

All Roads Lead Here: The Super Glue Church
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 9:9-11; Mark 1:35-39; Romans 15:22-33

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 15:22-33. For context, we're going to start with verse 20 from last week. May God speak to our hearts and minds through the reading of His precious and inerrant Word. "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. 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 see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. 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. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen."

Dunkirk. It's become famous since this year's Academy-Award nominated film came out this summer. As some of you now know, Dunkirk is where World War II went terribly wrong for the Allied forces. Hundreds of thousands of men were stranded on Dunkirk beach as the German forces closed in. Due to the incredible bravery of thousands of British civilians who sailed their yachts and pleasure cruise boats across the English Channel, a huge number of British soldiers were saved and brought home to fight another day.

But the thing you might not know from the film is that it wasn't just British soldiers who were kept from becoming prisoners of war. The Dunkirk effort picked up nearly 140,000 soldiers from France, Belgium, Poland, and the Netherlands. What became known by Winston Churchill as "the miracle of Dunkirk" wasn't just about saving one group of people from destruction. It was about rescuing the vast majority of the Allied forces – forces that would eventually play a huge role in liberating Europe from the Nazis.

I was reminded of that fact about *Dunkirk* when I started reading today's passage for the first time because it's an illustration of what we see as Paul continues to finish his letter to the church in Rome. He's not concerned about just his "home" church or even the churches he's had a hand in starting. He's linking churches all over the Roman world into what we might call The Super Glue Church. They're all interconnected in their love of Jesus and caring for one another.

Paul begins to explain why, despite his eagerness to visit the church in Rome, why he hasn't been there yet. He explains he has "often been hindered from coming" because God had put it on his heart to preach the gospel where no one had yet heard of Christ. Paul might have wanted to visit, but he knew that wasn't where he was most needed. It made no sense for him to abandon his work just to visit the saints in Rome.

Even though his work where he is has finished up, he doesn't make his way to Rome for a vacation. His plan is to head to Spain, and to use Rome as a stepping stone to get there. He always has the end goal in mind – to continue to make Christ known wherever God's Spirit leads. He'll enjoy their company for a while, he says, but then he will head north – and use whatever assistance they can give him.

Now church history tells us that Paul did eventually make it to Rome, but not the way he had planned. Paul was arrested for preaching the gospel and causing riots among the religious pagans that though he was harming the worship of their gods. Because he was a Roman citizen, he had the right to appeal to Caesar. So he did, and the local authorities had no choice but to go along with it. But Paul wound up traveling to Rome in chains, arriving after a near-fatal shipwreck and countless hardships. He got to go to Rome, but he was on house arrest for at least two years before appealing to Caesar and being set free. We don't know if he ever made it to Spain before Nero came to power and he was executed during Nero's persecution of believers.

With this backdrop in mind, let's talk about four core ideas Paul gets across here. They aren't his central purpose in writing; it seems to me that Paul was primarily relating his travel plans and asking for assistance and prayer along the way. But the underlying assumptions that go more or less unstated tell us a lot about how the global church should operate.

The first idea is this: *the global church, the Super Glue church, assumes unity*. This is probably the most hidden concept, the one lurking in the background. But Paul speaks matter-of-factly about all these churches working together. Of course the churches in Macedonia and Achaia are pleased to help the church in Jerusalem. Of course you'll assist me when I get ready to head to Spain. Of course we're working together. We know from the other letters that each church had its own problems, but the assumption is that we're all in this together.

Talking to people over the years, I've realized that most folks – Christians and non-Christians alike – have no idea what denominations are about. We're a part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church...but very few people have any idea what's the difference between a Presbyterian and a Lutheran and a Catholic and a Baptist. A lot of people think they are completely different religions, which in most circumstances isn't true.

Modern denominations came about as likeminded people with similar understandings of the Bible came to work together toward common goals. For a very long time, there was a realization that even though we might not see eye to eye on everything, there are basics we can agree upon that allow us to do ministry together. Most denominations exist to give structure to the larger global church. They give us opportunities to do together what we couldn't accomplish separately. And while significant disagreements keep the denominations from working together on some things, many times we can come together about matters on which we all agree.

For example, at Compassion Pregnancy Center where I work part-time, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Wesleyans, Catholics, Baptists, all work together for the same thing. We want the lives of children to be spared and souls to be saved. We sometimes disagree about theology, but we keep the main ministry in mind to work together. That kind of unity existed in the early church. Sometimes people forget their commitments to God, His Word, and His gospel, and we have to divide. Yet God is greatly glorified when we work together in His name.

It's also why the rise of non-denominational churches worries me. Many churches have no connection to other churches. There's no guidance, support, accountability. The church sinks or swims on the charisma of the pastor or the strength of their programs. Now non-denominational churches can do great things and work with other churches. But every church needs to be connected to others it can partner with in ministry. We are meant to be Christ's body around the world, united in sharing His message, His love, and His salvation and living it out.

The second idea that Paul makes us think about is this: *the global church supports local congregations in times of hardship and trouble*. In Paul's time, the congregation in most need of financial help was the church in Jerusalem. The birthplace of the church had serious financial problems. Jerusalem had become a divided city between Jews and Christians. Christians were unwelcome and shunned; they lost the support of their families who rejected Jesus.

The Jerusalem church may also have run into problems because, in its earliest days, the wealthy sold off most everything they had to support others in the church. Acts says that "no one was in need" during that era in the church because "everyone held everything in common." The problem is, the Jerusalem church grew and grew, including a lot of folks who didn't have much money, and that communal life couldn't hold up.

