father of many nations. That's what the whole of the scriptures, the Old Testament, pointed to and prophesied.

Paul quotes in verse 21 there from Isaiah chapter 52, where he says that many who know nothing of the Messiah will see, and they'll understand, and they too will come to delight in him.

And in fact, this priestly language here in verse 16 is also lifted straight out of Isaiah chapter 61. That's the chapter, remember, that Jesus famously quoted in the synagogue, where he stood up and said, the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

But that chapter goes right on, and God says, speaking to his own people in those days, he says, but you, you, my people, will be called priests of the Lord.

They will speak of you as ministers of our God. It's exactly the language Paul uses here in verse 16. And of course, all those later chapters of Isaiah's prophecy look forward to these last days, as we read at the beginning, when God's salvation will spill over to the very ends of the earth, and people from every tribe and nation will come and bow down to him as God and Lord.

[17 : 47] Listen to these words again from Isaiah 66. I will send messengers forth to the nations, and they shall declare my glory to the Gentiles, and they will bring back your brothers from all the nations as an offering for the Lord, just as the Israelites bring grain offerings in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord.

See, the grain offerings were some of the most holy, sweet, savor offerings that were a gift that brought a pleasing aroma to the nostrils of the Lord.

Think of the lovely smell of freshly baked bread. And Paul's saying that the greatest gift that delights the heart of God is when his people bring people, men and women and boys and girls from every nation, people who were complete outsiders, who were sinners, who were enemies of God, and they've become friends.

They've become sons and daughters of the living God, saved by the precious blood of God's Son, sanctified by the Spirit of His Son. And they're brought to God as His people.

That's what delights the heart of God. That's what brings a sweet savor to the nose of God. What a privilege to share in that priestly service of the real worship that God truly delights in.

[19 : 21] Now, Paul, of course, had a special calling. He was the apostle to the Gentiles. In verse 16, he says, that's God's particular gift of grace to me.

But his whole argument here is building forward towards the later verses, verse 24 and following, where he says that the whole church is involved in that privileged ministry with him, just as Isaiah prophesied.

I need to be helped by you, says Paul. You've got a part to play in this marvelous priestly service of God. Because it's not Paul's power that accomplishes anything.

It's Christ himself. Alone who does it, he says in verse 18, very clearly. It's Christ who brings the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed. It's Christ's word.

It's his gospel. It's his doing. It's his power alone that can bring people to new life. But you see, and here's the wonderful privilege again. He does it through the ministry that he grants to his people.

[20 : 27] The priestly service of the whole church led by the apostles. Christ says, Paul, in verse 18, accomplish it through me. And that's why in verse 17, you see, he can have a sense of pride.

It's not haughtiness. It's not a sense of self-importance. No, it's just a humble wonder that Christ should give such privilege to mere men and women.

That they should be involved in such wonderful service to God as this. Verse 17, In Christ Jesus, he says, In him alone, I have reason to be proud, to boast in my work for God, because he deigns to accomplish his words and deeds through my words and deeds.

Bringing Gentiles, total outsiders, ignorant, arrogant, defiant pagans, but bringing them to obedience, to bow the knee as lovers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By the way, do just note the parallel between verses 16 and 18. For outsiders to become acceptable to God, to become holy and sanctified in God's sight, means they're brought to obedience.

[21 : 43] Do you see that? There's no true faith in Christ that isn't obedient faith. It doesn't bow the knee to the lordship of Christ and to Christ's commands. That's very plain what Jesus said, isn't it?

He who loves me keeps my word, keeps my commands. And of course, only God's sovereign power can ever cause disobedient and defiant men and women to bow the knee to Christ's lordship.

As he commands them and as he converts them, however stubborn their hearts are. But he does it through the preaching of the gospel, through the preaching of Jesus Christ.

That alone is what brings about the obedience of faith. The gospel is the power of salvation for everyone who believes, says Paul. And we share the privilege of that priestly service, of bringing outsiders to obedient faith through proclaiming the gospel.

And that, in turn, ministers directly to God himself, delighting God's heart with his true heart's desire. with a sweet savor of men and women and boys and girls giving love to his precious son, our Lord Jesus.

[23 : 09] Again, Paul's own apostolic ministry, of course, is unique. It says here in verse 18, it was marked with signs and wonders.

The things that mark a true apostle's ministry, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12. That terminology, signs and wonders, it's actually quite rare in the Bible. It occurs around the time of the Exodus and the exploits happening then in the great redemption of the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, it clusters around the Lord Jesus Christ. We're told that his ministry was one of signs and wonders, that he too was powerful in word and deed. And of course, the book of Acts also tells us that that ministry attended the apostles because their task was unique in completing the inauguration of Christ's kingdom by laying the foundations of the Christian church.

