

JEWISH RESISTANCE TO THE GOSPEL  
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INTRODUCTION

An oft told joke within the Jewish community opens with four Russian Jews on a train. It seems that each one has converted to Christianity. The first says that he changed his religion to escape persecution. The second explains how he desperately wanted to attend the university, and since Jews were not admitted he became a Christian. The third tells how he fell madly in love with a beautiful gentile who would not have him unless he converted. The fourth says, "I became a Christian because I saw the light and was convinced that it was true," to which the other three disdainfully respond, "Tell that to your gentile friends."

That joke reflects a deep seated truth; that within the Jewish community it is deemed unthinkable that a well informed Jew could actually believe the gospel. In fact, Jewish resistance to the gospel is so deeply entrenched that one who pretends to be a Christian in order to escape censure or receive benefits is still less contemptible than one who actually claims to believe that Jesus is the son of God.

Celebrated Yiddish linguist Leo Rosten gives a definition for the Jewish people when he quotes the anonymous saying, "Jewish people are just like everyone else . . . only more so."<sup>1</sup> Jewish resistance to the gospel certainly fits this definition. Jews are certainly not the only people to resist the gospel, yet my Jewish people have the longest history of opposition to the gospel, as well as the best documented, most prolific and comprehensively strategic opposition to the Christian message of any people group.

In approaching the subject of Jewish resistance to the gospel, I intend to deal with foundational as well as strategic factors. By foundational factors, I mean the historical, spiritual and social issues that contribute to Jewish resistance. By strategic factors, I am referring to the well-defined efforts by Jewish community leaders to perpetuate resistance to the gospel. Finally, I would like to suggest appropriate Christian responses to Jewish resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosten, Leo. *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), p. xxxix.

## I. FOUNDATIONAL FACTORS

Many writers of material on “resistance and receptivity” focus on sociological factors. Many missiologists limit the role of theology: they allow the Bible to say why it is important to go into all the world and preach the gospel, but they rarely consult it concerning the manner in which to proceed. Missiology should be an interdisciplinary study between theology and the social sciences. The Bible not only defines our imperatives, it also provides the foundational understanding of receptivity. It is through that theological grid that we must interpret the data of the social sciences and develop a strategic response.

### A. SPIRITUAL

As I minister in churches on behalf of Jews for Jesus, many Christians ask me, “Why don’t more of your people believe in Jesus when he is presented so clearly in their own Bible. Can’t they just read Isaiah 53?” Yet a more biblically informed position recognizes that fallen human nature rebels against God. Rather than expressing surprise at those who reject the gospel, we, like the disciples might well exclaim, “Who then *can* be saved?” (Matthew 19:25b, emphasis supplied) The Bible teaches us that the most pressing reasons to resistance the gospel are spiritual. This is true for Jews and gentiles alike. Humanity’s sinful condition is what made the gospel necessary, and it is also the condition that causes people to resist the gospel.

Sin is not merely our outward failure to resist one temptation or another. It is the ingrained reality of every human soul. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, all of humanity has been shaking its fist at the heavens, declaring to God, “We will not have you rule over us.” The rabbis reject the doctrine of total depravity, citing it as one of the differences between Jewish and Christian theology, Yet it is a Jewish doctrine from the standpoint that the sinfulness of the human condition is clearly taught in the Jewish Scriptures:

“The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any “who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike... perverse; there is no one who does good, no not one.” (Psalm 14:2-3) “the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse - who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

It should come as no surprise that any people, including the Jews, resist the gospel. Jesus Himself experienced in his own body the full force of rejection by his own people. He did not cry out in amazement, “What’s wrong with you people? Don’t you know who I am? Can’t you just read Isaiah 53?” As He wept over Jerusalem, He cried out, “Oh, Jerusalem who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her.” He did not see His own rejection as an isolated event in the history of Israel, but as the culmination of a long history of resistance and rejection of the messengers of God. The Apostle Paul understood this when he declared that “the man without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and, he cannot understand

them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1st Corinthians 2:14). There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles when it comes to the sinfulness of the human heart, which is the first and primary reason for Gospel resistance.

