

Obstacles to Jewish Evangelism

by **Jim R. Sibley**

As First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill thought he saw a way to bring World War I to a swift conclusion. History has proven him correct. His plan, if successful, would have ended the war years earlier and would have saved countless lives. He had seen that by taking Constantinople and driving in a northwesterly direction to Austria, the Allied Powers could outmaneuver the Central Powers and achieve a relatively swift victory. In order to capture Constantinople, British ships would have needed to successfully navigate the Dardanelles, laced with mines and bracketed with cliffs surmounted with heavily reinforced gun emplacements. Churchill had vision, but he had obstacles. No one can hope to succeed who is not aware of the obstacles that must be overcome.

Those of us who have a vision for the salvation of the Jewish people must consider the obstacles, as well. Due to the scope of this paper, I will be able only to suggest some of the more obvious ones and point to some resources for further study. I must also confine my remarks to conditions in Europe and the United States, as the obstacles in Israel would require a separate treatment.¹

Western Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism makes Jewish evangelism politically incorrect in the West.

¹Since the majority of our members are from North America and Europe, and since these are the regions with which I am more familiar, my remarks will primarily reflect the situation in these two areas of our world. This is not to slight any other region; however, it is merely to acknowledge my own limitations.

Multiculturalism is the idea that modern societies should invest distinct cultural groups with equal social acceptance. To state it in different terms, multiculturalism is the view that all cultures, from that of a cannibalistic tribe to that of an advanced industrial civilization, are equal in value.

What is at issue is whether a value judgment of a culture is ever justified. Should every culture be equally affirmed without subjecting it to any evaluation at all? Or, should some aspects of a culture be affirmed and others condemned? Should differences between cultures be subject to value judgments? Or, are we prepared to equate a culture that has been shaped to some extent by Christianity with one that has not? Must we jettison values such as those of hard work, of honesty, of concern for the welfare of others? Must we forsake the ability to distinguish good from evil, to distinguish that which is life-promoting from that which is life-negating?

Actually, multiculturalism operates with a double standard. Every culture and religion is to be affirmed, except Christianity. That's why multiculturalism affirms "artistic" displays that are deeply offensive to Christians, but immediately rejects cartoons that poke fun at Islam. That is why copies of the Koran are allowed in public schools, but not copies of the Bible.

In such a context, evangelism becomes proselytism. Rather than seeing evangelism as a proclamation of the good news of salvation, multiculturalism sees it as an unjustified attempt by Christianity to snatch someone from a different, but equally valid culture or religion, in order to increase the number on its membership rolls—which is proselytism.²

²For more on multiculturalism, cf. Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth: Responding to Multiculturalism, The Rejection of Reason, and The New Postmodern Diversity*. Minneapolis, Minnesota:

In American Christianity

In America, the major obstacle, as I see it, is not theological, but hermeneutical. The inspiration and authority of the Bible is affirmed, but there is confusion between the meaning of a text and its application; or, to put it another way, there is too much haste in moving to application. The meaning of the text is defined in terms of personal relevance, rather than of original intent. Thus, from the beginning, real possibilities for understanding are severely restricted.

Too often, Christian faith is built on a kind of Gentile midrash—that is, on a manner of understanding Scripture that is superficial, devotional, and spiritualizing. Consequently, every promised blessing to Israel is applied to the life of every believer as though that were its original meaning. Therefore, II Chronicles 7:14 is talking about *my* land; Jeremiah 29:11 is speaking of the plans God has for *my* life; and Acts 1:8 is speaking of *my* Jerusalem. The situation is not significantly improved in most pulpits, where superficial, topically-oriented sermons have taken the place of more substantive, expository sermons. In such a context, motivation for Jewish evangelism is severely weakened, for the voice of Scripture has been muffled.

In European Christianity

Evangelism, in general, has fallen on hard times in Europe. This is due primarily to theological obstacles. Generations ago, the authority and inerrancy of

Bethany House Publishers, 1996. Regarding the differences between proselytism and evangelism, Rainer Riesner says, “The very name makes clear that the proselyte is one ‘coming to’ Judaism. According to the Great Commission the Christians ‘go out’ ‘to all nations.’” [“A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?” in Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein, eds., *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 250.]

