
Theological Reflection and Jewish Evangelism

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The paper from which this article was originally prepared was entitled *The Impact of Theological Reflection for Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today*.

During July the Lausanne Consultation for Jewish Evangelism (LCJE) held its 5th International Conference in Jerusalem at kibbutz Ramat Rachel. All the participants held the event to be of great significance and, probably, not since the Acts of the Apostles had such a discussion been held in Jerusalem. Not since 1910 had an international conference on Christian world mission been held in that city; and that had only a small place for the evangelisation of the Jewish people. Some felt that Jewish missions had at long last come home; an altogether understandable reaction, in view of the previous obstacles that the ideologically and religiously divided city of Jerusalem had produced. It was deeply moving to wake up each morning, open the curtains and look across the quiet fields to the little town of Bethlehem where the Messiah of Israel was born.

The vitality and vibrancy of Jewish Christianity impressed itself on more than one visiting leader. The generosity of the Lord to the movement was seen in the many abilities demonstrated. For example, we were treated to a preview of the new opera by an Israeli Christian leader, David Loden. The libretto takes its material from the story of David and Bathsheba and intercuts it with the words of the penitential psalms, especially Psalm 51. Through this medium Loden seeks to challenge the popular Israeli icon of King David and sets forth the universal themes of human sin, the proclamation of divine judgement, repentance, God's pardon and gracious restoration.

The Jewish Christian contribution to the world of the fine arts was also well represented through the exhibition of paintings and sculpture in the foyer. Slightly less obvious but still very evident was the academic seriousness that is a growing feature of the best segments of the movement. A significant number of both field missionaries and those occupied in support ministries are currently pursuing research, both formal and less structured.¹¹ The practical consequences of their researches are making an impact at the point of witness and in the nurture of new believers.

As the European co-ordinator it was my responsibility to report on the impact of theological reflection on Jewish missions in Europe today.² The period under investigation was that from the last international conference at Zeist, Holland in 1991 to the present; the past four years. During Spring 1995 a questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of European members of LCJE. This sample included large and small evangelistic organisations, messianic congregations and traditional churches, groups and individuals, academics and practitioners in the field. The group also represented the broad spectrum of European church traditions. It included the Church of England, Dutch Reformed Churches, Finnish Lutheran Church, the German Lutheran

tradition, Independent Evangelical Churches, and the Scottish and Irish Presbyterian Churches. This article is essentially based on that report and follows, more or less its format.³

Issues considered during the last four years

Our respondents reported that twenty-four issues had been considered; they can be grouped in five subject categories, Theological and Biblical, Missiological, Historical, Apologetics, and Traditional and Messianic Jewish studies.

Theological and Biblical

The Willowbank Declaration was produced in April 1989 by an international consultation of theologians who met at Willowbank, Bermuda, under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Their task was to produce a statement on questions relating to Jesus Christ and the Jewish people. Jean Paul Rempp, a Reformed Baptist pastor from Lyon, France, has translated the document into French and has produced a detailed set of Biblical references for this most useful tool. Rempp, like others, uses the document to convince hesitant church leaders of the Biblical basis for a distinctive witness to the Jews. In the UK the BEC has taken a lead in encouraging churches to espouse the principles of Willowbank, making copies available from its St Albans offices.⁴

Sadly there are many Church leaders (including some evangelicals) who fail to see *the need for Jewish Evangelism*. Some have conceded to the prevailing liberal and pluralistic opinion that argues that evangelism to the Jews is unhelpful and inappropriate. Not least among such wrong-headed clergy is the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has tacitly expressed censure of the work of the evangelical Anglican *Church's Ministry to the Jews* by refusing to be its patron.

The powerful force of the *Two Covenant theory*, which sees Israel as a necessary partner in ecumenical dialogue rather than an evangelistic target, cries out for a definitive evangelical response. In a nutshell the Two Covenant theory teaches that God's covenant with the Jews actually precludes them from accepting Jesus as Messiah. By remarkable theological gymnastics these theologians turn on its head the question addressed by the early Church in the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council. Then the question was: is Jesus for the gentiles? Today the question is: is Jesus for the Jew? The answer of the Two Covenant theologians is, no!

