

## PAUL WRITES TO THE GREEK *FIRST* AND ALSO TO THE JEW: THE MISSIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S PURPOSE IN ROMANS

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### I. WHY PAUL WROTE ROMANS AND WHY IT MATTERS

When Paul wrote that salvation is “first” for the Jew and also for the Greek (Rom 1:16), he wrote those words *first* to the Greek and also to the Jew. To put it more simply, mission drives the theological agenda of Romans. This essay seeks to demonstrate exegetically that Paul wrote Romans in order to motivate the Roman church to support his mission to the “barbarians” in Spain. Paul purposely writes to “Greeks,” not simply “Gentiles.” The letter’s elaborate theology exists so that Paul might preach the gospel where Christ had not been known (cf. Rom 15:20). If this is the case, what are the implications for our own missiological and pastoral practice?

It matters how one begins and ends a letter. In the case of Romans, the consequence of skipping Paul’s introduction can reduce his theology to abstraction. It is easy to forget that Paul did not begin his letter to Rome at Rom 1:16. In fact, this famous “thesis statement” to Paul’s letter begins with a “for” (γάρ), meaning it is simply supporting a previous idea. Prior to verse 16, one must go back to Rom 1:14 to find main verb in Paul’s extended thought: “I am a debtor ...” (ὀφειλέτης εἰμί). The whole verse reads, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish” (ESV).<sup>1</sup>

In Rom 1:1–4, Paul begins his letter by summarizing the gospel, the good news that Jesus is king. Specifically, Jesus is David’s offspring, God’s son,<sup>2</sup> the “Christ” who is “Lord.” Paul simply reiterates Nathanael who confessed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel” (John 1:49). This gospel was “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2; cf. 1 Cor 15:3–4). Accordingly, one understands Paul’s remarks in Acts 13:32–33, in which he proclaims the gospel [εὐαγγελιζόμεθα] by saying that that Christ fulfills the promises God gave Israel in the OT. In particular, Paul succinctly summarizes the gospel in Gal 3:8 in this way: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations come from the ESV unless otherwise stated. Romans 1:15 stems from verse 14, as indicated by the “thus” (οὕτως) and the infinitive “to preach the gospel” (εὐαγγελίσασθαι), which explains Paul’s intention resulting from his sense of obligation.

<sup>2</sup> “Son of God,” as a royal title signifying Israel’s Davidic king, can be traced back to OT passages such as 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 17:13; Pss 2:7; 89:20–27; et al. Also, see Gerald Cooke, “The Israelite King as Son of God,” *ZAW* 73 (2009) 202–25.

shall all the nations be blessed.” The king whom this gospel announces commissions Paul’s “apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations” (Rom 1:5). In short, Paul’s opening words highlight Paul’s understanding of the gospel. Paul’s dense and carefully crafted greeting sets a context that is critical for understanding the Paul’s purpose in writing Romans.

Why did Paul write Romans? Scholars have attempted to discern some sort of unity within Paul’s letter. This article does not attempt to give an extensive review of the arguments on the topic. Others like William Barclay have considered the strengths and weaknesses of the major perspectives.<sup>3</sup> One of most conventional suggestions is that Paul wanted to help unify the Roman church, which suffered from a Jew-Gentile division as evident in Romans 2–4, 11. Another view regards Romans essentially as a summary of the gospel, around which the church should be united in love and in their mission. A minority view suggested by some is that Romans is fundamentally missiological, specifically aimed at furthering the work of missions among the Gentiles.<sup>4</sup> Most certainly, these options should not be too sharply separated. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to relate the bulk of Paul’s letter (Rom 1:16–11:36) with his comments in Rom 1:1–15, 15:18–32, the latter in which Paul expresses his intention to preach the gospel in Spain. Specifically, how does his dense theology and discussion about Jews and Gentile relate to Paul’s plan to visit Rome on his way to evangelizing the Gentiles who are in Spain?

A single question can have multiple answers. One could easily fall into reductionism. People should be cautious about pitting Paul’s theological message against his pastoral or missionary concerns. However, amid Paul’s various themes, readers can seek to discern his major and minor objectives. Identifying such emphases can help the church to properly apply the message, neither overstressing nor neglecting particular points of discussion. A faithful interpretation will not only try to grasp the meaning of a text but also to prioritize that which the author himself wanted to emphasize.

This essay draws upon a number of clues to pose a straightforward thesis: Paul seeks to overcome the Roman sense of cultural superiority that threatened to undermine Paul’s effort to gain support for his mission to the barbarians in Spain. It is not uncommon for commentators to mention in passing that Paul’s readers may have had cultural pride; yet, only a few people have considered this idea as a

<sup>3</sup> William B. Barclay, “Reading Romans Missiologically” (paper delivered at Evangelical Theological Seminary, November 1999). This paper was later published in *Global Missiology* 1/1 (2003), online at <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/search/authors/view?firstName=William%20B.&middleName=&lastName=Barclay&affiliation=&country=>.

