

## **Paul's Boast and God's Glory: Frontier Missions in Romans 15:17-21**

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A well-known irony of the Apostle Paul is his discussion of "boasting." Far from being sinful, boasting in Paul becomes a virtue which he encourages in believers: "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31). Among passages where the boasting motif figures prominently is Romans 15:17-21, perhaps the clearest reference in the New Testament to "frontier missions" (by which I mean cross-cultural evangelism to unreached groups). The notion of boasting, as developed throughout Paul's epistles, provides a theological key to understanding Paul's teaching on frontier missions in Romans 15. Three things which might seem strange bedfellows link closely together in this passage: Paul's boast, the glory of God, and frontier missions. I will attempt to show how these interlock in Paul's teaching and will draw out some practical conclusions for our understanding of frontier missions.

Before examining Romans 15, first it is necessary to consider the boasting theme in general. Paul's teaching on boasting reflects the ideas and phraseology of Jeremiah 9:23,24:

Thus says the Lord, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord (New American Standard Bible).

Already in Jeremiah we see the differentiation of two kinds of boast. The same text forbids boasting in one sense ("let not a wise man boast") and permits it in another ("Let him who boasts boast of this"). The Lord's command allows boasting which is centered upon our knowledge of Him ("that he understands and knows Me") or upon His own character ("that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness"). The Lord excludes boasting in oneself, one's wisdom, riches, or might. These words from Jeremiah occur in the context of God's judgment (Jer. 9:1-22 and 9:25,26). Precisely because God has passed judgment on Israel and set her attainments at naught in the accomplishment of His purposes, the wise man is commanded: "let him...boast of this...." Israel's own wisdom cannot save her (9:12).

### **THE BOASTING THEME IN PAUL'S LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS**

1 Corinthians 1 continues and amplifies the boasting theme of Jeremiah 9. Jeremiah's permitted boast, the boast that one "understands and knows Me...that I am the Lord," corresponds to Paul's "boast in the Lord." Similarly in Paul there is an impermissible boast. Paul says that the manner in which God has brought salvation—choosing the foolish, the weak, and despised—has nullified boasting in human power and human attainments, "that no man should boast before God" (1 Cor. 1:29). This leaves open only one kind of boast, a boast in the Lord (1:31). Since salvation is "His doing" and since Christ has become our "wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1:30), we can boast only in Him. Paul's teaching on salvation by grace through faith gives even greater poignancy to Jeremiah's command to boast only in the Lord.

The boasting which Paul encourages always gives glory to God, for it attributes to Him what is due Him. Boasting in oneself represents the opposite and mutually exclusive attitude, which robs God of His rightful glory. As Isaiah says: "I am the Lord, that is my name; I will not give my glory to another...." (Is. 42:8). Although not specifically stated, the glory of God and His zeal to uphold His glory are underlying presuppositions of the boasting passages.

To boast in the Lord, then, is to take a godly pride in the Lord, His character, and His acts. As noted in the article "*kauchaomai*" in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, this kind of righteous boasting gives glory to God even if sometimes paradoxically it involves speaking of oneself.<sup>1</sup> To boast in the Lord we

sometimes must refer to what He has accomplished through human agents. When we speak of God doing through His servants what only He can do, then we are "boasting in the Lord" and give greater glory to Him. The glory of God, which often in Scripture means His self-manifestation, becomes visible in human lives under certain circumstances. Hence the distinction between "boasting before God" (1 Cor. 1:29) and "boasting in the Lord" (1:31) does not correspond exactly to the distinction between speaking of oneself and speaking of God. In a sense the entire book of 2 Corinthians presents Paul boasting in the Lord though speaking of himself. He speaks of what God accomplishes through him in spite of his inadequacy for the ministry (3:5,6), the fragility of his human nature (4:1-18), mortality (5:1-10), innumerable hardships (6:1-10), his lack of skill in speech (11:6), his sufferings in the flesh (11:23-30), and his weakness (12:9,10; 13:4).

