

All People

The Impact of Jewish Evangelism on the Evangelization of the World

Conferences, seminars, and books galore have been convened, presented, and written regarding Jesus' imperative to "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (Mt. 28:19). I think it is safe to say that no other command in Scripture has received more deliberation, more scrutiny, more analysis, or more ink than this one.

This is understandable considering that making disciples of all nations has always been at the core of God's heart. It has always been God's desire for all of humankind to enjoy the fullness of His love and grace.

In fact, according to the Prophet Isaiah (25:6), God at this very moment is preparing "*a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.*" And when that day comes, not only will God be footing the catering bill, but all nations will say—"*Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.*"

While we have all gathered here in England to dialogue and encourage one another regarding the salvation of the Jewish guests at God's Kingdom Banquet table, I am frequently reminded that we as Jewish missions strategists must contend with the command that Jesus' first disciples had to contend with—the "big hairy audacious goal" to make disciples of *all* nations—Jews *and* Gentiles.

Now, for those of you who think I'm about to challenge all of us here to tone down our focus on proclaiming the Gospel to the Jewish people and to increase our sensitivity and emphasis on reaching non-Jews, I've got some good news for you. I'm not. In fact, I want to encourage all of us, and especially the Church-at-large, to increase our engagement with the proclamation of the Gospel among the Jewish people—because I believe that doing so is central to God's strategy for reaching all people.

Putting First Things First

But before I make that point, I think it's really important that we put first things first and consider what Jesus' disciples did after they first received his command to "go and make disciples of all nations." Get this—according to the Scriptures—they did not convene a conference and come up with a comprehensive global missions strategy and start booking boats and camels to the four corners of the earth, which is likely what my natural inclination would have been if I had been standing there that day.

You know they did? According to Luke's gospel they had a prayer and praise vigil at the Temple in Jerusalem (24:52-53). Instead of having a strategy session, they worshipped God and they waited. They went to their assigned rendezvous point in Jerusalem and they waited for the Holy Spirit to show up and empower them carry out Jesus' imperative to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

They worshipped and they waited, just as those before them who had experienced the victory of God through their lives. Noah built an ark and waited on God to bring the rain. Abraham built an altar and waited on God to provide a ram. Moses confronted Pharaoh and waited on God to part the sea. Joshua marched around Jericho and waited on God to knock down the walls.

The disciples worshipped God and waited on what they so desperately needed more than any strategy—the power of God Himself.

Which challenges me to consider, is it possible that in all of the evangelistic plotting and scheming that we often set our minds to, do we often get ahead of ourselves, and even worse—get ahead of God—and neglect what we should be doing? Worshipping and waiting. Praying and listening. Surrendering and relying on God to do great things through us—not because of us.

Or is it possible that have we been too busy strategizing, or pursuing someone else’s dream, or jockeying for organizational position, or worrying about how our evangelistic campaigns are going to get funded, or worse yet...trusting in our bountiful resources to create Kingdom impact that only God Himself can create?

Could it be that what God wants more of is less of us? Is it possible that we often marginalize and/or forfeit the power of God in our evangelistic strategies and campaigns—as impressive and as successful as they can often appear to be—and have settled for something less?

I don’t know, but I do know this—I could stand to do a bit more worshipping and waiting, because I know that I often fall prey to myself. Prey to my talents. Prey to the longing for human accolades and affirmation. Prey to fear. Prey to comfort. Prey to the easy way. Prey to the wounds and lies of the Enemy.

I can’t speak for anyone else here, but my guess is that there are others of you who fall prey to these things too, and maybe what you need is not another pep talk or strategy session on how to effectively carry out the Great Commission, but what you need is to fall prey to God Himself. Prey to His grace. Prey to His promises. Prey to His authority. Prey to His “all-surpassing power.” If that’s you, then know this—you’re not alone in the battle to surrender your will to His.

In fact, it might comfort you to know that immediately preceding Jesus launching into his command to go and make disciples of all nations, Matthew (28:17) informs us that when his disciples saw Jesus that there were some who worshipped him, and there some who doubted him.

Can you believe you that? They’re standing in the presence of the risen Messiah and they doubted. They lacked faith. They had reservations. They weren’t “all in.” They fell short.

