



This article is adapted from a paper Dr. Jim Sibley delivered at a conference several years ago at Criswell College, and it appears here by his kind permission. It is about his long-time pastor, W.A. Criswell (1909-2002), of First Baptist Church in Dallas—and specifically about “Dr. C’s” love for Israel and the Jewish people. We think you will enjoy reading about this godly Baptist preacher who earned the respect of the Jewish community in Dallas without compromising the integrity of his witness as an evangelical believer in Jesus.

Friendships within the Israeli Jewish Community

Dr. Criswell described his initial meeting with Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, who served in that position for thirteen years, with the following statement:

I was in Jerusalem and in the King David Hotel. And walking through the hotel, one of the men said, “David Ben-Gurion and his wife are seated over there in the dining room. I would like to introduce you to them.” I said, “I would be delighted.” He was then prime minister of Israel, the first prime minister of the Jewish state. When I went over there—his wife was from Brooklyn, he had married a Brooklyn girl—she was delighted to see me, to talk to me about America. And I was introduced to him as the pastor of the largest Baptist church in America, and that intrigued the Prime Minister. So he invited me to sit down with them at the table and we conversed.¹

Dr. Criswell met with Ben-Gurion several times² and considered him a friend.³ Yet, Ben-Gurion was not the only one of Israel’s Prime Ministers with whom Dr. Criswell made acquaintance. He received a congratulatory telegram from Menachem Begin, and he also knew Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin. In fact, he extended an invitation to Yitzhak Rabin to speak at the annual Southern Baptist Convention.⁴ He also had opportunity to visit with the chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Nathan.⁵

Due to his friendship with the Jewish people and his support for Israel, Dr. Criswell was the recipient of a number of honors and awards. In 1979, Dr. Criswell was named by Prime Minister Menachem Begin to receive the Israeli Humanitarian Award. In accepting it, Criswell became the only Christian clergyman ever to receive this award.⁶ In 1988, he received the Tree of Life Award from the Jewish National Fund. This last award was granted at a dinner to which greetings were extended to him by the Mayor of Dallas, the Governor of Texas, and the Israeli Consul General. On this occasion, he also received letters and telegrams, not only from the governor, but also from President Ronald Reagan, Dr. Billy Graham, and the Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Shamir. There were other awards and citations, but these two stand out.

The Love of Zion in His Ministry

Throughout his ministry at First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dr. Criswell had a warm place in his heart for Jewish believers. Let me introduce you to just a few.

Lilly Wolff was a Holocaust survivor who had been a famous fashion designer in Germany before World War II, but afterward, she arrived

penniless in New York. Accepting a job offer in Dallas, she moved to Texas and, hearing Dr. Criswell over the radio, she became convinced of the truth of the Gospel and came under conviction of her sin. She walked to a church near her home, the Gaston Avenue Baptist Church, where the minister of education led her to faith in her Messiah. Shortly afterward, she joined First Baptist Church and was involved in Jewish ministry for many years. She designed dresses for the Miss America Pageant, and she even designed Mabel Ann Criswell’s wedding dress. Her designs are featured today at the Texas Fashion Collection at the University of North Texas. She was also an early supporter of Criswell College.

Ed Hecht is a Jewish believer and member of First Baptist who was led to the Lord by Dr. Criswell in 1949. He and his wife joined the church and became friends with a number of other Jewish believers who were already members. Later, Ed would bring his mother, Anita, who had also trusted the Lord, to join the church. Once, when Ed was to lead in prayer during a worship service, Dr. Criswell introduced him, saying that the salvation of one Jewish person was worth the salvation of 500 Gentiles. That may be disputed as Criswellian hyperbole, but few have contributed as significantly to the work of the church as Ed Hecht.⁷

Ed and Pat Borofsky were somewhat high profile, because almost every Sunday they were escorting someone down the aisle whom they had led to the Lord that week. They had an enthusiasm for the Lord and for the church, and they loved Dr. Criswell. Monk Harris, Zola Levitt, and an estimated forty or fifty other Jewish believers were members of the church. Eventually, Shalom Chapel was formed, and it evolved into Adat Sha-lom, a messianic congregation that has been a mission of First Baptist throughout the years.

