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Doing Jewish Evangelism from a Denominational Base

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A Historical Perspective

In an article published in June of 1986, Susan Perlman and David Harley did a wonderful job of surveying the modern history of Jewish evangelism and missions.¹ In that article they remind us that prior to the Holocaust, ministry to the Jewish people was primarily conducted by denominations. Following the Holocaust, due to the inroads of liberalism and the ecumenical movement in many of the major denominations, interest in Jewish evangelism quickly waned.² This may be graphically seen in the rise and fall of the International Missionary Council's Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews, as it became associated with the World Council of Churches.³

When attention is turned to Baptists, and more specifically to Southern Baptists, we may see some of the same effects, but they were mollified to a large extent by the autonomy of local congregations. Baptist denominations exist through the voluntary cooperation of local churches. Rather than a denominational hierarchy exercising control over the churches, the seat of authority in Baptist life is occupied by the local church. The denominational agencies exist to elicit, combine and direct⁴ the resources of the churches.

A few years ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to spend a few days in New England. Although we only had a couple of hours for our first visit to Newport, Rhode Island, we visited First Baptist Church, the oldest Baptist church in the United States. Newport, of course, was founded by Roger Williams, a Baptist, and, it should come as no surprise that it also hosts the oldest synagogue building in the United States, the Touro Synagogue, built in 1763.⁵ That is more than a coincidence! Baptists have been staunch defenders of religious liberty for all, and it is no wonder that the first Jewish settlers who came to

¹ To the Jew First by Susan Perlman and C. David Harley in *World Evangelization* (A Publication of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization), 13:43, pp. 1, 3-4.

² Unfortunately, for the leadership in some denominations, all interest in evangelism seems to have dissipated.

³ Cf. *For the Love of the Jews: A Theological History of the International Missionary Council's Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews, 1927-1961*. This is an unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham, England by Allan R. Brockway, September 1992.

⁴ This phrase, whether as past tense, gerund, or present tense, can be traced to W. B. Johnson, an early Baptist leader. It is used in the constitution of the Triennial Convention (1814) and in the constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention (1845).

⁵ Cf. *Touro Synagogue of Congregation Jeshuat Israel; Newport, Rhode Island; Founded 1658* (Published by the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, Inc., 1948. Cf. also *The Story of the Jews of Newport* by Morris Gutstein (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1936).

Rhode Island found a safe haven with those who were willing to defend to the death the right to worship according to the dictates of one's conscience. May I add that, according to Orthodox Rabbi Daniel Lapin, no group has profited more from religious liberty than the American Jewish community?⁶ Baptists, together with most evangelical Christians and conservative Jewish leaders, are committed to this original understanding of tolerance and religious liberty. We do not accept the new meaning the word, pluralism, has acquired, either. Chuck Colson recently said, In today's relativistic environment, pluralism no longer means tolerating competing ideas, but rather forced neutrality: no one should express any idea that could offend another.⁷

Joseph Samuel Christian Friedrich Frey, The Father of Modern Jewish Missions, was born Jewish, he later came to know his Messiah, Yeshua, became an Anglican, then a Baptist in 1827, and served Baptists until his death in 1850. Dr. Bobby Adams, whose doctoral dissertation is worth consulting, says something very significant about Baptists of the 1800s and about Frey's contribution to the shaping of Baptist attitudes concerning the Jewish people:

In the organizations that Christians formed to relate to Jews and Judaism, top-level leadership was Baptist. This indicates that Baptists desired the conversion of Jews. Baptists over the nation shared this concern. Frey himself, as a Baptist, preached some 5,000 times and traveled 50,000 miles in his efforts to persuade Christians to act responsibly toward Jews. In the year 1833 Frey made a trip through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama to New Orleans, and returned through Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio. While on this 8,000-mile trip he visited 276 churches and preached 300 times.⁸

Did all of his traveling and speaking have any effect on Southern Baptists? Listen as Dr. Adams surveys official pronouncements made by Southern Baptists in the years that followed:

