

The Scandal of Jewish Evangelism

From Edinburgh 1910 to Edinburgh 2010

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

According to Paul “the message of the cross” is a *skandalon* to Jews and “foolishness” to non-Jews. God, however, decided to save those who believe “through the foolishness of what was preached,” namely Christ, the crucified and risen one (1 Cor 1:18-23).

Whether or not it is compatible with contemporary theology and missiology, the question needs to be asked: Does an apostolic concept like this have anything to say to Christian theology and mission in the 21st century? And does it still apply to Jewish people?

First: Which stand did they take on Jewish evangelism in Edinburgh in 1910 and in the subsequent decades?

Edinburgh 1910 and Amsterdam 1948 – and the Jewish People

In *Edinburgh 1910* there was a clear affirmation of Jewish evangelism:

Followers of the Lord Jesus Christ – Himself after the flesh a Jew – should give to the presentation of Christ to the Jew its rightful place in the Great Commission. It is not a task to be left to a few enthusiastic believers, but the obligation and responsibility of the whole Christian Church. The Gospel must be preached to the Jew wherever he may be found.¹

In *Amsterdam 1948* – only three years after the war in which six million Jews had been killed in concentration camps in so-called Christian countries – the Jewish question could, of course, not be ignored by the World Council of Churches (WCC). It is stated that anti-Semitism “is a sin against God and man”. However, in the first paragraph, *The Church’s Commission to preach the Gospel to all men*, there is still a clear call to Jewish evangelism:

All of our churches stand under the commission of our common Lord, “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature”. The fulfilment of this commission requires that we include the Jewish people in our evangelistic task.²

And from the International Missionary Council in 1957 it was proclaimed:

Judaism is as much without Christ as Mohammedanism and Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Either all people need Christ or none.³

Do such words still apply to those who are going to celebrate Edinburgh 2010? If *yes*, then it implies a *no* to the idea that religious plurality is a God-given plurality. If *no*, then the door is wide open for a religious plurality where the *biblical* insistence on the uniqueness of Christ and salvation in him has been reduced to theological and missiological anachronisms.

¹ World Missionary Conference, 1910. *Report of Commission I: Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World* vol. I (Edinburg and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, n.d.), 276-77.

² Online, <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1489>

³ Göte Hedenquist, *Twenty-five Years of The International Missionary Council’s Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1957), 5.

This short article does not allow long explanations and references,⁴ so I will get down to the point right away. The call to Jewish evangelism has, not least within the last 50 years, become increasingly weak in the framework of ecumenical theology and missiology; in some cases there has even been a strong dissociation from it.⁵ In the evangelical world there are still groups that advocate it. A case in point is the full-page ad which the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) inserted in the New York Times on March 28, 2008.⁶ In content there is a clear continuity between this and Edinburgh 1910. The question is: Will Edinburgh 2010 be able to produce a *comparable* statement with a clear affirmation of Jewish evangelism, which implies support for and solidarity with the Jesus-believing Jews of our time? As will be shown, the Messianic Jews have practically been made losers in the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The ad is reprinted here *in toto*.

The Gospel and the Jewish People - An Evangelical Statement [2008]

As evangelical Christians, we want to express our genuine friendship and love for the Jewish people. We sadly acknowledge that church history has been marred with anti-Semitic words and deeds; and that at times when the Jewish people were in great peril, the church did far less than it should have.

- We pledge our commitment to be loving friends and to stand against such injustice in our generation. At the same time, we want to be transparent in affirming that we believe the most loving and Scriptural expression of our friendship toward Jewish people, and to anyone we call friend, is to forthrightly share the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ.
- We believe that it is only through Jesus that all people can receive eternal life. If Jesus is not the Messiah of the Jewish people, He cannot be the Savior of the World (Acts 4:12).
- We recognize that it is good and right for those with specialized knowledge, history and skills to use these gifts to introduce individuals to the Messiah, and that includes those ministries specifically directed to the Jewish people (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).
- We deplore the use of deception or coercion in evangelism; however, we reject the notion that it is deceptive for followers of Jesus Christ who were born Jewish to continue to identify as Jews (Romans 11:1).

