

Jews vs. Gentiles OR Us vs. Them

For years I've read **Romans 1-2** as Paul talking about Jews versus Gentiles. Perhaps you've heard the same thing. That is, I've said in **Romans 1:18-32** he was talking about Gentiles. Surely it was Gentiles because Jews would never be accused of doing the things talked about in these verses. Jews worshiped the living God and didn't exchange the glory of the immortal God for the images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Paul is talking about those pesky, pagan Gentiles and all the sinning they did. Then in **Romans 2:1** when he writes, "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges," he turns to talk to those judgmental Jews who thought they were better than the Gentiles because they had the Law of God and had submitted to circumcision. And now I have a nice neat little package of Paul showing both Jews and Gentiles how awful they were and how much they need Jesus.

While that final conclusion is true, Jews and Gentiles have both been awful and both need Jesus, I'm no longer sure Paul's path to that point is the one I outlined above. Let me explain.

First, consider the historical situation in Rome. The most likely point in the New Testament timeline for the writing of **Romans** is during Paul's three-month stay in Greece recording in **Acts 20:2-3**. Notice what was said in **Acts 18:1-2**. Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. While **Romans 16:3** demonstrates that some of the Jews had returned by the writing of **Romans**, we can't expect a large contingency of Jewish Christians there. That is especially compounded by the fact that when Paul arrives in Rome in **Acts 28:21-22**, the Jewish leaders in Rome treat the sect of Christianity like a group that they don't know much about. They have heard bad things but have had little to no interaction with it themselves. This could not possibly be true if a significant number of Jews in Rome were part of the Christian church there.

Since Paul is writing to a largely Gentile audience with only a few Jewish members, why would he build this stellar argument to blast this minority group? Why would he write an argument that sounds like this minority group has some kind of overwhelming control that needs to be taken down a notch or two? That just doesn't make much sense to me.

Second, consider the way the Roman church would have heard this letter when it was read to them. I think this is a point I have often missed. When Paul wrote this letter, his intention was not that all the Roman Christians would receive a copy of it that they could read repeatedly in the privacy of their homes, cross-referencing with their copies of other letters Paul had written or with transcripts of sermons they had heard someone preach. The fact is most of the Roman Christians wouldn't have been able to read. Literacy rates at this time were between 5 and 20%. That means on the good side 80 out of 100 could not read the letter themselves. Paul didn't expect the Roman Christians to read this book for themselves. He expected them to hear it read when they came together as a church. For them, this letter wouldn't look like a private correspondence; it would be more like a sermon. So, read those first two chapters again from the standpoint of listening to someone read it to you like a sermon. What do you notice?

When you hear "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteous of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (ESV) who do you think about? As a mostly Gentile audience hearing this in a sermon, do you hear, "Those pesky sinful Gentiles"? I don't. I hear, "Yep, that's what those rotten sinners out there are like. All those people out there who haven't come to Jesus are so bad, wicked, sinful, and evil." As Paul builds up his argument, I am aroused into hearty and repeated, "Amen." If I were inclined and I didn't think my brethren might run me out on a rail, I might even shout, "Preach it, brother."

But then the reader looks out at the audience and says, "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things" (ESV). When I hear this do I think, "Oh, Paul is talking to the Jews now." No. I don't think that at all. The reader has been talking about those sinners out there and now he has looked at me and said "you have no excuse." Who is he talking to? He is talking to me.

Paul's trap in these two chapters wasn't meant to put the Jews in their place, it was meant to put us Christians in our place. Paul's point was not about Jews vs. Gentiles, it was about Us vs. Them. How easy it is as Christians to forget where we came from. How easy it is to forget that we were all sinners. We may not have done everything on Paul's list in **Romans 1:29-32**, but we did our fair share. How dare we think that we are somehow better than all those people out there? Like Paul said in **Titus 3:1-7**, we are to treat those people out there with courtesy and be ready for every good work among them because we were just like them and the difference between then and now

is not our awesomeness. Rather, the difference is the grace of Jesus Christ and the regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we must teach against sin. But we must not do so to prove we are better than them. We do so to bring people to Jesus Christ who has saved us and can save them.

Never think that you are going to heaven because you are so much of a better person than all those others. The fact is when you were outside of Christ, you proved yourself to be every bit as bad as they are. Rather, give glory to God through Jesus Christ for the regeneration He is working in you. And if you are outside of Christ, recognize that you can have that regeneration too. You don't have to become a good person to be regenerated. You simply have to turn your life over to Jesus and He will regenerate you.

Are you regenerated?

—Edwin L. Crozier