<sup>4</sup> Das compares various interpreters who see Romans as “preparation for the Spanish Mission” in A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 32–34. Das cites Seifrid who rebuts this interpretation by claiming the mission to Spain is mentioned only once and therefore is unlikely to be Paul’s reason for writing the letter (Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 34). He cites Mark Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (NovTSup 68; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 194. Seifrid’s objection is too narrow because he ignores Paul’s repeated emphasis, as within the immediate context, that Paul is the apostle whose calling it is to evangelize the Gentiles (e.g. Rom 1:5, 13; 16:26).

primary reason for which Paul writes his letter. Further, those who give a “missiological” reading to Romans have overlooked a number of critical details. Their arguments attempt to relate broad theological themes but can leave one to wonder if some connections are too speculative. In short, a “missiological” reading of Romans still needs more exegetical support to order to effectively explain and integrate the whole of Paul’s letter. This essay tries to address that need.

## II. ROMANS AS THEOLOGICAL MISSIOLOGY OR MISSIOLOGICAL THEOLOGY?

Chapters 1 and 15 in effect form a thematic *inclusio*. Observing this is key to interpreting the body of the letter. Romans 1:5–15 follow naturally from Paul’s gospel declaration in Rom 1:1–4. Paul highlights the fact that he has “received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (Rom 1:5; cf. 16:26). Also, in Rom 1:14–16, he magnifies the scope of Christ’s commission given to Paul: “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Paul not only wants to explain the gospel; he in particular wants the support of the Roman church. Why? The importance of Rom 15:20–28 cannot be understated:

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.” This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

Paul’s mission to the Gentiles in general and Spain in particular is not an incidental. He wants to the help of the Roman church, perhaps in the form of financial support and coworkers. By reiterating his mission, Paul unmistakably frames the rest of his letter. The first and last chapters of Romans act as bookends that clarify the aim of his theology, expounded mainly in the first eleven chapters. If one removes Paul’s theology apart from this missiological context, the various issues discussed (e.g. justification, law, etc.) can quickly become abstractions. Being aware of the danger of decontextualizing Paul, we do well to reconsider his opening words, especially Rom 1:14.

As has been stated, this is not the first article to posit a “missiological” reading of Romans. Reviewing a few examples of such interpretations will help to identify key issues and potential weaknesses of such a reading. After looking at three representative articles, our attention will turn to the various ways theologians have interpreted Rom 1:14, 16. It will become clear that so many interpreters have simply assumed the meaning or significance of key phrases like “Greek” and “barbarian.” As a result, such speculation obscures Paul’s intent and makes it more difficult for us today likewise to develop both a theological missiology and a missiological theology.

Russell’s article offers more of a suggestion than a detailed exegetical argument. He thinks that Western scholarship tends to emphasize Paul’s theology, specifically justification by faith, at the expense of Paul’s explicit missionary ambitions. To do so, however, may indicate “Western cultural biases.”<sup>5</sup> Although one easily recognizes the centrality of Jew-Gentile problem in Romans, few easily relate it to Paul’s opening and closing statements about going to Spain. In Russell’s interpretation, Paul addresses the Jew-Gentile division in large part to perpetuate the work of evangelism among the Gentiles. Paul saw the disunity of the Roman church as crippling to its ability to unify together for the sake of the Gentile mission after Paul’s death.<sup>6</sup> The article raises the right question, namely, how Paul’s explicit missiological aim relates to the dense theology of Rom 1:16–11:36. Further, it is reasonable that Paul’s theology serves a missiological function. Unfortunately, he gives very little exegetical support to his speculation and instead shows the theological coherence of his view with the rest of Romans. Might there be some other way to relate the Jew-Gentile relationship to Paul’s mission to Spain?

William Barclay’s treatment is more extensive than that of Russell.<sup>7</sup> Barclay reviews the strengths and weaknesses of conventional interpretations of Romans (as related to Paul’s purpose in writing); however, he well defends the view that the letter has greater “coherence” when understood in relations to Paul’s missionary agenda. According to Barclay, Rome “occupied such a strategic place in terms of geography and prominence, must have an evangelistic zeal to take the gospel to the ends of the earth if Paul is unable to complete his journey.” The Roman Christians are not only to do what Israel failed to do (be a light to the Gentiles); also they should reach out to Jews and not “despise the thought of Jewish converts.”

Enoch Wan says his “missio-relational reading of Romans” is a “complementary study to current approaches.”<sup>8</sup> He affirms, “Paul wrote Romans in order to

<sup>5</sup> Walter B. Russell, “An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans,” *BSac* 145 (1988): 179.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 182. He cites Dean S. Gilliland, *Pauline Theology & Mission Practice*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 32. Similarly, see James C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Barclay, “Reading Romans Missiologically.”

