

Modern Christians and Jews in United States could continue discussion begun by Apostle Paul

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Today's Christians and Jews in the United States should be able to continue a conversation which the Apostle Paul began in the early years of Christianity.

That view was presented by Rabbi Dr. Michael J. Cook, associate professor of intertestamental and early Christian literatures at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, in the second of two lectures to Mobile area clergy.

COOK SPOKE FOR an hour at Spring Hill Avenue Temple about the Apostle Paul's view of Judaism as indicated in chapters 9-11 of Paul's Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament.

The rabbi quoted Dean Krister Stendahl of the Harvard University Divinity School as saying today "is the first time in recent history when there could be an open relation between Christians and Jews and where the conversation which Paul started in Romans 9-11, but which was

PAUL FACED TWO major dilemmas in his relationship to the Jews, according to the lecturer: Paul, as a Jew, could not look calmly upon the rejection of the Gospels by the Jewish nation for the most part; God's promises to Israel should have been fulfilled by the coming of the Christ, but the promises were unrealized because Israel rejected the Christ.

The lecturer said Paul offers responses in four stages to these two dilemmas:

FIRST — "HE begins by asserting that the promises of God to Israel were never applicable to the people of Israel as a whole but only to selected groups or individuals within that nation....

"This choice was an act of pure grace ... without any prior consideration of the merits involved whatsoever.

"Not all who are physically descended from Israel, therefore, really constitute Israel as we should understand her, and the fact that many Jews have rejected the Christ in no way implies that God's plans or promises

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broken off mainly by Christian expansion and superiority feelings, can start again. The pain of history and the shame of the Holocaust (World War II Nazi massacre of Jews) interfered with real dialogue, but the possibility really exists and it is to be hoped will increase."

IN HIS LECTURE, Cook named some problems which modern-day persons face in understanding the Apostle Paul: The New Testament book of Acts and Paul's epistles are at variance in their representation of Paul; although Paul was reared as a Pharisaic Jew, his upbringing seems to have been in the diaspora, or the dispersion of Jews outside of Palestine, and the nature of Pharisaism in Asia Minor of that time is not known today; Paul's epistles are letters which often are random answers to random questions, and Paul had no idea the epistles would come to be considered part of Christian Scriptures; since Paul was not systematic in his writings, scholars have attempted to systematize Paul's thoughts, and some attempts at systematization may reflect as much of the modern systematizer as they do of Paul himself.

The lecturer made some general comments on Paul's relation to Judaism: While modern-day persons refer to Paul as a Christian, Paul himself never had any sense of being anything other than a Jew, and he discussed who was a "true Jew" rather than a "true Christian." Paul and many other Jews in the Greco-Roman world had problems understanding the importance of the law of Moses, and Paul, who saw the law of Moses as being subject to time, pointed to a better and later revelation in Christ.

have been frustrated, for the Israel to whom God made his promises was not the Israel according to the flesh but only the Israel according to the spirit.

"Just as some who are biologically descended from Israel do not belong to Israel according to the spirit, so there are some who are not physically descended from Abraham who nevertheless do belong to Israel according to the spirit....

"It is thus conceivable that in the present time Israel according to the spirit might contain but very few Jews by nationality and, by contrast, very many Gentiles who have become heirs of the promise."

SECOND — **ONE** might claim that the process of God's election of some and rejection of others is almost arbitrary, and even if it is it "is hardly unjust, for surely does God not have a right to do what he wishes with his own?..."

"Humanity's salvation does not depend upon human beings' own merits or works. Rather all depends upon God's free grace."

THIRD — **EVEN** though "God's arbitrariness would be justified, it just so happens that God's choice has not been arbitrary at all but rather issues from the failure of the Jewish nation as a whole to call upon God in faith."

The basis for Israel's disbelief "can only lie in her stubborn adherence to her own kind of righteousness, righteousness by the law."

FOURTH — **PAUL** "indicates that Israel's apostasy is not final, and neither is God's rejection of his people. In fact, the difficulty created by this seeming rejection of the Jews is largely resolved by the notion that their

apostasy is only a necessary stage in an overarching process which will result in all people's knowledge of God's grace."

Cook said that while Jews have found Paul's teaching unpalatable, the Jews prefer Paul's attitudes to those expressed by some spokesmen of the later church.

Paul saw the Jews as being chosen, and he emphasized that Israel's rejection by God was only temporary. However, some early church fathers "came to present the Jews as the hopeless enemies of the church. Their rejection was deemed permanent."