We want to make it clear that, as evangelical Christians, we do not wish to offend our Jewish friends by the above statements; but we are compelled by our faith and commitment to the Scriptures to stand by these principles. It is out of our profound respect for Jewish people that we seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them, and encourage others to do the same, for we believe that salvation is only found in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the World.

⁴ I argued the main points in the present article in Tuvia Zaretsky (ed.), *Jewish Evangelism: A Call to the Church*, Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) no. 60 (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2005). Online, http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP60_IG31.pdf

⁵ See e.g. *Mishkan* 36 (2002), whose theme is “The Church and Israel – Dialogue and Witness”.

⁶ Online, <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/news/article.htm?id=1732> – In August 2008 an international task force of the Theological Commission of the WEA drew up the document “The Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today”. The main headings are: 1. Love is not Silent: the Need for Repentance; 2. Beyond Genocide: the Problem of Sin; 3. The Solution for Sin: the uniqueness of Christ; 4. The Call to Action: Jewish Evangelism; The Next Step. Online, <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/tc/berlin.htm> - Excerpts of papers in *Mishkan* 56 (2008). Expected publication of all papers in 2010 by Paternoster Press, UK.

Reactions to the WEA Advertisement

The statement speaks of love for the Jewish people, and it dissociates itself from anti-Semitism. In this way the statement does not differ from the many hundred similar statements or documents that have been issued since World War II.⁷ But it is nonetheless maintained that Jews need the gospel for salvation. This salvation is determined as eternal life. And with a reference to the well-known words in Acts 4:12, it is stressed that only Jesus can grant this salvation: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” – words said *about* the Jew Jesus, words said *by* Jesus-believing Jews, and words directed *to* the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus’ death. The statement, moreover, validates the existence of a purposive mission to Jewish people while it distances itself from the use of deception and coercion. It is also asserted that it is not dishonest for Jesus-believing Jews to continue to see themselves as Jews.

In the current dialogue between Jews and Christians the principal perception is the opposite. Because of the church’s history with the Jewish people – often characterized by hatred, coercion, persecution and a theologically motivated contempt resulting in anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism – the church has reconsidered its attitude, something which has often resulted in a rejection of Jewish evangelism, which the church has regarded as not only irrelevant but also unethical and theologically unnecessary. There should no longer be an active and organized proclamation of the gospel of Jesus to Jews. And, it is often concluded, Jews who come to faith in Jesus should no longer insist on seeing themselves as Jews.

Jewish reactions to the WEA advertisement came promptly.⁸ Here is just one example. Abraham H. Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, pronounced:

The World Evangelical Alliance Statement defending the targeting of Jews for conversion is offensive and insulting to the Jewish people and brazenly dismisses Jewish self-definition. Instead of validating God’s irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people, and ongoing Jewish covenantal life, themes also found in their Scripture, this group of religious leaders does the opposite.

It is especially odious to defend the duplicitous proselytizing of Jews by groups such as Jews for Jesus and so-called “Messianic Jews.” While they claim to deplore the use of deception and coercion, they “reject the notion that it is deceptive for followers of Jesus Christ who were born Jewish to continue to identify as Jews,” thus turning the meaning of deception on its head.⁹

This rejection from Jewish quarters is similar, also in the language used, to the reaction to *The Willowbank Declaration on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People* (1989), which with more theological arguments put forward the same viewpoints as the WEA ad.¹⁰ Rabbi A. Rudin, then National Director of Inter-Religious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, called the Declaration a “blueprint for spiritual genocide that is shot through with the ancient Christian ‘teaching of contempt’ for Jews and Judaism.” Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, describes the Declaration as “retrograde and primitive”.

⁷ For a huge collection of documents, see (1) Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Herman Henrix (eds.), *Die Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1945 bis 1985* (Paderborn/München: Bonifatius Verlag/Christian Kaiser, 1988). (2) Hans Herman Henrix and Wolfgang Krauss (eds.), *Die Kirchen und das Judentum: Dokumente von 1986 bis 2000* (Paderborn: Gütersloher Verlagshaus/Christian Kaiser/Bonifatius Verlag, 2001).

