

DID THE APOSTLES DELAY PREACHING TO GENTILES OUT OF RACISM?

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Some claim that the apostles were disobedient to the Lord's command in Mat. 28:19 that they go and make disciples of *all nations* in that they initially preached the gospel only to Jews. This sometimes is coupled with an allegation that racism or prejudice against Gentiles caused the apostles to restrict the scope of the Great Commission to Jews living among the nations and that it took a special intervention by God at Cornelius's house to get them to accept that Gentiles were to be included within God's saving work. This may fit the emphasis on racism in modern American culture, but I think it is a misunderstanding of Scripture.

It is worth noting at the start that the religious, social, and cultural separation of Jews from Gentiles did not originate from racism or prejudice (though that may have followed) but was commanded by God as a means of keeping his special people free from influences that might hinder or corrupt their mission in his unfolding plan. The law not only distinguished Israel from the Gentiles in the broad sense that it defined a special relationship between God and Israel, but specific commandments produced social separation. There was a restriction on Jews marrying indigenous foreigners (Dt. 7:3-4; Ezra 9:1-2; Neh. 13:25-27), and the extensive regulations in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy defining ritual uncleanness (e.g., involvement with certain animals, foods, bleeding, corpses, and graves) meant that the noncomplying Gentiles were ritually defiling. This is why Paul in Eph. 2:14 refers to the law as "the dividing wall" and "the hostility." As Peter O'Brien comments, "[The law] separated Jews and Gentiles both religiously and sociologically and caused deep-seated hostility."¹

This is not to deny that many Jews in the first century felt superior to Gentiles, which further fueled the hostility of Gentiles toward Jews, but it was widely understood by Jews throughout history – based on texts like Gen. 22:18; Ps. 22:27-28, 86:8-9; Isa. 2:1-2; 9:1-2, 42:1-7, 49:6, 56:6-8, 60:1-3; Dan. 7:13-14; Hos. 2:23; Amos 9:11-12 – that Gentiles would have a place in the eternal kingdom of God. Indeed, in Acts 15:14-18 the Lord's brother James defended Peter's account of how God at Cornelius's house had included the Gentiles among his people by explaining that it was consistent with what God had said in Amos 9:11-12. God there revealed that he would raise up the "fallen tent" of David, a metaphor for the kingdom of David, and that this restored Davidic kingdom would include other nations. Since Jesus is the Davidic king promised by Amos and the restored Davidic kingdom to which Amos referred included Gentiles, James's point was that Peter's experience and testimony should not be resisted as theologically suspect. On the contrary, it was in accordance with God's revelation in Scripture.

The apostles were not sinless, but given that Gentile inclusion in salvation was a common Jewish expectation rooted in Scripture, it would be stunning if the Spirit-filled apostles allowed a personal dislike of Gentiles to cause them to withhold the gospel from them contrary to God's instruction. The fact there was no delay in preaching the gospel to ethnic Gentiles who previously had converted to Judaism, as indicated by the faith of the proselyte Nicolaus (Acts 6:5), shows that the delay in preaching to "non-Jewish Gentiles," those who had not converted to

¹ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 196.

Judaism, involved something beyond their ethnicity. It reflected the apostles' belief about how God intended the Great Commission to unfold.

The command in Mat. 28:19 that they were to make disciples of all nations was subject to the divine plan that the gospel first be preached to the Jews. This priority is reflected in the fact Jesus said he was sent *only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Mat. 15:24), instructed the Twelve to avoid the Gentiles and Samaritans and to go instead to *the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Mat. 10:5-7), and declared that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, *beginning from Jerusalem* (Lk. 24:47). Most clearly, Paul said in Rom. 1:16 that the gospel was the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, both *to the Jew first* and to the Greek. The proclamation of salvation was to unfold from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The details of the timing were not specified.

God chose the Jews as the people through whom the Christ was brought into the world, so it is not surprising that they were to be the first beneficiaries of the gospel, the first to have the good news preached to them. Indeed, this Jewish priority continued to be reflected in some outreach efforts long after the gospel was being preached to Gentiles (e.g., Acts 13:46). Rather than assert that the apostles initially preached only to Jews because of racism or prejudice against Gentiles, it is better to see their initial limited focus as an attempt to be faithful to Jewish priority in the divine plan.

When God dispersed the young Jewish church from Jerusalem to regions of Judea and Samaria in the persecution following the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1), he soon made clear in the events involving Cornelius that the gospel was to be preached to Gentiles *as Gentiles*, meaning without any requirement that they first convert to Judaism (Acts 10). Peter's initial hesitation about being the instrument of that revelation was rooted in religion not social prejudice. It was a matter of conscience based on a lifetime of sensitivity to the ritual contamination that he would face in the home of a Gentile. God patiently overcame Peter's reluctance in preparing him for his role.

In the wake of God's revelation at Cornelius's house, which became known throughout Judea (Acts 11:1), some Jewish Christians preached the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch to great effect (Acts 11:20-21). The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, not to find fault but to evaluate and report on the situation in this church. He was glad with what he saw and exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose (Acts 11:23). And since he was the church's emissary, his assessment as reported by Luke presumably reflects that of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Indeed, there is no hint of a contrary reaction.

It is true, of course, that some Jewish Christians resisted the truth revealed at Cornelius's house that Gentiles could be saved in Christ without coming under the Mosaic law. They so exalted the Mosaic covenant that they could not accept its planned obsolescence and thus made an idol of it. But as was made clear at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the apostles and leaders, in step with the Spirit, embraced the Gentile mission in terms of the gospel Paul preached (i.e., without requiring submission to the law). Even Peter, who had faltered in Galatia from fear of the circumcision group, forcefully sided with Paul. These brothers wrestled with how, not

whether, God intended for them to preach to the Gentiles, and there is no indication that racism or prejudice factored into their assessment. They preached first to the Jews, and the gospel that was preached to the Gentiles was free of any requirement that they commit to living under the law.