IN TALKING ABOUT how Jewish thinkers responded to the attitudes of Paul and the early church fathers, Cook said modern-day persons might turn to rabbinic literature.

A problem in turning to rabbinic literature, however, "is that while we are certain of rabbinic attitudes, we cannot always be certain to what extent a given rabbinic statement is a direct or indirect response to Christianity and to what extent the rabbis made the statement totally oblivious to Christianity.... To the best of my recall, rabbinic literature never mentions Paul by name."

Rabbinic literature offers some contrasts in the views of Jewish thinkers and of Paul and some early church fathers:

FIRST — FOR Paul the Jewish law is only to a limited extent divine. The law could be canceled. For the rabbis the law is "thoroughly divine and eternal."

SECOND — PAUL and the rabbis differ in their view of sin. Paul views sin as "man's innate condition which man is helpless to overcome by any devices of his own. Man is accordingly totally reliant on God's gracious redemption...."

"For the rabbis sin does not mean man's innate condition. The rabbis conceive of the human race in both its physical and spiritual dimensions as God's pre-eminent creation, the singular blend of the earthly and the divine.

"In rabbinic Judaism there was no inherent impurity in the flesh as opposed to the spirit. The body in its marvelous construction was perceived as a masterpiece...."

"The human soul, the spiritual force within, was endowed with free will, enabling each person to choose the good and reject the evil.

"Sin was thus an erring from the path of virtue. It was not in any sense the depraved state of humanity."

THIRD — RIGHTEOUSNESS, in the view of the rabbis, "bore no relation to a gift of God's grace. Rather it was a mode of behavior over which man himself was in control.... Sins could be triumphed over.... In direct contrast to Paul, the rabbis argued that the law was a protection against the power of sin."

FOURTH — WHEREAS some early church leaders taught that the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 was indicative that God had forsaken the Jews, the rabbis taught that the temple "was destroyed not because the Jews placed their faith in the law but for precisely the opposite reason — because they neglected

the Torah ... but God will also save Israel for the sake of the Torah."

FIFTH — THE rabbis taught that "the 'chosenness' of Israel had absolutely nothing to do with God's grace. The reason the Jews were chosen ... was that only the Jews saw the true value of a life filled with works, works as specified in the Torah."

SIXTH — THE rabbis held that "the bond between God and Israel is unbreakable. Hence, the emphasis is not simply on the sanctity of the Torah, the Sabbath, circumcision but their permanent and irrevocable sanctity."

In talking about how modern Jewish scholars view Paul, Cook said the scholars have "been none too sympathetic."

He said, "Many Jewish scholars do not view Paul in continuity with Jesus but rather at variance with Jesus. Paul is alleged by them to preach only faith in Jesus, not the faith of Jesus.

"The reason for Paul's variance from Jesus is commonly advanced to be Paul's proximity to the mystery cults which emphasized salvation of the soul through union with a dying and rising deity."

Some Jewish scholars contend that Paul "was removed from mainstream Judaism and dependent upon the Greco-Roman mystery environment.

"ALL THESE FACTORS account for the strange paradox that while virtually all Jewish scholars on Paul term him a genius, they yet feel that his thinking has absolutely nothing to teach them."

Cook talked about his personal reactions to Paul:

FIRST — JEWS are a thinking people, and what early Christians called blindness of the Jews, the Jews saw as their clear-sightedness, and they could not take Paul as seriously as Christians might expect.

SECOND — WHEREAS Paul set righteousness by faith and righteousness by law in opposition to one another, with the implication that Judaism does not recognize righteousness by faith, "I don't feel this is accurate...."

"Jews believe that the truly righteous person is one of faith and one of works. Paul's schematization seems reflective of his own personal dilemma; a dilemma not necessarily shared by all persons."

THIRD — "NOT everyone is built the way Paul was. Not everyone is troubled by what troubled Paul. When Paul universalized his own particular predicament he came to include within it many Jews who did not honestly feel they were actually involved, and this is one reason why even in the modern day, Jews consider the issues which Paul raises by and large to have no relevance to them personally."

FOURTH — PAUL'S universalism, in that he made no distinction in Jews and Greeks, is often lauded. Yet Paul was "a particularist. It was his own type of Judaism, which later came to be referred to as Christianity, which was his particular concern.

"As one scholar phrased it, 'Paul's universalism did lead him to deny any difference between Jew and Greek so long as they are both in Christ, but he did not depart from particularism.'"