

Missions to the Jews

Should Christians evangelize Jews? The history of the relation of Jews to Christianity and of their conversion to Christ is complex, confused and fraught with misunderstanding. It varies from country to country and from period to period. But the unspeakable evil done to the Jews in our century has led Christians to re-examine their relationship to the Jews. It has caused theologians to devote much energy and time to rethinking the position of the Jews in God's plan of salvation. Many no longer believe the traditional position that the Church has replaced Israel. The Holocaust, the Nazi ethnic cleansing of the Jews, left European Christians with a deep scar on their collective consciences. Some reflected on the traumatic ending of the novel *Night*, authored by the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, "Where is God?... He hangs there from the gallows..... and it made a deep impression on them. They began to realize that they could have done more and said more to protest Hitler's "final solution." And they point to two thousand years of history filled with cruel acts by individuals and groups who considered themselves Christians.

During and after the Second World War the phrase "Mission to the Jews" was quietly dropped by most involved in it. Prior to that time, it was in regular use. A growing body of literature has developed trying to answer the question of evangelization of the Jews. At times the discussion has been intense, more so among Protestants than Roman Catholics. This greater interest on the part of the former may be due to the continued presence of mission societies dedicated to reaching the Jews with the gospel.

Many now view mission work among the Jews as anti-Semitism. The Rev. Dr. Goran Larsson, Director of the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem, has bluntly stated that

After Auschwitz Christians can no longer teach and preach about the Jews and Judaism as they did before. Anti-Semitism is apostasy. It is blasphemous when disguised in Christian robes.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 gave the Jews a renewed sense of purpose and national pride. They now have their own homeland where they can be Jews without feeling a sense of shame or oppression. Therefore, many Jews see all attempts at their conversion to Christ as a mission to destroy their identity and as a threat to their survival as a people.

World Council of Churches

In 1961 the World Council of Churches (WCC) organized a committee on the Church and the Jewish people (CCJP). It pays careful attention to any expression of anti-Semitism. It has permanent contact with six Jewish organizations, among them the World Jewish Congress. The WCC held consultations in 1988 in Siguna, Sweden, where a set of affirmations were made up, trying to sum up what had been learned in Jewish-Christian dialogue during the past decades. They state that Jewish people are

not rejected by God. The continuing vocation of the Jewish people is a sign of God's love. Their covenant remains. The Jewish people today are in continuation with biblical Israel.

Therefore, the Jews are beyond the reach of the gospel and of the gospel proclamation. Many in the ecumenical movement teach that Christians and Jews share one hope and the joint mission that God's name may be hallowed. Jesus is the Saviour of the Gentiles. Jews, on the other hand, had a covenant with God, and so they had no need for a Saviour. There are two ways to God - the Jewish and the Christian. The Jews are now considered partners in the ecumenical movement with the task to restore the unity of God's people on earth. Dr. Goran Larssens argues that Christians are forbidden to disqualify Judaism and despise Jewish obedience for the Torah with all its commandments, as if God had broken His covenant on Sinai and changed His eternal Word, lest they lose their faith in the one God who is the same yesterday, today and in all eternity.

The Second Vatican Council

Pope John XXIII, who convoked the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), turned around Roman Catholic-Jewish relations. While receiving a delegation of American Jews in audience, he made a play on words, making reference to his own name (Joseph). He said,

When I see you all standing before me, I recall the incident of Joseph in Egypt who hid his true identity from his brothers for a long time. But finally he could not any longer and confessed: "I am Joseph your brother."

The Second Vatican Council published its *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, and this document revolutionized official Roman Catholic attitudes. It affirmed that the relationship between Jews and Christians "concerns the church as such." It spoke of the Jews as "very dear to God" and affirmed that "God does not take back the gifts bestowed or the choice he made." Subsequent Catholic statements developed the idea of the unbrokenness of God's covenant with the Jewish people. They imply that salvation is present in Judaism today and also repudiate the traditional Catholic position on mission to the Jews. The focus is on conversation and cooperation.

To illustrate the changed theological attitude toward Jews, I will introduce two prominent theologians - one Protestant and the other Roman Catholic.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, world-renowned Protestant ethicist and professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, in 1958 gave an address before a joint meeting of his own faculty and that of the Jewish Theological Seminary, in which he opted outright for a permanent moratorium on the evangelization of the Jews. He endorsed the view proposed by philosopher Franz Rosenweig that Christianity and Judaism are "two religions with one centre, worshipping the same God, but with

Christianity serving the purpose of carrying the prophetic message to the Gentile world." Niebuhr believed that Christianity is "a faith which, whatever its excellencies, must appear to (the Jews) as a symbol of an oppressive majority culture." In his book *Pious and Secular America*, Niebuhr argued against doing mission work among the Jews. He declared that it is both futile and wrong. Jews can find God in their own tradition and Christians in theirs.

Gregory Baum (1923-)

Himself of Jewish background, Gregory Baum, author of many books and a prominent liberal Catholic, says that the Christian Church is now summoned "to a radical reformulation of its faith" and must develop a new way of looking at Christ in the history of salvation. He believes that Jesus is no longer the way to God. He finds this exclusivism unacceptable for our times. And he makes this generalization about the new stance of the Christian churches:

After Auschwitz the Christian churches no longer wish to convert the Jews. While they may not be sure of the theological grounds that dispense them from this mission, the churches have become aware that asking the Jews to become Christian is a spiritual way of blotting them out of existence and thus only reinforces the effect of the Holocaust.