In 1867, Baptists resolved to labor and pray more earnestly for the conversion of Jews. In 1873, Abraham Jaeger, a converted Rabbi, addressed the annual convention session on the subject of the conversion of the Jews. Following his address, the Convention was asked to direct the Board of Domestic Missions to employ Jaeger to work among the Jews. He was not employed. In 1875, Crawford H. Toy offered a resolution to direct the Home Mission Board to seek those who would work among the Jews. In 1882, a similar resolution was adopted. This time, however, the Foreign Mission Board rather than the Home Mission Board was asked to seek missionaries to Israelites in this and other countries. Six resolutions were adopted between 1894 and 1921 asking that mission work be begun in Palestine.⁹

⁶ Personal conversation.

⁷ The Ugly Side of Tolerance, in *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2000, p. 136.

⁸ Bobby Adams, *Analysis of a Relationship: Jews and Southern Baptists* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation; Ft. Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; December, 1969), pp. 78-79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

Between 1867 and 1921, Southern Baptists adopted ten resolutions that dealt with Jewish evangelism. In response to these early resolutions, the Home Mission Board employed Dr. Jacob Gartenhaus as their first missionary to the Jews. His employment eventually led to an entire department of Jewish evangelism, directed by Gartenhaus, until his retirement in 1949. In the late 1940s and 1950s, more liberal theological persuasions and ecumenical sympathies were in ascendancy among the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention. This new and embarrassed ecumenism lies behind a statement in Gartenhaus' autobiography: "As it happened, soon after I retired from the Home Mission Board after twenty-eight years, the Jewish Department was effectively done away with through a merger with other departments."¹⁰ Seventy-five years would pass, since the last resolution on Jewish evangelism, and forty-seven years since Gartenhaus' retirement, before Southern Baptists would renew their position publicly.

Following several decades of struggle within the Southern Baptist Convention, during which the authority and inerrancy of Scripture was reaffirmed, I believed the time had come for the denomination to take a clear stand regarding the need of the Jewish people for the gospel and of our responsibility to pray for them and to share the gospel with them. The resolution on Jewish evangelism that was adopted in 1996 was the result. It was an attempt to bring clarity where there had been some confusion and to restore a concern Baptists had traditionally held. It was certainly not an attempt to say that we were only going to focus on the Jewish people, but merely to correct something that had been neglected.

Actually, the neglect of Jewish evangelism by all of the major denominations following the Holocaust effectively marginalized Jewish believers and Jewish ministries. The lack of active support from the major denominations gave credence to the charge that it was indeed impossible to be both Jewish and a follower of Jesus, and those who objected were written off as either deranged or dishonest.

Biblical and Theological Perspectives

The agenda of the Church is established by God's Word alone. This necessarily means that our agenda is not affected by such things as current notions of political correctness, intimidation (whether from unbelieving Jewish organizations, ecumenical organizations, the mass media, or governments), or the current popularity of pluralism and relativism. In a day in which every conviction has become merely an opinion, we insist that some things are non-negotiable. Some things are worth dying for.

According to the Scriptures, it is God's will that the gospel be proclaimed to all people, especially to the Jewish people.

Since we are truly monotheists, then those who worship other gods, worship falsely and need to be directed to the one, true God. Monotheism and compassion drive our desire to share the Good News with all people. The only sufficient knowledge of God includes

¹⁰Jacob Gartenhaus, *Traitor? A Jew, A Book, A Miracle* (Chattanooga, TN: International Board of Jewish Missions, 1980), p. 211.

knowledge of the gospel, and the only sufficient response is to receive the gift of salvation by faith in Yeshua. Such a decision must be completely voluntary for it to have validity.

The message of salvation and forgiveness for sin that is available through faith in Jesus the Messiah is to be proclaimed to all people, of every race and religion, on the face of the earth. Nevertheless, in this universal assignment, priority was to be given to the Jewish people (Romans 1:16). In fact, in the New Testament, there are only two kinds of missions – not home missions and foreign missions, but Jewish missions and Gentile missions.

