

Reflection on the 2008 Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today

By Vladimir Pikman

"[I]t is our prayer that the Berlin Declaration 2008, signed by the thirteen members of the Task Force, will prove to be equally useful in supporting the work of taking the Gospel 'to the Jew first' and also the rest of the world..."

Dr. David Parker,
Executive Director, WEA Theological Commission

Introduction

Although the 2008 Berlin Declaration is not an official document of the WEA, the WEA Theological Commission is distributing it for study and consideration. "We hope that this Declaration will encourage many Christians to see the importance and biblical warrant for this important ministry," Dr. Parker stated. "We would like to see the 2008 Berlin Declaration circulated as widely as possible amongst those who are engaged in and interested in this ministry." He stated that the European setting of the statement is of particularly significance.

The Declaration follows earlier documents produced by the WEA on Jewish evangelism. The first was the Willowbank Declaration of 1989, which was hailed at the time as a decisive statement and continues to be referred to as a landmark document. The second was a brief statement, published and endorsed by the WEA reinforcing the validity and importance of Jewish evangelism, which appeared in the New York Times in 2008.

Clearly, if the Declaration is distributed, it could have a significant impact on the mindset of those affiliated with the WEA. In the following reflections on the Declaration, I will discuss some reactions the terminology and setting of the Declaration could evoke in various audiences and mention some of its strengths and weaknesses in terms of addressing its primary target audience.

Primary Target Audience: Conservative Evangelicals

The worldwide Jewish community certainly would not be happy with the Declaration, but that does not seem to be its designated target audience. It lacks major points of open dialogue and the terminology designed to address the Jewish community, both of which would be needed in order to speak to the Jewish people.

It is also not possible that the Declaration's intended audience is secular society; its clear position concerning the gospel immediately communicates the message that it is produced by "Christian fundamentalists." The same is true for liberal Christianity.

For the most part, those belonging to traditional churches (Catholic, Orthodox, etc.) are not very interested in Declarations such as this one as their approach to "evangelism" and its terminology differ greatly from the evangelical perspective inherent within the Declaration.

In general, the messianic community has not shown much interest in the Declaration. It remains unnoticed among the messianic community because such "Christian" things are considered too "goyish" (Yiddish: "non-Jewish").

The Declaration's primary audience, the one audience it is truly able to address, consists of "conservative" evangelical Christian believers and Jewish believers interested in Christian theological developments or missions. To be even more precise, it resonates with those who respect and appreciate the goals and ministry of the WEA. I am certain the Declaration was consciously written with this target audience in mind, and those involved in formulating it have indeed reached their goal. Hence, in this paper, I will reflect primarily on the implications this Declaration may have for this audience, particularly for evangelical Christians and messianic believers involved in or supporting world missions.

Some Reflections

I appreciate the statement that the goal of the Declaration is to think about ways for the Christian community to express "love for the Jewish people, especially in Europe." Love is the essential part of our outreach, and to remind everyone of this fact does good for the cause.

The open and honest Declaration of the Christian guilt involved in the persecutions of the Jewish people and even in the Holocaust, and the elevation of those providing help to the Jews even under threat of death, both communicate the right sense of humility regarding the Jewish people to Christians.

The statement, "Many more today feel embarrassment and shame for the general failure to protest" is applicable primarily, if not exclusively, to Germany. In other European countries, especially in the countries of Eastern Europe, this sentiment is much less representative. There are hence many Christians in Europe to whom this statement would not speak. The case is also similar with the statement, "There is an evident insecurity about relations with Jewish people." The idea that "there is a tendency to replace direct gospel outreach with Jewish-Christian dialogue," while it holds true for many churches in Germany, is primarily true only of liberal Christian circles in other European countries, leaving conservative churches scratching their heads.

I would question the phrase "direct gospel outreach." The kind of gospel outreach meant here should be clarified. I think this terminology is not typically used in world missions and could be substituted by another definition.

The statement about "non-passive" love prepares the way well for the statement that evangelism is an expression of that love. I appreciate the coexistence of word and deed in the phrase "expression of Christ's good news in word and deed," because it conveys a holistic approach to evangelism (one unfortunately misunderstood by many Christians; some zealous evangelists forget about the importance of deeds while some "good" Christians neglect to proclaim the gospel).

The statement that follows, which emphasizes that the Jewish people have the same need for forgiveness and shalom and therefore must be included among all others in outreach to the nations, will probably do its job for Christians interested in outreach to the lost. However, within the European setting, it is urgent to provide a biblical and theological justification for asserting that the Jewish people have the same need as everybody else. Although I understand that the Declaration does not allow for an extended theological argumentation, at least some outline sketching out the underlying reasoning would be helpful. Also, just to state here that the Jewish people are the same as everybody else when it comes to the gospel misses the unique placement of the Jews in this regard ("to the Jew first"). It is stated later in the Declaration, but I do not understand why it is not mentioned here.

