

Introduction

Have you ever applied for a job, been through the interview process, then got the letter of offer in the mail? The letter calls you to belong to the company, and to work for the company. Sometimes in the Bible, Christians are said to have been called by God. The letter of Romans is from Paul to a bunch of Christians in Rome. He said that he had been called himself by God to call other people, to belong to God's people, and to work, to obey Jesus.

Verses 1 to 7 of Romans 1 are the introduction to the letter. Usually a letter in the ancient world would begin with the name of the author, then the recipients, then a greeting. 'From Steve, to Glenn, Hello.' Paul, in verses 1 to 7, is expanding this normal greeting. He speaks of himself as the author in verses 1 to 6, then of his recipients in the first part of verse 7, then gives a very Christian 'hello' in the second part of verse 7. A word that occurs throughout is the word 'call' or 'called' in verses 1, 5, 6 and 7. So we are going to think about the call we have from God, today.

Our Apostle

In verse 1, Paul wrote of his own call. He introduces himself as '**Paul, ... called to be an apostle**'. Then he gets a bit sidetracked in verses 2 to 4, speaking of the gospel, before coming back to his self-introduction in verse 5. In this verse we learn what it meant for Paul to be an apostle. Let's read it. '**Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.**'

The 'him' is the Lord Jesus Christ, from verse 4. Paul received his call to be an apostle from God, through Jesus. Apostleship is a gift. When Paul says '**we received grace and apostleship**', he probably means 'grace of apostleship'. Being an apostle was a gift from God. The word 'grace' means 'undeserved favour'. And Paul certainly didn't deserve to be an apostle. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 Paul writes that '**I... do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God**'. Paul imprisoned, tortured and murdered Christians before he met Jesus. That is grace, for God to call Paul the persecutor to be an apostle.

Have you ever been promoted out of the blue, and you know you don't deserve it? I remember once I was in a job I really wasn't enjoying, and I don't think I was very good at it. Then I got promoted to a position in the head office, and I was simply thankful. That was grace, both from God and from my company.

The ultimate reason Paul had been given the gift was '**for his name's sake**'. That is, for the sake of Jesus' name. God's ultimate purpose, throughout the Bible, is for people everywhere to honour Jesus as King. For people to use his name in awe and reverence and love. This was what got Paul up in the morning. He had been called for the sake of Jesus' name. Not for his own name, or the name of his family, or for his nation, but for the name of Jesus.

So what was Paul to do for the name of Jesus? His gift of apostleship was '**to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith**'. We'll come back to the second part, '**the obedience that comes from faith**', in a bit. For now, let's zone in on Paul's job, which was '**to call all the Gentiles**'. Gentile means 'non-Jew'; someone who wasn't from Paul's own people, the Israelites. Paul's job was to go to all other peoples; all the many ethnic groups in the world and call them to Jesus.

He only got to some of the Roman Empire. A good portion of it, but only some of it. He died well before '***all the Gentiles***' had heard the call. And yet, here we are today, on the other side of the world, a Church of many nations, listening to Paul's words in Romans. Paul is still the apostle to the gentiles (Rom 11:13), even though he is dead. When we read his letters, we are hearing from our apostle, the one sent to us.

Let's now turn to what Paul calls us to, in verses 6 and 7. We are called, through Paul, to belong and to obey.

Called to Belong

In verse 6, Paul makes the point that the gentiles in Rome were among the people he was sent to. They were called to belong. '***And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.***'

Belonging is not something we should take for granted. Last week we saw that the Old Testament is all about Jesus Christ, like small tiles coming together to form his image. Part that picture is the people of God, Israel. God said to them, in Exodus 19:5-6, "***If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, the out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a Kingdom of priests and a holy nation.***"

In choosing Israel '***out of all nations***', God was not choosing all other nations. That's a large group of people, to which you and I belong. New Zealanders, South Americans, Chinese, Macedonians ... we were not chosen. We belong outside the people of God, not within the people of God.