And these things belong, therefore, to their foundational ministry. And Paul refers right here to that foundation-laying ministry in verse 20. But apostles, you see, did not build on other people's foundations.

They laid their own and they built on them. For some of the apostles, like Peter, it was particularly among the Jewish people. But for Paul, it was very particularly among Gentiles.

[24 : 32] And therefore, his ministry, as verse 19 says, you see, it was a ministry that literally fulfilled the gospel of Christ. That's what it says.

There's nothing there about ministry. It just says, I have fulfilled the gospel of Christ in the sense of establishing that gospel witness in new territories. He speaks similarly in Colossians 1.25 where he says he's fulfilled the word of God by bringing the gospel to the Gentiles there in Colossae.

And verse 19 tells us he's done this now all around what we would call the eastern Mediterranean from Jerusalem all around to Illyricum which is roughly Bosnia, Herzegovina where we see that on the map today.

He's laid foundations says Paul among many unreached people. He's established believers and churches and he's built on those foundations to strengthen them and to call them also to share in his mission.

The book of Acts bears witness to that very clearly. Verse 20 there doesn't mean as sometimes people think it means it doesn't mean that Paul only did evangelism and never did any building or establishing of churches afterwards.

[25 : 47] We know that's just not true. He did a great deal of ongoing teaching. He visited the churches again. He wrote letters to them to build them up and to establish them. Now the point he's making here is that he laid his own foundations in new territories for the gospel.

That's what the apostles did. They laid foundations for the church. They were the foundational builders of the church. Ephesians 2 tells us that Christ is the chief cornerstone but he builds on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

And so now Paul says he's fulfilled the gospel all around the eastern Mediterranean founding and establishing churches in key places so that they in turn would go on continuing the spread of the gospel.

Sharing in the furtherance of the same priestly ministry of God that he's founded as they offered themselves as living sacrifices obedient to God and also as they offered others to God as they called Gentiles out of darkness and into light.

And the apostles like Paul were the founders. They were leading this wonderful fulfillment of the gospel promises of God that all the families of the earth would be blessed through the Messiah.

[27 : 02] But what he's saying is that the whole church are sharers in that wonderful privilege. That is the privilege given to God's people living in the last days the days of Christ's church.

The priestly service that delights the Lord above all things has been given to us. That from all the world people might be brought and offered to God as obedient believers in Jesus Christ.

And you see Paul's point so clearly in these verses is that that task has just begun in his day. And the fact is it's still urgent and it's still not complete in our day.

And so if we grasp that we today still share in the great apostolic privilege of this priestly service to God then we must also grasp that we must share the apostles' priority.

And that's the second thing that Paul emphasizes here in verse 20 to 24. He's saying to us that a pioneering service of real witness towards outsiders and the unevangelized must always be the church's priority just as it was the apostolic founder's priority.

[28 : 21] The church can't share in the privilege of real priestly worship without sharing in the priority of pioneering witness. Or to put it very simply only an outward looking witnessing church can ever truly be an upward looking and worshipping church.

And that's the burden that Paul's communicating in these verses 20 to 24. The priestly service of Paul the worship leader if you like offering Gentiles to God requires the pioneering service of Paul the missionary leader.

And the church must never lose that same gospel passion that he shows here. So verse 19 tells us that the gospel has been fulfilled in all the eastern Mediterranean.

How? Well the answer is in verse 20. Thus says Paul in this manner it's been fulfilled by me making it my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ has not yet been named.

In other words by pioneering evangelism in virgin territory where Christ is not known and not obeyed and not loved where there's no foundation yet been laid. By making it my ambition says Paul for the gospel to keep spreading and keep overflowing into new regions beyond where we've already been.

[29 : 47] The gospel must keep establishing new foundations in new areas. Why? Well verse 21 because very simply that's what the scriptures say must happen and must be fulfilled.

He's quoting from Isaiah again there. Those who have not heard of him will see and will understand and will come to worship him. Remember what Jesus said, the risen Jesus in Luke chapter 24 to the people on the road to Emmaus.

everything written in the scriptures about me must be fulfilled. Repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name must be proclaimed in all nations.

That's what he says again at the beginning of the book of Acts isn't it? Acts chapter 1 from Jerusalem to Samaria to the very ends of the earth the gospel must go.

