

Finding the Missing Link in Our Missiology

Decades of annual, clockwork-like repetition had taught John Wilkinson to expect the arrival of the letter in the opening days of each New Year. Wilkinson had founded the Mildmay Mission to the Jews in London in 1876. And, not long after the organization launched, he began receiving annually a check in the mail from a particular noteworthy donor. That check always carried the date January 1 and the same four words written on the memo line:

To the Jew first!

That donor was Hudson Taylor, the pioneering 19th-century English missionary to China. Numerous biographies have been penned to document Taylor's profound and lasting impact on the spread of the Christian faith in China. That's right, the Western world's pre-eminent missionary to China made the very first check he wrote each year a donation to a group dedicated to bringing the Jews of Europe the good news that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Messiah.

This poses an intriguing question. Namely, why? Why would a missionary with a legendary passion for reaching the people of China with the gospel start each new year with a donation to a group in London endeavoring to evangelize the Jewish people?

It is because Hudson Taylor understood some spiritual principles very few Christians in today's world can comprehend. In fact, Taylor clearly understood two key missiological truths. (*Missiology* is the theology of evangelism and missions.)

First, he understood that there is spiritual power in putting first what God has said to put first. The words on Taylor's annual donation check memo line ("To the Jew first!") reveal

that he understood and believed the implications of Paul's famous Romans 1:16 declaration:

"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" (NASB, emphasis added).

Secondly, he grasped that the Word of God links the spiritual awakening of the Jews to success in the church's mission to take the gospel to the whole world.

Let's explore both of these principles in the clarifying light of Scripture. As we do, I believe we'll recover a lost key to blessing—for ourselves individually, for our individual congregations, and for the church as a whole.

Let's find what I call "the missing link in our missiology."

'Ethnos' and 'Goyim'

Matthew records a startling prophetic statement by Jesus that I consider the clearest and most concise statement in the entire Bible concerning the Last Days.

"And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14, NIV).

Here Jesus directly mentions "the end" and links it to the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world. Put another way, He is declaring that visible, worldwide evangelism will be the event or activity that will signal the Last Days are upon us—and implies that until this is fulfilled, Jesus will not return.

Please note the word "nations" in Jesus' statement. When most of us see that word we think of countries, or nation-states. For example, we speak of the United States, France and India as being nations. There are essentially 196 nation-states in the world today, but this is not what Jesus was referencing in

his statement.

In Hebrew, the word for *nations* is *goyim* and refers to the non-Jewish people of the world—the Gentiles, in other words. And the Greek word for nations is *ethnos*, from which we derive the word ethnic. Matthew uses the word *ethnos* in relating Jesus' words. *Ethnos* literally means “race” or “tribe,” or as we more commonly say today, “people group.” Because we live in a mobile world in which people are constantly migrating, most countries of the world contain a rich mixture of *ethnos* within their borders. The United States alone comprises a myriad of nations whose people have settled here to find freedom and a better life.

When Jesus declared that the gospel of the Kingdom must be preached to every *ethnos*, He was not saying that we merely had to reach inside the 196 nation-states of the modern world. No, the commission is to reach the distinct ethnic groups that live within all those countries. Just think about the magnitude of that challenge—in the U.S. alone.

With such a huge challenge before us, it is natural to wonder, “Where do we begin?” Thankfully, the Word of God has an answer for us!

First Things First

We have already taken notice of the Apostle Paul's words to Gentile believers in Rome in which he articulated his priority for delivering the gospel—“to the Jew first, then for the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16). By the way, Paul backed up those words with actions. Throughout his ministry—even though his self-declared calling was to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13)—Paul's first stop in every new city was the local synagogue. This pattern reveals something important about Paul's priorities that is missing in the missiology of most evangelicals.

Most of the cities Paul visited in the Roman world were

diverse melting pots as well. There were many *ethnos* living in Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica and the other busy trading ports to which Paul traveled. Yet his first evangelistic efforts were always directed to the Jewish community of the city. It seems that only after he was satisfied that the Jews of the city had been given an opportunity to accept or reject the Messiah did he feel released to direct his preaching to the other *ethnos*.

