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HOW DOES ONE'S THEOLOGICAL POSITION AFFECT ONE'S ATTITUDE
TOWARD JEWISH EVANGELISM
From the Viewpoint of an Amillennialist

INTRODUCTION

An attempt will be made throughout this presentation to avoid any theological critique of the correctness of the commonly classified viewpoints "premillenarian," "dispensational," or "amillenarian." My impression is that we all realize, irrespective of our theological position on the nature of the millenium, that the message we bring to the Jews varies somewhat from one position to another. The question posed for this paper goes a bit deeper than that. It asks not what do you say to the Jew, but does your theological stance affect your active participation in outreach to the Jew?

It must also be understood that I approach this question from the perspective of Reformed theology. There are others whose theology differs from that of the Reformed churches and who are neither premillenarians nor dispensationalists. Some have perhaps never faced the issue; some certainly give little attention to the matter.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Frankly, I dislike being called an "amillenarian." If that title means to imply that one holds to no millenium at all, it is patently incorrect and inappropriate. Amillenarians believe in a millenium. They do not ignore the first six verses of Revelation, but hold that the millenium of Revelation 20 is not exclusively future but is now in the process of realization. In spite of my objection to the term I have no adequate alternative and will continue to use the term believing that you know what I mean.

THE REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

Reformed theology has never repudiated premillenarian or dispensational viewpoints, though admittedly only a minority of its theologians and ministers have held certain theories along those lines. A few decades ago one of my professors at Calvin Seminary (Prof. D. H. Kromminga) held to and published his understanding of a millenium which would be introduced in history at the Second Coming of Christ and in which persons would hear the Gospel and be saved. He called his position "Covenantal Millennialism" and his views made many of us cautious about rejecting out-of-hand positions differing from the amillennial view of the majority among us.

Speaking realistically, my church has not given serious consideration to these various viewpoints. In the 1920s one of the pastors of our denomination espoused very extreme dispensational views, later forming his own denomination. The church took issue with him, not on the basis of a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth, but with his teachings on three points: (1) his denial of the unity of the Old and New Covenants; (2) his denial of the unity of Israel and the church; (3) his denial of the present kingship of Jesus Christ over the church. It would take us too far afield to go into the implications of each of

these. Suffice it to point out that he later denied the sacraments and continued to affirm two distinct ways of salvation: for Gentiles through Jesus Christ, and for Jews by way of the reinstitution of the sacrificial system.

So today a great deal of latitude is permitted in the church with respect to these matters. In the past a few pastors from Jewish background left for other organizations (1920s), motivated largely by dispensational views and opportunities for broader, concentrated outreach.

THE REFORMED RECORD

My denomination has always had strong ties to its roots in the Netherlands Reformation and churches. Because of this we shared in and benefitted from a long history of outreach to the Jewish people. In our American experience this involved implementation of mission to the Jews along the institutional model. Significant efforts were put forth in Paterson, NJ, and Chicago, IL, along these lines. Support (financial, personnel, moral, prayer) were never lacking. Reports to the annual synods always included heartening and encouraging resumes of these ministries. Public prayer in congregational worship for "Jewish missions" is a strong, abiding memory from my early and teen years. The staff members of these missions were regularly part of the missionary union teams sent throughout the churches to inform our congregations as to what was being done on all our mission fields.

We experienced the demise of institutional work along with others in the period following World War II. The official, denominationally sponsored promotion of the "parish approach" to mission to the Jews by Albert Huisjen marked the transition, but produced minimal fruit leading to direct evangelism at the time. Today, however, local programs of outreach characterize the church in a number of places. In all probability more persons are engaged in such outreach with a greater measure of "success" than ever characterized the institutional approach. Financial support for ministries such as Jews for Jesus is quite easy to promote, although there is at times an undercurrent of uneasiness toward organizations that are openly dispensational.

WHAT IS MISSION?

The reason for this last judgment is not hard to find. The Reformed understanding of the unity of God's people (Jew and Gentile) in Jesus Christ makes them hesitant to support or cooperate in any venture which would tend toward two ways of salvation, two messages concerning Jesus Christ, or anything that would lean toward making anything but God's mission to all peoples in Christ the focus of the Old and New Testaments.

We have therefore always insisted that it is necessary to include the Jews in the Christian mission. This consciousness has never been lacking among us, even though our track record may not be as brilliant as our conviction. There is only one mission that God has committed to his church and that is that the Gospel must be preached to all peoples. The establishment of a new fellowship of disciples drawn

from all peoples, Jews as well as Gentiles, can mean nothing less than that both Christian Jew and Christian Gentile have a reciprocal responsibility to one another. It is always so encouraging to me to see non-Jews responding to the Gospel presented by Jews.