What is *the place of Jewish Evangelism* in the mission of the Church? This important question raises issues such as the exegesis and application to missionary theory of such passages as Romans 1:16 (including the meaning of *proton* and the use of the present tense) and the practice and rationale of Paul and his missionary team. The result of such a study will demonstrate whether or not there is a Biblical justification for believing that Jewish evangelism enjoys a continuing priority in the missionary strategy of the Church.

Although the term *Replacement Theology* is not in wide currency throughout much of the Church its leading idea is. It is the growing tendency of some evangelicals to stress the radical discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Unlike classical covenant theologians, such thinkers believe that God has rejected ethnic Israel and it has no continuing part to play in the unfolding history of redemption. This view may not be dissimilar to that held by some of the anti-Jewish early church Fathers. The

resurgence of such ideas may have serious repercussions for Jewish evangelism and has therefore necessarily occupied the thoughts of a number of the LCJE European members during the past four years.

Missiological

The challenge of pluralism remains one of the most crucial issues confronting evangelicals today. The idea that one religion is uniquely true and all others are false is generally considered unacceptable by many professing Christians today. The corollary of this view is that the strongly pluralistic Jewish community views traditional missionary activity as an anachronistic arrogance; an act of hostility not an expression of compassion.

The presuppositions of pluralism often form the context of Jewish and Christian dialogue and determine *the state of contemporary Jewish / Christian relations*. Relations between Christians and Jews have been revolutionised since the Second World War. Indeed the holocaust is described with some justification as the major event of twentieth century *Church* history. How can we again evangelise Jewish people when millions of baptised Christians were willing or silent accomplices in the mass murder of six million European Jews? Have not evangelicals forfeited the right to call Jews to repentance if they themselves have the blood of the innocent on their hands? Jews and Christians, especially those espousing a loose concept of witness, equivalent to open-ended dialogue, are, after nineteen centuries of drawing apart, building bridges, mending fences and developing common ground. They are also making common cause against missions as traditionally understood. This in turn has resulted in a largely healthy critique by contemporary Jewish missions of their past and present practices.

Many involved in the leadership of Jewish missions are much troubled by *Christian Zionism*, especially the insistence that support for the state of Israel can be a substitute for a clear gospel witness.

Europe generally knows nothing of the growth of the *Messianic Jewish congregations* seen in the USA. However in Britain we have seen something like thirty messianic groups which have come into existence in the recent past. Some are small fellowship groups, for Jewish Christians and enquirers, held on Friday evenings. Such cannot be said to be in competition with the churches but rather supplement their ministry, encouraging Jewish people to associate with the wider Body of Christ. Others have felt the impact of the Church Growth school's encouragement of mono-ethnic congregations. A small fringe, with orthodox Jewish trappings, concessions to Talmudic Judaism and pseudo-synagogue structures, is in danger of becoming ensnared in something akin to the Galatian heresy. At Jerusalem this year it was significant to see some, who in years past had encouraged the messianic Jewish emphasis, now intent on getting the genie back into the bottle. Others, emphasising the importance of the unity of the Body of Messiah, nevertheless justifiably resent the imposition of gentile culture leading to the diminishing of a distinctive Jewish identity in the Church. Others feel that Messianic congregations, of a more moderate nature, serve as valuable evangelistic bridges into the Jewish community, which generally believes that a Jewish Christian is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

With *Messianic Prophecy* being such an essential component of Jewish evangelism, more and more attention is being focused on matters of hermeneutics and exegesis. This is also true of the often over-heated subject of *Israel in eschatology*.

Historical

Some excellent historical work has also been undertaken over the last few years, largely of a biographical nature. Subjects have included *David Baron the missionary and Zionist*, *John Duncan & the Budapest mission*, as well as research on the correlation of Jewish mission and revival in Scottish church history. However, the most significant work on the history of Jewish missions to emerge for many years is the result of the research undertaken by Dr Kai Kjaer-Hansen, the Danish scholar and International coordinator of LCJE, on the life and influence of *Joseph Rabinowitz*.⁵ Rabinowitz, a Russian Jew, “discovered” on the Mount of Olives in 1882 that Jesus was Israel’s king and Messiah, the brother of the Jews and thus the answer to the so-called Jewish question. Rabinowitz was feted by the Jewish missions of his day and invited to address the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in 1896. What so fascinated and attracted interest was the existence of the Messianic movement and its Jewish Christian congregation in Kishinev under Rabinowitz’s leadership. Kjaer-Hansen’s research and subsequent book is of great value to all struggling with the questions of messianic Jewish identity. Among other things it helps us define the questions that need to be addressed today.