<sup>8</sup> Enoch Wan, “A Missio-Relational Reading of Romans: A Complementary Study to Current Approaches,” *Evangelical Missiological Society Occasion Bulletin*, Vol. 3/7 (2010) 1–8 (accessed January 8, 2012), online at <http://www.enochwan.com/english/articles/index.html>. The document included on the website is the author’s original Microsoft Word document, containing 20 pages. All cited pages come from this latter document.

address certain internal concerns within the Christian community in Rome, and to introduce himself to them in anticipation of a later mission trip to Spain.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he follows Dean Gilliland when he adds, “to prepare ‘these believers in every way possible, especially in the right belief, to rise to the challenge and become a missionary center (Rom 15:24, 28).’”<sup>10</sup> His article is a general survey of the missiology of Romans. It lays particular emphasis on the “missional sequence of the gospel” being “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”<sup>11</sup> Without elaboration, Wan especially notes Rom 10:12<sup>12</sup> and claims, “This consistent mission strategy and personal policy is expounded in great detail in Romans 9 to 11.”<sup>13</sup> A significant difficulty of this reading is that Romans 9–11 is a densely theological section primarily concerned with Israel’s historical relationship to God, then with the Gentile’s inclusion in God’s people. Overall, the section may function more like a theodicy than that of missiological strategy (cf. Rom 9:6, 14). Referring to the time sequence by which God revealed himself to the world (i.e. “first to the Jews”) does not necessarily imply Paul is talking about his own missiological strategy. Wan seems to see Rom 1:14 as a reference to Gentiles in general who have not heard the gospel; likewise, “Greek” in 1:16 is a narrower way of talking about Gentiles.<sup>14</sup>

### III. ARE THE “GREEKS” REALLY GENTILES? COMMON ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GREEKS AND BARBARIANS

Inasmuch as Paul’s letter has any missiological agenda, a few early phrases are significant. We should especially note the reference to “Greeks” and “barbarians” in Rom 1:14 as well as Paul’s repeated phrase “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16; 2:9–10; 3:9; 10:12). How have people interpreted these key phrases? Romans 1:14 affects Ben Witherington’s reading of Romans very little; he asserts that is general reference to “non-Greeks.”<sup>15</sup> He passes quickly over Rom 1:16, even paraphrasing it with “the Jew first as well as the *Gentile*.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Calvin says of Rom 1:16, “the two clauses comprehend all mankind.”<sup>17</sup> While Calvin also thinks “Greeks” and “barbarians” are explained by the phrases “wise” and “foolish,” N. T. Wright sees Rom 1:14 as summarily pointing to “all categories of non-Jewish hu-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 10–11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>12</sup> On p. 5, he actually writes Rom 9:11, but the accompanying quotation shows he means Rom 10:12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 5–6.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Wan’s interchange of verbiage in *ibid.* 2 (n. 6), 4, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 44.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 46 (emphasis added). Witherington changes the wording to “Gentile” rather than “Greek.” Likewise, Mounce’s commentary translates Ἕλληνι (normally rendered “Greek”) as “Gentile” without discussion. See Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (NAC 27; Nashville: B&H, 1995) 70–71.

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Enhanced Version 1.1.; Wheaton: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009).

manity.”<sup>18</sup> He follows Cranfield when commenting on Rom 1:16, “‘Greek’ here is a way of saying ‘Gentile.’”<sup>19</sup> Craig Keener says “barbarian” means “non-Greek” such that 1:14 refers to “Gentiles” or more basically “everyone.”<sup>20</sup> Others divide Greeks and barbarians according to where they live<sup>21</sup> or their ability to speak the Greek language.<sup>22</sup> In P. T. O’Brien’s *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul*, he interprets Rom 1:14 simply as indicating, “[Paul’s] mission knew no limits.”<sup>23</sup> At least two commentators suggest, “the mention of barbarians is certainly an allusion to Spain and the missionary plans of the apostle.”<sup>24</sup>

Some commentators attempt to defend (rather than assume) the idea that Rom 1:14, 16 refers to either all Gentiles or all humanity respectively. For example, regarding Rom 1:14, a few people cite Rom 1:13 as support that Paul basically means all “Gentiles.”<sup>25</sup> However, this is far from being an adequate explanation. Paul twice repeats himself in the form of two contrasting groups (Greek/barbarian, wise/foolish); thus, it appears the difference in verbiage (in Rom 1:13–14) is more significant than some suggest. Cranfield rejects the idea that “barbarian” refers to those in Spain because some Spaniards were Romanized and calling them “foolish” would be too “sweeping.”<sup>26</sup> However, his conjecture *a priori* denies the possibility that Paul would use stereotyping language according to conventional Roman thinking; yet, Titus 1:12 shows that Paul is clearly willing to speak in that way. Concern-

<sup>18</sup> N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 422. Also, cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 62.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, “Letter to the Romans” 424. He cites C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of Romans* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 1.90–91. Craig S. Keener agrees in *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009) 26. In agreement is Ambrosiaster as noted in Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., *Romans* (ACCS; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 29.

<sup>20</sup> Keener, *Romans* 24. In agreement is Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 63–64; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988) 33; Mounce, *Romans* 69.

<sup>21</sup> While Dean Flemming’s emphasis is on culture and language, he twice repeats the point that Greeks would have lived in “urban” areas. See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005) 128–29.

<sup>22</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on Romans* (Kindle Edition; Grand Rapids; Baker, 2011) 260–68. There is no paper edition of this book. Everett Harrison and Donald Hagner say essentially the same thing in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11: *Romans–Galatians* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 648. See also Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 65–66, following Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993) 250–51.

<sup>23</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 66; cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 55–56.

