

EVANGELIZATION AMONG JEWS

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Living in 1974 almost twenty-six years after the founding of the state of Israel it would be difficult, if not impossible, to talk about sharing the good tidings of the Gospel with our kinsmen the Jewish people without declaring publicly:

a. That the state of Israel is God's work through men even though those men did not necessarily understand that they were instruments in God's hands;

b. That the state of Israel is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the founding of a Jewish state in the latter days, and not merely the result of force of arms as has been claimed by some;

c. That the mistakes of Jewish leaders and people will never alter the purposes and promises of the Living God to the Jewish people. God works in accordance with his plan and his faithfulness.

I want to further limit this study to the situation since 1948. Not only do we choose this date because it marks the inception of the state of Israel as an independent nation, but there is also, tragically, a break in the Jewish believer's presence in the land of Israel. Unfortunately, because of the War of Independence in 1948 and 1949, almost all Jewish believers left the country for a number of reasons, never to return; and work among Jewish people had to begin anew and afresh in Israel. So there is the phenomenon of a new work in Israel since 1948, particularly among the immigration of a return home by Jewish people from a world-wide dispersion.

Although our basic approach to the subject of reaching our brethren will be from our own national viewpoint, we believe that it will still be valid on a worldwide basis barring some specific problems peculiar to the present state of Israel.

The heritage which the Christian Church has bequeathed through the centuries has been so frequently negative about the Jewish people, and the difference between "Christianity" and true faith in Jesus Christ has often been so great, that it is necessary to rethink the whole subject of evangelism concerning the Jewish people in general and Israel in particular. Evangelism among the Jewish people calls for different methods than those used among other peoples.

Why is it so hard to reach the Jewish person for Christ in the first place? There are many reasons. The tragedy of behavior of the "Christian" Church in the past is historical fact which cannot be erased, along with the hundreds of years of persecution and anti-semitism, and also partly because most Jews look upon any person who is not a Jew or Muslim as being "Christians." Thus to become a "Christian" is to lose one's identity as a Jew. When the claims of the Messiah are made by missions and churches, the Jew is asked, from his Jewish point of view, to

become a non-Jew and to join one unit of a group which is classified as Christian.

The Jew who thus accepts this concept is therefore outside the mainstream of the Jewish context and virtually denies his identity as a Jew. Unfortunately in the so-called Christian countries of the world the Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Savior have often made the attempt to forego their Jewish identity, and this places a further stumbling block before their fellow Jews who might otherwise be open to the Gospel of our Messiah. We cannot emphasize enough the tragedy of this phenomenon, and earnestly urge our believing Jewish brothers to rediscover their identity in Christ. On the other hand, it is necessary to remember that God entered into a covenant with Abraham and his seed *forever*, and that this covenant is the basis of his dealings with Israel. God's covenant with Abraham was and is an unconditional covenant emanating purely from his love, and resting firmly upon his faithfulness for its fulfillment. As such, God's covenant cannot be broken.

We who are Jewish people and believe in Jesus Christ recognize in him our own Messiah who came to seek the "lost sheep of Israel." Having believed in Jesus, we remain Jews. We have not become "Christian" (the name given to the Gentile idol worshipers in Antioch who embraced faith in Jesus as their Savior). Instead we belong to the root of the olive tree while the Gentile believers have been grafted into the tree which is Israel. Unless we understand and declare that we do not introduce something foreign to the faith of Moses and the prophets of the Old Testament we become destroyers of the Jewish nation who are worse than Hitler who murdered our fathers and mothers, our husbands and wives, our sons and daughters. It is necessary to restore the Jewishness of Jesus and to put him back into a Jewish framework.