Why is this? We don't have to guess. Paul gives us the key in his extensive discourse on the Jewish people in Romans chapters 9 through 11. Here Paul makes it clear that the Jewish people are a major key (perhaps the key) to reaching the nations. Allow this explanation:

In the 11th chapter of Romans, Paul addresses Gentile believers who had been making the argument that, since the Jewish people had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God had in turn rejected them—the implication being that salvation was no longer available to them. Paul flatly dismisses this assertion:

"I say then, has God rejected His people? God forbid! For I also am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom he foreknew" (vv. 1-2, MEV).

Paul goes on to explain that, although a "remnant" of Israel was currently accepting Jesus as Messiah, the rest had been providentially "hardened" against the gospel message. But Paul declares this hardening was not permanent:

"I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid! But through their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression means riches for the world, and their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness mean?" (vv. 11-12, MEV).

Paul points out that such a rejection was necessary in order for salvation to be offered to the remainder of the world. But he doesn't stop there. He makes what I believe to be an extremely significant prophetic prediction when he says:

"For if their rejection [of Jesus] means the reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" (v. 15, MEV).

Yes, every non-Jewish believer in the world who has come to experience forgiveness, peace and eternal life through faith in the Messiah has been blessed because of that rejection. But Paul indicates that an even greater blessing will result when that rejection turns to acceptance. Indeed, we are told it will bring *life from the dead*. And Paul goes on to prophesy that such a day is coming!

"For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, lest you be wise in your own estimation, for a partial hardening has come up until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved ..." (vv. 25-26, MEV).

This verse and others suggest a linked destiny between Israel and the church and between Israel and the nations. And that phrase "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" also suggests a link between a Jewish revival and the imminent return of Jesus for His Bride.

Just as Israel's rejection released the gospel to spread throughout the world, the Jews' return will signal something very special and something very exciting. I do not claim to understand precisely how this will manifest or what it will look like exactly, but I am absolutely convinced that this is a spiritual reality.

No, God is not nearly finished with Israel. Nor has His "to the Jew first" mandate in our evangelistic and missionary efforts expired.

A Missing Key to Blessing

Now, more than ever before, God is calling every believer to reach Jewish people with the gospel. And Jews are responding—in unprecedented numbers. Not since the days of the book of Acts have so many Jewish people opened their hearts to receive Messiah. Through Jewish Voice Ministries International alone, some 75,000 Jewish people worldwide have responded to altar calls in the past six years.

Have “the fullness of the Gentiles” come in? I don’t know. What I do know is that God is opening long-blinded eyes and regenerating thousands of Jewish hearts every single day. And this is something that we should find very exciting indeed.

I also know that God is pouring out special blessings upon people and upon churches that acknowledge God’s order of things by honoring the “to the Jew first” principle in their giving to missions.

For example, a dear friend of our ministry is Pastor Robert Morris of Gateway Church in the Dallas, Texas area. Gateway is one of the largest and fastest-growing churches in North America. In his recent book on church growth and leadership, Pastor Morris cites the question he is invariably asked whenever he encounters other pastors and ministry heads. Namely, “What is the secret of the success, prosperity and favor that seems to rest upon Gateway Church?”

Many pastors find his answer surprising. Pastor Morris says he is convinced the key reason Gateway has been blessed is that very early in the church’s existence, he and the leadership grasped the “to the Jew first” principle and began ordering the church’s missions budget accordingly. The *first* tenth of Gateway’s budget for outreach and evangelism has always gone to support organizations that are endeavoring to take the gospel to the Jewish people.

Hudson Taylor would approve. As I mentioned at the outset, the

first check he wrote each new year was to the Mildmay Mission to the Jews. The man who received those checks, John Wilkinson, once described his life's mission:

"From 1854 to this day, much of my time has been occupied in preaching the gospel to the Jews, showing from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. A considerable portion of my time has also been spent in expounding to Christians, God's truth about the Jews with a view to awaken Scriptural interest in the conversion of our Jewish brethren."

That's my mission too. Much more importantly, it's the heart of God.

"To the Jew first . . .!" This, I believe with all my heart, is the missing link in our missiology. It's the key to great blessing for us and an extraordinary end-time revival among the *ethnos* of the world.

*A Jewish believer in Yeshua (Jesus), **Jonathan Bernis** is President & CEO of Jewish Voice Ministries International. He has worked on the forefront of world evangelism since 1984, taking the Good News of Israel's Messiah to the far reaches of the Earth, to the Jewish people, and also to the nations.*