#### THE BOASTING THEME IN ROMANS 15

In Romans 15 Paul discusses frontier missions in the context of just such a boast—he speaks of himself and yet boasts in God.

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 God has accomplished through me [emphasis mine], resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles in 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, that I might not build upon 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" (vs. 17-21).

When Paul chooses to speak only of "what God has accomplished" through him, what does he speak about? The cross-cultural communication of the gospel! In 2 Corinthians Paul tells how God strengthens him for the apostolic ministry in the midst of affliction, suffering, and hardship. Here he speaks of how God used him to bring the gospel to new peoples. In both cases the mighty power needed to accomplish the work lies so clearly in God and not in Paul himself that he can mention the accomplishments without fear that he be regarded as boasting in himself. Frontier missions for Paul exemplifies the power and activity of God to a preeminent degree and so brings glory to Him.

A moment's reflection will show why frontier missions is worthy of boasting (in Paul's sense) and why it brings such glory to God. It is built upon no human foundation. "And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named...." The first missionary to a new culture has no forerunner, no basis on which to build. He stakes everything on the universal relevance of the gospel message and its universal power to draw all men to Christ. If the gospel were merely a human ideology we could not possibly expect it to take root, as it has, in every branch of the human family and among every sort of person. In virgin territory, then, most of all, the progress of the gospel depends entirely upon its God-given character as the one way of salvation for all. A merely human "gospel" can be widely propagated but invariably diminishes the distinctives of the various groups which embrace it. Yet the gospel of Christ, rightly preached, produces diversity in unity. This, I believe, further demonstrates that the transplantation of the gospel into new territory is uniquely the work of God, which, as something only God can do, brings glory to Him when it is accomplished. We sense something of the glory of God in the prophecy of Revelation 9:9ff., because we know that men from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue would never be assembled in the same place, let alone united in the worship of God, unless God Himself had brought this about.

#### "MADE MIGHTY IN WEAKNESS"

Now it seems that only a small step separates us from an inevitable conclusion: the frontier missionary is an extraordinary individual who glorifies God to a unique degree. But this runs close to missing the point. Let me distinguish two paradigms for the frontier missionary: "the rugged American individualist" paradigm, and what I perceive Paul to teach, the "made mighty in weakness" paradigm. In the former, the missionary struggles alone against impossible odds. He is a spiritual version of the lonely mountain man who hewed

out trails through the wilderness so that others could later follow. This interpretation of Romans 15 seems to be in vogue in the present renewal of interest in frontier missions, and it even seems to coincide with certain traditional American values, yet I question whether the larger context of Paul's teaching on boasting permits us to read him this way. Paul, who desired "not to build upon another man's foundation," never seemed to discourage co-workers in the Lord from rendering him assistance. He rather frequently expressed his need for help, and in some cases, his virtual inability to function without the help of others (2 Cor. 2:13, 7:5-7; Phil. 2:19-23; Col. 4:11; 2 Tim. 1:15-18, 4:11; Acts 17:14,15). The impulse that drove Paul with the gospel to the regions beyond the established church was probably not the trailblazer's hankering after "elbow room." It was his zeal for the glory of God, that God's power be exhibited through his own weakness. No doubt frontier missionaries are often alone and do face tremendous odds against their work. Yet despite the romantic mystique that this holds, we should view the frontier missionary not as an exceptional sort of person, constitutionally averse to the company and support of fellow-brethren in Christ, but as one who daily exhibits a peculiar sort of weakness. He is privileged to live out a boast in the Lord and to exhibit complete dependence on God. He is exceedingly weak, but his weakness is God's opportunity for the demonstration of His power.<sup>2</sup>

#### Notes

1. R. Bultmann, "kauchaomai, k.t.1," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III—Theta to Kappa, Ed.: Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 650-652.
2. Cf. David Alan Black, "Paulus Infirmus: The Pauline Concept of Weakness," *Grace Theological Journal* (Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring '84), pp. 86-88.