A history of Jewish missions

How should we react to the call for a moratorium on mission to the Jews? Were Christians prior to World War II wrong in evangelizing the Jews? Both Roman Catholics and Protestants were active in this work.

Ignatius of Loyala (c.1491-1556) and the first Jesuits were active in endeavouring to win the Jews in Rome. They gained some converts both among the more prominent and among those of lower social status. Records tell us that in Rome from 1634 to 1790 2,430 Jews were baptized. Many of these converts in that time period rose to high position in the Catholic Church.

Protestants were also very active in efforts to evangelize the Jews. Near the close of the 19th century, forty different societies and 260 missionaries were said to be devoting themselves to this task. The most prominent mission was the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, founded in 1808 by a Christian Jew who had come from Germany and had become impressed with the challenge of the Jewish population in London. (In the 1960s the name was changed to "The Church's Ministry among the Jews.") Although after 1815 its membership was confined to the Church of England, its chief support came from evangelicals. Already in 1820 this society began a pioneering work in Palestine. In 1822 the first important 19th century German body for the conversion of Jews was founded, the Berlin Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews. For a time it received financial aid from the London Society.

Prominent public figures also supported sacrificially the evangelization of the Jews. Anthony Ashley Cooper (1801-1885), one of the greatest philanthropists of his age, was dedicated to the mission to the Jews. Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890), an acknowledged Old Testament scholar, himself of Jewish descent, gave much energy to missions to the Jews. He also founded a Jewish missionary college, and translated the New Testament into Hebrew.

To show that the evangelization of Jews was not without fruit, I will give one example from Dutch history. Isaac Da Costa (1798-1860), born into a wealthy Jewish family in Amsterdam, was converted, through the persistent witness of Willem Bilderdyk, to a fervent faith in Christ. Thereafter his life was devoted to the Lord's cause. His lectures and writings had a profound influence on the Dutch Reveil movement and the Secessionists.

The Kirk of Scotland

Calvinism, with its covenantal theology, always had a burden for Jewish mission. The latter is confessed in Q & A 191 of the 17th century Westminster Larger Catechism:

Q. What do we pray for in the second petition?

A. In the second petition (which is, Thy Kingdom come), acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in....

In the Directory for the Public Worship of God, adopted by the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland on February 3rd, 1645, are found these words: "To pray for the propagation of the gospel and the kingdom of Christ to all nations; for the conversion of the Jews, the fullness of the Gentiles" The first denominational ministry to the Jews was established by the Scottish Presbyterians in the first half of the 19th century.

Holland

Shlomo Hizak wrote that Holland is a primary example of what it really means to love the Jews. He refers to the many Dutch citizens who opened their arms and their homes to the Jews in times of oppression. Reformed Christians in Holland regarded the Jews as God's unique old covenant people, to the point of families and individuals risking their lives for them. One individual even became known throughout the world for her efforts on behalf of the Jews. What Corrie Ten Boom and her Reformed family did for the Jews and their courageous acts of hiding them have been told through her book and film, *The Hiding Place*. When she was already quite old she was honoured for her efforts and for those of her family by a Conservative synagogue in the Southern United States. The Jews did not forget what they had done. Some years ago my wife and I visited her

home in Haarlem, which had been restored to its original World War II setting. We noticed visitors from many parts of the world.

One covenant

I believe that a moratorium on mission to the Jews is Biblically unwarranted. Furthermore, Scripture does not support the new two-covenant theology. The Church grew out of the old Israel. Rev. S. G. De Graaf, author of *Promise and Deliverance*, said in a sermon on Jeremiah 3:19-4:2 that we do not believe in a special role the people of Israel might still have in history of the kingdom of heaven. Yet God does not let go of His people. When they repent and turn to God they too will be saved. For both Jew and Gentile, Christ is the only way to the Father.

The earliest Christians were Jewish. After Gentiles joined the Church, there was no schism between them and the Jews. All believers are the spiritual children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29) and members of the new covenant. Our Lord spoke of it shortly before His death, burial and resurrection (I Corinthians 11:25,26). The Church is now the true people of God, the people of His covenant. David E. Holwerda rightly concludes his book *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* by saying that "There is only one way to God, not two; one way of salvation, not two; one way to citizenship in the City of God, not two."

Jesus only

The Jewish people share the same needs all people have. We have all sinned and need reconciliation with God. And the remedy for our sin-sick situation is for all the same. Therefore, the unavoidable question "Who is Jesus?" divides the synagogue from the Church. If a Jew is to experience a covenantal relationship with God, it must be through faith; yes, faith in the Messiah who has already come, Jesus Christ. The confession that Jesus is God's Son and the only Saviour is at the heart of the Christian faith. The New Testament makes it clear that both Jew and Gentile are saved by the one Lord and "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"(Acts 4:12; John 14:6).

The mission mandate

The mission mandate is clear. No church may ever give up on its missionary activity. Our Lord commissioned the Church to begin its witness in Jerusalem, and from there go to all Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). All people - from every tribe, race, and nation - must be reached with the gospel, including the Jews. The Church may not remain paralyzed by the horrors of the Holocaust and as a consequence refuse to evangelize the Jews. And the Church should not succumb to a new two covenant theology as a means to escape responsibility. We are called to minister with sacrificial love, patience and persistence. The Jews, like all others, are looking very closely to see if Christians are living their profession of faith. Out of love for

our covenant God we will want to proclaim the gospel to the Jews. George A. F. Knight, a sympathetic friend of Israel writes:

There is one thing, and only one thing that we must communicate to all men, and that is Christ. To refrain from doing so... is a form of religious anti-Semitism which is as basically evil as the philosophy of the Nazis.

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