

3. Paul's Identification of His Audience (1:6-7)

In his self-introduction Paul conspicuously identified himself in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ. His identification of himself with the gospel has two distinct aspects to it, the first *personal* and the second *corporate*, or more properly, *redemptive-historical*.

- With respect to the former, Paul could not think of himself as a *person* except in relation to Christ and his saving gospel. He had been set apart from his mother's womb, and at the ordained time God had revealed Christ to him and in him (Galatians 1:11-17). The result was that he had been crucified with Christ, so that he no longer lived as formerly, but Christ lived in him. Therefore, the life he now lived he lived in accordance with his unwavering faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself for him (Galatians 2:20). And as one whose life was hidden with Christ in God, Paul viewed himself as always carrying about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus in order that Christ's life should be formed and perfected in him (2 Corinthians 4:6-11; Colossians 3:1-3).

- At the same time, it has been observed that Paul viewed his identity in Christ as having *redemptive-historical* significance. That is, he considered his own calling and conversion in terms of his *apostolic mandate*. Yahweh's long-promised Redeemer and King had come in the fullness of the times, and by His resurrection and ascension had ushered in His kingdom. Unlike the typological Israelite kingdom that preceded it, this kingdom was marked by "the Spirit and power" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5), that in accordance with God's eternal counsel it should finally extend to "*the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth*" (Ephesians 1:9-10). The "ends of the ages" had come, and now Christ, at the right hand of the Majesty on high, was building His Church and extending His reign in His saints throughout the earth unto the day of His appearing in glory.

This was the great, all-encompassing, eschatological reality that filled Paul's mind, and he could not think of his own personal salvation except in relation to his appointed role in this marvelous, divine drama. The coming of the kingdom of God meant the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all mankind (Acts 2:1-21), and Paul was Christ's chosen instrument toward the accomplishment of that end (Acts 9:1-16). He was in a singular way the Lord's apostle to the nations; his mandate was to give his life as Christ's bondservant in order to "*bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles*" (1:5, 16:25-26), and from the day of his conversion Paul was driven by the compelling consciousness of his great and privileged calling (2 Corinthians 2:1-4:18; Galatians 1:1-2:9; Ephesians 2:1-3:13; Philippians 1:12-26, 2:12-18; Colossians 1:24-2:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:12; 1 Timothy 1:12-16, 2:1-7; etc.).

Christ had commissioned Paul to be His apostle to the Gentile world, and his prescript communicated to the congregation at Rome that he viewed them as falling within the sphere of his apostolic ministerial responsibility. He wanted them to understand from the outset of his letter that he had a sincere concern for and bond with them, though they had never personally met him. The goal of his apostolic labors was the obedience of faith among the nations, which made his burden for the Romans entirely appropriate. For as a predominately Gentile congregation, they, too, were “*the called of Jesus Christ*” - eternally “*beloved of God*” and “*called as saints.*”

By these two verses (1:6-7) Paul brought his prescript to its close. Its intention was consistent with his other epistles: it served first to identify Paul as the epistle’s author, and second the church at Rome as its recipients. Finally, it supplied Paul’s trademark salutation to the saints. But it differs from others of Paul’s prescripts in that it sets the framework and direction of the entire epistle. A simple *from* and *to* prescript could have been communicated very briefly (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1-2; Ephesians 1:1; etc.), but the extended seven-verse prescript of this epistle reveals the *gospel orientation of Paul’s consciousness*, both as a person and with respect to the Roman church. Just as he identified himself in terms of his relationship to the gospel, so also he identified his Roman readers in the same way. Specifically, he noted three aspects of their identity before directly addressing them in his salutation: their *calling*, their *filial relation* to God, and their *status* in Christ.

