

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION
AND JEWISH EVANGELISM¹

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The story is told of two friends who crossed a deep ravine in Africa. The ravine was spanned by a bridge of wooden planks suspended by large ropes. But this was a most unusual friendship, for it was a friendship between an elephant and a mouse. As they crossed the ravine, the bridge groaned and shook violently. When this strange pair arrived safely on the other side, the mouse said to his large friend, "Boy, we really shook that thing, didn't we!!" I have been reminded of that story a number of times during the past year. To change the metaphor, the attention that has been given (and continues to be given) to Southern Baptists' position on Jewish evangelism carries the fingerprints of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I believe He wants to equip Southern Baptists to be more effective in their prayer for, and witness to, the Jewish people. I am thrilled to be along for the ride -- to join Him in what He wants to accomplish.

On the purely human level, however, I am anxious to express my gratitude to three individuals in particular. First, I want to thank Fred Klett for his very kind invitation for me to address you today. Second, I would probably not have been motivated to write the resolution in the first place were it not for the book by Marvin Wilson (*Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*. Eerdmans/CJCS, 1989).² Last, but not least, I want to thank James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee, without whom I would never have had the opportunities to explain, through the mass media, the good news of Messiah and the prejudice against Jewish believers that is still held by some in the rabbinic community.

I. Past Southern Baptist Involvement

A year and a half ago, my wife, Kathy, 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 were able to visit the First Baptist Church, one of the oldest Baptist churches in the United States. Newport, of course, was founded by Roger Williams, and, it should come as no surprise that it also hosts one of the oldest synagogues in the U.S., the Touro Synagogue, built in 1763. That is more than a coincidence!! Baptists and the Jewish people have had any number of historical and theological points of contact.

¹This paper is adapted from an earlier paper presented to the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship.

²Cf. review article by author in *Mishkan*, Vol. 10, pp. 90-96.

Joseph Samuel Christian Friedrich Frey, "The Father of Modern Jewish Missions," became a Baptist in 1827, and served Baptists until his death in 1850. He believed God was, "still the God of Abraham and his natural seed in a peculiar sense."³ God was going to lead this people, in unbelief, back to the Promised Land. There, he believed, they would trust in Jesus as their Messiah and become Baptists. Dr. Bobby Adams, whose doctoral dissertation at Southwestern Seminary 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 [c. 164 years ago] 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.⁴

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 [later called the Home Mission Board] 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.⁵

So, between 1867 and 1921, there were ten resolutions that dealt with Jewish evangelism. Until this past June, seventy-five years had passed since the last resolution to mention Jewish evangelism, and 114 years since the last one to specifically address the needs for reaching the Jewish population of the United States. In response to these resolutions, although there was a lengthy delay, the Home Mission Board employed Dr. Jacob Gartenhaus as their first missionary to the Jews. This eventually led to the establishment of a department of Jewish evangelism. But, largely due to Gartenhaus' activism in alarming Baptists to the Nazi threat, resentment grew

³As cited and discussed by Bobby Adams, *Analysis of a Relationship: Jews and Southern Baptists* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation; Ft. Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; December, 1969), p.76

⁴Ibid., pp. 78-79

⁵Ibid., pp. 86-87

among the leadership of the Home Mission Board, and Gartenhaus eventually retired in 1949. In his autobiography, he says, "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."⁶ Thus was born the Interfaith Witness Department.

II. Exodus of Denominational Involvement Following WWII

The disaffection with Dr. Gartenhaus was perhaps also due to shifting winds of doctrine which were having their effect on many who were in leadership in the Home Mission Board and also in the Convention. First of all, there was the persistent allure of moderate liberalism. This "modern" and more sophisticated theology also brought a lower view of Scripture.

Secondly, there was a shift in the eschatology of some Southern Baptists from postmillennialism to amillennialism. Although not essential to amillennialism, in Southern Baptist life, it was usually accompanied with a supersessionist view of the Jewish people, that is, the view that the Church had replaced Israel in the purposes of God. World Wars I and II had destroyed what some perceived to be the naive positivism of postmillennialism, but, though most of the people in the pews turned to premillennialism, the seminaries and the denominational leadership turned to amillennialism, and with this shift, embraced replacement theology. While liberalism resisted a high view of the Bible, replacement theology resisted a more literalistic hermeneutic. Furthermore, some Baptists who held to a premillennial understanding failed to appreciate the importance and urgency of witness to the Jewish people, focusing instead on Israel's role as "God's prophetic timepiece."

Finally, "Christian" guilt over the Holocaust gave rise to an invigorated ecumenical movement. This was true across denominational lines. As a result, there was an exodus of major denominations from involvement with Jewish evangelism following World War II. This coincided with the retirement of Dr. Gartenhaus and the demise of the Department of Jewish Evangelism among Southern Baptists. It did not take long for our Interfaith Witness Department to become more involved in interfaith dialogue and education than in interfaith witness.

As a result of these changes, grassroots Southern Baptists who were burdened for the Jewish people, turned to non-denominational Jewish mission agencies (many of which are represented here today). These agencies, without exception, still held to a high bibliology and a more literal hermeneutic. These Jewish missions have done a fantastic job. They have been faithful, even as our denomination was not faithful. But I am so very glad that the Lord is not finished with Southern Baptists!

