

## Article of the Month – March 2011

### Missiological Observations in the NT (1) – Romans

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This month we start a series on New Testament mission perspectives, in which we will look at all NT books except the Gospels and Acts. In May another series will start on 'Missions & Eschatology'. With these, the next 2½ years will be filled. We now start with the book of Romans. There are twelve observations I would like to share with you:

Paul gives two criteria for true salvation: confessing Jesus' Lordship with the mouth and believing with the heart that God raised Him from the dead.<sup>1</sup> This goes beyond raising one's hand or walking to the altar after a call to repentance. Whether Paul's conditions are met can only be verified in personal follow-up sessions. Anything less leads to self-deception.

He gives a perfect model for preaching the Gospel locally and mono-culturally (evangelism) as well as cross-culturally (missions) to the unreached: 'how can they believe, if they haven't heard or hear without preaching, and how can someone preach if he wasn't *sent*?'<sup>2</sup> In other words: no evangelist or missionary can or should work on his own, but should be sent by the church. Therefore, a church that shirks its responsibilities in this regard fails to fulfill the very reason for its existence, namely to reach the world for Christ.

Working hard at the evangelization of the Gentiles and thereby making the Jews envious, is one of Paul's major tactics in reaching the latter and lead them to accept the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> The principle stretches a lot further though and should not be limited to Jews; making people envious because of Christian love and unity among us was taught by Jesus already.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus said that 'the first will be last and the last will be first'.<sup>5</sup> Throughout His ministry the Jews were the first to receive the Gospel even though the majority rejected it. Then it went to the Gentiles and only after their full number has been saved will it be accepted by the Jews at a larger scale.<sup>6</sup> The basis for this grace is God's promises to the Patriarchs.<sup>7</sup>

When Paul says that 'God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all'<sup>8</sup> *he does not mean that everybody will be saved*. That would imply a doctrine of

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 10:9,10

<sup>2</sup> 10:14,15 (my paraphrase and italics)

<sup>3</sup> 11:11,14

<sup>4</sup> John 13:35; 17:23

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 19:30;20:16

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 11:25,27

<sup>7</sup> 11:28,29

<sup>8</sup> 11:32

universalism, which would be a hybrid element to Paul's teaching. What he *does* mean, is that God's offer of mercy should be *made available to all*. None is to be excluded.<sup>9</sup>

Dealing with the weak and the strong<sup>10</sup> has to be read *also* from a *missiological* perspective and the differences in opinion that surface from diverse cultural backgrounds taken into account. On the mission field, differing cultural opinions can become major stumbling blocks between nationals and cross-cultural missionaries. The same is true when the latter work in multi-cultural teams. Different cultural biases often form big barriers in World Missions. Rome was a multi-cultural society, a characteristic that was also reflected in the church. Paul's principles<sup>11</sup> stretch much further than eating meat or drinking wine: we should not please ourselves, thereby causing our brother to stumble over our differences whether cultural, social or spiritual.

All of us will be subject to God's judgment.<sup>12</sup> From an evangelism- and missions-perspective (apart from the direct context not to judge *one another*) this should be an encouragement for us to take the Gospel to literally every person.

Making the Gospel known where it is unavailable, in other words: giving priority to the unreached and least reached, is a Pauline principle<sup>13</sup> that has to rule World Missions today too. All too often missionary effort is directed to places where the Gospel can be heard 100 times a day, while those who have never heard it even once, are neglected.

Paul did not settle in areas that had become known or comfortable to him, nor did he ever assume any local leadership. A true missionary keeps moving. He had been working all the way from Jerusalem, to Antioch, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, and Illyricum (Albania and the Croatian coast). This was a huge area and it must have been very satisfying for Paul to be able to say that 'there is no more work for me in these regions'.<sup>14</sup> This is the reason why he looked at areas where he had not been yet, i.e. Spain.

Paul wasn't afraid to ask for the assistance of the Romans with regard to his planned trip to Spain – although he probably never got there. He does not specify the nature of that assistance, but specifically asked for prayer.<sup>15</sup> He refused to detach his missionary work from church-involvement.

He shares the principle, that *recipients* of the Gospel (i.e. Gentiles) should share their material means with its *senders* (i.e. Jews).<sup>16</sup> Paul elaborates on this several times in other letters.

The fact that the Gospel must be made known to all peoples is a mystery for most church leaders today. If World Missions is to receive the place it deserves, divine revelation is needed

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Pet. 3:9

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 14

<sup>11</sup> 14:1-15:7

<sup>12</sup> 14:10-12 – a judgment of our works, not of our faith

<sup>13</sup> 15:20,21

<sup>14</sup> 15:23,24. Paul did not mean that *every person* had heard the Gospel, but that *every different people group* had been reached. See J. Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1993/2007:179-181; 192-195; 208

<sup>15</sup> Rom. 15:30,31

<sup>16</sup> 15:26,27

for them, so that what has remained a poor side-show of the church<sup>17</sup> will finally become a major thrust.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Otis, *The Last of the Giants*, Chosen Books, New York, 1991:237,238

<sup>18</sup> Rom. 16:25,26