Now Paul himself was the one specially commanded to lead that advance and his apostleship was to bring about the obedience of faith particularly among these Gentile nations and therefore you see verse 22 therefore everything else both for Paul and for the church in Rome everything else must come second to that great apostolic priority.

[31 : 10] This is the reason he says I've been hindered from coming to you. In verse 23 he's plain he longed to see them I've longed to see you for years he said way back in chapter 1 he said I've longed to see you to strengthen you and for you to encourage me but wonderful though that fellowship would have been it was not as important either to God or to Paul as his pioneering witness in front line evangelism and mission.

Only now says verse 23 only now when his work in other regions has come to a close could he make time for this second priority of visiting the Romans and even then it was only because that could be fitted into his ongoing primary priority of more pioneering mission to the western frontiers to Spain.

I'll only be passing through he says in verse 24 and I'll need your support and your provision to help me on my way to where I really want to be. Regions of unevangelized territory.

So he says the blessing that we can have together of sharing fellowship and company that can only be for a while and even that is only to draw us into a greater purpose of partnership and front line mission so that they could help him on his way.

that's actually a technical term that means cough up a lot of money and resources to help him get where he wants to go. Tangible material possessions and payment.

[32 : 50] I'm coming to you for fellowship but get the hint you're going to have to give me a great big gift and a whole lot of resources because what's really important is that I get from Rome to Spain. That's what he's saying to them.

It's very striking don't you think that here is Paul at last getting to the place he's longed to go to this great city of Rome at the very heart of a world empire to this church that has a great reputation and he's not in the least but interested in coming to be their leader or their guru of thinking well here's a prestigious church fit for an apostle like me.

He's saying I just want to pass through and get some of your help to a place that's much more important than that the place that doesn't have any churches at all. I wonder how many Christian pastors and Christian workers would see things that way today.

Not many I don't think. Paul has no desire whatsoever to come and be their pope but what he does want is their partnership in the gospel in the great priority of ever expanding an ongoing witness to the very ends of the earth.

death. He was very clear as to his own personal apostolic calling in response to the grace that God had given to him. But he was equally clear about the whole church's calling by the same grace of God.

[34 : 16] A calling into partnership in that ongoing task to help him on his journey there. I will leave for Spain by way of you he says. You are involved. And Paul's passion, Paul's sense of obligation to all is clearly something that he expects this church in Rome to share.

And he's calling them as well to prioritize above everything pioneering gospel witness. And to partner as a church in that pioneering ministry to all, to outsiders, to Gentiles, to all who don't yet name the name of Christ both in Rome and also to the very ends of the known world.

And friends, that is why the Holy Spirit has preserved this writing in the Bibles for us. That is what Paul's words are likewise teaching the whole church today.

That the foundations have been laid, yes, fulfilling the gospel of Christ once and for all by Paul and the other apostles. But Christ is still building his church worldwide today.

And we still share in that extraordinary apostolic privilege of being called to be real worshippers, sharing in this priestly service of offering total outsiders, those who have never heard of Jesus.

[35 : 41] And offering them to God is a fragrant offering to delight God's heart as they do here and bow the knee and come to rejoice in the name of Jesus.

I want to ask you, can there be any greater privilege in the world than that? To be able to bring to the Lord God of heaven and earth the one offering that he desires above everything else?

It's the greatest joy, isn't it? We know that, to be a part, even a small part, in seeing somebody brought from darkness into light, from death to life in Jesus Christ.

There's no greater thrill, is there, to see them growing and developing and bearing fruit in ministries of their own. There's no greater joy for believers or for a whole church than that.

But you see, Paul is saying also, we will only share that wonderful privilege of priestly service if we also share that absolute priority of pioneering service of witness, above everything else in the life of the church today.

[36 : 50] above even good things, like enjoying one another's company and refreshing one another's needs and so on. For that matter, many other things that we tend to think of as being important parts of worship and praise.

But the real worship that God desires from us is the living sacrifice of our sanctified lives and the sanctified lives of others that are the fruit of our witness to the gospel of Christ.

Truest sacrifice of praise to God, the Hebrews writer tells us, is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name to the obedient lives of those who have come to faith by God's saving power at work through our words and deeds in the ministry God has called us to.

Let me just say a few things by way of conclusion. Verse 14, look at it again, I think is a verse that I can honestly address to us as a fellowship here, just as Paul did to Rome.

This is a good church. And I know that you are a congregation being shaped by grace, that you are fulfilled in the knowledge of the true gospel, that you are increasingly able to teach and to instruct one another.