Paul had a deep concern for those living in Jerusalem. For one, the vast majority of the Christians there were Jewish converts; they were inheriting their birthright, and at the same time they were being disowned by their families and friends who didn't believe that Jesus was their Messiah. He felt the larger church owed its existence to these faithful Christians of Jewish heritage who gave up everything in order to follow the truth.

Beyond that, Jerusalem was the birthplace of the church, the city where God had been worshipped for a thousand years, and the place that would be restored in God's Kingdom even when the heavens and earth passed away. Last but not least, he cared deeply for the people who were under persecution from the religious authorities and had virtually nothing. They had supported him even though he was once their persecutor, forcing them to scatter throughout the Roman Empire. The least he could do was to take up collections for them during his travels.

Moving it into our time...CrossWay exists because our denomination believed in us and supported us financially. There were times we weren't sure if the finances would hold out, but churches in the EPC and our local presbytery – the gathering of our denomination in our three closest states – came through. They put this into practice. We even received donations from a small Spanish-language church in Texas where I'm friends with the pastor. They supported us. And while we're still tiny, once our finances get settled with the great situation in our new space, we'll be able to support others.

While the church has to spend money on itself – the pastor, local aid and charity, programs for the people who come – we also want to help those who are connected to us. It's why we regularly pray for churches in our area. We are in this together, and when we struggle, we should support one another. I've been befriended by pastors in the local ministerial group for years. We have been on the receiving end for a while...and as we share, as we pray, as we grow, we'll look to be on the giving end.

Our third principle from the early church: *the global church spearheads mission beyond its current borders*. Paul didn't go out on his own just planting churches because he felt like it. He was called by God to do it in Acts 13. The early church confirmed that calling and sent him out with Barnabas to do it with the leading of the Holy Spirit. (Later on, Silas and Luke, the writer of the gospel, would travel with him.) But God spoke to the church confirming their call. And ultimately, the church funded Paul's missionary journeys. When we look at Paul's language carefully in the Greek, he's not just asking the Roman church for funding. He's asking for some of them to accompany him on the journey, to be his partners and assist his travels.

I've heard from lots of people when I talk about serving other countries and supporting missions work, "Don't we have enough people to help here?" Of course we do – part of our job is to help in our local community not just with physical needs but to let people know there's a God who loves them and desires them in His Kingdom. But another significant part of our job is to be part of the missions process, to make sure people around the world who haven't learned about Jesus know who He is and come to faith in Him.

Almost everyone in this room is a Christian because of a missionary effort at some point in history. Our ancestors may have been believers stepping off the Mayflower or coming here from Poland or Germany or someplace in Africa or South America. But if they were, it was because someone told them about Jesus in their home countries. Because unless your family hails from the Middle East near to ancient Israel, someone at some point went and converted the people in the lands where your ancestors came from.

The church is called to provide for and support missionaries, which is why we pray for different missionaries every week, and some of us send funds as we can. Because those called to missions work do not have it easy. Paul could list the countless times he nearly died spreading word of Jesus. In the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the majority of our missionaries are sent to areas where we cannot use their last names because they could be killed, jailed, or thrown out if word leaked that they were Christian mission workers.

All the yearly business of the church from our General Assembly is broadcast on the Internet except the half-hour commissioning of our missionaries. Our folks agree to a creed when they go that they know where they are going is dangerous and they might not come back. They are willing to go because of their call, and because it is so incredibly important for people to hear the gospel and respond. Because we believe that the world's only hope is Jesus. The only way to be saved from the rightful punishment due us for our sins is to have Jesus stand in our place as our advocate and sacrifice. Our missionaries are willing to live and die to proclaim that good news, that there is hope and peace and joy that can only be found through faith in the Son of God.

It's difficult work, and we recognize our call to our missionaries is especially tough. And that leads into our final theme from Paul, the one perhaps we need to practice most: *the Super Glue church prays for each other, especially those in authority, ministry, and leadership*. Paul says, "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed."

There's one thing I've come to learn in ministry, and I easily forget it, and I have to remind myself of it all the time. Prayer is the most important work of the church. We can build buildings, we can establish churches, we can send missionaries, we can even tell people about Jesus, but if there's no prayer over it, if we haven't been in conversation with the Lord about it, even if it looks to be successful, it will still be missing the blessing of the Holy Spirit. It will be missing God's approval. We can work and work and work and still not accomplish what God has in mind if we haven't talked to Him.

Prayer is what makes our work effective for God's Kingdom. Not because prayer is some miracle tool by which we get God's blessing, but prayer is how we come to Him in humility and ask for His will rather than ours to be done. Prayer is how we recognize that some things that could look to be His plans really aren't. Prayer isn't about getting our way but aligning our will with God's will. It's through prayer that Paul's call to be a missionary to the Gentiles was revealed. It was through prayer that they discerned where they were to go and not go. It was because of prayer that the ministry took root and flourished.

Not only does prayer bring us around to God's way of thinking, it also joins us to those on the frontlines. We may not be a Paul out on the wild edge of the world, but we can join in partnership with missionaries and their struggle by praying for them. You may not be called as a pastor, but when you pray for me and for others who are ministering, you join us in the fight. And because God is pleased to answer the prayers of His people, the course of events can be influenced by our heartfelt cries. Paul asked for prayers that he might not fall into the hands of the Jewish leaders in Israel – and in fact, he didn't, when easily he could have. You may never know how God has steered history based on what you ask of Him to do that aligns with His will and purposes.

We are in this together – brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. He has brought us together as the church so that the world may see that He is Savior and Lord. And He's given us ways to come together, to be the Super Glue church – by unifying around our trust in Jesus, by supporting those congregations in need, by spearheading mission, and by praying. May we love our brothers and sisters, the saints who make up Christ's church, and prove through the church that God is at work in our world.