And, when Jesus came, he said that he had been sent '***only to the lost sheep of Israel***' (Matt 15:24). Jesus spoke to, and healed, and loved, the chosen people of God; Israel. When Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven, Jews naturally thought that it was all for them. That the gospel was for Jews *alone*.

You and I didn't belong. We weren't God's people, we were outsiders. But Jesus sent Paul to non-Jews like us to call us to belong to Christ Jesus.

Perhaps you still think you are an outsider, that you don't belong. Perhaps you have not come from a Christian background, or are not an Anglican, or you are not very good or worthy ... you think you don't belong. Paul says to you, in Jesus' name, "you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ". You are not excluded, you are included. You belong.

If you're still not convinced, verse 7 says that you are loved by God. '***To all in Rome who are loved by God.***' God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die for us. We were outside, shivering in the freezing cold, unable to move. It wasn't enough to open the door and let us come inside to the warmth, God had to send someone out to get us. But the effort it took to push us inside sapped the life from Jesus, and he himself was left outside, frozen to death. He died in our place. That is love. If you feel unloved by God, remember the cross. You belong. You so belong. It's unbelievable how much you belong.

Called to obey

In many Churches today, that is where my sermon today would end. With God reassuring us that we belong, that he loves us, that he will heal our pain and make

everything alright. Which is all true ... but also an inadequate explanation of what it means to follow Jesus. We are called to obey.

Even worse, the focus of some Christian teaching seems to be on personal fulfilment. As if God saves us to help us reach our goals and achieve our dreams. The problem is that this is extremely selfish, and keeps me at the centre of my world. That's sin! Self-focus is what Jesus has rescued us from, not what Jesus has rescued us for. He wasn't born as a baby, killed as a man and resurrected as Lord so that you and I could fulfil our dreams. We are called to obey.

If we focus on the relief of our pain or the fulfilment of our desires, we have forgotten that second part part of God's call. In verse 7, Paul says, '**to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints**'. To be a saint means to be set apart for God's purposes; marked for higher things.

You and I are called to be set apart for God alone. So we must ask the question, 'If we are set apart for God's purposes, what does God intend to do with us?'. The answer to this is in verse 5, the part we skipped over earlier on. Paul was an apostle, '**to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith**'. We are called to obey. Jesus is our Lord, verses 4 and 7; he's our boss.

Imagine you got offered a job, and you turned up for your first day. Let's say you're an office worker. You get shown your desk, given some business cards with your name on it; you have your computer, your filing cabinet ... you *belong* in this place of work. Which of us would be so foolish as to sit there and do nothing; just enjoy belonging? That's clearly not why you have been employed ... you have been employed, given a place, to work. And so it is with following Jesus. We are called to obey.

Obedience comes from faith, says the verse. If you believe in Jesus; that he died in your place, that he rose from the dead so that you could have life, that he holds your future in the palm of his hand ... then you will want to obey him as Lord. Out of thankfulness and awe and love and joy.

So you have not simply been called to belong, you have been called to obey. Are you listening? Given that Paul has already spoken of calling people from all nations ... let's think for a moment about what God commands us to do for all nations. Jesus said, '**Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**'. Including ... making disciples of all nations! If you believe that the name of Jesus should be honoured by all people everywhere, what obedience comes from that faith?

I'm not saying that you should be the person who explains the gospel fully to them, or that you will do all the teaching, we make disciples as a Church. Romans 12:6 says that we all have different gifts, according to the grace gives us. Some will teach, others will encourage, others will serve. But for the sake of the name of Jesus, we all use whatever God has given us to make disciples.

We live in a remarkable part of the world, where there are many nations, many languages, many cultures. Outside Church, how many people do you know by name who don't speak your first language? Do you have friends who are from other nations? If not, then why not? Don't you want to obey Jesus, and make disciples of all nations?

Brothers and sisters, we all have a call. It comes from God, thorough other people like Paul. It is a call to belong and to obey. If you belong, then you have a call to make disciples of all nations. All of us have the responsibility of making connections with those of other nations, to make friends. I'm going to give us all some time now to make a list of people we could befriend. Neighbours, work-mates, people at the shops ... whoever.