

"MISSIONS AND THE WORD OF GOD"

(Romans 10:1-21)

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Before I studied or taught Romans, I had often heard 10:14-15 quoted in missionary sermons to prove the need to "send out" missionaries. Like many who listened to such sermons, I did not have a good sense of the context from which the verses were taken. When I studied that context, I realized that the usual application of the verses was not on target. That text is not encouraging us to send out missionaries. Rather, it is asserting that God has already done so. He has sent out people like Paul and the other apostles to preach the good news. Israel has heard that good news but failed to believe it. This is the issue in Romans 10.

But this text still has important things to teach us about missions—and the message is one the church must pay close attention to in the new millennium. For, while Paul is not calling on the church to send out missionaries with the message of the gospel, he is nevertheless clearly assuming it needs to be done. People can only believe in Jesus when they hear about him, and they can hear about him only when someone presents the good news. "Faith" comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (v. 17).

The absolute need for people to hear the gospel preached if they are to be saved was one of the greatest forces impelling the modern missionary enterprise, begun in the early 1800s and flourishing yet today. Yet the tie between preaching the gospel and being saved is being severed in many churches and denominations. Caving in to the flood of postmodern malaise and afraid of seeming intolerant, many churches have lost missionary zeal. Reasons vary, of course. But some teach that other religions are also ways to God, so why bother sending missionaries if people can be saved within their own religion? Others teach that God reveals himself to all people in various ways, so that an oral or written presentation of the gospel is unnecessary.

But the text before us shows such viewpoints as the false teachings or easy generalizations they really are. Paul links salvation to belief, which he in turn ties to hearing the message about Christ. People must be "sent" so that the message can be proclaimed to all people. Paul himself, of course, was among those whom God had sent out. In his own life of difficult travel, he illustrates the theology he teaches: People need to hear the gospel so that they can be saved.



I do not want to minimize the problems inherent in a theology that ties salvation to response to God's Word. I, too, struggle with the question of fairness, wondering about those many people who never had a chance to respond to the Word of God. And I do not want to dogmatize beyond the text about the ways in which God may bring his message to people.

But I do think Romans 10:14-21, in the context of Paul's life and theology, teaches that response to God's Word is the only way to salvation and that sending out people to proclaim that word is God's chosen way to bring that Word "to the ends of the earth." The twenty-first century church needs to embrace this theology and staunchly defend it against the many attacks that are sure to increase. We need also to translate that theology into practice so that the sending of missionaries can again take top priority in the life of the church. Too many churches spend far too much on themselves and far too little on missions. We so easily turn inward and become preoccupied with our problems and potential, neglecting the millions who have never heard the Word and the wonderful potential to bring God glory by showing them the way into the kingdom