We must also recognize the place of satanic deception in Gospel resistance. The Apostle John declared, “We know that we are of God and the whole world is in the power of the evil one.” (1st John 5:19) The Apostle Paul referred to Satan’s role in deceiving individuals with regard to the Gospel when he said, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.” (2 Cor. 4:4)

All too often, we give mere lip service to this spiritual reality. We fail to include a proper awareness of spiritual power in our evangelistic strategy. I believe that the Jewish people are the particular target of satanic attack. Ever since Abram left Ur of the Chaldees, his descendants, the Jews, have been a people of destiny. And that destiny has been wrapped up with the supernatural. God elected to convey His truth to the world through the Jews. “Salvation is of the Jews.” (John 4:22) No wonder the enemy of God has, throughout history, attempted to destroy the Jewish people.

The very integrity of God, the trustworthiness of the Bible, and the future promises concerning world redemption will be demonstrated, not only through the survival of the Jewish people but through their salvation in Christ. (Romans 11:12 & 15) That is why, “With every fiber of his depraved sinister being, Satan despises the Jews. He hates them with a perfect hatred. Their total destruction is his goal. He is the author of the spirit of anti-Semitism. There is no other way to explain the venomous hostility that has been directed against the Jews by so many people and so many countries for so many years.”<sup>2</sup> As we consider the spiritual factors of Jewish resistance to the gospel, we cannot afford to underestimate the special attention the adversary pays to God’s ancient people. It takes the power of the Holy Spirit to come against the power of the unholy spirit.

There is a third spiritual factor that we must confess is a mystery, though the Scriptures speak openly of it. There exists a special blindness, unique to the Jewish people. Paul, himself, calls it a mystery when he says, “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the gentiles have come in.” (Romans 11:25) The veil is a scriptural metaphor for this hardening: “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”

This hardening of the Jews remains a mystery, but must be factored into our understanding of Jewish resistance to the gospel. Some missiologists and pastors

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Michael. *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood*. Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1992, p. 155.

have concluded that Jewish evangelism is not a primary concern at this time. One well known pastor said, "I don't have a great burden for Jewish evangelism. I believe that God will evangelize them when He is ready. In the meantime, God has poured out His grace, His spirit upon the gentiles and thus I like to fish where the fish are biting. I really feel that for the most part [Jewish evangelism] is a waste of church finances that can be better used to evangelize the gentiles at this time."<sup>3</sup>

In light of this Divine hardening, perhaps we should apply to Jewish evangelism, esteemed missiologist Donald McGavran's suggestion to, "hold lightly" the work in resistant fields.<sup>4</sup> But there is a danger of misconstruing what the Scriptures teach regarding Jews and Jewish evangelism. Paul describes the hardening as partial and temporary. Yes, there is an eschatological element to consider with respect to the receptivity of the Jewish people as a whole, but meanwhile, Paul affirms that the veil can be lifted from individuals when "they turn to the Lord." Paul did not "hold lightly" to Jewish evangelism. Despite his own calling to the gentiles and despite his several pronouncements that, "from now on I will go to the gentiles" (Acts 18:6), Paul maintained a fundamental commitment to the primacy of Jewish evangelism (Romans 1:16).

Paul recognized that God had preserved a remnant according to the election of grace. (Romans 11:5) This understanding of the continuing remnant must shape our thinking with regard to Jewish evangelism, especially in the face of Jewish resistance to the gospel. If our goal were to see the majority of Jews accept Christ now, then I would agree with Chuck Smith that the church had better concentrate on evangelizing gentiles. But we must remember that humanity in general will not accept the gospel en masse, (small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Matthew 7:14) Unless we apply this biblical understanding to our theories of gospel resistance, we will inevitably wring our hands and despair of the task. Instead, we can rejoice with the angels that God is indeed saving some. We certainly see this in Jewish evangelism today. Though the level of official resistance is greater than ever and though the strategies to prevent a gospel witness among the Jewish people abound, we are still seeing Jewish people receive the gospel. In fact, more Jews today coming to faith in Christ than at any time since perhaps the first century when those first Jews for Jesus, Peter, James and John were preaching the gospel.

