

## Ministry News

Many Christians think that the Church was at its best in the first century. It was blessed in many ways. It manifested wisdom, power, purity and zeal. It made a tremendous impact on the world. Why? The Church that was directed by the Jewish Apostles was a Church that understood the Scriptures. It was a Church that understood the Jewish roots of the Faith. It was a Church that understood the importance of Israel in the mind, heart and plan of God. It was a Church that was faithful to the command to bring the Good News about the Messiah to the Jew first.

Might one of the reasons why the present-day Church lacks power, purity and unity be because we have failed to understand the importance of Israel? The Lord declared to Abraham: I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. To be blessed, Gentiles are to pray for the Jewish people's well-being and success. Non-Jews, even Christian ones (and particularly Christian ones), are to seek Israel's good and support God's special plans for the Chosen People. Might the Church be lacking all of the blessing it should be enjoying because Messiah's Holy Community has not blessed the descendants of Abraham with the best blessing of all: bringing the Message of Salvation to the Jewish people first? Hasn't the Church neglected the command to bring the Gospel to the Jew first? Hasn't the Church abandoned the God-ordained priority of Jewish evangelism?

One of the fundamental responsibilities of the Church is to carry out the Great Commission - that important task that Messiah commanded His followers to engage in with Him: Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you (Matthew 28:18-20). Since world evangelism is an essential duty of the Church, it is vital that we follow the Bible's evangelistic methods and priorities. The sequence for world evangelism is stated by the Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles in Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel (the Good News about salvation made possible by the Messiah for those who trust in Him), for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." This is the biblical order for evangelism, regardless of the medium (radio, television, street meetings, literature distribution, door-to-door visitation, mass evangelism, ads in the media, the Internet, etc.).

What is true for the local church is also true for the missionary in the field. He must first take the Good News about Messiah to any Jewish people who may be in the region where he is working. Regardless of his particular place of calling, his obligation is to give evangelistic priority to the Jewish people and present them with the message of salvation. Where there is already a clear biblical command, no special "leading" is necessary. Many missionaries may object, but there is a biblical and an apostolic example in Paul, even though he was not called to the Jews, but to the Gentiles: In Romans 11:13 he tells us: "I am the apostle to the Gentiles." Paul's ministry to the Gentiles was different from Peter's ministry to the Jewish people: Seeing that I had been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Peter and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (Galatians 2:7-9).

Only if Romans 1:16 is understood in this way can one better understand Paul's actions in the Book of Acts. While one must be careful not to develop theology from historical books like the Book of Acts, historical books can be used to illustrate doctrine. The doctrinal statement of Romans 1:16 is that the Good News is to go to the Jewish people first, and also to the Greeks. In the Book of Acts we find frequent examples of that doctrinal point. Acts 13 records the beginning of Paul's missionary work. The apostle to the Gentiles went to the Gentiles, since that was his calling. Yet, regardless of specific individual calling, in this case the need to go to the Gentiles, the principle of Romans 1:16 still stands - going to the Jewish people first - as Paul's procedure shows: So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews (Acts 13:4-5). Going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down (Acts 13:14). In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks (Acts 14:1).

Putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled (Acts 16:11-13). Normally, Paul would go immediately to the synagogue but in Philippi the Rabbi from Tarsus could not do that because the Jewish community in that town was too small to finance a synagogue. By Jewish tradition, if the Jewish community was too small to afford a synagogue, on the Sabbath the Jewish people were to congregate by a body of water. There, he found a little

Jewish group in order to preach the Gospel to them. Paul, knowing this, waited until the Sabbath before he preached elsewhere because he knew that the Good News must go to the Jew first.

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures (Acts 17:1-2). The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews (Acts 17:10).

Acts 17:16-17 is another good example that shows exactly what Paul's procedure was. Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. This great evangelist came to Athens and saw the city full of idolatry, and he was provoked to preach to those who worshiped these idols. It was not the Jews who worshiped idols, because idolatry ceased to be a Jewish problem with the Babylonian Captivity. It was the Gentiles who worshiped these idols, and to these Gentiles Paul was provoked to preach. However, the principal of Romans 1:16 had to stand. According to verse 17, "so," which means, "for that reason," Paul went to the Jewish people in the synagogue, and also to the Gentiles.