<sup>24</sup> Franz J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary* (London: Lutterworth, 1961) 45. Leenhardt’s comment is highlighted by Morris, *Romans* 64. Similarly Schreiner, *Romans* 56 notes that Mason too thinks vv. 13–15 refer to Paul’s Spanish mission. See S. Mason, “‘For I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel’ (Rom 1.16): The Gospel and the first Readers of Romans,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (ed. L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson; JSNTSup 108; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994) 270–73.

<sup>25</sup> Harrison and Hagner, *Romans–Galatians* 40; Gundry says, “He owes both them [barbarians] and ‘Greeks’ a proclamation of the gospel. Since Greeks were known for philosophy, which means ‘the love of wisdom,’ ‘to ... wise people’ probably means the same as ‘to ... Greeks.’ Correspondingly, ‘mindless people’ would refer to ‘barbarians.’” See Gundry, *Romans* 262–70.

<sup>26</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 84.

ing Rom 1:16, Robert Gundry says Paul has to use the singular “Greek” since the matching “Gentile” (singular) is almost never used.<sup>27</sup> By why could he not say “Jews” (cf. 3:29; 9:24)? Also, why does he suddenly drop the “Jew/Greek” distinction in Rom 2:8–9, 3:9 and 10:12, instead of simply contrasting Jew *and* Gentile, to match their surrounding context? More pertinent is Rom 3:9, where the plural “Greeks” is used, not the singular, with a plural “Jews.” This plural could just as well have been used back in Rom 1:16. Furthermore, Gundry himself points out that Paul allows exceptions, such as when he uses the singular “Gentile” in Rom 10:19.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the scope of Paul’s language, there is agreement that “Greek” and “barbarian,” respectively, carried positive and negative connotations to Paul’s Roman readers. Seifrid claims the word for “Greek” is an “honorific term” (cf. the contrast in Rom 1:14).<sup>29</sup> Robert Jewett, citing various scholars, suggests that βάρβαρος (i.e. barbarian) “is the ‘N-word’ in Greco-Romans culture. When paired with its ideological opposite, ‘Greeks,’ it denotes the violent, perverse, corrupt, uncivilized realm beyond.”<sup>30</sup> Philip Esler thinks the Greeks/barbarian language points to those “who were highly educated and people who were not.”<sup>31</sup> In Rom 1:16, Jewett rejects the common notion that “Greek” simply implies “Gentiles,” which he says was a “pejorative term” essentially equivalent to “second class non-Jews.”<sup>32</sup> Esler observes that Paul defines identity in terms of faith over against the “‘us’ and ‘them’” mentality typical in society; thus, Paul is calling on his readers to reexamine their loyalties.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV. EXEGETING PAUL’S ETHNIC LANGUAGE AND UNDERSTANDING HIS THEOLOGICAL MISSIOLOGY

A number of clues within Romans itself seem to indicate that Paul’s choice of words were intentional, indeed integral to his agenda. One could continue to list interpreters who would basically assume with little argument that Greeks and barbarians refers to all “Gentiles,” whereas the Jew and Greek of Rom 1:16 points to all humanity. Given the letter’s explicit theological and missiological orientation,

<sup>27</sup> Gundry, *Romans* 283–87; also Moo, *Romans* 68. In disagreement with Gundry and Moo is Mark Seifrid, “Unrighteousness by Faith: Apostolic Proclamation in Romans 1:18–3:20,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (ed. D. A. Carson, Mark A. Seifrid, and Peter T. O’Brien; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 115, n. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Although citing the OT, Paul shows himself very willing to adjust the wording of the LXX, even in critical places, as he did in Rom 3:10 and 4:11. Gundry notes that Paul does use the singular “Gentile” in Rom 10:19.

<sup>29</sup> Seifrid, “Unrighteousness” 115, n. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Jewett, “Honor and Shame in the Argument of Romans,” in *Putting Body and Soul Together: Essays in Honor of Robin Scroggs* (ed. Virginia Wiles, Alexandra R. Brown, and Graydon F. Snyder; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) 264. Likewise, Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 32–33.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Francis Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 138. Cf. Schreiner, *Romans* 56.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (ed. Eldon Jay Epp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 140.

<sup>33</sup> Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans* 140.

one can only guess why so little attention is given to more clearly defining these terms. Perhaps for fear of injecting ethnic superiority or divine partiality *into* the text, it may be that theologians have actually forced ethnicity *out of* the text altogether. One must be careful not to “settle” for the truth (e.g. the category “Gentile” consists of Greeks and barbarians).<sup>34</sup> In so doing, we may compromise the gospel and undermine Paul’s missiology.

At first glance, Paul’s words are strange. Throughout Romans, he consistently contrasts Jews and Gentiles, but Rom 1:14 compares Greeks and barbarians, the wise and the foolish. Why does he randomly (or so it appears) interject these two types of people? As others observed above, Paul’s grouping of terms gives the impression that Greeks are wise and barbarians are foolish, at least from the perspective of some of Paul’s potential readers. In addition, note Rom 1:16, where he says that God through the gospel brings “salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*” At this point, Paul speaks of the Greek but begins by mentioning the Jew. In fact, he says “first” (πρῶτον) the Jew; thus, implicitly the Greek is somehow second. Historically, the Jews were the first people chosen by God to receive his revealed word or law (cf. Rom 3:2; 9:4); yet, God in no way shows partiality. We must keep in mind Paul’s repetition and clarification in Rom 2:9–11. First, he says, “There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek” (2:9–10). He then adds in verse 11, “For God shows no partiality.” We must not confuse Paul’s point. The entire letter of Romans makes clear Paul’s meaning: God loves the world, not just Jews. Paul’s prioritizing the Jew over the Greek is merely with reference to history.