But yet that didn’t stop Jesus from calling them out to go and make disciples of all nations.

I know if I had been Jesus, I probably would have wanted the assurance that everyone was “all in.” But apparently it didn’t bother Jesus that there were a few skeptics in the camp. Maybe this is because, as Timothy Keller writes, *“People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic” (The Reason For God).*

I don’t know which group of disciples you find yourself in today—the “worshipper’s camp” or the “doubter’s camp,” but I can tell you that I often find myself in the “doubter’s camp.” Maybe that’s you too. Are there any of you here who have experienced the transforming power of God in your life, but you sometimes question if God is real and if He’s actually going to accomplish what the Scriptures said He would do...through you?

If so, then know this—you’re in good company. Doubters have always filled the pages of God’s Redemptive Story. Abraham and Sarah both doubted that God would make them parents in old age; Moses doubted that God could use him to deliver the Israelites from captivity; Elijah doubted that God would protect him from Jezebel’s death threat; just to name a few.

Consider also Gideon. Gideon not only doubted, but he blamed God and made excuses for his predicament, yet God waited patiently for him and reassured him that he had what he needed more than anything else—the hand of God Himself, and when God’s hand is upon you—regardless of your stature, your size, or your status—there isn’t anything that is going to stop God from accomplishing his purposes through you.

Doubters fill the pages of God’s Redemptive Story, but may we all be confident of this, as the Apostle Paul said (Phil. 1:6), “...*he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*” God starts the work and he will finish the work.

Friends...let this be an encouragement to all of us as we go about the ministry that we have been called to. May we all hold firmly to that promise, and know this—God’s ways are always paradoxical to human strength and ingenuity, and His schemes always produce results that far exceed what they should reasonably be expected to produce.

The Domino Effect

One of my favorite pastimes growing up was carefully setting up an elaborate sequence of dominos on end and then watching them all fall according to plan after I gently knocked over the first domino. Of course I would always gather around as many people as I was able to find to be a part of watching the grand scheme unfold. There was always great anticipation among those gathered as my finger approached domino uno and “on the edge of your seat” excitement as we enjoyed the experience of seeing all of the other dominoes fall.

My domino schemes, of course, didn’t even come close to creating the kind of excitement that the world record setting domino scheme created in 2009 in the Netherlands, when almost 4.5 million dominoes fell, but it was still a lot fun nevertheless.

This recreational activity, of course, has become a metaphor in life known as “the domino effect”—when the first domino falls, it sets off a chain reaction that has wide reaching impact and influence on all of the other dominos. When oriented around the right cause, people are big fans of the domino effect, because it has cumulative results for little effort. It only takes the effort of knocking down one domino in order to have wide reaching impact on all of the others.

God also appears to be big fan of the domino effect. Routinely throughout biblical history we see God employ the paradox of the domino effect in order to accomplish his redemptive purposes in the world.

God chose one man, Abraham, and made him a father of a great nation, Israel, as well as a father of many nations (Gen. 12:3; 17:5). God comes to the rescue of this one nation, Israel, and sets his hand upon one man, Moses, to deliver them from the captivity of a far stronger nation (Ex. 3:10). We also learn that God chose this one nation, Israel, though the smallest in numbers, to become the most resourced of any other nation (Deut. 7:7,14). He also said that that one nation, Israel, despite its size, would be a vehicle of blessing (Gen. 12:2) and a beacon of light (Isa. 60:3) to all the other nations of the world.

One unlikely vessel after another having an impact on the multitudes after God sets His hand upon them.

Of course we continue to see the domino effect approach play out through God’s “*one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

Humanly speaking, Jesus was a paradox of redemptive standards if there ever was one. “*Can anything good come from Nazareth,*” Nathanael inquired (John 1:46)? Apparently so!

Would you not agree, when it comes to redeeming the world, the domino effect is God’s preferred strategy for doing so?

The Jewish “Domino”

This gets back to why I believe the Church-at-large needs to increase its focus on the proclamation of the Gospel among the Jewish people. At first glance, considering that the Jewish community only represents 0.2% (1/5 of 1%) of the world population, any reasonably minded missiologist would probably put Jewish missions low on the priority list of discussions on propagating the Gospel among the nations. In fact, from my observations, Jewish missions is frequently absent and/or a footnote to broader discussions and strategies related to the evangelization of the world.