After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth... And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:1-4). They came to Ephesus... Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews (Acts 18:19). It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus... And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:1, 8).

When Luke comes to the end of Acts (his book of the deeds of Messiah's emissaries), he writes this: When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him. After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews (Acts 28:16-17). Paul was a prisoner and could not go to the synagogue of Rome. Therefore he invited the Jewish leaders of Rome to his prison in order to proclaim the Good News about the Messiah to them first. Everywhere in the Book of Acts it is recorded that the apostle to the Gentiles, consistent with his affirmation in Romans 1:16, always went to the Jew first. God's principle is that whenever the Good News goes out and by whatever means it goes out, it must go to the Jewish people first.

These examples in the Book of Acts are illustrations of active evangelism. The principle also holds true for passive evangelism. Passive evangelism is when an individual supports those who do the work of evangelism. He may not be able to leave home and preach the Good News to others, but he can commit to pray and give money to help someone else go.

Although the Scriptures are very clear about this God-ordained, to-the-Jew-first evangelistic priority, it is nevertheless denied by many. A major argument used to refute this doctrine is based on Acts 28:25-28: And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say, "you will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.'" Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.'" Because of these concluding words and Paul's declaration that the Good News will now go to the Gentiles, the passage is taken to mean that the Gospel is no longer to the Jew first and that God has now changed His program of evangelism, superceding Romans 1:16, which was written before the Book of Acts. It is agreed that Romans was written before Acts, but this passage does not mean that the Message of Salvation is no longer to go to the Jewish people first, or that God has changed His procedure for evangelism.

The true meaning of Acts 28:25-28 is found by comparing this passage with two other passages where similar words were spoken before. The next Sabbath nearly the whole city (Pisidian Antioch) assembled to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the Earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed (Acts 13:44-48). But when Silas and Timothy came down from

Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Yeshua was the Messiah. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18:5-6). Acts 28:25-28 is to be understood by these two passages, which indicate a local change and not an overall change in the program of world evangelism. In the first passage, the Jewish people of Antioch of Pisidia rejected the message about the Messiah; so now in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul will go to the Gentiles. In the second passage, the Jews of Corinth rejected the Gospel; so now Paul will turn to the Gentiles of Corinth. Whenever he left for a new territory, he consistently sought out the Jewish community first, even in those instances in which he had declared in the previous locale that he would now go to the Gentiles. What was true of Antioch of Pisidia and Corinth is also true of Rome. The Jewish leaders of Rome rejected the Good News, and now Paul will go to the Gentiles of Rome. There is no shift in the procedure of presenting the Messiah of Salvation. Acts 28 is only a continuation of the procedure already established of presenting the Gospel to the Jew first and then turning to the Gentiles.

In relation to evangelism and missions, the Good News must still go to the Jewish people first. This is not a matter of preference, but a matter of God-ordained priority. It has to do with the plan of God. It has to do with the nature of the Chosen People. It is connected to the covenant that God made with Abraham. It is in the outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant in this area that the local congregation can appropriate certain blessings, for in giving the Gospel to the Jew first, the Church is blessing the Jews.

There are certain blessings that the local church will always have as long as the Gospel is preached and the local congregation stands true to the fundamentals of the Faith. However, there are some blessings that are based on other conditions. The blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, available to the local congregation, are conditioned upon the congregation's blessing the Jewish people, by presenting the Good News to the Jew first, actively and passively, both through direct evangelism and by financial support and by prayer. Then the local church can legitimately appropriate the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant - blessings that can't be obtained any other way. By being faithful to the God-ordained priority of Jewish evangelism, the Church will be empowered. By blessing the Jews with the Good News, the Church will be blessed. Shouldn't every church, and every individual, and the entire Church of God, want those blessings? Maybe then the Church of the 21st century will enjoy the same kind of wisdom, power, purity, unity and zeal that the Apostolic Church enjoyed in the first century, and we will turn our world upside down - to His glory!