The question must still be pressed: Why does Paul continue to distinguish two groups while alternating terminology (i.e. Greek/barbarian, Jew/Greek and Jew/Gentile)? Since scholars typically assume to generalize the meaning of these groups, theological and missiological literature lacks a satisfactory answer to the question. After all, after Rom 1:16, 2:9–10, Paul almost entirely drops the “Greek” language, speaking instead of “Gentiles.” The exceptions are Rom 3:9, 10:12, which will be examined later. In those two instances, one should not miss how seemingly out of place it is for Paul to suddenly return to this Jew-Greek comparison. In the surrounding contexts, his predominant way of referring to non-Jews is as “uncircumcised” or “Gentiles.” From a Jewish perspective, the term “Gentile” was inclusive of all non-Jews, including Greeks, yet was more vague and carried negative connotations.

By contrast, Paul’s Roman readers would consider it a greater honor to be called “Greek.” The Roman Empire had tremendous respect for Greek culture since it represented wisdom and was the epitome of civilized culture. Therefore, the Roman Empire even utilized Greek language and would call themselves “Greek.” This self-designation highlighted their sense of identity. Given the focus

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<sup>34</sup> Strictly speaking, in light of Rom 1:14, the Jew-Greek distinction would not encompass all humanity, since it would exclude barbarians, whom Paul just mentioned.

on boasting, Greeks, and wisdom in 1 Corinthians 1–2, reckoning oneself “Greek” may imply something else—a *sense of cultural superiority*. Recall Rom 1:14, where the barbarian is likened to a fool but the Greek with the wise. How did Greeks typically respond to the gospel? Paul in 1 Cor 1:22–24 explains, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Fittingly, Paul undermines Greek boasting by continuing to say, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25; cf. vv. 26–31).

Paul uses a similar rhetorical strategy in Romans. Paul wants the Roman “Greeks” to support his mission to the Spanish “barbarians.” One must keep in mind the pride that would come with living in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. Even if there were exceptions to the rule, the Spanish would be reckoned foolish or backwards. To be fair, the Roman Christians themselves may not have harbored hatred or disdain *against* those in Spain; yet, they may well have been indifferent towards such non-Greeks. Paul knows well that people having even a latent sense of superiority will foster apathy such that their prejudice would weaken their enthusiasm and love for others and the gospel. Because of this, Paul in his own round about way confronts the sense of superiority within the Roman church.

How does Paul specifically use this approach in Romans? Paul recounts the gospel in order to overcome Roman cultural pride. In essence, Paul compares the relationship between Greeks and barbarians with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. In other words, Paul’s extensive theological treatment of Jews and Gentiles serves a missiological purpose—spurring Roman Greeks to embrace Paul’s mission to Spanish barbarians. Notice how Paul step-by-step shifts his terms. First, he mentions Greeks and barbarians (1:14). Then he immediately but subtly changes the comparison. Though keeping the word “Greek” in 1:16, he adds the Jew and swaps the order of precedence. Now, the Greek is in the second place (which was previously occupied by the “foolish barbarian”). After Rom 2:10, Paul drops “Greek” and simply uses “Gentile” to contrast the Jews. No doubt, this alteration would grab readers’ attention. In the first century, it would not have been uncommon for people to harbor some degree of anti-Jewish sentiment. In Rome itself, Barclay mentions, “We know historically, both from Acts (18:2) but also from Suetonius (*Life of Claudius* 25.2), that the emperor Claudius issued an edict that expelled Jews from Rome.”<sup>35</sup> Scholars may disagree on the extent or practical effect of the edict; nevertheless, the very fact that the Jews were expelled is instructive of the context into which Paul speaks. His choice of address is provocative.

Paul is provocative in at least two other ways. First, when Paul calls the Greeks “Gentiles,” his address is less than flattering. This is a specifically Jewish way of talking about non-Jews and would in large measure carry derogatory overtones. As far as Jews were concerned, Gentiles were “outsiders.” Some even regarded “Gentiles” as enemies. To all concerned, whether Greek or Jew, “Gentile”

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<sup>35</sup> Barclay, “Reading Romans Missiologically” 3.

was to some degree a term that could easily be taken as an insult. Many Greeks looked down on Jews, who themselves scorned “Gentiles” as “dogs” (cf. Mark 7:26–28). In a modern setting, a comparison could be made to a Chinese context, where foreigners have previously been referred to as “foreign devils” (洋鬼子). What is Paul’s intended effect? His subtle adjustment in word choice aims to humble his Roman readers.