⁸ Cf. also Susan Perlman, “A Look at the Response to The Gospel and the Jewish People – An Evangelical Statement,” *LCJE Bulletin* 93 (2008): 4-6.

⁹ Online, <http://pjmillier.wordpress.com/2008/04/01/evangelical-leaders-jews-need-jesus-christ-brings-rebuke-from-adl/>

¹⁰ Online, <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/tc/willowbankdeclaration.htm>

Schindler is quoted as labelling the Declaration “a desperate attempt to stop the clock of progress in inter-religious relations.” Rudin calls the Declaration “the worst kind of Christian imperialism.”¹¹

God’s Covenant with Israel and Supersessionism

One of the central pivotal points for the theological conversation between Jews and Christians for more than half a century has been the concept of “covenant”. The classical Christians position has been that God in Christ has annulled his covenant with his people Israel and that the church has *replaced* Israel. Although many have rejected this notion, it has not resulted in agreement concerning the question of Jewish evangelism. The fact that God still honours his covenant with the Jewish people has made many people reject the idea of Jewish evangelism. However, people who are involved in Jewish evangelism maintain that even if Israel continues to be the chosen people, it does not mean that they do not need the gospel about Jesus.

Modern covenant thinking within the framework of the Jewish-Christian dialogue is often some brand of two-covenant theology in which Jews via Sinai – but without Jesus – and non-Jews via Calvary – but with Jesus – reach the same God, Israel’s God. In such a context it is not appropriate to say that Jews need Jesus for salvation. If this happens, nonetheless, it is because one’s Christian theology is permeated with *supersessionism*, a word which is filled with contempt and in dialogue circles sometimes seems to be a synonym for anti-Semitism.

Theologically it is used against those who believe that Christianity replaces and supersedes Judaism. The most extreme form of supersessionism is found in second-century Marcion. He did not believe that Israel’s God was identical with Jesus’ father. The God of the Old Testament was the God of vengeance and wrath, whereas the New Testament portrayed a loving God. Although the church as such, and rightly so, dissociated itself from Marcion and proclaimed him a heretic, Marcionism seems to be hale and hearty in Christian circles today, but it is based on a poor reading of the Old as well as the New Testament.

But even if a Christian today distances himself from Marcion and a “Christian” neo-Marcionism, it does not mean that he becomes kosher in the Jewish-Christian dialogue or among Jewish theologians. For if you insist that with Christ came “something more”, “something which was not there before” but which has been “fulfilled” in Jesus, something with an existential and crucial significance also for Jewish people today, you will nonetheless be denounced as a supersessionist, which Jewish Orthodox scholar Professor Jon D. Levenson, among others, has made abundantly clear: “This claim of a fuller revelation is the foundation of what has come to be known as Christian ‘supersessionism,’ the theology that sees the putative new revelation as transcending and surpassing the old, rendering it obsolete.”¹²

For David Novak, professor of Jewish studies at the University of Toronto and one of the authors of the document *Dabru Emet* (see below), the renunciation of supersessionism is “the necessary precondition both for a more positive Christian theology of Judaism and a more positive Jewish theology of Christianity.”¹³ Even though Novak concedes that both Judaism and Christianity are still open for “proselytes” – that Jews can convert to Christianity and Christians to Judaism – the argument for changing religions has been challenged through the new awareness that both parties have come to. As he says: “Nevertheless, the renunciation of supersessionism by Christians

¹¹ Concerning references, see Kai Kjær-Hansen, “The Problem of the Two-Covenant Theology”, *Mishkan* 21 (1994): 56-57.

¹² See Jon D. Levenson: “Did God Forgive Adam? An Exercise in Comparative Midrash”, in Carl E. Braten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *Jews and Christians. Peoples of God*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 152.

¹³ David Novak, “From Supersessionism to Parallelism in Jewish-Christian Dialogue”, in Braten and Jenson (eds.) 2003, 97.

suggests that Christians have no more arguments for our conversion than we have arguments for their conversion. That opens the grounds for God to make the truly final demonstration of an end that will include us all, making our presently parallel lines converge in eternity.”¹⁴

It should be added that an understanding like this turns Jesus-believing Jews into losers.

