

First things first

Romans 11:33–12:2

Dr. Tom Riley

Anne and I recently visited our old stomping grounds in Kentucky and Tennessee. It was just south of Nashville, in the town of Franklin, that we decided to begin church planting after years of working with large churches. I still remember sitting with my church-planting mentor (Scotty Smith, of Christ Community Church) at the Mercantile Cafe. He scribbled some thoughts on a napkin. My mind exploded.

Drawing a series of circles he described the appropriate move for reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus. The first circle: Gospel Astonishment. The second circle: Gospel Community. The third circle: Gospel Movement. You will need to see the graph in the sermon to get the flow.

I knew church growth principles like the back of my hand. I would summarize the principles I've used to help churches grow this way: (1) Prayer, (2) Groups [7:100 members], (3) Celebrative Worship, (4) Empowering Leadership, (5) Ministry Staff [1:100 members], (6) Healthy Families, (7) Patience/Unity, and (8) Prayer. The bookends are prayer. The key is letting God lead us together in patience and unity. And the other principles work to create a healthy climate for reaching the lost.

What blew my mind was Scotty's description of the Biblical flow. Gospel astonishment leads to gospel community, which leads to gospel movement. If we pursue gospel movement before being astonished, we have the proverbial "cart before the horse."

The Book of Romans provides us with a powerful example. The first eleven chapters display the wonders of what God has done in the redemptive process. Chapter 11:33ff. presents a doxology, an explosion of praise! This serves as the hinge for Paul's letter to the Romans. After the praise comes the "therefore" (or in the EVD, "so").

God's creative wonders are phenomenal! Think of the images from the Hubble Telescope. Or, we could consider beauties in Spain: the Guadarramas, a lightning bolt over Madrid, or a sunset at Las Lagunas. More recently, Anne and I explored the Cuevas del Águila. Spectacular stalactites and stalagmites! The wonders of God's creation.

Then, there's Baptism Sunday at Immanuel Baptist Church of Madrid. Wow! What wonders we get to behold!

Wonders of God:

- Creation had a starting point.
- Creation declares the Way Maker's glory!
- Creation points to the Great Designer!
- Creation emphasizes the power and wisdom and beauty of our awesome Promise Keeper!
- Our text marvels at another creation of beauty ... God's promise keeping design of hope in Christ!

Regarding our Baptism Sunday, here's a quote from Yale Divinity School's Aidan Kavanagh ("The True Believer," *The Sign* [April 1978], 10):

"The Church is the blood-filled corps of those who have been plunged into Christ's death and who live his eerie resurrection life around a sacrificial table. To these, nothing human or divine is alien. They are the living battlefield where heaven and earth, life and death, spirit and flesh slam together and fuse. Baptism is nothing less than Christ's own passion, death, and resurrection thrown open to all. It is the Church's constant birth, fresh and new."

Considering the context of our text in Romans 11:33–12:2, Roman Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) expelled all Jews from the city of Rome. This included Christian Jews. Roman historian Suetonius noted that Claudius "... expelled all the Jews from Rome because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus" (*Life of Claudius* 25.2). This meant that for the first time in history there was a church that was totally Gentile. Later, when the Jews were allowed to return to the city of Rome, there would be a need to love and compromise concerning the way to follow God in a diverse culture.

For example, Priscilla and Aquila were a Jewish couple who believed in Jesus. They met Paul in Corinth after being expelled from Rome (Acts 18:1-2). They travelled with Paul to Ephesus and remained there while he traveled on to Caesarea (Acts 18:19). Later, they returned to Rome and hosted a house church in their home (Rom. 16:4-5).

No wonder Paul focuses so much on God's astonishing work of redemption—for the Jew first and also for the Gentile.

Chuck Swindoll tells the moving story of an American soldier on the streets of London after WWII. One of the saddest sights was that of orphaned children living in the streets. This soldier noticed a small lad with his nose pressed against the window of a bakery. As the smell of fresh donuts filled the air, the hungry boy stared in silence.

The soldier's heart went out to the boy: "Son...would you like some of those?"

"Oh, yes! I would!"

The soldier entered the shop, bought a dozen donuts, put them in a bag. He walked out and handed them to the boy: "Here you go."

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. There was the child ... who asked quietly: "Mister, ...are you God?"

Oh, the wonder of God's love. He gave it all for us (John 3:16). Notice these things that boggle the mind:

- God's love is beyond our imagination.
- Our power is linked to Christ.
- Our hope is alive and moving with the Holy Spirit.
- Our joy is steadfast in the face of life, or death.
- Our love is defined by the cross.
- Our grace is fueled by God's grace.

Read Romans 11:33—12:2. Stop. Read it again. Notice the explosion of praise, followed by the "therefore" of our response. *It's the Indicative / Imperative.*

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴ "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

It's what God has done, followed by our logical response of a life that climbs onto the altar of love and service to God. So, we love one another. And the church moves from Gospel Astonishment to Gospel Community ... then on the Gospel Movement (as the letter closes with the mention of several house churches in Rome carrying the love of God into their neighborhoods).

One of my favorite movies of all time is "Chariots of Fire." It depicts the life of Christian missionary Eric Liddell, who won Olympic gold before becoming a missionary to China. His classic statement sticks with me: "When I run, I feel God's glory."

As we see God's glory everywhere around us, we somehow are allowed to become the embodiment of that cruciform glory—within the body of Christ, and beyond.