Referring to Romans as “Gentiles” is provocative for a second reason. Paul is essentially implying that culturally proud Greeks must submit to and depend on the God of the *Jews*, the very people expelled by the Caesar! Famously, Roman and Greek culture had a pantheon of gods. Cultural pride was tied to one’s local deities (cf. Acts 19:26–28). Jewish monotheism would be incomprehensible if not incendiary to many. In short, Paul tramples upon cultural pride when he reckons the Roman Gentiles as mere “wild olive shoots” (Rom 11:17) who share in the *Jews’* spiritual blessings (Rom 15:27).

Two observations within Romans confirm the present interpretation. First, one should notice the two instances after Rom 2:9–10 where Paul returns to Jew-Greek language. These two exceptions may be instructive. Romans 3:9 begins Paul’s extensive indictment of sinners, saying, “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, *both Jews and Greeks*, are under sin.” In Rom 10:12, Paul summarizes the point that salvation is available to all who believe, “For there is no distinction between *Jew and Greek*; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.” Noteworthy about each of these passages is that they highlight the same essential point—there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, whether with respect to sin or salvation. Instead, it is faith that is critical to one’s identity before God, not place of birth, family background, or cultural citizenship. Paul’s repetition of Jew/Greek language makes complete sense in light of the interpretation being offered in this essay. Paul is applying his theology directly to his Roman readers, who exalt themselves over barbarians, even though they both are just Gentiles in the scope of salvation history. Paul’s placement of “Greek” language is quite strategic and convicting as it recalls Rom 1:14 and the “social distinction which was fundamental to the world of his day,” that is, Greek and barbarian.<sup>36</sup>

Elsewhere, Paul compares Jews and Greeks in a similar fashion to that seen in Romans. For example, Gal 3:28 states, “There is *neither Jew nor Greek*, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Colossians 3:10–11 echoes Gen 1:26–27 to undermine all preconceived notions of social rank, claiming that those in Christ “have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not *Greek and Jew*, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” In 1 Cor 12:13, Paul’s language seeks to instill unity among Greeks and Jews: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—*Jews or Greeks*, slaves

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<sup>36</sup> Seifrid, “Unrighteousness” 115.

or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” Finally, in 1 Cor 1:22–24, cited earlier, Paul’s Jew/Greek comparison acts as a foil to undercut all boasting.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, a second observation within Romans confirms the intentionality of Paul’s “Greek” language. As has been stated, Greeks boasted in wisdom. 1 Corinthians contains the most instances where Paul uses “wisdom” language.<sup>38</sup> Romans holds second place with seven occurrences, including Rom 1:14, 22; 11:25, 33; 12:16; 16:19, 27. When applied to people (e.g. 1:22; 11:25; 12:16; 16:19), Paul challenges human pride, as in Rom 12:16, where he warns, “Never be wise in your own sight.” Paul appeals to the Greek value of wisdom in order to humble his readers. On the other hand, Paul magnifies the wisdom of God. Accordingly, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33). Finally, the letter closes by giving praise “to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.” In short, Paul ironically employs this central Greek-value to turn the tables on his readers. He simultaneously exalts God and humbles people.

Finally, the interpretation put forth in this article is consistent with recent insights and emphases within biblical scholarship. For a few decades, biblical scholars have debated the “New Perspective of Paul” (NPP).<sup>39</sup> One of the issues discussed is whether Paul’s doctrine of justification primarily combats legalism (i.e. works-righteousness) or ethnocentrism (i.e. one must become Jewish to be accepted as God’s people). Framed another way, scholars try to locate where Paul’s emphasis lay on a spectrum between soteriology and ecclesiology.<sup>40</sup> Even if some reject the NPP emphasis on ethnicity, one can acknowledge that a key contribution of the NPP debate has been to highlight afresh the importance of ethnicity in Paul’s thinking, especially in Romans and Galatians. In view of such insights, the interpretation of Paul’s “Greek” language becomes more critical. One might suppose that the main idea of Romans is to explain salvation; however, it may be that how a person gets saved is simply an important implication of Paul’s more central point. Perhaps, Paul’s comments on salvation and the church serve a more basic *missiologi-*cal purpose in Romans. Paul challenges all group-centrism; that is, just as some Jews were wrong to boast over Gentiles, the Romans likewise have no ground to exalt themselves over the so-called “barbarians.”

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the lone mention of “Gentiles” in 1 Corinthians is found in 1:23, sandwiched between two verses that compare Jews and Greeks. Paul says the Gentiles consider the cross “folly” (μωρία).

<sup>38</sup> Specifically, σοφός is used 28 times. Also, φρόνιμος is used twice (4:10; 10:15).

<sup>39</sup> The details of this debate cannot be reviewed here. For helpful summaries, see Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010). For a scholarly proposal that nicely mediates the various perspectives, see Michael Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (New York: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> For further study, also see Michael Bird, “What Is There Between Minneapolis and St. Andrews? A Third Way in the Piper-Wright Debate,” *JETS* 54 (June 2011) 299–310; N. T. Wright, “Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” *JETS* 54 (June 2011) 49–64; Thomas Schreiner, “Justification: The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ,” *JETS* 54 (June 2011) 19–34.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, a clarification is needed regarding the relationship between missions and the gospel. Missions is the necessary corollary of the gospel because the task of missions is to announce the kingship of Christ over all nations. Missionaries call upon all nations to give their allegiance to the King of kings. From another perspective, missions is the means by which God fulfills his promise to bless all nations, which Paul explicitly calls the “gospel” in Gal 3:8. To minimize the church’s mission to the nations is to minimize the gospel itself. Thus, one need not suppose Romans is *either* about missions *or* the gospel since they are mutually explanatory. To engage in missions is to give manifest testimony to the gospel.<sup>41</sup>

