

BIBLE & BAGEL

Romans – Our Common Faith

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How did the Apostles communicate their thoughts and teachings in the first century before the advent of modern means of communication such as emails etc.? They did not even have photocopiers to make multiple copies of their letters. Every city or region such as Rome had many congregations and all of them had to hear the Word released by the Apostles. What they did was to just write one letter and deliver it to one city, the letter was passed from one congregation to the next once it had been read, so it was a circular letter.

Romans 1:8-17

8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. 9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, 10 making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. 11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established — 12 that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. 13 Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. 14 I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. 15 So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." NKJV

The Apostle Paul commends the Roman believers for their faith saying that they have gained a reputation for it throughout the whole world i.e. the Roman Empire which was vast stretching from Europe into Asia. He then says that he is always praying for them and has had a great desire to visit them but had been hindered. Paul greatly desired to go to Rome to visit the church so that he could impart something to them and establish them.

When he mentions “spiritual gift” here he is not speaking of the gifts of the Spirit as we Charismatic or Pentecostal Christians would often think. The Holy Spirit could easily give the people such gifts without Paul’s presence, he was speaking here of the Word, teaching. Paul says here that the Roman believers were famous for their faith, yet he desired to go to them to teach them so that they could be established. The Greek word for established is “sterizo” which means to set firm or to turn resolutely in a certain direction. This implies that the believers in Roman although renowned for their faith lacked something, they were not yet firmly established.

This tells us that we need to ensure that we are established in our faith. It is not enough to know Jesus to the point of salvation; we need to be firmly planted in the Word so that our life will take the right direction. When I was in the Philippines I have experienced some very strong winds when there was a typhoon blowing not too far away, I once saw a five gallon drum filled with earth and a plant in it being moved by a strong wind. The plant was moved because it was not firmly established in the ground. Storms will come in the course of our life, also the winds of strange doctrine and worldly thought processes are very strong today, and we need to be firmly planted in the Word of God to prevent being blown away easily. In giving the Great Commission,



Jesus did not tell his disciples to go and make converts; He told them to make disciples, we must grow from converts to disciples, from church-goer to a firm follower of Christ.

Paul also expresses his great desire to have some “fruit” among both Greeks i.e. Greek speaking people, even though the people were Romans, Greek was the common language. Who were the “barbarians” that he speaks of here? IN the NIV it says “non-Greeks” meaning those who were not born Greek, so we have to ask the question; who were the major people groups in the church in Rome? Aside from the Greeks they would be the Jews, thus he says in verse 16 that the gospel is for the Jew first and then the Greeks. It is interesting to note that Paul uses the Greek word “barbaros” to describe them, this has been translated in the NKJV as “barbarian”. Paul used this word because that was how Roman society viewed the Jews and anyone who worshipped only one god by Roman standards they were barbarians, uncultured.

The Romans considered the covenant people of God uncultured, barbaric even called them pagan, they were not really accepted in society and they brought these prejudices into the church. We have to check ourselves; do we bring our prejudices into church? Whether these prejudices are racial or status based. I have encountered churches in Singapore who are willing to accept foreign professional workers in their midst but not the construction workers, labourers and maids. In God's kingdom there must be no such prejudices. To be able to bear fruit we must remove prejudices which are like parasites on a plant that can eventually kill the plant, prejudices in the church will also kill the church eventually.

The Apostle turns this mentality on its head when he says that the gospel is to the Jew first and then the Greek. He is telling them that God's order is different than theirs; when placing the Jew first he is not saying that they are better rather this is the order that God ordained, just as He ordained the husband to be the head of the house and the wife and children to be submitted to him. God is not saying the husband is better but this is simply His order. The Apostle emphasizes their equality by saying that both Jew and Greek are justified by faith.

We have to ask ourselves are we willing to accept God's order of things, in the family are we willing to submit to the head of the house, in the church are we willing to submit to the appointed leaders? God honours an obedient and submissive spirit. For leaders, whether in the house or in the church we must not forget that we are not better than our family members or church members, we are all saved by faith in the same Lord and his completed work on the cross.

ⁱ Matthew 28:18-20