- a. First of all Paul identified the Romans as those who were “*the called of Jesus Christ*” (1:6). Like him they participated in Christ’s call upon their lives. What is crucial to note is that Paul is here referring not to the *universal* call of the gospel that goes out to all men, but the *effectual* call of God brought to bear by His Spirit, the call by which men are quickened to life and joined to Christ.
 - This interpretation is clearly evident from the context, but is also supported by the fact that Paul always employs the idea of God’s calling in reference to His sovereign determination and effectual power by which He brings men into Christ’s kingdom (ref. Romans 8:28-30, 9:10-12, 22-26, 11:28-29; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, 7:17-24; Galatians 1:6-7, 13-17, 5:1-13; Ephesians 1:17-18, 4:1-4; Colossians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, 4:7, 5:23-24; etc.).
 - It’s crucial that Paul’s meaning not be missed, for the context shows that he considered the Romans’ status as “called ones” to be foundational to their identity. If Paul were merely speaking of the general call of the gospel, then this designation of being “the called of Jesus Christ” would be emptied of its power and significance; there would be nothing in it to distinguish them from anyone else who had heard the claims and charge of the apostolic gospel.

But as it is, the Romans were *the* called of Jesus Christ. Whether one interprets Paul as saying that they were called *to belong to* Jesus Christ or called *by* Jesus Christ, the central idea remains unchanged. The Roman believers had been set apart by the eternal determination of God to be joined to His divine Son in the fullness of the times. And it was that spiritual union with Christ and the new life associated with it that now served as the foundational and essential definition of their existence as people.

- b. Second, Paul referred to the Romans as those “*who are beloved of God*” (1:7a). As they were Christ’s “called ones,” so their calling proceeded out of the *eternal love* of God for them (ref. Ephesians 1:3-6). In a time in which it is common for some to deny God’s *particularizing* love, and for others to deny altogether His genuine love for men *as men*, Paul is adamant that both denials represent unbiblical conclusions. God’s eternal love for the Roman believers *as individuals* stood behind their election, even as it motivated His redeeming and transforming grace toward them. Thus Paul could declare to Timothy that the divine electing grace that secured the saints’ entrance into Christ’s kingdom was given to them from all eternity (2 Timothy 1:8-9). The love of God for them that was *eternal* and *effectual* was no less *invincible* (Romans 8:28-39).
- c. Finally, Paul identified them as “*called saints*” (1:7b). His grammar duplicates that which previously described him as a *called apostle*, so that, given the context, it is reasonable to assume the same interpretation here; the adjective *called* functions attributively with the noun *saints*. In other words, as his apostleship was not self-derived, but the result of divine authority and calling, so was their status as saints; they were *called saints*, or “saints by calling.” This interpretation also provides insight into the relation between this expression and the former one that identifies the Romans as *the called of Jesus Christ*. Both are very similar, being focused upon the matter of their Christian calling. But whereas the former pertains particularly to the *basis* and *fact* of their union with Christ, this latter is expressive of the *consequence* of that union, which is their status as saints.

The term *saint* is very common in Paul’s writing, occurring some forty times in his epistles. It is a noun form of the Greek adjective translated *holy*, and is equivalent to the Hebrew noun *qadosh*. In its most fundamental sense it conveys the idea of *separateness*, usually with respect to intrinsic nature, purity, and/or designated role (consecration). Thus God Himself is preeminently holy by virtue of His transcendent nature as the Creator and His absolute purity and righteousness. To His covenant people God commonly referred to Himself as *the Holy One of Israel* (cf. Psalm 71:22; Isaiah 37:21-23, 41:8-20, 43:1-15, 45:11-13; etc.). Likewise the angels are referred to as “holy ones,” primarily because of their consecration to the will and work of God (Deuteronomy 33:1-2).

As well, inanimate things and people are designated as *holy* on the basis of their being set apart or consecrated to God. This consecration can be either negative or positive, depending upon the relation the holy entity maintains with God. Negatively, people and things are considered as holy when they are set apart for destruction, as in the case of being “under the ban” (Deuteronomy 7:1-26, 13:12-18; Joshua 6:1-19, 7:1-15). Positively, they are holy when they are consecrated to God for His worship and service, as with the priests and the holy articles of the tabernacle. So also Israel, as a nation set apart for God from among all the peoples of the earth, was designated a “holy nation.”

In each of these instances it is evident that the characterization of created things as *holy* depends entirely on the sovereign designation of God rather than something inherent in the creature itself. The implication of this is obvious: *holiness refers to a status gained by divine determination, not a quality or conduct inherent in the creature.* So also Paul’s reference to the community of the Church at Rome as *saints* carries the same qualification. *The believers at Rome were not designated as saints on the basis of their godly conduct, but by virtue of having been set apart to God by His Spirit in union with Christ.* Their status as saints had nothing to do with what they did, but who they were according to the purpose and power of God.