But this was not the case for the Apostle Paul. When writing to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul informs us that the evangelization of the Jewish people is intricately linked to the evangelization of the world. In fact, he states that Jewish acceptance of the Gospel actually accelerates the advancement of God’s Kingdom to all of the other nations of the world. He writes (Rom. 11:12): “*If the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God’s offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it.*”

And in case any of Paul’s readers might have thought that he was simply referring to some future event in redemptive history that they had no personal role in, he made it very clear in his comments that followed that proclaiming the Gospel to the Jewish community was to be a pressing priority for them as well. He writes (vs. 13-14): “*I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.*”

In other words, Paul is stating, “Although my primary task is on making disciples of non-Jews, I’m equally committed to making disciples among the Jewish people, *and so should you*—because just imagine the global Kingdom impact that God will orchestrate through them when they come to faith!”

Considering Paul’s words, it would be safe to say that the Church’s effectiveness in reaching Jewish people has a direct impact on its effectiveness in reaching all of the peoples of the world. It might even be safe to say that the salvation of the Jewish people is the linchpin to the salvation of *all* people.

In Donald Lewis’ book, *The Origins of Christian Zionism* (2009), he shares a story about Charles Simeon, who was rector of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge in the late 18th and early 19th century and was considered to be the leading evangelical Anglican minister of his era. During a London Jews’ Society meeting that he attended, Simeon was given a note from Edward Bickersteth, with the following question on it: “*Six millions of Jews, and six hundred millions of Gentiles—which is the most important?*” Simeon wrote back: “*But if the conversion of the six is to be life from the dead to the six hundred millions—what then?*”

Friends, while there is no doubt that the Church is called “to go and make disciples of all nations” and is God’s chosen vehicle by which He has been orchestrating His redemptive mission throughout the world, make no doubt about it that He has set the Jewish people up to be high-octane turbo-injectors within the fulfillment of that mission.

Mark Twain Weighs In

In fact, I would venture to guess that if 19th century American author and humorist Mark Twain were alive today and assigned with the task of developing a comprehensive global missions strategy, Jewish evangelism would be a major component of it.

“How’s that,” someone might wonder? Well, consider these observations Twain made of the Jewish community back in 1898 in *Harpers* magazine:

The Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also very out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him.

Despite their lack of critical mass and the waves of persecution they have encountered over the centuries, isn’t it interesting to see how God has positioned the Jewish community to be influencers in the world. Consider that since the Nobel Peace Prize was first awarded in 1901, 22% of its recipients have come from a Jewish background. Isn’t it also interesting to note that in *Time* magazine’s 2011 list of the 100 most influential people in the world, that several of the people on that list are Jewish, including 2001 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, economist Joseph Stiglitz, as well as Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu? Also on that list are Larry Page (co-founder and CEO of Google) and Mark Zuckerberg (founder and CEO of Facebook).

If God’s method of the “domino effect” holds true, coupled with the biblical principle that people who have been entrusted with much have the potential to influence much, then it would seem to be a strategic no-brainer to pray for and engage in the work of making disciples within the Jewish community.

Can you imagine what kind of domino effect and Kingdom impact there would be if God leveraged the surrendered hearts of Jewish people around the world and unleashed them for the advancement of the Gospel?! Imagine with me if Joseph Stiglitz, Steven Spielberg, Adam Sandler, David Schwimmer, Ben Stiller, Barbara Streisand, Ben Stein, Howard Stern, Howard Schultz, and Paul Simon embraced Jesus as their Messiah (and that’s just the “S’s”). Not only would that have an impact upon the salvation of other Jews, but I’m confident that it would have Kingdom impact among all the nations of the world.

Despite this obvious reality, there are still many churches and followers of Jesus today and throughout history who have steered clear of investing their time, talent, and treasure toward the cause of building redemptive bridges with their Jewish neighbors. In fact, some have even been party to erecting barriers that distance the Jewish people from the gospel of Jesus.