Furthermore, I believe that there is an important distinction that must be made between evangelism and proselytism. The former has to do with proclaiming this Good News of salvation through faith in the Messiah, and leaving the results to God. Proselytism, in my opinion, is concerned with seeking members for one's own organization. Some groups teach that one must become a member of their organization. For them, such membership is not only desirable, but essential. We make no such insistence. Becoming a Baptist will not improve one's standing with God. In fact, as any Baptist pastor will testify, not all Baptists have truly been born again! We are not primarily concerned with making Baptists, but with proclaiming the Good News to all. That allows us to rejoice with our brethren of other denominations when they celebrate growth through evangelism.

According to the Scriptures, it is God's will that prayers be offered for all people, especially for the Jewish people.

There are admonitions to pray for the Jewish people in any number of passages in both the Hebrew Scriptures and also in the New Testament. Praying for the Jewish people is an act of compassion and concern – it is certainly not a hate crime! In Romans 10:1, Paul tells us, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [i.e., the Jewish people] is for their salvation. This is the only place in the New Testament where we find specific prayer for the salvation of unbelievers. Commenting on this verse, Douglas Moo says Paul wants his predominantly Gentile Christian readers to know that he takes no delight or satisfaction from Israel's fall. Quite the contrary, . . . Paul remains passionately committed to the salvation of the Jews."¹¹ C. E. B. Cranfield adds, "In this prayer for Israel's salvation he has set an example for the Church to follow. A church which failed to pray for Israel's salvation would be a church which did not know what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ."¹²

According to the Scriptures, it is God's will that every believer proclaim the gospel and offer prayers for all people, especially for the Jewish people.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, edited by N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and G. D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 631.

¹² C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary, edited by J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 513.

Following the adoption of the Resolution on Jewish Evangelism, a reporter asked me how large my staff was. When I told him that he was speaking to the entire staff, he was obviously perplexed. Well, then, how large is your budget? When I told him it consisted of my salary, a small operations budget (to cover telephone and office supplies), and a travel budget, he was incredulous. How do you propose to convert the Jewish population of North America, single-handedly and with no more funding than you have? I then had the opportunity to make a very important point: Southern Baptists believe (even if our actions are not always consistent with our beliefs) that every Christian is a missionary. My assignment is to motivate and equip Southern Baptists to do the work themselves. In other words, among Southern Baptists alone, we have a potential six or seven million missionaries.

Where would I get such an idea? Ephesians 4:11 and 12:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.

The reason God gave the Church evangelists and pastors and teachers (and they are to be considered gifts) is so that they can equip believers, in order that the believers can do the work of ministry. The primary responsibility of the evangelists in Ephesians 4:11-12 is the training of other believers, and the ultimate goal is the involvement of all believers in ministry. To be sure, this training should involve modeling responsible, consistent and effective evangelism, discipleship, prayer, etc., but it is a misunderstanding of this passage to see justification for a caste system in the Church, which distinguishes professionals from the laity. Furthermore, these professionals are not gifts to the Church in the sense that they are to do these things so that ordinary Christians don't have to do them (!). Instead, they are gifts to the Church, because they are to help the ordinary Christians do that for which they were created, and that which should give them supreme satisfaction. This is where denominational approaches to Jewish evangelism have their greatest opportunity.

A Missiological Perspective

Although dialogue with Jewish groups who do not believe in their Messiah and networking with Christian denominations and organizations that are involved in Jewish evangelism are important aspects of my responsibility, the focus must always be on motivating and equipping Southern Baptists to share the Gospel with their Jewish friends and neighbors.

This goal is being pursued through the following activities:

- The production of literature and other media
- The offering of courses in our seminaries and colleges; and seminars in churches, associations, and state conventions

The planting of Messianic congregations that are related to the Southern Baptist Convention.

One day, perhaps, we will bear a greater resemblance to the New Testament model a Church that openly exhibits the unity that exists between both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Yeshua HaMashiach (Jesus the Messiah). In the meantime, we have work to do.