Our faith is in the Messiah of the New Testament. It is not in the fathers of the Church who each in his own way stood against the first Jewish church in Jerusalem. It is not the faith of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation as, for example, Luther who became an anti-semite in his latter days. Nor is it the faith of the manifold denominations of the present-day Protestant Church. Our unity with Gentile believers is in Jesus Christ — the body consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. It is not in a theology which is so often Hellenistic in nature. Of course, we all readily recognize the spiritual bond among all believers in the body of the Messiah. There is a oneness of all believers regardless of who they are. But does it stop there? Do we overlook the ethnic identity of believers to say that ethnic identity is not necessary? On the contrary, missions and evangelism to other cultures generally pay careful attention to the cultures in which they have to operate. But what happens when evangelism or missions preach to Jewish people? We have a curious phenomenon of evangelism that if Jewish people believe in Christ, then they are no longer called Jews but Christians! I do not want to become too involved with the doctrine of the church, but I am raising an urgent plea that we once again come back to our New Testament to see if we have overlooked some basic considerations regarding the believer in Christ. When we look to the Scriptures and the brief report of the first group of Jewish believers in Jerusalem, we find men who retained their

Jewish identity and from that point of reference declared the Messiahship of Jesus to their fellow Jews. With the passing of time the number of Gentile believers far outstripped the number of Jewish believers. Subsequently the Gentile leaders of the church took offense at the Jewish traditions of our forefathers. Changes took place because they desired to separate the church from the Jewish people. Why, for example, do we celebrate the crucifixion of our Lord on the Friday before Easter instead of on Passover eve? Is there any place in the New Testament where a Jew, though a believer in Jesus as Savior, should give up his ethnic identity? No. Instead, I find that every one of the New Testament writers, with the possible exception of Luke, were Jewish. Even Paul, though suspect by Jewish scholars today, affirmed again and again as to who were his kinsmen. Paul also makes the profound statement, as a believer in Jesus the Messiah, "...for I am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom. 11:1). Therefore, for the sake of evangelism among Jewish people and especially in Israel, we must reassess again this matter of the role of ethnic ties of the Jewish believer to his people.

The national fellowship of Israeli believers

Now, alongside the missions, etc., we are also seeing the growing presence of a national fellowship of Jewish believers and Arab Christians in the land of Israel. We are organized in groups called assemblies but we have no organic tie with any denomination. These assemblies are found in Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Beer Sheva. We also have one group of Arab Christians in Nazareth in fellowship with us, recognizing us as being Jewish believers.

As Jewish believers, we are called Messianic Jews. One of Israel's most popular dictionaries, *Even Shoshan*, defines Messianic Jews as "a sect of Jews who have declared themselves as Jews in their nationality and for their faithfulness to the State of Israel, and as Christians in their religious expression." By "Christian" we mean an expression of our particular Messianic faith in Jesus as Redeemer and his atonement for sin, as well as our hope for oneness with God some day because of our faith and trust in him. The Messianic Jews are a dwelling presence, witnessing in the land of Israel today.

The assemblies of Jewish believers provide the nucleus for fellowship. There is a growing consciousness for a worship pattern that will fit into the Jewish context. Since we live in Israel, and since the seventh day (Shabbat) is the day Israel sets apart for worship, the Messianic Jews also worship on this day. While our hymnal contains the standard hymns sung in the Christian West among evangelicals, we are including a new hymnal reflecting more Jewish life. We sing the Psalms in a Jewish idiom. In addition, since Israel follows the Jewish year calendar, we also seek to fit into it, but at the same time we try to provide the redemptive fulfillment in each of the feasts and holidays. These feasts that we observe become a testimony to the nation that we certainly are Jews and that we also remember our history. But at the same time there is also a witness of the fulfillment that Yeshua is the Messiah of the nation of Israel.

Therefore, we see immediately the distinctive problem of the work of the missions and the denominational churches in trying to bring Jewish people into worship patterns that reflect the Gentile Christian

West. At the same time, one can also recognize that it is much easier to bring an interested Jewish person into the assembly of Jewish believers. There will be a natural bridge for the Jewish person to cross over to find his redemption. Accordingly, one can raise a very serious question as to whether missions, each as a unilateral force, have any longer a place in the land of Israel. This does *not* mean that there is no place for Gentile Christians with distinctive talents who come and work with the national fellowship of believers under its leadership and guidance. We welcome those who come and help in this way.