John Dawson, International President of Youth With A Mission (YWAM), writes, “*People who have truly followed Jesus have always been genuine lovers of the Jewish people. But it is also true that the Christian Church—in name, though not in spirit—has been responsible for much of the terrible suffering of the Jewish people*” (*Healing America’s Wounds*, 1994).

Sadly, as we are all keenly aware, some of the actions (or inactions) of followers (or so-called followers) of Jesus throughout history has complicated the advancement the Gospel among the Jewish people, and I’m concerned that if the Church is not mindful, then the latest wave of anti-Semitism gaining traction in our world today will erect an even greater barrier to the mission of reaching the Jewish people with the Good News of Jesus.

The “New” Anti-Semitism

The latest wave of anti-Semitism that appears to be gaining momentum both within secular society and the Church is the rise of “anti-Israelism” (aka, anti-Zionism), which is the attempt to delegitimize Israel’s right to exist by dismissing or marginalizing any theological and/or historical connections that the Jewish people have to their ancient homeland.

While I am keenly aware that the establishment of the State of Israel did not come without tremendous turmoil and heartache for thousands of Arabs living in that region, I agree with former U.S. president Bill Clinton, who said in 2009 at a gathering I attended for the opening of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center: *“I honestly believe God meant for Jews to have a permanent home in the Holy Land. I honestly believe after all the genocide and endless persecutions suffered in the Diaspora everywhere...the Jews have earned the right to live in peace with their neighbors.”*

I also agree with the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said during a speech at Harvard University in 1968, according to U.S. Congressman John Lewis, *“Peace for Israel means security, and we must stand with all our might to protect its right to exist.”* King is also reported to have stated, *“When people criticize Zionists they mean Jews, you are talking anti-Semitism.”*

While Dr. King was certainly not advocating blind acceptance of every Israeli policy ad infinitum, he was keenly aware that anti-Semitism did not die with Hitler, and I’m convinced that if the Church does not recognize this fact, then this new wave of anti-Semitism aimed at the State of Israel will be just as devastating to the advancement of the Gospel among Jewish people if it chooses to stand idly by.

In the same breath, it is critically important to understand that we as followers of the Messiah cannot turn a blind eye to the challenges and struggles of the Palestinian Arabs. It simply is not acceptable for fully devoted followers of Jesus to have compassion for a certain group of people and disdain for another. We are commanded to love and have compassion for all people—even those who seek to destroy the Jewish people and their friends.

This is why we must be diligent in doing what the Scriptures instruct us to do—*“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem”* (Psalm 122:6)—and never forget that true and lasting peace is only ultimately available through the Prince of Peace, Jesus the Messiah.

Building Redemptive Bridges

A few miles from the church I attend is the newly built Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie, a suburb just north of Chicago that has more Holocaust survivors per capita than any other community in North America. Earlier this year our church made a financial contribution to the museum, and at present we are the only church that has its name on their donor wall.

At a recent Holocaust Remembrance event that our church hosted at the museum, one of the security guards went out of his way to share with me that he was very impressed with how friendly and ethnically diverse we were. Like any sensible follower of Jesus, I knew that this was a great opportunity to invite him to come visit our church. He was very receptive to my invitation and readily took down our contact info. But he also asked me this question—*“Is your church accepting of people from different faiths?”* Now I don’t know for certain what all was behind his question, but I assured him that while we were unapologetically into Jesus, that there were people from all different faith backgrounds who have come through our church doors and eventually found themselves at home there—even Jews like me. Almost instinctively he responded—*“Well, even Jesus was a Jew.”*

My take on this conversation was that he was feeling me out to see if Jews are welcome at our church. Whatever the case, it reminded me that historically the Church has not always been so welcoming of Jewish people.

Creating Safe Houses of Worship

To illustrate this point, imagine with me for a moment that the rabbi of a local synagogue comes to believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, as does his entire congregation. You hear about this tremendous news and you take it upon yourself to meet with the rabbi at his synagogue to welcome him into the Christian community. You get to talking, and because you've been a follower of Jesus for many years, you take it upon yourself to make a few suggestions to help the rabbi make their transition into the Christian community as smooth and easy as possible. First you tell the rabbi that even though "*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*," that they should probably switch their weekly services to Sunday if his congregation wanted to feel more in unison with the Christian community around them.