Our understanding of Jewish resistance to the gospel requires an awareness of spiritual factors but there are other factors to consider.

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<sup>3</sup> From a transcription of a radio message by Chuck Smith (Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa CA) on KFAQ, December 30, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> "Correct policy is to occupy field of low receptivity lightly....Resistant lands should be held lightly." McGavran, Donald A. *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 262.

## B. HISTORICAL

Jewish history is replete with persecution in the name of Christ. It has been said that the sad saga of Jewish-Christian relations could be written in blood and punctuated with violence. It is not the purpose of this paper to catalog this history but certainly a few examples are in order. Czar Nicholas I ordered conscription in the Russian army: 25 years for all boys, unless they happened to be Jews. Jews were to serve for 31 years for all Jews. Those extra six years were designed to convert Jewish boys to Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup> One account of Czar Nicholas I tells how a group of Jewish children were brought to the Volga River to be baptized--and at the command of Nicholas, all were plunged under, never to come back up."<sup>6</sup>

The Crusades, although not aimed specifically at Jews, provide another poignant example of persecution in the name of Christ. The Crusaders, upon reaching the city of Jerusalem, found that the Moslem invaders had passed on through and all that was left were a defenseless group of Orthodox Jews. They rounded up those Jews into the great synagogue and then burned it to the ground. As the people inside perished, those outside marched round and round with their crosses, singing "Christ We Adore Thee."<sup>7</sup>

These and other shocking historical facts appear as a mere blip on the screen of most people's understanding of history. Yet, for Jewish people, these facts are huge on the horizon of Jewish-Christian relations. These and so many other historical facts that show Jews suffering at the hand of Christians are the cornerstone upon which Jewish historical identity is based.

Jewish people do not distinguish between those who call themselves Christians and those who actually practice the Christian faith. Most Jews have concluded that Jewish survival is based upon their own historic resistance to the Christian flood. Christian mission is seen as synonymous with persecution and anti-Semitism. From most Jewish people's understanding, there are two types of people . . . the Jews and the Christians. "Christian" has become synonymous with non-Jews who have persecuted Jewish people throughout the ages.

Therefore, Willie Mays, Billy Graham, Adolph Hitler, and the Pope all fall into the same category. They are Christians.

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<sup>5</sup> Sachar, Howard Morley. *The Course of Modern Jewish History , Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Delta, 1977), pp. 86-87.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Sachar's wording suggests that this may have been a suicide chosen in preference to conversion.

<sup>7</sup> Rausch, David, *A Legacy of Hatred: Why Christians Must Not Forget the Holocaust* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 27. Rausch cites Hans Eberhard Mayer, *The Crusades* (tr. John Gillingham; New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 99-100).

## C. SOCIAL

The third foundational factor in Jewish resistance to the gospel is social. Issues of individual and group identity have a profound bearing on Jewish resistance to the gospel. This is where the more recent theories of resistance and receptivity are most helpful. Jewish people are rooted and grounded in the biblical narrative, yet the historical split between synagogue and church has led to a highly developed social identity within the Jewish community. The leaders of this community have designed this identity to provide plenty of cultural distance between the Christian church and the Jewish community.

In speaking of Japanese resistance to the gospel message, Peter Lundell introduces the concept of "Nihonkyo." The concept actually speaks to one's ultimate loyalty. That loyalty is not to a particular belief or even to a nation, "but rather to one's identity and obligations as a Japanese person."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, there is an expectation of loyalty on the part of individual Jews despite their religious convictions. Part of that loyalty is defined as not believing in Jesus.