Salvation has meaning, therefore, only if it is all-inclusive and embraces all mankind. God is sovereign over all. The unity of Israel and the Gentiles belongs to the very signs of Messianic fulfillment. Humanity (in general) displays its most visible brokenness at the point of its separation from God's people. The coming of Christ and the reconstitution of the People of God in the mission to the nations was the great and decisive turning point of Israel's destiny as the People of God. Paul's argument in Ephesians turns on one significant truth: Jesus is not really the Messiah if Jews and Gentiles remain separate.

It is to be deeply regretted that the emphasis in Christian missions has shifted so far away from the sense of duty and responsibility to the Jews. Strangely, while Christian mission propaganda emphasizes "the uttermost part of the world," it frequently neglects "Jerusalem and Judea." We can confidently say that it was never our Lord's intent that our mission should ever be either-or (either to the Jew or to the Gentile), but rather both-and ("to the Jew first and also to the Gentile"). We affirm, therefore, that both the motive and the attitude of the church's mission to the Jews must take account of Israel's priority of privilege with respect to the gospel which is hers by virtue of the promises and covenants of God in the history of salvation (Rom. 9:4, 5).

THE OLIVE TREE

From what is said above it becomes obvious that one's understanding of what is the church is basic to our message: into what fellowship do we invite mankind? What happens to our "Jewishness" or our "Gentileness" when God saves us in Christ and makes us his people?

At the risk of adding still another interpretation to the many now promoted concerning the meaning and identity of the olive tree of which Paul writes in Romans 11:16-24, a few observations may be helpful.

(1) The root is all important. That root is Christ in whom, by whom, and from whom the trunk and branches receive their character and nature.

(2) The olive tree is obviously Israel, though an Israel pruned of branches broken off because of unbelief.

(3) The pruned branches will and can be grafted in at any time they do not persist in their unbelief. God is not through with Israel.

(4) The wild Gentile branches are subject to the same conditions as are the natural branches. For them also the condition to abide in faith holds, and if unbelief occurs, the same judgment follows as in the case of the natural branches.

What we see here is God at work creating a new entity out of the old, and giving it a unity in faith and obedience in Christ Jesus. God

is not at work creating two kinds of people, two kinds of church, two different ways of salvation. In these last days God is at work bringing in the great harvest which will be complete when the final consummation takes place.

This confronts us with an urgency we may neither ignore nor seek to escape. Jesus has broken down the middle wall of partition and out of the two (Jew and Gentile) formed a unity that was previously only dimly known and partially realized. This unity will include "the full number of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25), as well as "all Israel" (Rom. 1:26).

CONCLUSIONS

In this section I will state (or re-state) the basic commitment of my denomination to mission to the Jews. I have shared these with some of you on other occasions and repeat them here as evidence that an "amillennialist" is by no means hindered in his witness or commitment to such a mission. If you read these affirmations carefully, you will notice that they do not arise out of the process which Jim Reapsome described in the Evangelical Mission Quarterly (January 1985, p. 82) as searching "the Old Testament and the news to see how much of the prophetic puzzle they can solve." He adds in words worthy of an "amillenarian":

On the other hand, for those with a missionary heart Israel is not primarily a land to be adored, but a people to be won to Christ. It is dangerously possible to be so enamored with the land, and to be so taken up with Israel's cause, that one can forget the desperate spiritual blindness engulfing Israel today.

That blindness is so great that the apostle Paul said his fellow Jews were "enemies of God" (Rom. 11:28). They were not his personal enemies. Paul would have willingly surrendered his own salvation for their sakes. But they were enemies "as regards the gospel."

The overriding issue for Israelis, as for anyone else, is the gospel. It's not prophetic signs. Neither the land itself nor the Temple are the crucial matter. What matters is the confession of Jews that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed their promised Messiah.

Instead of wishing that the Temple will be rebuilt, and that unbelieving Zionism should flourish, we should exhibit the same passion for missions to Jews as Paul himself had. "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved," he cried (Rom. 10:1).

He knew that the salvation of Israel awaits the return of Messiah, but that did not deter him from trying to convince Jews about Jesus "from morning till evening" (Acts 28:23). As you look at Paul's missionary passion for Jews, you don't find him cozying up to them but rather confronting them.