On a personal note, growing up in the church, Dr. Criswell knew of my early calling to missions in Israel. When he visited Israel in 1969, he brought a Hebrew Bible back from Israel as a gift to me, and when the Foreign Mission Board appointed us as missionaries to Israel, he held a special time of commissioning for my family and me during a worship service at the church.

The local missionary of the American Board of Missions to the Jews [now Chosen People Ministries] was also a member of the church. At first, this was Bill Ennis and his family,⁸ but when he was transferred to Houston, he was succeeded by Dr. Tom McCall, who had been led into Jewish missions through the ministry of Dr. Criswell.⁹ In a partnership between Dr. Criswell, the American Board of Missions to the Jews, and Al and Dorothy Pasche (for whom the Pasche Institute of Jewish Studies is named), an effective ministry was opened to the Jewish community of Dallas. Dr. McCall writes:

For many years we had an annual banquet at First Baptist Church for our Jewish friends. Often it was what we called a “Jewish and Christian Passover Banquet.” Dr. Criswell was excited about inviting the Jewish people of Dallas to the church. He asked us to gather a list of all the Jewish people we could and he sent a personally signed invitation for them to share a Passover experience with their Christian friends.

When the people received the invitations, many asked their rabbi what they should do. Some said it was OK to go, but others strenuously objected. It was a matter of considerable discussion in the synagogues for several weeks leading up to the banquet each year.

One of these occasions was particularly memorable. Dr. Charles Feinberg, Dean of Talbot Theological Seminary in California, and an outstanding Jewish believer in Christ, led the Passover Seder. Dr. Criswell welcomed the guests warmly, and there were some 300 Jewish friends present in the Church gymnasium, with 400 Christian hosts, including about 40 Jewish believers in Christ.

A remarkable thing happened at the banquet. At first, the Jewish guests became the “hosts” at each table, explaining everything about the Passover to the Gentile Christians. Then, as Dr. Feinberg explained the way Jesus fulfilled the Passover as the Messiah, this was something they had never heard before. We spent the rest of the year visiting these families, and over the years several hundred Jewish people came to faith in Christ directly and indirectly through the impact of the annual banquet at First Baptist Church of Dallas.¹⁰

In connection with these dinners, each year for a number of years, the leadership of the Jewish community in Dallas sent an appeal to the deacons of First Baptist encouraging them not to evangelize the Jewish people. As the business and financial leaders of the city, their collective appeal was somewhat intimidating. Dr. Criswell read their appeal to the deacons, followed by his response, in which he expressed the following sentiment:

What you are asking of us is something we would never think of asking of you. You are asking us to stop being Christians, and we would not think of asking you to cease being Jews. It is the very essence of our obedience to God to express our faith in Jesus. As Christians, we will always defend your right to disagree and to reject what we share with you, but we have an obligation to keep on telling the greatest story ever told. It is our hope and our prayer that you would consider the message we share.¹¹

Jim Sibley and his wife Kathy are valued colleagues and longtime friends of CJF Ministries. Gary Hedrick serves on his advisory board at Criswell College’s Pasche Institute, where Jim serves as director. He’s also the editor of the popular Messianic theological journal Mishkan (for subscription information, email mishkan@pascheinstitute.org). Jim was awarded his PhD from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth this past December—and we extend hearty congratulations to him for that milestone in his ministry!



In addition to the annual Jewish Christian Fellowship Dinners, the church also sponsored an annual conference on “Prophecy and the Jew.” These continued until the mid-1980s.¹²

His Love for Israel: The Land and the People

His love for the people and Land of Israel originated with his theology, and was strengthened through his personal friendships with Jewish people. Dr. Criswell first visited Israel in 1948, when, as he tells in one of his sermons, he watched the salvage operation that raised the Patria and the Exodus from the bottom of Haifa Bay.¹³ He was to visit many more times over the years, and he made his last trip to Israel in 1995, with O. S. Hawkins, Gary Frazier, and Jack Pogue.