Jewishness is defined broadly within the Jewish community. It is a fact of birth, a product of social development, education and identification, and lastly, a matter of religious affiliation. Yet when it comes to the specifics of Jewish identity, even the leaders of the community disagree. In fact, the question of who is a Jew is one of the most hotly contested issues in the State of Israel today. Israel is a largely secularized state, but the religious minority has a very prominent voice.

The majority of Jews in Israel and elsewhere minimize the religious aspect of identity. That is Jewish identity broadly defined. But there is a more narrow definition of Jewish identity that is widely accepted, a definition that gives the appearance of religious or spiritual content. That definition amounts to identity by negation. "We are Jews because we don't believe in Jesus." "We are Jews because we celebrate Passover, *not* Easter." "We are Jews because we celebrate Hanukkah, *not* Christmas."

Because Jewish identity comes in the form of a negation which precludes faith in Christ, resistance to the gospel is a given. It is an indoctrination that comes with mother's milk. Montgomery rightly points out that, "receptivity toward an outside religion will be low if adherence to it is regarded as bringing about a sense of loss of a valued aspect of social identity, such as ethnic or national identity and perhaps a religious identity closely associated with them.... Becoming attached to a

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<sup>8</sup> Lundell, Peter. "Behind Japan's Resistant Web: Understanding the Problem of *Nihonkyo*" *Missiology: An International Review* 23:4 (October 1995), p. 409.

religion, coming from the outside, is perceived as rejecting one's own ethnic group or cultural heritage."<sup>9</sup>

Christians need to know that Jewish people do not see Jewish believers in Jesus as those who have followed their convictions. They see Jewish believers in Jesus as traitors to themselves, their family, their people . . . they see them as traitors to their very survival. And survival is paramount in the Jewish community.

The facts of Jewish history have combined with the forces of secularization to transform Judaism into a religion of survival. Preservation of Jewish identity has become the highest and the only non-negotiable religious ideal. Couple that fact with the conviction that Jews cannot believe in Jesus and remain Jewish, and the syllogism leads to the highest possible form of gospel resistance in the social realm.

Robert Priest rightly points out, "people refuse to convert because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from one culture--their own, which they are familiar with, successful in terms of, and believe is good--to the missionary's national culture--which is alien and may even seem immoral. The resistance . . . may have little to do with resistance to the Holy Spirit and rejection of Christ, and a great deal to do with allegiance to one's own culture and society in the face of an invitation to a disloyal conversion to an alien culture."<sup>10</sup>

For Jews, the invitation to Christ appears to come, not from merely an alien culture, but from a culture that is perceived as hostile. Moreover, Jewish identity and faith in Jesus are considered mutually exclusive by the Jewish establishment. That means that for a Jew to accept Christ he or she must violate that part of his or her conscience that has always accepted the equation that becoming a Christian equals betraying the Jewish people.

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<sup>9</sup> Montgomery, Robert L. "Receptivity to an Outside Religion: Light from Interaction between Sociology and Missiology." *Missiology: An International Review* 14:3 (July 1986), p. 292.

<sup>10</sup> Priest, Robert J. "Missionary Elencics: Conscience and Culture." *Missiology: An International Review* 22:3 (July 1994), p. 304.

## II. STRATEGIC FACTORS

Jewish community leaders recount with great passion the historical and social factors that help maintain the collective conscience--and the commitment to identity by negation as described above. This leads to our second set of factors in Jewish resistance to the gospel: strategic factors. These factors are highly developed, well organized and intended to produce a negative commitment to the person of Christ.

### A. THEOLOGY

Many Christians assume that Judaism today is much like it was in the time of Jesus, or that Christianity and Judaism are alike except for faith in Jesus. This is simply untrue. Today's rabbis teach a Judaism vastly different from that of Jesus' day. Contemporary Judaism is thoroughly polemical in its construct--and it was not constructed in a vacuum. It developed within the context of a particular challenge: that of an emerging sect of Jews whose hearts were committed to Jesus.