My own denomination, although it no longer has a denominationally sponsored program of mission to the Jews, has nevertheless committed itself to such outreach in the following guidelines for the churches:

1. The Word of God compels the church to have an urgent concern for mission to the Jews. It is evident from Romans 9-11 that we have a debt and calling to the Jews.
2. The church must recognize that God has not "cast off all the descendants of Israel for all that they have done" (Jeremiah 31:37), but in keeping with the sure word of prophecy (II Peter 1:19) and with a saving purpose, God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all (Romans 11:32).
3. The church must recognize that the day of salvation for the Jews is now; that the saving of "all Israel" of Romans 11:26 does not await a new epoch in the history of salvation.
4. The church must recognize that the provocation to "jealousy" and "emulation" of Romans 11 stands out as God's provision for pressing the claims of the gospel upon the Jews, and that this provocation does not imply a specific method other than confronting the Jew with a personal and collective witness to the saving grace of God in Christ by Gentiles to whom salvation is come.
5. The world-wide spread of the Christian church and the wide-spread dispersion of the Jews throughout the Christian communities should be recognized as a providential setting which makes the church aware of its responsibility to be a living witness to the Jews.
6. The Lord of the church who controls the history of mankind is calling us through the tragic and dramatic events of our modern history to be aware of the urgency of the Jews' continuing need for the gospel.
7. The church must with complete and genuine openness stand ready to receive into its fellowship every Israelite who turns to Christ.
8. The church must recognize that the Jew who is brought to faith in Jesus Christ, although he has thereby been converted from Judaism, does not cease being an Israelite. Therefore, although he has the freedom in Christ to conform in patterns of piety and religious observances to the larger Christian community, he must also be accorded the exercise of his freedom in Christ to observe patterns of piety and religious observances appropriate only to him as an Israelite (e.g., Jewish).

AN UNSOLVED QUESTION

From the beginning God's purpose with Israel was not that it should at some future date be the recipient of special privileges denied

to Gentiles. Rather, Israel was to be a blessing to all mankind (Gen. 12:1-3). To believe that God has in mind a separate future for Israel in distinction from the future he has planned for the Gentiles is actually contrary to God's purpose.

My colleague, Dr. Anthony Hoekema, asks in this connection:

Is there no future then for Israel? Of course there is, but the future of believing Israelites is not to be separated from the future of believing Gentiles. Israel's hope for the future is exactly the same as that of the believing Gentiles: salvation and ultimate glorification through faith in Christ. The future of Israel is to be seen . . . in terms of everlasting blessedness shared with all the people of God on a glorified new earth.

Does an amillennialist position affect one's attitude toward Jewish evangelism? Of course it does, but positively, not negatively. There are many things we share with and appreciate about evangelicals whose stance on the millennium we do not share. We appreciate our common acceptance of the verbal inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. We also look, long, and pray for the personal return of Jesus. We share the conviction and together proclaim that in every age salvation is by grace alone, on the basis of the merits of Jesus. We agree together in looking for a future phase of the kingdom of God which will involve the earth, in which Jesus will reign and God will be all in all.

We confess also that the details as to how God is going to accomplish this is for us not as clear as some suppose.

It would be exceedingly naive for anyone to hold that every promise, every prophecy concerning Israel in the Old Testament as well as the New has had its complete fulfillment in the first coming of Jesus Christ. It is better and more correct to affirm that the New Testament deepens and confirms the lines of the Old Testament. No matter how the believing Jew and the Christian Gentile regard each other, neither can get away from the other. As long as Israel does not accept its Messiah, the church is reminded that its faith is and can be contradicted and that we do not live in the consummated new age but on this side of a great future. At the same time the church cannot adopt Israel's faith. We believe not only in a future but also in a redemption that has already happened and of which the future will be the unfolding.

The church then keeps believing for Israel (that Israel and its Messiah will find each other) and therefore also keeps believing in Israel (that through Israel the sign of God's covenant will always become visible), as H. Berkhof says. While neither expecting nor demanding that Israel must lose its identity in the church, we do expect that in the church Israel will accept and fulfill its central role. How this will take place, what means God will use to bring this to pass, or how specifically we can define just what God will produce--all these things elude us. To acknowledge that our present era of salvation is only provisional, a step along the way, makes us look forward to a future when Jew and Gentile will come together on the basis of Messiah Jesus. Of that future the Christians out of Israel have been and will always be the sign and guarantee (Rom. 11:1f.).

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

This short bibliography is not intended to be exhaustive, but is simply for the purpose of calling attention to a few sources which may not be well-known to some who receive this paper. Nor is it an endorsement of every viewpoint expressed in the materials cited. Some of the books listed may not be readily obtainable, but all are available from the Calvin Theological Seminary Library; Grand Rapids, MI 49506.

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