[38 : 12] And I thank God genuinely for that, as I thank God for the many who have labored over many years to lay such strong foundations. But, verse 15, surely we also can't be immune from needing that but, and needing that constant reminder that we have a calling by God's grace to live constantly with Paul's real gospel passion, to cherish the privilege of that priestly worship that's ours, and therefore to be ever more committed to the priority of pioneering witness, without which that worship will never happen.

A worshipping church, a church truly living up to its priestly calling from God, needs more than to be just full of goodness and knowledge and fine teaching. It's really living with the apostles' priorities.

It will constantly show evidence of what I'm calling three G's. First, it will always actually be gathering.

Gathering in and offering new believers to God as people of all ages and stages and cultures and backgrounds are brought into the kingdom of Christ through the gospel witness in our midst.

And that will be because evangelism is always given a priority, an absolute priority, over the mere enjoyment of those already inside the church, just as it was for Paul in verse 24.

[39 : 54] Prayer and provisions and all of these things will always be given more to Christ's mission than to our comforts, always to his priorities over our own personal preferences.

That's the kind of church, isn't it, that will be a gathering church, offering trophies of grace to God in acts of real worship. An upward-looking and a worshipping church will always be an outward-looking and a witnessing church.

It will always be gathering. Second, it will be a church that is always giving. Not hoarding, but giving. Giving to support front-line work, to help on the journey of the gospel into virgin territories, to break down the barriers for the gospel, to speed on its witness to the world.

But not only generously giving provision, equally generously giving people. Some of the best, perhaps, teachers and evangelists.

Giving them away to regions beyond where a foundation has already been established. It's like the Romans enjoying Paul's company only for a while, but then not only letting Paul go, but paying and supporting him to go to his new and pioneering missionary work.

[41 : 14] Now, let me tell you, friends, that is a hard thing to do as a church. It's a hard thing to do for a pastor. To wave goodbye to some of your best people. To pay and support them.

To go away from here to regions beyond. But a worshipping church is always a giving church. Because it knows that real church growth isn't about building a work or an empire of your own, or a reputation of your own for size and influence.

Real church growth is about offering people to God in the priestly service of the gospel. And that happens more and more as we give to pioneering work all over the world.

Wasn't it a joy to our hearts on Wednesday evening to see those pictures from Eric of the new center in Ranchi. And the three new churches already planted there since Easter. And of the five men sitting there training in the Bible ashram to become leaders in the church in that part of India.

All of that because God moved our hearts to be able to give. And what a joy and a delight the fruit of that offering is to us. And thirdly, a church that truly shares that gospel passion will always also be going and desiring to go and looking for ways to go to Spain.

[42 : 38] I don't mean to the Costa Bravo on holiday. I've been there and it's very enjoyable. But I mean looking for and breaking into the places where people remain unreached for the gospel of Christ.

Obviously that means that many unreached people groups all around the world today. The teeming billions of Southeast Asia and so many other parts of the world. But of course today it's equally true, isn't it, that many, many unreached people are flocking here into our cities.

To colleges and universities and to jobs. Some of them seeking asylum. And so a church that truly rejoices in the privilege of that priestly service to God will make a priority, won't it, of breaking through these cultural barriers.

So that Christ will be named among those who are yet still unknown, even within the environs of our own cities. And of course it's true that even in our own Scottish compatriot culture today, there are so many who are totally unevangelized.

Un-evangelized. Who are really living in virgin territory. Who's only ever hearing of the name of Christ. This is a swear word. We need to be going.

[43 : 57] Going to them. And helping others on their way to reach them. In their schools, in their colleges, in their prisons, in their offices, on the streets, everywhere.

We have a calling, says Paul, by God's grace. A calling to the privilege of a priestly service.

Offering to God in praise the objects of His great mercy that He is calling to Himself through the gospel of Christ. Friends, may we together make it our priority to be always going.

And always giving. And always truly gathering. So as to be not just a church with gospel precepts in our heads. But a people with gospel passion in our hearts.

Like Paul. Let's pray. Dear Lord, our Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the Apostle Paul.

[45 : 05] For his calling. To always be going onwards and outwards. To regions beyond. And through whose sharing that passion with your church.

The gospel came to these lands. And to our hearts. And to our lives. To bring us out of darkness. And into the light of the kingdom of the Son of your love. So Lord, may our hearts be also filled with this same passion.

We might rejoice. In the sheer privilege. Of a priestly service. That brings to you trophies of your amazing grace.

And so teach us the way of true priorities. That as people and as a church. We may follow you gladly. Going. Giving.

And so gathering in the great harvest that you have promised. For the glory of your Son. For we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.