With the destruction of the 2nd Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, the success of the Jewish Christian sect in winning converts grew at what was, for the rabbinical authorities, an alarming rate. Some scholars have estimated that by the turn of the 1st century, as many as one third of the Jews in Palestine had professed faith in Christ. Jewish authorities felt they had to do something to staunch the flow of Jews who were coming to Christ. Their efforts to deal with this have been well-documented by Jacob Jocz, James Parks and others.<sup>11</sup> Shifts in theology have helped to keep the Jewish religion separate from Christianity. The differences in theology are real enough, but they are rendered even more intense by false impressions that many Jewish people have of Christian beliefs and or practices. Following are three examples of such theological shifts in Judaism, with attendant misunderstandings that many Jews have regarding Christian theology.

Sin: Rabbis have embraced an ethical dualism, and have established the belief that each soul is endowed with a good inclination (*yetzer ha tov*) and a bad inclination (*yetzer ha ra*). Each person is responsible to follow the good inclination and reject the bad. While this emphasis on responsibility and the continual choice to do good or evil parallels Christianity to some extent, the Jewish religion veers away in its teaching that human beings are born morally neutral. In contrast to the doctrine of original sin, Judaism recognizes no human condition which would prevent people from doing good and rejecting evil. Part of the morning liturgy

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<sup>11</sup> Jocz, Jakob. *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: The Relationship between Church and Synagogue*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979; © 1949), esp. ch. 5, "Primitive Hebrew Christianity." Also Parkes, James. *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of anti-Semitism* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), esp. ch. 2, "The Clash with Christianity" and ch. 3, "The Parting of the Ways."



recited each day from the Jewish prayer book illustrates this: "O my God, the soul Thou gavest me is pure; Thou didst create it, Thou didst form it, Thou didst breathe it into me. Thou preservest it within me, and Thou wilt take it from me, but wilt restore unto me hereafter."<sup>12</sup> Sin is seen as individual acts, not a natural condition. While most Jews will admit that they have made mistakes, few would identify themselves as sinners. Sinners are those who have stolen, murdered, sold drugs, etc.

Further, most Jewish people do not understand what Christians mean by original sin. For many, it comes down to another "we" and "they" distinction. We (meaning the Jewish people) believe that people are good, created in God's image, as the Scriptures teach. They (meaning the Christians) have little respect for humanity; they teach that all people are evil from birth and punished for something that others did. The concepts that sin has marred humanity's ability to reflect God's image, and that God treasures humanity so much that He came to suffer and die for our redemption are alien to most Jewish people.

Salvation: The Exodus from Egypt, or deliverance from national calamity, is the paradigm of Salvation in the Old Testament. Add to that the fact that Jewish theologians do not believe that people are born separated from God and it is not surprising that they don't see a need for personal salvation. Salvation is viewed as a corporate, not personal, concern. In addition, there is the concept of *tikkun olam*, whereby the Jewish people see themselves in partnership with God to create a better world. Many Jews do not believe in an afterlife, or assume that if there is one, they will naturally have a place in heaven. Christianity is viewed by many as a religion that is only concerned with what happens to people after they die.

Savior: Judaism has been forced to evolve since the destruction of the second Temple. Prayer, repentance and good deeds have been substituted for the Temple sacrifices. Whereas Judaism was once a redemptive religion, it is now a moralistic religion. Rabbis rarely speak of atonement for sin, or how to have a relationship with God. Instead the concerns are "horizontal"-- how to treat one another and how to live as a good Jew. The idea that Israel needs a savior to die for their sins is no longer part of mainstream Jewish thinking. Therefore, the response to the gospel might sound something like this: "Judaism teaches every man dies for his own sins. Even if there was to be a savior, we would not worship him--that is idolatry." A common misunderstanding among Jews is that Christians believe a human being became God, rather than vice versa.

These are just a few examples of many ideas which developed in opposition to Christian teaching and ultimately Old Testament doctrine as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Hertz, Joseph H. *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, revised edition (New York: Bloch, 1961), p. 19.