I wholeheartedly agree with the cogent observation suggested by Susan Perlman and David Harley,⁷ that with the departure of the denominations, Jewish ministry has been

⁶Jacob Gartenhaus, *Traitor? A Jew, A Book, A Miracle* (Chattanooga, TN: International Board of Jewish Missions, 1980), p. 211.

⁷Susan Perlman and C. David Harley, "To The Jew First," in *World Evangelization*, 13:43 (June, 1986), pp. 1-4 (esp. p.3).

marginalized by the Church. It has been left to specialized missions; Messianic congregations have often been viewed as oddities that are tolerated by the "real" Church; and Jewish believers have been disenfranchised by their exclusion from the dialogues between Church leadership and rabbinic leaders. Is this the way God intends Jewish and Gentile believers to demonstrate unity in the Messiah?

III. The Present Opportunity

Through the conservative resurgence, Southern Baptists have reaffirmed both an inerrant Bible and a literalistic hermeneutic. There are signs of an ascendant premillennialism in some of our seminaries. In my opinion, these are some of the closest friends Jewish evangelism could have, yet there remain tremendous challenges to the future of Jewish evangelism in Southern Baptist life. Although the changes of the past twenty years have provided Southern Baptists with the opportunities of the present, it is of utmost importance that Jewish evangelism not be politicized. Whether conservative or moderate, all Southern Baptists (and all evangelicals) should be united in our responsibility to carry the good news to all men. Jewish evangelism should not be written off as a fundamentalist agenda, for it is a New Testament agenda.

This sense of purpose, however, must also be accompanied by both a spiritual revival and a theological reformation. In order to answer the call to Jewish ministry, Southern Baptists (and other evangelicals) must respond in both areas, for there must be repentance of gentile pride vis-à-vis the Jewish people (Romans 11:13, 17-18a, 20, and 25), and theological reformation as the Church searches the Scriptures again regarding the place of Israel and of Jewish evangelism in the plan of God.

IV. The Future of Jewish Evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention

What is the future of Jewish evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention? I believe that we can perform a dual role. On the one hand, for the unsaved of the Jewish people, we are witnesses not only that Jesus is for Jews, but that He is the only way to have a personal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For the unsaved of the Jewish people, we are witnesses that the Messiah has not only redeemed, but unified, Jew and Gentile in Himself. On the other hand, within our own denomination, we are witnesses that Christianity is Jewish and that the Church cannot really be the Church envisioned in the New Testament without a strong Jewish contingent. We can anticipate the blessings of God as we bless the descendants of Abraham with a loving proclamation of atonement through the shed blood of Yeshua, the Lamb of God.

What are some practical measures which can be implemented? Let me outline some aspects of a strategy for involving Southern Baptists in Jewish ministry. First of all, we must gain a hearing on the seminary campuses. Unless we reach the seminaries, we have no future in Southern Baptist life. I am scheduled to teach a two-hour, masters level course on Jewish evangelism in a one to two-week intensive format in our seminaries on a rotating basis. I have received encouraging responses and/or specific commitments from New Orleans Seminary, Southern Seminary, Southeastern Seminary and from Southwestern Seminary. I have been

invited to teach at Mid-America's northeast branch in Schenectady, New York, and at the Mercer School of Theology in Atlanta. I hope to be able to teach at the extension of Southern Seminary, in Boston, and at the Canadian Baptist Seminary, as well. In time, I pray that others, more qualified than myself will be appointed to teach these courses on a more permanent basis at the various seminaries.

I am developing seminar materials designed for Southern Baptist churches, to introduce Jewish ministry and witness. As soon as these materials are developed and field-tested, I would hope that they will find wide acceptance and that they would prove useful to you and to the churches in your areas of ministry. We must also increase the number of Southern Baptist ministries to the Jewish people. In some cases, this may mean the planting of additional messianic congregations. In other cases, it may mean starting an adult Sunday School class, taught from a Messianic Jewish perspective, in a Southern Baptist church. By whatever means, I am anxious to involve Southern Baptists in a Biblically based outreach to our Jewish friends and ministry to Jewish Southern Baptists.

We will continue our efforts to engage the rabbinic community in dialogue, but will insist on the inclusion of Jewish believers in that process. I am not proposing any form of tokenism, but full and equal participation. We are not optimistic about the prospects of dialogue with yesterday's spokesmen for the rabbinic community. Unfortunately, they have decided to absent themselves from future discussions. Therefore, we have no choice but to seek more responsible voices from their community, with whom we may be able to forge a more honest and respectful relationship for the new century.

Finally, we need to enlist the support and understanding of the various Jewish missions and of other denominational ministries. We are co-laborers with you. We have a tremendous appreciation for the excellent work you have done, and are presently doing. We want you to rejoice with us that the Lord is bringing a love for the Jewish people into the heart of one of the world's largest evangelical denominations. When you come under fire, we want to stand with you. On the other hand, we have much to learn from you.

When I think of the future of Jewish Evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention, I am filled with optimism. God is the Initiator, the Enabler, and the Consummation. He has raised up Dr. Phil Roberts, the director of the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board, "for such a time as this." Through his efforts, the full-time staff position, that I now fill, has become a reality. For the first time in decades, we have an open door on seminary campuses. Everywhere I go, I find not only openness, but enthusiasm. The challenge for us is the challenge of our fathers. Their faith was the outgrowth of their dependence on the Lord. If our hearts are right with Him, I believe we are in for quite an experience! Although our journey may have its ups and downs, I look forward to our continued fellowship in the way...but especially, to our times of rejoicing on the other side of the bridge.