

To the Jew First

The Books of Romans is considered Paul's greatest theological work. It is placed first among his 13 epistles. In the first chapter of Romans, Paul makes a strong statement:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first** and also to the Greek (v.16).*

What does Paul mean when he says that the gospel is “to the Jew first”? Does this mean that the Jew is better than the non-Jew? No. Paul goes on to stress Jewish and Gentile equality in the Lord. As far as salvation is concerned, they are equal before God (2:7-12; 3:9-31; 4:9-12; 5:12, 17-19; 9:24; 10:12-13; 11:30-32).¹

First, Paul's words reflect a historical priority in going to the Jew first. It is a simple fact that Jesus offered the Good News to the Jew before offering it to the Gentile. When Jesus sent out the 12 disciples to preach and minister in Matthew 10:5-6, He said, *Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

Second, there is a covenant priority in going to the Jew first. Salvation by faith has primary relevance to the Jew since they were chosen by God to be the recipients of the promised Messiah. Paul said he wished he could be *accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from who is the Christ according to the flesh* (Romans 9:3-5). Paul goes on to say, *...from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable* (Romans 11:28-29).

Third, “there is a present priority to proclaim the Gospel to the Jew, and the Church should acknowledge it.”¹¹ Dr. Mitch Glaser, current president of Chosen People Ministries, wrote that Christians today should have,

“a priority of Gospel concern for the Jewish people...Perhaps the most lucid explanation of the Present Priority view of Romans 1:16 can be found in the statement of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism, Occasional Papers #7:

‘There is, therefore a great responsibility laid upon the church to share Christ with the Jewish people. This is not to imply that Jewish evangelism is more important in the sight of God, or that those involved in Jewish evangelism have a higher calling. We observe that the practical application of the scriptural priority is difficult to understand and apply. We do not suggest that there should be a radical application of the “to the Jew first” in calling on all the evangelists, missionaries, and Christians to seek out the Jews within their sphere of witness before speaking to non-

Jews! Yet we do call the church to restore ministry among this covenanted people of God to its biblical place in the strategy of world evangelization.”ⁱⁱⁱ

How do we know that Paul meant Romans 1:16 to be a present priority? We can only know it by looking at Paul’s life and pattern. *According to Paul’s custom* (Acts 17:2), he first stop was the local synagogue. In Acts, Paul’s evangelism strategy included “to the Jew first” in Salamis (13:5), Pisidion Antioch (13:14), Iconium (14:1), Thessalonica (17:2), Berea (17:10), Athens (17:17), Corinth (Acts 18:4) and Ephesus (19:8).

Also while in prison in Rome, Paul *called together...the leading men of the Jews* and solemnly testified to them of Jesus (Acts 28:17, 23). Some believed and some did not. Paul rebuked the unbelieving and declared this salvation would now be sent to the Gentiles, and *they will also listen* (Acts 28:28).^{iv}

Was Paul saying in these closing words of Acts, that Romans 1:16 was no longer a priority for the Jew? No. This would contradict Paul’s clear teaching in Romans 9-11.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles...if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead. (Romans 11:11-15).

As Gentiles are saved, it somehow provokes Jews to jealousy and leads to their salvation. And as Jews are saved, it eventually means “life from the dead.” In other words, when the Jewish people turn to the Lord, the resurrection will occur.

Israel as a nation, and as a people, will someday have a “believing majority”^v (Romans 11:25-27). On one hand, Jesus said that the Jewish people would not see Him again until they say, *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord* (Matthew 23:38).^{vi} On the other hand, Jesus said the end would not come until *this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations* (Matthew 24:14).

Paul felt bound by duty to follow the Jewish pattern of “hastening the Messiah’s coming” (2 Peter 3:12), “by evangelizing the Jews indirectly (Romans 11:13-14), as well as directly (Acts 9:28; I Corinthians 9:19-23).”^{vii} As believers, we have a responsibility to unashamedly take the Gospel to the Jewish people as well as the Gentiles of every nation. As we do, we cooperate with God in fulfilling His great end-time plan for world evangelization before Jesus’ soon return.

Fuller Theological Seminary released the following statement emphasizing the present priority of Romans 1:16:

”Dean Authur F. Glasser and the School of World Mission faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary feel constrained to address ourselves and the Church at large concerning the Jewish people....We wish to charge the Church, as a whole, to do more than merely include the Jewish people in their evangelistic outreach. We would encourage an active response to the mandate of Romans 1:16 calling for evangelism "to the Jew first." For this we have the precedent of a great Jewish missionary, the Apostle Paul. Though sent to the Gentile world, he never relinquished his burden for his own kinsmen after the flesh. Wherever he traveled, he first visited the synagogue before presenting Christ to the Gentiles. So it must be in every generation. We must provide a priority opportunity for our Jewish friends to respond to the Messiah....More; we feel it incumbent on Christians in all traditions to reinstate the work of Jewish evangelism in their missionary obedience. Jewish-oriented programs should be developed. Appropriate agencies for Jewish evangelism should be formed. And churches everywhere should support those existing institutions which are faithfully and lovingly bearing a Christian witness to the Jewish people.”^{viii}

ⁱ David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1996), p. 329.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Don Finto, Your People Shall Be My People (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), pp.79-80.

^v For a discussion explaining Hebrew thought in “all Israel shall be saved,” see David H. Stern, Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel (Jerusalem, Israel: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1988), p.26.

^{vi} Daniel Juster and Keith Intrater, Israel, the Church and the Last Days ((Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishing, 1991), pp. 78-79.

^{vii} See Stern’s notes on how “hastening” the coming of the Messiah is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, JNTC, pp. 412, 764-767.

^{viii} Authur F. Glasser, Fuller Theological Seminary News Release, May 12, 1976.