Dr. Hawkins tells of an incident on that trip that took place in Jerusalem, and Jack Pogue substantiates his account. They paid a visit to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. This was about thirty days before Rabin would be assassinated. Rabin entered the room tired, with a frown and an unpleasant disposition. He was perhaps impatient with the social obligations of his office. As he took his seat, Dr. Criswell immediately took Rabin’s large, rough hand in his and said, “Now, sweet boy, here’s why we are here.” Dr. Criswell then expressed that they had simply come to tell him of their love for Israel and for the Jewish people. By all accounts, Rabin simply melted, and they had a very intimate visit.¹⁴

On that same visit to Israel, they were walking down Jaffa Road in west Jerusalem, when they realized that Dr. Criswell was no longer with them. They went back, retracing their steps until they found him. He had stopped to listen to a sidewalk musician playing Ha-Tiqvah, the Israeli national anthem, on a violin. Dr. Criswell was transfixed as he listened to the music with tears streaming down his cheeks.¹⁵

Dr. Criswell loved Israel, the Land and the people, for he loved the things the Lord loves. In Zechariah 2:8, the prophet says of Zion, “He who touches you, touches the apple of [God’s] eye.” In Psalm 137:5–6, David says, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.” In the New Testament, Paul expresses his deep love for the Jewish people when he says, in Romans 9:1-3, that he would be willing, if it were possible, to forfeit his salvation and spend an eternity in Hell, if it would result in the salvation of the Jewish people. Dr. Criswell had the heart of Paul; he had the heart of David; he had the heart of Zechariah; and he had the heart of God for Israel and the Jewish people.

ENDNOTES

¹W. A. Criswell, “State of the Church,” January 2, 1977, W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/PrintTranscript.cfm/SID/1443.cfm> (accessed January 20, 2010).

²“I have [met] David Ben-Gurion and talked with him” (W. A. Criswell, “Redemption: The Age in Which We Live,” December 2, 1956, W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/PrintTranscript.cfm/SID/2774.cfm> [accessed January 20, 2010]). “Several times, I visited with David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the modern nation of Israel” (W. A. Criswell, “The Beginning and the End of Israel,” February 23, 1986, W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/PrintTranscript.cfm/SID/172.cfm> [accessed January 20, 2010]).

³“David Ben-Gurion, my friend whom I visited with several times” (W. A. Criswell, “The War of Armageddon,” August 4, 1985, W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/PrintTranscript.cfm/SID/740.cfm> [accessed January 20, 2010]).

⁴“Criswell: Jews Protect Christians,” Texas Jewish Post, November 30, 1978.

⁵W. A. Criswell, “The Pope, the Rabbi, and the Pastor,” July 18, 1971, W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/PrintTranscript.cfm/SID/2886.cfm> (accessed January 20, 2010).

⁶“Israel Award Honours Criswell,” The Australian Baptist, January 10, 1979.

⁷Ed Hecht, interview by author, Dallas, TX, January 20, 2010.

⁸Cf. Harold A. Sevener, A Rabbi’s Vision: A Century of Proclaiming Messiah, A History of Chosen People Ministries, Inc. (Charlotte, NC: Chosen People Ministries, 1994), 314–16.

⁹Ibid., 326–27.

¹⁰Thomas McCall, e-mail message to author, December 13, 2009.

¹¹We were unable to find a printed copy of Dr. Criswell’s response, so I have recreated it here, to the best of my ability, from information provided by deacons and others who were present at the meeting. We’re not claiming that the quote is verbatim, but it most assuredly is the essence of what the pastor said that day.

¹²Sevener, 327.

¹³W. A. Criswell, “The Jew and Palestine,” September 11, 1955, W. A. Criswell Sermon Library, <http://www.wacriswell.com/PrintTranscript.cfm/SID/823.cfm> (accessed January 20, 2010).

¹⁴Hawkins; Jack Pogue, interview by author, Dallas, TX, November 25, 2009.

¹⁵Hawkins.