Apologetics

While witness to Israel today builds on the legacy of the past it must also develop an apologetic related to the questions in the minds of contemporary Jewish people.

Various Jewish attempts to “rehabilitate” Jesus as a Jew have encouraged many in Jewish mission to re-assert *the Jewishness of Jesus* without detracting from either his deity or the supreme authority of the New Testament. Jewish people need to understand that the Jewishness of Jesus is revealed so clearly in the Gospel accounts. After all, Christianity despite its misrepresentation by some gentiles, is a religion whose roots run deep into the Jewish world of the Hebrew Scriptures. To state clearly the Jewishness of Jesus leads the Christian missionary to affirm his status as Israel’s Messiah. In turn he will then have to pick his way through the minefield of *Rabbinic objections to the Messiahship of Jesus*. Having established that point he will discover it to be linked to the doctrine of *the Trinity in Old and New Testaments*. Seeking to communicate these highly controversial doctrines to the enquiring Jewish mind calls for both great skill and sensitivity.

The issues that need urgent consideration

The following table lists the crucial issues which, in the opinion of LCJE European leaders, need urgent scholarly attention. The interesting omission is that of historical research. This, in view of the prevalence of Jewish revisionism, seems a strange blind spot, neglecting as it does such issues as the accurate understanding of Christian origins and Jewish / Christian relations throughout the last nine centuries.

Theological and Biblical

- The Great Commission and the priority of Jewish evangelism.

Missiological

- The refutation of alleged theological grounds for not witnessing to Jews.
- The challenge of universalism and pluralism.

- A theological affirmation of respect for minorities, the rejection of racism and anti-Semitism.
- The integration of scholarship and leadership in evangelical Jewish missions.
- Mobilising the Church in witness to the Jewish people in a pluralistic culture.
- The problems Christians may have in reaching into the Jewish faith community.
- The need to develop a theology of inter-mission co-operation.

Apologetics

- Developing apologetics to demonstrate the Biblical and cultural authenticity of messianic Jews.
- Traditional and Messianic Jewish Studies.
- The uniqueness of Jesus.
- Understanding Jewish mysticism.
- Dealing with Jewish anti-mission objections from an exegetical platform.

Our greatest theological weaknesses

Continuing in an introspective mood, the sample group were asked to highlight the particular weaknesses they considered prevalent in our movement. The following are those so identified:

Biblical and theological

- The negative influence on missions and evangelism of certain Dispensational schemes.

Missiological

- The generally low level of theological competence of many entering Jewish evangelism.
- How to communicate the gospel sensitively and winsomely without loss of content.
- The need for higher theological educational institutes to provide programmes in Jewish missions and Jewish studies.
- The development of a distinctive Jewish Christian apologetic.
- The field of Christology.

Traditional and Messianic Jewish studies.

- The Church's generally inadequate level of understanding of Jewish thought and history.
- The inadequacy of evangelical responses to Jewish suffering and the Holocaust.

Resourcing theological study

All contributors agreed that theological reflection was “as important as evangelism” or that it was “an essential pre-requisite to evangelism”. None concluded that it was “less important than evangelism” or that it was “an alternative to evangelism”. 60% of respondents indicated that their organisations or churches made special provision for theological activity through the allocation of funds, time and personnel. However that leaves 40% who, for whatever reasons, do not provide any special resources, though they too indicated its importance in the overall scheme of Jewish evangelism.

The concrete results achieved

The concrete results achieved over the past four years form an impressive list. This itself reminds us that lying behind every evangelistic encounter, every tract printed and every book on the bookshelf, lies theological work. Such work must continue and it shows every sign of being continued.

- Books commissioned and published.
- Pamphlets/tracts written.
- Theological consultations undertaken.
- Lectures and papers given.
- Theological students made more aware of the issues.
- Churches and Christian groups informed, thus increasing support for and interest in Jewish evangelism.
- Greater and clearer insight into Jewish thought and practice gained.
- Deeper conviction of the legitimacy and centrality of Jewish mission.
- Creation in the churches of greater confidence in Jewish evangelism.
- Commencement of new areas of evangelistic activity (most notably in Germany).
- Increased intercession and prayer for the salvation of Jewish people.
- Clearer and more incisive presentation of the gospel to Jewish people.

