

Jewish Evangelism in the 21st Century

David Brickner

Intro

I am not a Messianic Nostradamus-or as has been said, I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet though I do work for a non-profit organization. But it seems to me that it is a good thing to think together and imagine and dream what might be the future of Jewish Evangelism as we move into the second decade of the 21st century.

It is too easy for us to gather together and tout our various achievements as though we were in need of convincing ourselves of our continuing value and importance. As we look forward we dare not do so wearing the rose colored glasses of our own press releases or donor reports. None of us have that much to boast about. If we do boast here let it be in the Lord. He is the only basis for bragging rights and we have a lot to cheer about if our cheering is for Him.

On the other hand there is a lot of reason to be concerned for the enterprise of Jewish evangelism today. I could be worried by trends that we can see in our movement and in the church at large. I see fragmentation within and marginalization without. By fragmentation I mean a lack of real unity and vision among Messianic believers and those involved in Jewish evangelism. There are divisions and conflicts, turf wars, philosophical disagreements about what we should be focusing our time and efforts on, things that in his last LCJE paper Moishe Rosen called "deadly competition."

By marginalization I mean that the role of Israel and the uniqueness of the Jewish people in the plan of God, a conviction that gave rise to much of the effort in the church to love and witness to Jews over the past century and a half has been slowly diminishing. I have little confidence that the younger generation of church leaders will necessarily carry in their hearts the kind of love for the Jews often demonstrated by a previous generation. We have a lot of work to do and no small reason for concern.

But it is too easy to launch a Jeremiad, to complain about the dark clouds hovering on the horizon. Since the enterprise of Jewish evangelism is God's concern and not ours alone, I have every reason to believe and hope for good things to come. Even if we go through periods when it appears our movement might be on a decline I know there will be times of renewal.

The 19th and early 20th century was a time of great innovation and fruitfulness in Jewish Evangelism, especially in the European context. But the Holocaust wiped out much of the testimony of those successes, so that by the time of the mid 1960's there was very little to cheer about. Our field was rife with internecine squabbling, the fragmentation I am detecting today, and the church had lost interest in Jewish evangelism, some believing the holocaust had rewritten the responsibilities of the church vis a vis the Jews and the great commission.

A soon to be published biography of Moishe Rosen recounts how in 1969 the Fellowship of Christian Testimonies to the Jews (a now defunct umbrella organization for several Jewish ministries) sponsored a conference at Nyack College. The organizers of the conference felt it would be insightful to have a rabbi address the group, but no practicing rabbi could allow himself to accept the invitation.

Finally, the program committee invited Sid Lawrence, a trained rabbi who served as a Jewish community worker in Kansas City. He was asked to speak about "The Image of the Missionary in the Jewish Community." Lawrence (probably the first cigar chain smoker ever to speak at Nyack Christian

College!) was brief and to the point. He never meant to advance our cause with his speech but, indirectly, he did.

Lawrence said: "The missionary to the Jews has no image in the Jewish community. We heard of you a long time ago. We never think of you and if we did, there are two words which describe your efforts to convert the Jewish people. First of all, narishkeit (foolishness), and you can see how your efforts have failed. Why continue in an unsuccessful venture? And secondly, you have chutzpah (effrontery). It takes nerve to tell us that we must believe in Jesus. Most Jews have never heard of a Jew believing in Jesus and, if they had, we would have mobilized against you!"

While most people attending that FCTJ conference dismissed Lawrence's critique, Moishe recognized something of the truth in what he was saying. It sparked a dissatisfaction in him and a desire to see things change in our field. The results of this eventually led to the founding of Jews for Jesus. Likewise we here at LCJE should be quick to recognize pointed critique if we don't want to become as defunct as the FCTJ became.

Holy dissatisfaction with where we are at today is always appropriate as long as it doesn't turn into cynicism and discouragement. Just as Moishe allowed that holy dissatisfaction to lead to honest introspection and a new wave of innovation, so I believe we must always be open to new ideas and ways of doing things. We should not be so quick to believe our own press releases. We must be willing to hold the tried and the true in tension with the untested and the new.

"Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness *And* rivers in the desert. This people I have formed for Myself; They shall declare My praise." (Isa. 43:19,21)

I believe that the best literature has yet to be written, the best songs have yet to be composed and the best models and methods for Jewish evangelism have yet to be devised and we should allow holy dissatisfaction to prevent us from accepting the status quo and propel us forward to what God may have in store for us, just right around the corner in this 21st Century.

There are four areas I have for our consideration today in this regard, trends where we can see both problems and possibilities for our field of Jewish Evangelism both now and in the future. They are theology, geography, demography and methodology and materials. I hope we will add to my reflections on these and other trends through our discussion here today.

Theology

Super-sessionism is unfortunately alive and well and becoming increasingly politically correct in the church today. Many of us are here in Cape Town for the LCWE meetings this next week. As before, a statement will be suggested for the conference to adopt coming out of the work of a theological working group. The following may be found on the LCWE website as part of the suggestions for this statement:

"The one Church that God has called into being in Christ is drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language, with the result that no single ethnic identity can claim to be "God's chosen people". God's election of Old Testament Israel was for the sake of the eventual creation of this multi-national community of God's people, and the Old Testament itself envisages and anticipates it. We strongly affirm, therefore, that *while there are multiple ethnicities within the one church by God's clear intention, no single ethnic group holds*

privileged place in God's economy of salvation or God's eschatological purpose. Thus, we strongly believe that the separate and privileged place given to the modern Israeli state, in certain forms of dispensationalism or Christian Zionism, should be challenged, inasmuch as they deny the essential oneness of the people of God in Christ."

Now I hope and pray that such a divisive and sectarian statement will be replaced by a more direct call for evangelism of all peoples including the Jewish people. But it is indicative of a trend that isn't necessarily new but has a new 21st century social justice edge to it that can seriously hurt our work. We must work to ensure that ideology like this does not become so acceptable to a broad cross section of believers that it ends up marginalizing our movement within the Church and undermining Her commitment to love the Jewish people and share the Gospel with them.

Similarly, we see a fragmentation of support for Jewish evangelism due to an unscriptural form of Christian Zionism that intentionally leaves off any Gospel witness. I have written previously about this concern so I won't belabor the point, but suffice it to say that both in terms of misdirecting Christian enthusiasm and funding these groups can effectively undercut Jewish evangelism and they are just as potent a force as ever.

There are positive trends as well. The LCJE continues to play a significant role in making our cause known and our case heard in the wider Body of Christ. The result of some of this networking produced the LOP from the Forum for World Evangelization in Pattaya Thailand called Jewish Evangelism: A Call to the Church. Similarly the WEA sponsorship of the Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism Today not only gained notice in the press and academic circles but will also soon have a book of the papers from that conference published by Paternoster Press.

More narrowly within the Messianic movement there are hopeful signs that the potential for fragmentation may be diminishing as we see a growing maturity in terms of serious and substantial discussion taking place along with evaluation and critique of theological trends in the Messianic movement. This is evident certainly in the continued publication of the journal Mishkan and other works of Messianic theology, the cutting edge work of Dr. Richard Harvey and the helpful Boro Park symposium gatherings sponsored by Chosen People Ministries. Of course much work remains to be done in this area.

That is why continuing theological education must be highly prized in our movement. It is good for us to develop our own programs but we must also continue to engage theologically with the wider body of Christ and whenever possible with mainstream Jewish institutions.

Geography

Shifts in Jewish population are changing the areas of concern and focus for Jewish evangelism in the 21st Century as well. While nothing quite as dramatic has occurred in this first decade as was true of the last decade of the 20th century in terms of Russian Jewish immigration there can be little doubt that the 21st century will likely produce a continuing shift to where there will be more Jewish people in the Land of Israel than outside the Land. Post Soviet Jewish evangelistic opportunities are still numerous and fruitful in many countries but the landscape has shifted dramatically and will continue to do so. Our strategies and policies need to catch up with this reality.

When we think about important matters of theology and theological education, Russian and particularly Israeli Hebrew language programs are in need of major investment in the next few decades.