Finally, it is important to note how Paul’s redemptive-historical perspective is again implicated in these three ascriptions to the Roman believers. In each instance - *called of Jesus Christ, beloved of God, and called saints*, the language of Israel’s covenant relationship with God is carried forward and used of the New Covenant Church. For as noted previously, Israel was uniquely God’s elect, called, beloved, and consecrated people (Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 4:21-23, 19:1-6; Deuteronomy 7:1-8). But now, in the fullness of the times, Israel had found her own covenant destiny in the community of Abraham’s true seed, defined not by physical ancestry but union with Abraham’s singular Seed.

- Whereas Israel had been constituted a holy people, separated from the world by its various laws and especially the ordinance of circumcision, the Romans were “holy ones” by virtue of the circumcision done by Christ in the “cutting off” of the sin nature and the inscription of God’s law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Colossians 2:8-14; cf. Romans 2:28-29).
- And whereas Israel enjoyed unique privilege as God’s elect son, that election and filial status were only *typological*. Not all Israel was Israel, and the majority of the nation in every generation lived in rebellion, unbelief, and alienation from their covenant God. Israel inhabited the former age of the flesh, and its pedagogical status under the law could not effect the reconciliation and filial blessing promised in the covenant. But with the coming of the age of the Spirit, the realities previously typified had been ushered in, so that the saints cry out, “Abba, Father,” in truth.

The outpouring of the Spirit meant the fulfillment of what had been promised to Israel. All of the stipulations of Israel's covenant obligation had been met in the true Israelite and covenant Son. As a result, no longer was God's pronouncement, "*I will be your God and you will be My people if...*" By His obedience Christ has fulfilled all of the righteous demands of covenant intimacy with God, so that all those joined to Him share in the fullness and confidence of His own filial union with His Father in the context of true sonship. Israel's *typological sonship* had found its destiny in the spiritual *adoption of sons* secured by the covenant faithfulness of the Son and brought to pass by the Spirit of adoption.

Thus the profound significance of Paul's trademark salutation: "*Grace to you and peace from God **our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Of all of the spiritual blessings that belong to the saints, no three are greater or more precious than those of *grace, peace, and sonship*. The good news of the gospel is that God has, in Christ, reconciled the estranged world to Himself (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). What the first Adam lost in the Garden the Last Adam has recovered, so that all who wash their robes in His blood have the right to eat freely of the tree of life that is in the Paradise of God (Revelation 2:7, 22:13-14). And not only are life and peace restored to them, they gain the indescribable privilege of becoming blessed, beloved sons of the Father in heaven, secured in His love because they have been made fully and everlastingly acceptable in the Beloved: "*See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are*" (1 John 3:1).

And so it is that, in a most marvelous way, Paul set the tone for his epistle to the Romans with an introductory prescript that is radically Christocentric, even as his overarching concern throughout the epistle was the exalted presentation of the gospel of his great Savior - the good news of God's full and glorious redemption according to "*the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*" In a day in which the essence, power, and singular excellence of the gospel have been largely eclipsed by what are regarded in the Church as more important and pressing matters - whether pragmatic or doctrinal - Douglas Moo's observations are well worth noting:

"The importance of Christology in this opening paragraph should not be missed. Paul shares with his Roman audience the conviction that Jesus is the heart of the gospel. He is the promised Messiah of Israel ('seed of David'), the Son of God, the Lord. Confessing the gospel in our own day requires that we subscribe to Paul's exalted view of Jesus; it is failure to do so that spawns many heresies. But Paul's attention, as we have also seen, is especially on the activity of this Jesus: his coming to earth as the Messiah; his exaltation through resurrection to Lord of all; his dispensing power as the Son of God. It is what Jesus has done, not just who he is, that makes the gospel the 'good news' that it is. But make no mistake: what Jesus has done cannot be severed from who he is. Ours is an age not too much interested in theology; but correct theology - in this case the person of Jesus - is vital to salvation and to Christian living."