## B. EDUCATION

Many Jewish leaders view education as the answer to most ills within the Jewish community. And since Jewish “defection” to Jesus is viewed as an “ill” many suppose that a defective Jewish education is to blame. The answer to this apparent defect is more rigorous education, which actually amounts to indoctrination. That indoctrination takes two forms. First, the development and study of literature designed to refute the New Testament. Second the use of Jewish identity and history to maintain a we/they mentality.

While local rabbis are entrusted with the responsibility to provide such education, their efforts are bolstered by national and international organizations. Groups like the Jewish Community Relations Council Task Force on Missionaries and Cults, Jews For Judaism and a host of other groups exist solely for the purpose of preventing the gospel message from penetrating the Jewish community. While these organizations have limited personnel actively involved in “anti-missionary work” they provide resources for rabbis, parents and other educators to refute Christian evangelistic efforts.

This kind of organized opposition is not a recent phenomenon. The history of Jewish polemics and refutation literature is as old as the Talmud itself. One refutation document which is still in use is a 16th century document entitled “Faith Strengthened,” by Isaac Troki.<sup>13</sup> Other recent attempts to discredit the gospel, such as Gerald Sigal’s little book, *You take Jesus, I’ll take God*,<sup>14</sup> are more intemperate. A tape series called, “Let’s get Biblical”<sup>15</sup> by Rabbi Tovia Singer has grabbed the attention of many evangelicals simply because it has been so widely distributed.

In evaluating this disputation literature, it is important to realize that its purpose is not to engage Christian scholars in debate, or to persuade them to abandon Christianity. Refutation literature is a purely defensive measure, designed to discourage Jewish people from considering the claims of Christ. In some cases, authors make honest attempts to weigh evidence and present a credible argument against the gospel. More often than not, this material is characterized by such logical fallacies as straw men, question begging and misrepresentation of the facts.

The first line of attack is to contradict the New Testament claims that Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, Matthew’s Gospel quotes Isaiah 7:14, concerning the virgin birth. This is refuted as a mis-translation of the Hebrew word *almah* which means “young woman,” not virgin. The predicted child is said to be the son of the prophet Isaiah.

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<sup>13</sup> New York: Ktav, 1970.

<sup>14</sup> Subtitled, “How to Refute Christian Missionaries.” Los Angeles: Hanorah Press, 1980.

<sup>15</sup> Monsey, NY: Outreach Judaism, 1995.

Attempts to identify Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 are rejected on the basis that they do not depict a person at all, but rather the nation of Israel. Since Israel is elsewhere identified as the servant, it is presumed that Isaiah is again speaking of Israel in Isaiah 53.

A second attack on the New Testament borrows heavily from the form criticism of liberal Protestantism. These presume late dates for the authorship of the gospels, they make much of “contradictions” in the Gospel narratives and they seek to demonstrate the roots of pagan mythology in Christian theology. While many Jewish leaders echo these critics, they don’t seem to realize that the very approach they borrow to attack the veracity of the New Testament can be applied to undermine the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures as well.

A further aspect of the indoctrination of gospel resistance is the notion that Jewish identity--by definition and based on historical perspective--precludes Jesus as an option for Jews. Some have accused Jewish leaders of fostering a “victim mentality” in the Jewish community. This mentality allows the strategic use of shame to prevent Jewish people from considering ideas which they perceive as the special property of those who have persecuted them.

The term “victim mentality” is problematical because to some, it implies that the victimization is purely imagined, and this has certainly not been the case for Jewish people. In fact, Jewish people have suffered enormously at the hands of so called Christians. Nevertheless, little effort is made in the Jewish community to present other relevant facts. Instead there has been a systematic spin on history to create the widest chasm possible between Jews and Christians. Martin Luther illustrates the point. This luminary of the reformation, scholar, prolific author, is known to Jews only as the author of the book, “Concerning the Jews and their Lies.”<sup>16</sup> This vitriolic polemic against the Jews is terrible indeed. But it is not the sum of Luther’s life and ministry. Nor is it embraced by Christians today. Yet it is deemed all that is necessary or relevant for a Jewish understanding of Luther. And for many, it is regarded as proof that Christians and Christianity are hateful.

