

“To the Jew, of Course!”
A Response by Jim R. Sibley, LCJE Coordinator North America

Thank you, Stuart, for a stimulating paper. You are always creative, innovative, and help us to see things in new ways. Your presentation holds much with which I can agree wholeheartedly and some things with which I must differ. Nevertheless, I value your friendship and your perspectives.

You begin by examining LCJE statements and conclude that “to the Jew first” from Romans 1:16 is most prominent and has become a *de facto* motto or watchword for LCJE. However, you suggest that there is “widespread disagreement” on how to interpret this phrase, and you indicate that we should be unified in our understanding. But, it seems to me that you exaggerate what really amounts to no more than different nuances of the same position. Then you assume that disagreements must mean disunity. Your next step, with evident concern for LCJE, is to say that our disunity regarding Jewish priority renders us a “house divided that cannot stand,” because we have built the network upon “tottering foundations.”

Ostensibly to save us from catastrophe, you delineate four interpretive positions on Jewish priority within the LCJE: positions, which you call descriptive, paradigmatic, restrictive, and prescriptive. Although you acknowledge that “these positions sometimes overlap or are difficult to distinguish,” nevertheless, these are your four positions. But you have not persuaded me that there are these four, and only these four positions, or that they are all represented in the LCJE.

While I will acknowledge that it may be stimulating to think in these categories, ultimately, I find them not to be very helpful. Not only do they overlap, but conceivably, a person could hold to all four simultaneously! For example, I believe the gospel *was* to the Jew first; I believe Jewish priority in the NT was *paradigmatic*; I believe that “the church can *only* be said to truly be doing mission when its mission includes outreach to the Jews”; and I believe that Jewish priority is *mandated* in Scripture. So, there is not necessarily disagreement, not necessarily disunity, and, you will be glad to know, we are not, thereby, in danger of utter ruin and total collapse!

Now, if I understand your overall point, it is that Romans 1:16 is inadequate, regardless how you understand it. You believe it to be the “the rhetoric of reticence,” even as you say of the Willowbank Declaration. So, different positions on Romans 1:16 don’t seem to be that important after all. You critique and dismiss all four positions on Romans 1:16, including the prescriptive, thus rendering Romans 1:16 almost irrelevant. And that brings us to your fifth position, the “prophetic-progressive” position.

Here, you argue, and I absolutely agree with you, that context is important, not just the context of Romans, but the context of all of God’s covenant promises and acts throughout the entirety of Scripture. I especially agree with you that Genesis 12:3 is crucial, in fact, more than you seem to realize, but your “prophetic-progressive” position is not really a position on Romans 1:16, at all, but instead is a way to shift the focus to *another* passage. Instead, you apparently want to shift the emphasis to Romans 11:24–27 and the vision of the ultimate fullness of Israel. You say that when we understand and serve “the anticipated consummation for the Jews outlined by Paul,” we will have as our mission the “fullness of Israel,” and as our “paramission,” the “fullness of the Gentiles.”

The problem, as I see it, is that there is nothing of a mission and a paramission for us in Romans 11. In Romans 11, Paul turns from an emphasis on the responsibility of the Jewish people in verses 11-15 to the sovereignty of God in the remainder of the chapter. Look at the passives of verse 17 and of God's activity throughout the rest of the chapter. These verses are not speaking of *our* mission (or our mission and paramission), but of *God's* program for the future.

The mystery of the hardening of Israel that Paul mentions in Romans 11:25 has to do with the way God is using the blindness of Israel to bring in the fullness of the Gentiles at present. This hardening or blindness will not be lifted from the nation by man or by man's efforts, but only by God.

Furthermore, we are specifically told that it will not happen "until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in" (Rom 11:25). Therefore, as long as Gentiles are being saved, we must content ourselves with reaching the remnant of Israel that is coming to faith in Messiah now. For the present, Paul says, we must deal with the majority of the people of Israel as our beloved enemies: "as touching the gospel, they are enemies for your sake: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sake" (Rom 11:28).

It is with justification that our watchword is Romans 1:16, since it states the very nature of the Gospel itself and is, in reality, a restatement of Genesis 12:3. Who knows, at our next LCJE conference, there may well be a paper on Romans 1:16!

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