We insist that we are *not* raising any barriers between Gentile Christians and Jewish believers; we are merely emphasizing the best possible method of trying to reach our people in Israel. We are aware of the problems that have arisen between the missions and national churches in other areas. Israel presents an even greater problem because of all that has gone on in the past between the church and the Jewish people. Now that there is a national fellowship of believers, a greater credence can be given to the force that can be unleashed through the providential work of God in the land of Israel, so that there can be the riches of fulfillment for Israelis who will believe.

Possibilities of evangelism

Traditionally, Jews are not open to the Gospel, for the reasons given above. There are, though, increasing numbers of Jews who are or would be open to the Gospel, both in Israel and in the rest of the world. For instance, many immigrants from Russia have strong messianic convictions, yet they know very little of Scripture. Many of these persons have come to Israel seeking because they feel that there is still something missing in their lives. We know what that missing something is!

Before we explore the positive side of Jewish evangelization, there are a number of negative aspects which should be considered, both in Israeli and in world Jewish evangelization. The usual conception of passing out tracts on street corners and conducting street corner meetings is resented, and in many cases is forbidden by law in Israel. This does not mean that evangelism is too cramped or restricted. It just means that we need to be familiar with the ways that will work. We need to be open to the Lord's guidance to other ways that will become possible. Evangelism is never a static procedure, and the Spirit of God both creates new situations and shows us new opportunities.

As mentioned before, the antagonism which exists between Israel and the church is a hard fact of history. Theological differences between various groups of Christians are not understood by most Jewish people. Most Jews do not understand the question of the Trinity, and this is a stumbling stone for them. It also does no good for the so-called evangelical church to try to explain the difference between the different churches and then wash their hands of the whole matter. The Jews must see a truly repentant and believing life in Jesus in the life of the believer.

The state of Israel has a sentimental appeal to denominations and sects of every description. Israel has become to them a dumping place. This condition is all very confusing to the Jews in Israel and also to the many thousands of Jews who come just to visit in Israel.

Foreigners generally take one of these positions in Israel. There are those who do not represent any officially recognized missionary society (i.e., officially recognized by the state of Israel). Such people are often aggressive in their approach and work without responsibility and without seeking to establish a local church, but rather seek followers for their particular sect. Then there are the officially recognized missionary societies which take part in the local assembly, seeking to help out wherever possible. Then there are those groups who compromise by being silent even to the extent of actively seeking not to evangelize, basing their approach on the premise of just being a "Christian presence" among the Jews.

A number of problems with missions and foreign Christian organizations are:

a. Worrying about their visas and permission to remain in Israel, which often causes them to shift the focus of their efforts from the Jewish population to the Arab population, because they do not want to pass over their property to the local church — not because they receive suddenly a "call from heaven" to the Arabs.

b. Compromising their mission in Israel by remaining silent concerning the Gospel, even to the extent of signing an agreement with the government not to evangelize among the Jews.

c. Seeking by any means possible to produce "Hebrew Christians" who then serve as propaganda agents concerning what they are doing in Israel. In such instances there is seldom any discernment as to whether the individuals involved are novices in the faith or whether there is any movement in their lives towards genuine spiritual maturity. Such individuals are often pressured into writing reports which are more often than not the fruit of their imaginations rather than true accounts of what really is happening.

d. There are mission groups which seek to be involved in work for the purpose of raising money to support their own Jewish worker in Israel. There are groups which tell about their work in European and American publications when very often no one in Israel has ever heard of these people. There are also mission groups which send to Israel couples who go about their witness without responsibility and then when the trouble starts they leave the country, making it that much harder for the local believer in Israel afterwards.

e. There are also the "Supro Pro Israel" Christian Gentiles who even evangelize in Europe, declaring that "we don't have to evangelize Jews," and that "God will deal with his people himself and someday...all Israel shall be saved." In Europe they speak about Israel and pour out money for it, but this money is given to the state, not to the church. Where is the spirit of Paul who was concerned only with the brethren?

f. What about the evangelical Christians who are touring Israel — visiting the country and the places of the early churches of the past — do they ask themselves whether there is a body of Christ in Israel today? It is compromise when all that the church is doing today is intended not to upset Israel! To the latter this seems an answer or a subsidy for the six million Jews who were killed in Germany of whom my father was one.