Christianity is not for Jews but for non-Jews

In 2000 five professors of Jewish studies published the document *Dabru Emet* (Speak [the] Truth), with a reference to the words of Zechariah 8:16. By way of introduction it is said that “there has been a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations.” An increasing number of Church bodies “acknowledge God’s enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contribution of Judaism to world civilization and to Christian faith itself.” Since Christians have changed their view of Judaism in a positive direction, the time has come for Jews to come to terms with the misunderstanding that Christianity should be an erroneous religion for non-Jews.¹⁵ *Dabru Emet*’s first point, of a total of eight, has the heading: “Jews and Christians worship the same God”. Here it is said:

While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.

It is easy to ignore the sentence “Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews” in sheer joy at the words that Jewish theologians rejoice that “hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.”

What is implied by this sentence?

Up to around 1300 it was a dominant Jewish viewpoint that Christianity with its doctrines of the Trinity and Jesus’ divinity, etc., constituted idolatry for non-Jews. This viewpoint was revised so that Christian worship was no longer seen as idolatry for non-Jews.¹⁶ At the same time it was said that *for Jews* faith in Jesus was idolatry, and it is this understanding which seems to be underlying the somewhat polished sentence in *Dabru Emet*.

Aryeh Kaplan, a Jewish anti-missionary, has a very clear answer to the question “What can a Jew lose by embracing Christianity?” The answer is: “Everything.” What is meant by “everything”? Kaplan answers in the following way: A Jesus-believing Jew

- is “no longer a Jew”
- has committed “religious treason”: “Along with murder and incest, it is one of the three cardinal sins which may not be violated even under pain of death”
- is “eternally cast away from before G-d”.

Kaplan concludes from this: “A Jew must give his life rather than embrace Christianity.”¹⁷ It is noteworthy that in their efforts to win Jesus-believing Jews back to Judaism, Kaplan and other Jewish anti-missionaries argue against the generally accepted Jewish principle, namely that the

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵ Written by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel and Michael A. Signer. Online, <http://www.jcrelations.net>

¹⁶ See Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance. Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times.* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 114-28.

¹⁷ Aryeh Kaplan, *The Real Messiah? A Jewish Response to Missionaries* (New York: The National Conference of Synagogue Youth/Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1985), 21.

person who is born as a Jew cannot become a non-Jew, irrespective of what that person thinks or believes.¹⁸

Orthodox Jewish theologians use a different tone than Jewish anti-missionaries, but the subject matter is the same. The book *Jews and "Jewish Christianity"* is a case in point. The book is a modern refutation of Christianity but is purged of the anti-missionaries' stereotype accusations that, for example, it is deceptive of Jews who believe in Jesus to propagate their faith, or that a person who comes to faith in Jesus becomes a non-Jew. It appeals to Jews who have come in contact with messianic Jews and who feel attracted to their faith. But the authors are not in doubt that, in *Dabru Emet's* words, "Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews".

The concluding words in the book are:

Furthermore, every form of "Jewish Christianity" in existence today teaches Jesus as God and not only as the Messiah. Any Jew who embraces this belief commits idolatry. While he does not thereby cease to be a Jew, since a Jew always remains a Jew, he commits one of the gravest sins of which a Jew is capable. It is imperative that Jews know this.¹⁹

Dabru Emet and the current Jewish-Christian dialogue thus challenge the Christian church to rediscover its Jewish roots, which is positive and should be welcomed. On the other hand, Christians are called on to dissociate themselves from Jews who have come to faith in Jesus, something Christians most certainly cannot do. How should one be able to dissociate oneself from messianic Jews who like oneself confess faith in the crucified and risen Lord – and agree with those Jews who regard them as idolaters?