Scripture were abandoned by many, and today, the two major theological obstacles to evangelism of any kind are: 1) the denial of the need for explicit faith in Yeshua for salvation and 2) the denial of any eternal, conscious punishment for those who die in their sin. So, there is neither positive nor negative motivation for evangelism of any sort, much less for Jewish evangelism.

Theological Issues

Of course, regardless of our nationality, there are theological obstacles to Jewish evangelism, even in countries like the United States, where many Christians are not particularly theological. For now, I want to focus our attention on three areas of theology: Bibliology, soteriology, and ecclesiology.

Bibliology

Ever since the Serpent asked Eve, “Did God *really* say, ‘You can't eat from any tree in the garden,’”³ there has been an unrelenting attack on the authority of the Bible. The assaults of liberalism, higher critical theories, and sensational novels (such as the *Da Vinci Code*) have all contributed to a societal distrust of Scripture.

The last quarter of the past century saw conservatives in a number of denominations, energized and motivated to regain ground that had been lost. In some cases this has resulted in the redirection of entire denominations, and in other cases, it has resulted in a “loyal opposition.” Of course, it is no surprise that support for Jewish evangelism comes from the most conservative elements in each denomination.

As we speak of the Bible, it is worth noting that even among conservative

Evangelicals, confidence in the use of messianic prophecy has been seriously eroded. Some conservative scholars, such as John Sailhamer, have launched a counter-attack, but much more needs to be done in this regard.⁴

Soteriology

The doctrine of salvation, that is, the gospel itself, has not remained unmolested. The so-called “wider hope” view was first promoted in England in the mid-1800’s in academic circles by Frederick D. Maurice⁵ and Frederick W. Farrar.⁶ In America, similar ideas had already been taught by Joseph Smith to his “latter day saints.”

In the mid-1900’s, a Jesuit priest, named Karl Rahner, espoused similar ideas and spoke of “anonymous Christians.” By this term, he meant those who would not call themselves Christians, and who may actually be active adherents of other religions, but who, through their piety or morality were actually saved by “common grace.” They are Christians, but they don’t know it.⁷

In our day, “inclusivism” is the more common term for similar ideas.

Inclusivism claims that, while Christianity is true and the death of Christ provides the

³Genesis 3:1 (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*), emphasis added.

⁴Cf. John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) and his article, “The Messiah and the Hebrew Bible,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44/1 (March 2001): 5–23. Cf. also, Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Michael Rydelnik, “The Promise of Messiah,” unpublished dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997 (especially pages 28–68), and his anticipated new book, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, forthcoming, 2009.

⁵Frederick Denison Maurice, *Theological Essays*, Michigan Historical Reprint Series (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library, 2005).

⁶Frederic W. Farrar, *Eternal Hope: Five Sermons Preached in Westminster Abbey, November and December 1877* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1885).

only means of salvation, explicit faith in Yeshua is not necessary for salvation. It claims that an implicit faith response to general revelation can be salvific. In contrast, the

Lausanne Covenant says:

We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness.

Inclusivism is driven by religious piety and emotion more than by Scripture.

However, as someone has said, “It is a case of trying to be nicer than God.” It is easy to see how the “wider hope,” the “anonymous Christian,” and inclusivism lead not only to a “post-missionary Christianity,” but also to a “post-missionary Messianic Judaism.”

Ecclesiology

The doctrine of the church may not seem to be as theologically significant as the doctrines of the Bible or of salvation; however, in terms of the overall impact on Jewish evangelism, one teaching concerning the church has had disastrous effects and poses a significant obstacle to Jewish evangelism. Of course, I am speaking of supersessionism, or replacement theology. Its impact can scarcely be overstated.

This view, that the Church has replaced Israel in the purposes of God, has a long history that stretches back to the end of the first century. It is so deeply embedded in the subconsciousness of Christians that it is often not even articulated, but simply presumed. However, R. Kendall Soulen has correctly observed, “While it may be possible to imagine a god who is indifferent to the existence of the Jewish people, it is

⁷His *Theological Investigations* filled 23 vols., but cf., Daniel Pekarske, *Abstracts of Karl Rahner's Theological Investigations 1-23* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2003).

impossible so to imagine the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of Israel."⁸ He goes on to note that when we claim to worship the *God* of Israel, but neglect the *people* of Israel, we introduce confusion and contradiction into the heart of our confession. To deny God's interest in the Jewish people is to deny the God of Israel.