On the positive side I want to present an aspect that has come about as we have searched our souls in this matter of communicating our faith. It has become very evident to all of us that if we wanted our people to be interested in the claims of Jesus the Messiah, a biblical repentance would not come merely by arguing the relative merits of Judaism *vis-a-vis* the beliefs of Jewish believers in Jesus in a general way; neither would a repentance come merely by discussing the identity of Jesus as the Messiah, etc. The dominant note in our studies seemed to be the necessity of calling our people to the *consciousness of sins*, and the conviction that without the emphasis on this need, one will not be able to help our people to see Jesus as the atonement for sin. Frankly, we feel that we need to work on the common ground with which our people are familiar, namely, the Law.

Let us earnestly seek to get this common ground when we present Christ to the Jewish people. Otherwise they cannot hear what we are saying, and our efforts to reach them are wasted. We need to stop declaring that the Jews crucified Jesus, and instead declare with Peter that your sin and mine caused Jesus to be crucified. We need to declare that what Jesus says is not new, but that he spoke to the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus is coming to reign in Jerusalem over a Jewish nation which will gladly receive him. Let us use the necessity of repentance as our jumping-off place. Let us bring the Jew under the influence of the Law (which is a schoolmaster whose purpose is to bring us to Christ). There they can see the holiness of God and their personal sinfulness. Only then will they be in a position to realize the necessity of a way of forgiveness and thus the necessity of the Messiah and Savior. If the Church of Christ does not discover its proper relationship to Israel and change its attitude, it will continue to lose opportunity to witness to Israel. God has a very specific message for Israel in these days — a message which will prepare Israel for the revelation of her Messiah. The Lord wants us to proclaim this message. He wants to work through us if we are ready and willing to be used. Brokenness is the way of usefulness in the sight of our Lord.

Opportunities for evangelism

I would like to point out what is being done here in Israel and how we hope to implement new approaches which God makes possible.

a. *Literature* — We plan for the translation and printing of appropriate Christian books in which we feel our people will be interested. As recently as ten years ago, we had practically no books or Bible study helps available to our people in Hebrew as compared to the many thousands of books available to believers in the Western countries. We have therefore translated and printed books on biblical subjects in Modern Hebrew. We now have approximately thirty titles completed such as Billy Graham's *Peace With God*; David Wilkerson's *The Cross and Switchblade*; Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There*; Corrie ten Boom's *A Prisoner and Yet*; as well as a number of books from the *Living Bible*.

Although some bookstores are willing to carry some of our titles, we have found that the best way for us to accomplish our distribution is through teams of young people. They are given minimal training in ap-

proach to Jewish people, with the main emphasis on selling these books on a door-to-door basis. Many thousands of books have been sold in this way. Many times these young people have opportunity to share their faith and testimonies.

We are interested also in other phases of literature as well. We are planning a first printing of the *Voice of Messianic Judaism*: aimed at reaching the intellectual Jew. We are choosing or writing appropriate articles which are to appeal to and challenge Jewish thinking people regarding biblical truths and the claims of Jesus the Messiah.

b. *Radio evangelism* — We have been using the shortwave facilities of Trans World Radio, advertising these programs through distribution of leaflets with an offer of correspondence courses for the past five years. The shortwave signal was narrowed to cover only a portion of the Middle East, and our coverage was also limited since very few persons listen to shortwave, even though we advertised the programs widely. We came to the conclusion that we have to make all of our efforts to beam the Gospel on medium wave transmission, since we have so few believers who are able to prepare the radio programs. Our vision is enlarged now as we see the new waves of immigration from Russia and seek to prepare messages in the Russian language. It will not be superfluous to use the new facilities of Trans World Radio from Cyprus in English to develop and expand the possibilities in this language also, since a large segment of the population in the Middle East speaks this language in addition to its own.