Then it is preferable to live with the *accusation* of supersessionism and vigorously *fight* anti-Semitism and religious triumphalism and in *loyalty* to the Lord of the church continue to point to the triumph of the gospel as it is found in the crucified and risen Jesus, and accept that both Judaism and Christianity make truth claims. The Jewish professor Jon D. Levenson has pointed this out in his severe criticism of *Dabru Emet*. He says, among other things: "For classical Judaism, there is no covenant between God and the Church."²⁰ And he continues:

Dabru Emet is not wrong to draw attention to common scriptures and "similar lessons." The problem is that it reduces what is not common to mere differences of opinion – as if the two traditions make no truth claims. This easygoing relativism profoundly impedes any sophisticated understanding of the two millennia of Jewish-Christian dialogue and dispute over the meaning of the Scripture. A more accurate statement would note that it is precisely the points of commonality that make disputation over the differences inevitable – at least within communities committed to the idea of religious truth and not simply to the theological equivalent of "I'm OK, you're OK."²¹

Theological and missiological absurdities

It is beyond all doubt that Jesus is portrayed as the Messiah and the Son of God for Jews in the New Testament. Whether or not he was it, and is it, is a question that can only be answered in the realm of faith.

¹⁸ Jacob Katz, 1962, 67-81.

¹⁹ David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and "Jewish Christianity"* (USA: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1978), 66. – Both authors have for many years been influential Jewish theologians in North America.

²⁰ Jon D. Levenson, "How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue", *Commentary*, December 2001, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

The claim that Jesus was a false or failed Jewish Messiah – and thereby really an irrelevance for Jews – is not to me a theological absurdity. Anyone has the right to assert it. That is also a question to be answered in the realm of faith.

But for me it is an absurdity to assert that this Jewish irrelevance, Jesus, who is without importance for Jews today, should nevertheless have decisive importance for us non-Jews! How is it possible to assert that the Jesus who met his own Jewish people with a demand to be heard and obeyed as they heard and obeyed God – indeed volunteered his own life for it – is without importance for the Jewish people, all the while it is said that his radical message is of decisive importance for all other people?

Jesus can only have this importance for non-Jews if he has it for Jews. It is a biblical absurdity to claim that the Jesus who allegedly is not the Messiah for Jews should nevertheless be the Christ for non-Jews when practically everything this Jesus did was done for Jews and practically everything he proclaimed was proclaimed for Jews.

Jesus is either nothing for all, or he is everything for all, for all that Jesus according to the New Testament means for non-Jews is *derived* from what he means for Jews.

And it is a missiological absurdity to give one's consent to the idea that belief in Jesus, whom non-Jews confess as Lord, should be idolatry for a Jew confessing the same belief.

Likewise it is an absurdity to reject "organized" mission Jewish people, as if truth claims can only be made in "unorganized" way; just imagine what would happen if such a principle was applied to world evangelization!

If it is maintained that Jews need the gospel for salvation, it has significant missiological implications, and world mission has been rendered a service! For when the Jewish people, which historically speaking is closest to God, needs the gospel for salvation, then it follows that all other peoples also do. Ourselves included. And vice versa: If Christian mission to the Jewish people is rejected, the road is open to a rejection of Christian mission to other peoples.

Already at the WCC's second assembly in Evanston, August 1954, significant contrasts were voiced concerning these questions. Swedish Göte Hedenqvist, then Director of the International Missionary Council's Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews, cannot hide his disappointment in a report from the meeting.

The experience from Evanston has made it clear that there are still many men of the Church who believe that the difference between Jewish and Christian faith is so insignificant (after all, it is only Christ who is the subject of discord) that we should instead devote ourselves to more important mission work.²²

To this can be added: Experience also shows that when mission to the people of Israel is disregarded, it often has a negative impact on Christian mission to other peoples. Now it is often said: the difference between Christian faith and other faiths is so insignificant – "after all, it is only Christ who is the subject of discord" – that we should refrain from evangelizing and instead focus on building a better world together.

People of different faiths should indeed go on building a better world together. Shared values concerning our lives as human beings charge us to do so. In such contexts it should be possible to work together without fear of being "missionized" by the other party. But this is a different, and important, matter and not the subject matter of this article.

²² Göte Hedenqvist, "Evanston og Israels Haab" ["Evanston and the Hope of Israel"], *Israelsmissionen* (Denmark) (1955): 56-57.

As the “intended outcomes” of Edinburgh 2010 the organizers first of all list *celebration* of the past and an affirmed *biblical call* to mission with particular focus on *evangelization*. This sounds promising. And this must naturally also include the Jewish people.

Must it not?

Translated from Danish by Birger Petterson