

Romans

Bible Study

To the Jew First

Romans 1:16

There is an interesting, and often misunderstood, phrase Paul uses, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” The word used for “Greek” can refer to someone living in Greece, someone who speaks Greek, or a Gentile. Since Jew is contrasted with Greek, it would lead one to believe Paul is contrasting the Jews with non-Jews, the Gentiles. But, what exactly does Paul mean by this statement. Is Paul speaking merely chronologically, that God had worked with the Jews before he included the Gentiles? Or does it mean that the Jews have a special priority over the Gentiles, perhaps even to this day. Are we to give Jews the first opportunity to hear the gospel before reaching out to Gentiles?

Historically, God did deal with Israel before dealing with the Gentiles as individuals. It was through Israel that Scripture was given to mankind. Jesus’ ministry was to Israel, and to Israel alone. When He met Gentiles, He passed over them, except in a couple of instances. He instructed His Disciples to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 10:6) and that they were to be witnesses beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). There is no record of the Disciples ever leaving Jerusalem. It was only after the Apostle Paul was raised up that there was any significant outreach to the Gentiles.

It is certainly true that the Jews did have first opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. It was only after the Jews rejected their Messiah that the call went out to the Gentiles through the Apostle Paul. However, is this what Paul was thinking when he said to the Jew first?

First in tribulation

We are given some insight into what Paul was thinking in Romans 2:8—11. Here Paul says that of those who do not obey the truth will come tribulation and anguish, to the Jew first. He also says that those who do good will receive glory, honor and peace, to the Jew first. Paul was going to the Jew first because, according to Acts 13:46, Paul and Barnabas were required to go to the Jew first. It would seem that the Lord told them to make reaching the Jews a priority as they travel and preach the gospel of Grace.

The answer to this problem is given to us in the Bible, specifically in Romans 2:11 where Paul says that God is no respecter of persons. When Paul says he will go to the Jew first, it would appear that he is giving the Jew priority. This is where we need to connect Romans 2:11 with Romans 1:16. It must be understood that while Paul says he is going to the Jews first, he is also going to the Gentiles. He is reaching out to both groups, something that Peter did not do. When Peter was told to go see Cornelius, he told him that it was unlawful for a man who is a Jew to keep company with one from another nation (Acts 10:28). Peter was going to the Jews only, as instructed by Jesus. Paul’s ministry was to both Jews and Gentiles, ministering without distinction.

This does seem to conflict with the agreement that Paul and Peter had in Galatians 2:7. Most read this verse to be saying that Paul was going to preach to the Gentiles (uncircumcision) and Peter would preach to the Jews (circumcision). Understanding that God sent Paul to both Jews and Gentiles helps us understand the true meaning of Galatians 2:7. This verse is not about going to different people groups, but about preaching two different Gospels. Peter would minister to those who previously believed the Gospel of the Kingdom (those we find in Jerusalem in Acts 21), while Paul was ministering to those who believed the Gospel of Grace. Peter was not actively preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom because the Kingdom offer had already been withdrawn with the stoning of Stephen, but Paul was actively preaching the Gospel of Grace.

Late Acts spin

Those who believed the church began in Acts 28 use Romans 1:16 to “prove” that Paul was preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. They believe the Jews had the opportunity to accept the Kingdom offer until the end of Acts. They believe it’s only after Paul declares, in Acts 28:28, that salvation is now sent to the Gentiles

that God put Israel aside and began dealing with the Gentiles. The early books of Paul (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Thessalonians) are thus seen as being written to Israel, leaving his final seven books as being written to the church.

There are a number of problems with this view. First, Paul never offered the earthly Kingdom to Israel. Peter offered the Kingdom to Israel in Acts 3 and Israel answered through the stoning of Stephen.

Second, Romans speaks of the believer today as already having received our spiritual blessings. It includes having peace with God (Romans 5:1), access, a standing in grace (5:2), being justified (5:9), and reconciled (5:10). All these things are a present reality and are congruent with the blessings listed in the book of Ephesians.

In contrast to the church, Israel is looking forward to having their sins forgiven. This is what Paul states in Romans 11:25—27, as he speaks of Israel's Kingdom program. This is in full agreement with Jeremiah 31:31—34 that promises a New Covenant will be made with Israel at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. God will forgive them (Ezekiel 16:60—63), however, our sins have been forgiven, as evidenced by us being redeemed (Ephesians 1:7). We are washed and sanctified (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Third, both Romans 12:4—5 and Ephesians 2:16 speak of the one body. The Acts 28 adherents claim there are two different bodies in view, the earlier Kingdom body, and the latter Church body. There is no biblical evidence that this is the case. The one body in Christ of Romans is the same body, made up of believers who are in Christ (Ephesians 3:6). This body is made up of Jews and Gentiles without distinction in both Romans 2:8—11; 10:12; 11:11 and Ephesians 3:6. The Gentiles have risen to be equal with the Jews so that there is now no difference between the two groups. This was not the case when the Gospel of the Kingdom was being proclaimed.

These are just a very few of the many arguments showing that the church could not have started after the end of the book of Acts.

Why to the Jews first?

Paul said it was necessary to reach out to the Jews first (Acts 13:46). He would begin his ministry in a new area by going to the synagogue to reason with the Jews (Acts 18:19). Why would he do this when Israel had already lost the opportunity to accept the offer of the Kingdom?

Note that even though Paul made sure to share the Gospel with the Jews, he never ignored the Gentiles. To the contrary, he understood they were on the same level so that the Gentiles were able to believe apart from Israel (Romans 9:24, 30; 11:11—13). In the future, after the close of this Dispensation of Grace, the believing Jews will be ruling over the Gentiles in the earthly Kingdom (Romans 15:12), but now individuals are able to come to Christ without going through the nation of Israel.

Israel was given every opportunity to believe in Christ. They had the testimony of John the Baptist, of Jesus Christ, and of His Disciples. They were given one additional year to believe (Luke 13:6—9). Even the Assyrians and Babylonians were used by God to turn Israel to Him (Joel 2:13). These opportunities to believe all speak of God's great mercy and love. He continued to reach out to Israelites even after Stephen was stoned to death. He did so through the Apostle Paul with the Gospel of Grace. This continued until the end of the book of Acts, allowing Paul to cover most geographical areas inhabited by the Jews. In each area, he was soundly rejected by the Jews, and as a result, he declared that he was now going to focus on the Gentiles without giving Israel preference. He did this at least three times as recorded in Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:28. In His mercy, God even allowed the sign gifts to continue until the end of Acts to give the Jews every possible opportunity to believe.

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