Others have presented papers at previous LCJE meetings that have addressed replacement theology⁹ and *Mishkan* has also given attention to this teaching.¹⁰ Furthermore, many of you have read and studied the issue significantly and some of you have written against it.

Missiology

Of course, poor theology leads to poor missiology. Perhaps more than any other theological issue, supersessionism has negatively affected our understanding of the mission of the Church. The foundational storyline of the Bible, which provides the basic impetus for missions, is understood in such a way that Israel and/or the Jewish people are largely neglected in mission enterprises. Most often, it is assumed that Israel was God's failed "Plan A," which has now been rendered irrelevant by the Church. Indeed, according to many, Israel's is a double failure: In the Old Testament they failed to go, and in the New Testament, they failed to receive.

At most, the Jewish people are simply one of thousands of other people groups, with absolutely no biblical, theological, or missiological uniqueness.

⁸ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 4.

⁹ Philip Bottomley, "Replacement Theology," 1989, 8 pages; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Replacement Theology," 1993, 23 pages; and Art Glasser, "Spiritual Obstacles in Jewish Evangelism," 1996, 14 pages.

¹⁰Cf. especially issue no. 21, 1994, on "Replacement Theology."

Supersessionism renders most Christians oblivious to the fact that the two most basic ethnic categories in Scripture are “Jew” and “Gentile” and to the fact that the two forms of missions in the New Testament are Jewish missions and Gentile missions.

At worst, the Jewish people have had their chance and are no longer to be on the agenda of the Church at all. The phrase in Matt. 28:19, “*panta ta ethne*,” is read by some as, “all Gentiles,” instead of “all the nations.”¹¹ Even if judgment is withheld on this textual issue, there is a suspicion that God Himself is not interested in the Jewish people.

This neglect of the Jewish people by mission leaders is reinforced by Western pragmatism that often reduces missions decisions to a “cost-per-soul” type of calculation. In such a calculus, resistant groups, in general, and the Jewish people, in particular, do not generally fare well. It is not viewed as good stewardship of mission resources to invest in groups where the anticipated “return” is not very great.

How very foreign this entire mentality would be to the prophets of Israel or to the apostles of the early church! Ezekiel went to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, not because he anticipated a significant responsiveness to his message, for the Lord had already told him that his message would not be received at all. He went out of obedience to the Lord, “that they may know that a prophet has been among them.”¹² The

¹¹For an excellent discussion of this issue, see the articles on “The Gospel of Matthew and the Great Commission” by Peter Stuhlmacher, Hans Kvalbein, Ulrich Luz, and Oskar Skarsaune in Adna and Kvalbein, 17–83; Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 98–101; and the discussion in Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 361–367.

¹²Ezek 2:5.

Apostle Paul always went “to the Jew first,”¹³ not out of expediency, but because it was “necessary”!¹⁴ This was not merely his practice, as though it were his peculiar quirk, without significance for others. On the contrary, Romans 1:16 and other passages indicate that the priority of Jewish missions is to be normative for *all* Christians throughout the centuries.

Conclusion

In his monumental, three-volume biography of William Churchill, William Manchester tells about the naval attack on the Dardanelles on March 18, 1915. When the mines had been cleared, the fleet moved into the Dardanelles, firing artillery at the gun emplacements on either side. The ships were receiving small arms fire, but the shells bounced harmlessly off of the thick steel plates of the ships. Victory was in their grasp, just as Churchill had known it would be. Unknown to the Allies, the Turks were virtually out of ammunition; Constantinople had already been abandoned. Nevertheless, the stress of battle had frayed the nerves of the commander of the lead warship and just as the Turks were firing their last rounds of ammunition, he ordered that the ship turn around and retreat.

Ten years after the war, the British officer who had devised the battle plan for the attack had the opportunity to steam through the Dardanelles under peaceful conditions. Manchester says, “His eyes filled. He said: ‘My God, it would have been even easier than I thought. We simply couldn’t have failed . . . and because we didn’t try,

¹³Rom 1:16.

¹⁴Acts 13:46.

another million lives were thrown away and the war went on for another three years.”¹⁵

Dear friends, I have tried to survey our obstacles, and they are real, but our greatest obstacles may prove not to be external, but internal. Our Commander-in-Chief has assured us of victory. It will not come without struggle, but we must not lose heart.

¹⁵William Manchester, *The Last Lion, Winston Spenser Churchill: Visions of Glory, 1874–1932* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1983), 542.