c. *Youth work and young couples' meetings* — About every six weeks we have a general fellowship meeting for young people in Israel. The meetings are located in different places so as to insure that all the country's youth can come at one time or another. At these fellowship meetings the young Jewish and Arab believers can come together, and unsaved Jews and Arabs can be invited to hear the Gospel and to make a profession of faith. At least once a year the youth meeting is planned with young couples in mind. During the young couples' meetings problems of being a family of believers in Israel can be dealt with.

Usually in July or August, we try to rent a camp site at the Sea of Galilee or at the Mediterranean for a week of camping in connection with the youth meetings. We find that such camps are an excellent time of opportunity to help our young people. But this is also a good time to reach unsaved youth. Decisions for the Lord have been made in these camp meetings in both salvation and the dedication of lives. But our big problem from year to year is to find camp sites that are willing to receive us or accept us because of our large numbers of seventy to ninety persons.

We are planning for the future, God willing, a center for camps and conferences so that we may continue the above activities on a more permanent basis. In this connection we are praying for a believing Jewish couple from either Europe or North America who are trained specifically in camp and youth work and would be willing to immigrate to Israel as Jews, making this project their life's work.

The local assembly of Jerusalem holds a day camp for one month in July for the children of believers, when we endeavor to reach our own children with the message of the Gospel. By having them for at least one

month's well-planned program, it gives us ample time for ministering to them on their level.

d. *Correspondence work* — Emmaus Bible correspondence studies have been translated into Hebrew, and tracts are distributed to offer Israelis this correspondence course. People are invited to send in the cards so that they may take advantage of this offer for Bible study by mail. Some response has been received through this approach, and some Israeli Jews are now studying the Scriptures in their homes. This is a good evangelistic approach and we hope to develop it further.

e. *Miscellaneous* — We are looking to a return of Jewish believers from abroad so as to aid the growth of the assemblies in Israel. We are aware of the great strides of evangelism in the United States among Jewish youth, and we hope that some thoughts from this paper may be of help in this matter. It is our desire that a good number of these young Jewish believers will be able to come to Israel and become a part of our nation in every way. This will add to our assemblies and give new life and inspiration to us. In addition, as an increasing number of Jewish believers immigrate and become Israelis, the government will begin to recognize that Jewish believers can be a part of the country and people of Israel. Government leaders will realize that Messianic Jews are not trying to deny their identity but rather to seek it. At the same time government leaders will be confronted by the fact that through this witness many respectable and responsible Jewish believers in many walks of life are coming from good backgrounds and seeking to work in the great adventure of Israel.

We also encourage Gentile postgraduate believers to come either to teach or study at the different universities, to stay for a year or two, to learn the language, to get to know Israelis better, etc. Many a Gentile believer in an *Ulpan* (language study center) or on a kibbutz has been instrumental in witnessing to Israelis. We have then seen these Gentile believers bringing their Jewish contacts to the assemblies where they can be exposed to the preaching of the Word of God from within the Jewish context. Some of these contacts have found the Lord.

Conclusion

Israel is passing through a time of crisis after the last war of Yom Kippur, and a time of spiritual despair. The Israelis have lost the confidence which they put in the Israeli army. The political situation is unstable and the division between the Labor Party and the Religious centers on the question of "Who is a Jew?" The military situation is not easy - the price is high. So many of our young people are falling as a sacrifice to our willingness to live.

From where will come hope and salvation? From the evangelical church, the silent church which did not open its mouth in the last war?

Yes, it is true today as in the past; from where cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord....the Lord Jesus Messiah of Israel.

Amen!