

BaptistWay: God's choice and our responsibility

October 23, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for Nov. 8 focuses on Romans 9:1-8; 10:1-21.*

These passages have prompted diverse interpretations. Some have read these verses as justifying neglect of contemporary Jewish people, while others have seen quite the opposite, using this text to demonstrate the continual importance of Israel—especially the nation founded in 1948. Some have sought to see an argument for predestination in these chapters, and others have observed an open invitation to all—including Israel—that God's door always is open if they will believe. To be sure, variety of interpretations increases the difficulty in reading these passages carefully.

One thing should be stated at the start: The Apostle Paul is in anguish that while many Gentiles are becoming part of the body of Christ, the number of Jewish people doing the same is diminishing. Otherwise, Paul would not feel the need to offer himself in the place of Israel: "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my race, the people of Israel" (9:3-4).

Christ and covenant linked

Indeed, as Paul argued in Romans 5-8, the covenant with Israel stands behind Jesus Christ's redemptive work: "Theirs is the adoption to divine sonship, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah" (vv. 4-5). Each item in this list played a role in Paul's discussion of Jesus as the embodiment of God's covenant faithfulness to Israel, yet the Jewish people find themselves outside of the benefits of that covenant. This is the source of Paul's deep

anguish, his “heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites ... that they may be saved” (10:1).

One New Testament scholar sees Romans 10:5-13 as the centerpiece of a larger section spanning chapters 9 through 11. In this section, Paul highlights the centrality of Christ in his thought, with numerous references to Jesus and his messianic role. Everything in these chapters points in this direction, with the prime focus on verse 9: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

There is more to say about this very popular statement, though. Contemporary readers of Romans might see references to “mouth” and “heart” as highlighting the need for personal profession of faith, as though one’s interior life is all that matters. In other words, when we read, “Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (v. 3), we sometimes understand “God’s righteousness” to be apart from the law, and “their own” to be based on the law—works.

Obedience is the fulcrum

Paul has other ideas. Drawing from the language of Deuteronomy 30, Paul states the righteousness based on the law arises from the word in one’s mouth and heart (v. 8). The law here is not to be avoided. In fact, obeying the law is the fulcrum between “life and prosperity, death and destruction” (Deuteronomy 30:15).

Paul, in placing Jesus within the covenant with Israel, ultimately sees him as “the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (v. 4). In other words, to establish one’s own righteousness is to turn from covenant faithfulness, as the people of Israel did, ultimately resulting in judgment and exile. Belief in Jesus places one’s

life and story within the life and story of Israel, becoming “children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring” (Romans 9:8).

Therefore, declaring with one’s mouth and believing in one’s heart involves more than a momentary decision for Jesus. Indeed, it encapsulates giving one’s life over to Christ, cultivating God’s righteousness within one’s life among the community of the faithful.

Hearing and preaching

This is what prompts Paul’s concern about hearing and preaching. As the Old Testament prophets spoke to Israel, the good news of God’s covenant faithfulness needs to be proclaimed. This is, of course, what motivates the church’s present efforts for mission. The prophets, these servants of the Lord, some of whom have books in the Bible named for them, called Israel to follow the covenant. Likewise, missionaries sent out by the church work to share the story of Jesus with all people, encouraging them to embrace God’s righteousness and covenant faithfulness through Christ.

Unfortunately, Israel failed to listen to these messengers (vv. 16-17). Paul states even in the first century they have failed to see God’s gracious movement within the world, causing them to miss out on the promises of the covenant. However, the Gentiles, “those who did not ask for (God)” (v. 20), did embrace the fulfillment of Israel’s covenant through Jesus.

Consequently, they have become part of Israel, who now is jealous of the welcome issued to those considered to be outside of God’s care. For Paul, even though this relativizes the Jew/Gentile distinction by opening up the covenant to the Gentiles, he still agonizes over the fate of his fellow Israelites, even to the point of imitating the Savior in sacrificial service on their behalf if needed.