Never the less, Diaspora movements continue to impact the opportunities and challenges for Jewish evangelism and more study and strategizing should be done about this. The Israeli trekker movement is alive and well, providing ongoing opportunities to reach Jewish young people in far away places like India and Nepal. Our Jews for Jesus Massah program just completed sending our first foray of Messianic Israeli soldiers to the Latin American countries of Brazil, Ecuador and Peru where we found many opportunities to share with young people just out of the IDF.

Demography

It is among those young people, a new up and coming generation of Jewish believers, that I see some hopeful trends for the field of Jewish evangelism as well. But whereas the later 20th century impact on Jewish evangelism was pioneered by an entire generation of young Jewish believers who were often the first in their families to come to Christ, this new demographic trend is distinguished by a preponderance of 2nd and even now 3rd generation of Jewish believers. This is not necessarily a bad thing but it often means a different character and kind of commitment among those involved in Jewish evangelism. Those first generation, primarily Western enculturated group of Jewish believers is slowly being replaced by this group and it will soon and dramatically change the face of our movement and the character of our ministries. Likewise the impact of the Russian speaking and especially Israeli, Hebrew speaking young people has yet to be fully felt, especially in terms of their priorities and their leadership within our movement. Like the broader missions movement today, we still live with a dominant Western influence because of organization and finance. Cultivating non-Western leadership and allowing their priorities and approaches growing and greater influence will require maturity and foresight on our part.

The extraordinary rate of intermarriage has deeply impacted the Jewish community as a whole and the field of Jewish evangelism in particular. This has opened up new opportunities for witness and ministry to Jewish-Gentile couples.

Methodology and Materials

Each new generation will inevitably develop new methods and materials for reaching out with the message of the gospel if they are to succeed in remaining relevant. We certainly see that happening now as well. Technology drives much of the innovation that we can see at this early stage with media such as the use of video, texting, specialized web sites, hospitality in the form of “couch surfing” and social networking to make Messiah known. We know these tools can and are being used for Jewish evangelism but we are only at the early stages of their development and effective use. Again our strategies and approach don't quite keep up. For example, how do you qualify and quantify what is effective ministry via social networking? We know it can be effective anecdotally. In ministry to the Israeli backpackers most trekkers are mobile for 6 months or more with no permanent address, yet almost all are on facebook and so our young people are able to connect and keep in touch with the friends they make in that way. Then when they return to Israel we have seen continuing opportunities for ministry when they are able to reconnect with one another back in the Land. We are also finding new opportunities to use new forms of music for outreach in small venues connected to Hostels, open mic nights and yes, coffee shops. Of course as is often the case, what appears to be new methodologies are often revivals of old forms with a new twist. And that is ok too. Like clothing fashion, what might seem outmoded for a while can find renewal and revitalization in time. It is the Gospel that remains the power of God unto salvation and our methods are just vessels to carry that content. There will always be robust debate in our circles on which methods or who's methods might be better...sung to the tune of my dog's better than your dog.... But I do think we need to remain vigilant as to the issues of justice

and mercy and the impact of that debate that is current in the wider body of Christ. I always felt like those of us in the field of Jewish evangelism would escape that issue because for the most part, Jewish people in the 20th century didn't really seem to be much in need of these kinds of services. It would help us to avoid the mistakes of some of the 19th century mission efforts that made so called rice Christians out of so many poverty stricken Jews. But this is no longer the case. Poverty among post-Soviet Jews and the prominent social needs of many in Israel today are challenging us on many different levels in this regard. We have yet to answer many questions arising out of the role of justice, mercy and the primacy of the great commission today.

Conclusion

But I am quite optimistic that we will face these challenges and renew ourselves in the cause of Christ among the Jewish people in the days ahead. The enemy of God's people always stands ready to attack and undermine the effort to proclaim Y'shua to the Jewish people and he will continue to do so through attacks from within and without. But with a maturing theology, with encouraging signs of openness and opportunity in Israel, with a new generation that is demonstrating an ability to avoid the internecine squabbles of the previous generations and with a constant effort to renew and revitalize our methods and materials I am quite hopeful as we enter this second decade of the 21st century that the best is yet to come. "Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness *And* rivers in the desert. This people I have formed for Myself; They shall declare My praise." (Isa. 43:19,21)