After reading the first part, I think the title “Love is not Silent: The Need for Repentance” might warrant a word other than “repentance,” as repentance is not explicitly mentioned in the text itself.

The acknowledgement of Christian anti-Semitism is a vital part of the Declaration, because many European Christians, particularly outside of Germany, are unaware of it. At the same time, I would rather expect the Declaration to emphasize that any kind of anti-Semitism in “word and deed” is a sin that leads to a curse. This is mentioned to some degree later in the Declaration, but I still wonder why it is not mentioned here.

The paragraph about Christians risking their lives for the Jews resembles a similar thought in the first part of the Declaration. It seems more appropriate to me to leave the thought here and remove it from part one.

The warning about rising European anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism is certainly important. While any kind of genocide is a sin, the Declaration, which primarily addresses conservative evangelical Christians, could emphasize that genocide against the Jews is a special kind of evil in the eyes of God. I would also appreciate a biblical pro-Israel statement in this regard.

I highly appreciate the strong affirmation of the reality of sin, the necessity of the gospel and the confession of Jesus. The statement “Confessing Jesus as Messiah affirms Jesus’ uniqueness as a person, especially to Jews, because Messiah (or Christ) is a Jewish concept” is very true and very helpful. It is impossible to confess him as a person, saying that he is both human and divine, without acknowledging his Jewishness.

The last paragraph of part three is similar to what is already mentioned in part one. However, it is elucidated more completely here, stating the priority of the Jewish people within world missions.

The first paragraph of part four, while being very well formulated, is, again, repetitive of statements made in previous parts.

It is an excellent point that for proper evangelism, Christians need both strong commitment to the message of the Messiah and respect for the views and freedom of others.

I think that the statement that Christians have much to learn from the Jewish people is of extreme importance for Christians to hear. I am sure this statement will probably cause the most problems and be a major obstacle for evangelicals in accepting the document. However, it is a test of the hidden anti-Semitism of the Church today.

While the idea of learning from the Jewish people and dialoguing with Jewish leaders is proclaimed by a number of Christian organisations involved in the dialogue with Judaism, such organisations usually decry any kind of evangelization of the Jewish people. For that reason, I am very glad the Declaration includes an affirmation that dialogue and evangelism are not mutually exclusive. The only challenge is to prevent Christian organizations focused on dialogue – even the conservative ones, and especially those in Germany – from rejecting this idea out of hand without any further consideration, something that typically happens, unfortunately.

The affirmation of the right of Jewish believers in Jesus to practice Jewish traditions is very important considering the historic “anti-Jewish” attitude of those involved in Jewish

evangelism – such people would like “converted” Jews to be more like Christians in their traditions. By “anti-Jewish,” I do not mean “anti-Semitic.” While anti-Semitism deals with a negative attitude toward the Jewish “race,” I use “anti-Jewish” for disparaging attitudes toward Jewish traditions and lifestyle.

But, while I consider this point to be an important beginning, I strongly feel it is incomplete, especially since it refers only to traditions (which are part of the culture) without approaching the issue of the commandments (which are not just a part of the culture but of the Scripture and biblical lifestyle). I understand the difficulties in this regard, including the multiplicity of existing opinions and the diversity of Christianity. Ideally, I would love it if the Declaration and Christians would not just affirm their toleration toward Jewish believers’ observance of Jewish traditions (as the Declaration does by affirming their right to do so) but also rejoice that many Jewish believers are practicing the Bible according to the ancient Jewish understanding of it.

As a Messianic Jew, I feel honoured by the paragraph that recognises the important role of Messianic Jews. I would love it if Christians were to hear this point. It seems to me, however, that the statement “to stand firm in their identification with ... their people,” should be elaborated in terms of what is meant by “identification.” Also, the terminology “Messianic Jews” requires some clarification and explanation for Christians unfamiliar with it. It might be challenging, since the term “Messianic Jew” still evokes some uncertainty in terms of its meaning and significance, as is even debated among messianic believers and those involved in Jewish missions. For the sake of clarity, it may possibly be better to use “Jewish believers in Jesus” in the Declaration.

The final part of the Declaration presents excellent steps that are very much needed in these days. The only exhortation I miss within the list would go something like, “Appreciate the Jewish lifestyle of the Messianic Jews.”

Conclusion

The Declaration is of great importance for the WEA and for conservative evangelical Christianity, as it is designed to motivate the Church to become involved in Jewish outreach on the basis of love and respect. It certainly serves its purpose. However, there may be some difficulties in understanding it because of its unnecessarily repetitive structure and its use of some terminology and concepts that are not fully clarified.