Conclusion

In a recent article in *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Dr John Stott, reviewing the significance of the “Lausanne” movement for mission today, stresses the need for cultural sensitivity and clear sighted, focused vision.⁶ He cites what took place with the collapse of the European Marxist empire as a “most unseemly scramble of Western missionary organisations... bringing acute embarrassment to historic national church leaders, and enormous confusion”. This was the context in which was revealed the inherent dangers of “our evangelical tendency to individualism and empire building”.

There is no doubt in my mind that serious and humble reflection on questions of theology and history provides a valuable corrective to such arrogant tendencies. The ultimate object of theological reflection must be the sovereign God himself; his being and his acts in human history. Such study must result in something akin to the humbling experience of Isaiah; who seeing God “high and lifted up” was forced to confess his own personal sinfulness and natural inadequacy. What better preparation could there be for the calling and equipping of today’s servants of the Lord whose primary task is to say to the cities of Judah “Behold your God!”

References

- ¹ Except where explicitly stated, the author reserves his own opinion regarding research projects currently being tackled.
- ² LCJE is open to evangelicals who affirm commitment to the Lausanne Covenant.
- ³ The documents of the 5th International Conference are available on application to the author in writing or by phone or fax from Christian Witness to Israel, 166 Main Road, Sundridge, Sevenoaks, Kent, TN14 6EL – phone: 01959 565 955, fax: 01959 565 966.
- ⁴ The BEC issued a press release stating “We, therefore, wholeheartedly adopt and affirm the principles set forth in the Willowbank Declaration as consistent with Scripture and our evangelical heritage. We encourage Churches and individual Christians to engage both in witness to the Jewish community

and in prayerful support of the British evangelical agencies presently exercising this ministry.”
British Evangelical Council Press Release, *Jews Still Need the Gospel, Evangelicals Insist*, 29 June 1992.

⁵ Kai Kjaer-Hansen, *The Herzl of Jewish Christianity – Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement*. Handsel Press & Wm B. Eerdmans, 1995.

⁶ Dr John Stott, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 19, No 2, April 1995, p 53.

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Evangelism and Jewish people

Article IV.19

WE AFFIRM THAT sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with lost humanity is a matter of prime obligation for Christian people, both because the Messiah commands the making of disciples and because love of neighbour requires effort to meet our neighbour’s deepest need.

WE DENY THAT any other form of witness and service to others can excuse Christians from labouring to bring them to faith in Christ.

Article IV.20

WE AFFIRM THAT the church’s obligation to share saving knowledge of Christ with the whole human race includes the evangelising of Jewish people as a priority: “to the Jew first” (Romans 1:16).

WE DENY THAT dialogue with Jewish people that aims at nothing more than mutual understanding constitutes fulfilment of this obligation.

Article IV.21

WE AFFIRM THAT the concern to point Jewish people to faith in Jesus Christ, which the Christian church has historically felt and shown, was right.

WE DENY THAT there is any truth in the widespread notion that evangelising Jews is needless because they are already in covenant with God through Abraham and Moses and so are already saved despite their rejection of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Article IV.22

WE AFFIRM THAT all endeavours to persuade others to become Christians should express love to them by respecting their dignity and integrity at every point including parents’ responsibility in the case of their children.

WE DENY THAT coercive or deceptive proselytising, which violates dignity and integrity on both sides can ever be justified.

Article IV.23

WE AFFIRM THAT it is unchristian, unloving and discriminatory to propose a moratorium on the evangelisation of any part of the human race, and that failure to preach the Gospel to Jewish people would be a form of anti-Semitism, depriving this particular community of its right to hear the Gospel.

WE DENY THAT we have sufficient warrant to assume or anticipate the salvation of anyone, who is not a believer in Jesus Christ.

Article IV.24

WE AFFIRM THAT the existence of separate churchly organisations for evangelising Jews, as for evangelising any other particular human group, can be justified pragmatically, as an appropriate means of fulfilling the church’s mandate to take the Gospel to the whole human race.

WE DENY THAT the depth of human spiritual need varies from group to group so that Jewish people may be thought to need Christ either more or less than others.

The Willowbank Declaration, 1989, section IV