You then tell him that you really appreciate the Jewish symbols like the menorah and Star of David, but that Christians use the cross and that it would probably be a good idea that he get one up right away—especially outside—so that everyone in the community has no doubt that they are now Christians. Smiling you remark, "*The old has gone, the new has come*," You also offer to share your mother's amazing ham and pea casserole recipe for all the left over ham they'll have from their first Easter dinner.

Lastly, you notice the Ark of the Covenant at the front of the sanctuary that contains the Torah Scroll, but you tell him that you've never seen anything like that in a church and that you could probably get him a good deal on a communion table engraved with the words—"Do This In Remembrance of Me." You even tell him that you'd be happy to donate a large family bible to place on top of it, opened of course to Galatians 3:28—"There is neither Jew nor Gentile...for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Hopefully you're chuckling a bit at this scenario, as I'm sure none of you would ever be so foolish, but the sad reality is that this is exactly what the Christian community has indirectly (and sometimes very directly) communicated to the Jewish community for the past 1800 years or so. "Check your Jewishness at the door and you can hang out with us." Some Jewish people, of course, because of their own discontent or lack of connection with their Jewish identity, have embraced the "gentilized" version of Christian spirituality, but it is not the method the Church has been instructed to use. Paul challenges us through his own testimony:

"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).

This is why those of here who are actively engaged in making disciples within the Jewish community must lead the way in encouraging the Church to maintain its connection to the Jewish roots and heritage, and we must help the Church understand its critical role in reaching the Jewish people—not only for the sake of reaching Jewish people, but for the sake of reaching all people.

Engaging The Influencers

A few months ago a friend of mine who is a Holocaust Survivor responded to my invitation to attend the Good Friday service at our church, where I (like many of you have) spoke about the meaning of the Passover Seder and its connections to Jesus. Following the service my friend sent me a very encouraging e-mail that said: "*You did good on Good Friday! The Seder was perfect. You did not miss a trick. You were very knowledgeable, funny and you knew your Hebrew. I even learned a few new things. Thank you for letting [my wife and I] be part of your world.*"

The following week I saw my friend again at the Holocaust Remembrance Day event our church hosted at Illinois Museum and Education Center, and he was still talking about how much he enjoyed the Good Friday service. But he wasn't just talking to me about it. He was talking to several of the museum staff members about it and how they should go check out our church. Here he is, a non-believing Jew, encouraging other non-believers to go to church!

A glimpse of the domino effect.

I'm not sure where things are going to lead with my friend's faith journey. That's ultimately between him and God. But I know this—if he eventually does respond to the invitation to take his seat at the “*wedding feast of the Lamb*” (Rev. 19:9), I have no doubt that the ripple effects will extend far beyond him.

This is why those of us who have already positioned ourselves around “domino uno” within the grand scheme of world evangelization, must continue to share our burden with others in the wider community of faith. We must invite others to not only gather around and watch us do it, but to participate with us in it.

We must be willing to engage in the sometimes long and arduous journey of helping the Church see its blind spots and understand its vital role in the evangelization of the Jewish people.

We must help the Church learn how to engage the Jewish community, not only through our organizational mechanisms, but through the mechanism of local churches becoming and creating safe and sensitive environments for their Jewish friends and neighbors who want to investigate the life and teachings of Jesus.

This means that we must seek to collaborate and partner with local churches, infusing them with insight and tools that they can use to increase their effectiveness in evangelizing and discipling Jewish people within their sphere of influence.

But most of all, whether we're leading or serving God through an evangelistic missions agency, pastoring a local church or messianic congregation, teaching and training the next generation of leaders through our educational programs and institutions, or simply just loving our Jewish neighbor across the street, may we never forget that it's only by God's amazing grace that anyone, be they Jew or Gentile, come to know Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

The work of salvation is His and His alone...and he will be faithful to complete his grand, yet paradoxical, master plan that is unfolding in and through us.

So let's not neglect to fast and pray, and continually confess our need for God's provision in our lives as we are “*compelled by the Spirit...to complete the task the Lord Jesus has given [us]—the task of testifying to the gospel of [His] grace*” (Acts 20:22,24)...until every last domino falls...

“...in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8b).

Amen?!

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All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.