As seen in the survey above, traditional interpretations generally assume that when Paul says “Greeks and barbarians” (Rom 1:14), he means all Gentiles. Similarly, “Jew and Greek” (Rom 1:16; 2:9–10) refers to all people, whether Jew *or* Gentile. As a result, conventional readings overlook the possible import of Paul’s subtlety and word choice. In short, the missiological significance of Paul’s letter may be lost due to a solitary focus on his theology of Jew and Gentile.

By way of summary, we should notice that the present interpretation has a few advantages over standard views. First, this reading accounts for the use and placement of the “Greek” language throughout Romans. Second, it makes sense of Paul’s frequent appeal and application to “wisdom.” Third, the present view integrates Paul’s theology and mission within Romans in a way that is supported by exegesis. It does not piecemeal theological ideas together. Finally, this interpretation coheres well with the emphasis on ethnicity within Romans, yet without obligating us to any extreme within the NPP debate.

## V. PREACHING THE GOSPEL TODAY AMONG FOOLS AND ALSO BARBARIANS

People have a propensity to boast in their group identity, whether it is their ethnicity, nationality, family, school, or team. Our vernacular may differ but the same basic sense of collective identity exists in nationalism, patriotism, family pride, school spirit, and the like. Competition between various camps or schools of thought can divide churches, mission agencies, companies, and families.

Mutual love and respect is lost when people confuse their social group identity with their most fundamental identity in relation to God in Christ. Perhaps Paul’s readers saw themselves as Christian Romans yet he wants them to be Roman Chris-

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<sup>41</sup> It seems to me that this is essentially the point of N. T. Wright’s interpretation of 2 Cor 5:21. He says, “What the whole passage involves, then, is the idea of the covenant ambassador, who represents the one for whom he speaks in such a full and thorough way that he actually *becomes* the living embodiment of his sovereign—or perhaps, in the light of 4:7–18 and 6:1–10, we should equally say the *dying* embodiment”; concerning Paul’s “self-understanding” (emphasis original); Wright adds that the phrases “minister of the new covenant,” and the one who has ‘become the righteousness of God’ are “mutually interpretive ways of saying substantially the same thing.” See N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God,” in *Pauline Theology* (Vol. 2; ed. D. M. Hay; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) 200–208.

tians. The Christian fundamentally belongs to God's people who are not defined foremost by citizenship, culture, or family. Such things like country and family may be good in many respects; nevertheless, they are still secondary. Only Christ deserves our supreme loyalty.

Having a sense of superiority not only undermines support for missions, it also conflicts with the gospel. This was as true for first-century Rome as it is in the present day. How do cultural pride and nationalism contradict the gospel? Jesus is not merely the King and Lord of our particular group (e.g. nation, church, denomination, etc.). The gospel is for the whole world because Jesus is the king over the whole world. He is King of kings (Rev 19:16), governors, presidents, chairmen, prime ministers, and CEOs.

To be mistaken about our fundamental identity essentially privatizes Jesus' kingship. Is this not exactly Paul's point when he writes, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. *Or is God the God of Jews only?* Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one" (Rom 3:28–30). Paul appeals to monotheism in order to overcome the Jewish ethnocentrism that pressured Gentiles to convert to Judaism via works of the law like circumcision. In effect, justification by works undermines the gospel because it restricts the sphere of God's reign and affection. Christ is king over all nations, not just Jews. When we privilege our own faction against others, we may subtly deny the point that "God shows no partiality" (Rom 2:11).

The danger of individualism cannot be understated here. The gospel does not merely concern individuals; it saves all nations (cf. Gal 3:8). When we think about the church's ministry, whom do we prioritize and why? How do we partition our world, city, and church? These are gospel questions. Anecdotally, I know a pastor who said in a staff meeting, in effect, that his church was not going to worry about the nations until their own neighborhood had been reached. Jesus says to the apostles, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Sadly, one could mistakenly read the verse as if it were to be geographically and sequentially applied to our own neighborhood. What would have happened if the apostles had strictly applied Jesus' words as a prescription (like the pastor I mentioned above)? In short, the gospel never would have left Jerusalem!<sup>42</sup> Christians should never say in good conscience that they will not go to other nations simply because "there are so many people already here in this country that do not know Jesus." We must not suppose that God is just like us. God is neither patriotic, nor nationalistic, nor does he have "team spirit," even in the World Series.

What if Paul had written his letter to readers in China? How might he have rephrased Rom 1:14? Perhaps, "I am under obligation both to Chinese and to foreigners, the civilized and the uncivilized." One may well expect Paul to say, "I am

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<sup>42</sup> Some have argued that Acts 1:8 has ethnic and not simply geographic significance. For example, see the discussion in Thomas S. Moore, "To the End of the Earth: The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke," *JETS* 40 (1997) 389–99.

under obligation both to Chinese and to the Japanese, the Han people and the minority groups, the socialist and the capitalist.” Those living in China perceive the tension in these words. The distinction between Chinese and foreigner is fundamental. Patriotism for many people entails hatred for Japan.<sup>43</sup> Depending on one’s location, the number of examples could go on. In America, for example, might Paul say, “Democrats and also Republicans”? What would he say to our particular setting? What social grouping would raise eyebrows among his readers? Answering this question requires honest reflection.

Paul’s words concern our identification with the various *subcultures* within broader culture. Membership in a subculture may be evidenced by one’s clothing, car, music, or occupation. One may not necessarily “hate” those people who belong to other groups. However, we may simply be indifferent or apathetic. Consequently, their needs either go unnoticed or simply are not a priority to us. Certainly, we may wish them well, but personal involvement seems like a big commitment because we are so busy with the more pressing issues of our own group. Before trying to justify ourselves, we do well to consider who our neighbor is so that we might love our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Luke 10:27–37).

C. S. Lewis’s comments in “The Inner Ring” illustrate the tendency against which Paul speaks in Romans.<sup>44</sup> Andrew Cameron summarizes Lewis’s idea, saying the desire to be in the “Inner Ring” “refer[s] to our passion to belong to some ‘inner circle’ of people who hover temptingly beyond our reach. When gripped by this passion, to be excluded from these circles drives us slightly mad, and to enter them leaves us smugly exultant.”<sup>45</sup> We see the similarity of this idea to that of Paul when we read what Lewis says is the consequence of this desire to belong: “[Y]our genuine Inner Ring exists for exclusion. There would be no fun if there were no outsiders. The invisible line would have no meaning unless most people were on the wrong side of it. Exclusion is no accident: it is the essence.”<sup>46</sup>

One hindrance to missions (as with other ministries) is not only prejudice against others but also fixation on oneself and group. In the subtle competition to win the approval of those near us, we forget the needs of those far from us. In the zeal to be like others whom we admire, we remain ignorant of those different than us. The desire to be included in the “inner ring” becomes idolatrous. Our inner circle of like-minded friends and family quickly becomes a rival empire. Like Gol-

<sup>43</sup> Among relevant articles, see T. P., “Of Useful Idiots and True Believers,” *The Economist* (September 18, 2012), online at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2012/09/protests-real-and-fake> (accessed October 29, 2012); Che-po Chan and Brian Bridges, “China, Japan, and the Clash of Nationalisms,” *Asian Perspective* 30/1 (2006) 127–56; Sunny Lee, “Beijing Suspicious of Japan’s War Crime Apology,” *The National* (Beijing, April 13, 2010) sec. Asia Pacific, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/asia-pacific/beijing-suspicious-of-japans-war-crime-apology>.

<sup>44</sup> For a summary and application of Lewis’s “Inner Circle” idea, see Andrew Cameron, “C. S. Lewis: Inner Circles and True Inclusion,” in *The Trials of Theology: Becoming a “Proven Worker” in a Dangerous Business* (ed. Andrew Cameron and Brian S. Rosner; Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009) 75–93.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 76.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 80, citing C. S. Lewis, “The Inner Ring,” in *Essay Collection* (ed. Lesley Walmsley; London: Harper Collins, 2000) 319–20.

lum, we isolate ourselves because our “ring” is so precious that we cannot think of sharing it with others or going to faraway lands.

How do these insights help us to assess the health of our churches and mission groups? First of all, when looking for a local church to join, perhaps people should consider how much attention the church gives to cross-cultural ministry, whether internationally or locally. If a central aspect of the gospel and the church’s mission concerns ethnic/group distinctives, then people should consider the church’s location and social diversity, to include economics, education, as well as ethnicity. Second, we cannot forsake “missions” on the altar of being “missional.” That is, it is not enough to be concerned with local needs. The gospel necessarily commissions people to cross cultures so that God would bless *all nations* (cf. Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8). In part, this means that Christians must extend their attention to unreached and unengaged people groups. Furthermore, if all those who are in Christ are Abraham’s offspring, then blood is not thicker than the baptismal waters. The work of missions is more than doing a good deed for “those people over there.” Instead, the labor of missions is a part of our family obligation. Those of other social groups (ethnic, national, education, economic, etc.) are family. We dare not divide the human family. Reconciling “Greek” and “barbarian” silences the babble of a cynical world.<sup>47</sup> Third, missionary training must account for the ways in which local and ethnic loyalties will hinder evangelistic preaching and church planting. It is not enough simply to communicate to individuals and appeal to conscience, even if they are Christians.

Paul was not apathetic to Roman indifference. Churches must intentionally reckon with the fact that Christ is not content to be king merely over our small spheres of influence. The contemporary church is obligated to preach the gospel to its own “barbarians.” This is because, as Kuyper famously puts it, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> As various scholars have noted, βάρβαρος (barbarian) is essentially an onomatopoeia meaning “blah blah” conveying a sense of “babbling.” Cf. H. Windisch, “βάρβαρος,” *TDNT* 1:546. Fittingly, going to those who “babble” brings reconciliation to the nations who have been divided since Babel (Genesis 11).

<sup>48</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader* (ed. James D. Bratt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 488.