Another interesting distortion of history in Jewish education is the notion that the Inquisition was launched by Catholics seeking to persecute Jews. In reality, the Inquisition was a case of Christians persecuting other Christians.

The Holocaust has dominated the Jewish perspective of history to the point where some within the Jewish community are beginning to call for balance.<sup>17</sup> Yet the

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<sup>16</sup> Dated to 1543. For a standard edition, see Sherman, Franklin, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 47 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 121-306.

<sup>17</sup> “There is almost nothing more sacred or more sensitive for Jews living in the generation after the Holocaust than the memory of the six million martyrs of the Nazi genocide. The poignant question, ‘Where was God?’, rather than being a theological provocation, is more likely a reflection of the abiding pain that lingers from the staggering losses. After all, what could

horrors of the Holocaust are compounded by the inference--and often outright accusation--that Hitler's diabolical plan was the logical conclusion of accepted Christian theology. Scant attention is paid to those valiant Christians who resisted the Nazis. Well developed and heavily funded Holocaust studies that are an integral part of Jewish education neglect names like Bonhoeffer and Ten Boom, and the Barman declaration is virtually unheard of.

This imbalanced view of history is designed to place any consideration of Christianity on a par with the highest form of disloyalty and betrayal of the Jewish people. Honest intellectual inquiry about Christianity is impossible from within the Jewish community, since the very question brings with it the specter of the highest form of community censure.

Further, anti-Jewish attitudes of the past are often imputed to present day Christians. The idea that Christians hope to destroy the Jewish people by converting them to Christianity is common. Many Christians are so horrified to learn this that they are too intimidated to tell Jewish friends about Jesus. Thus distorted education regarding Christians and Christianity has its desired effect. Jewish people learn prejudices regarding Christianity, and many Christians, wishing to prove those prejudices untrue, are unwilling to say anything that might be taken amiss by Jewish friends or acquaintances.

It is difficult to level an accusation of prejudice at the Jewish people, who have been the objects of so much prejudice. Nevertheless, the prejudice people experience does not necessarily keep them from prejudging others. In fact, prejudice tends to be a viscous cycle, as people form judgments and poorly informed opinions of those whom they feel have judged them.

### C. CREATING DISTANCE

This leads to the third strategic response within the Jewish community: the estrangement of vocal Christians--and particularly of Jews who believe in Jesus--from the Jewish community. Jews who profess faith in Christ often meet with tremendous outrage and hostility from other Jews. Jewish community leaders do everything possible to encourage this outrage.

In the past Jews who professed faith in Christ were publicly excommunicated. Families held funerals for the son or daughter who had "gone astray" and they became social outcasts. With the secularization of the Jewish community, this occurs

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possibly be more important than sanctifying the memory of those who died--except ensuring a future for those who wish to live as Jews? There is great justification for the continuing obsession with the Holocaust... But obsession with the Holocaust is exacting a great price. It is killing America's Jews. An obsession with victimization leaves no room for the joy of the faith and is driving many away." (Buchwald, Ephraim, "The Holocaust Is Killing America's Jews," The Los Angeles Times, April 1992.)

infrequently. Other methods of censure have been developed. Jewish Christians are labeled *meshummad* which means a destroyer. The most pervasive response is for Jewish leaders to simply say to the believer in Christ, "You are no longer Jewish." Yet the weight of Jewish literature teaches that a person born Jewish can never become a non Jew. It is possible to be a bad Jew, but no Jew can become a non-Jew.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the public stance of Jewish leaders is that a Jew who believes in Jesus no longer is a part of the Jewish community.<sup>19</sup>

By ruling of the Israeli Supreme Court, December 25th, 1989 any Jew who professes faith in Jesus Christ is no longer eligible for Israeli citizenship as a Jew under the Law of Return. Jewish Christians are refused access to any formal Jewish community assistance and they are denied the right to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Further, efforts to create as much cultural distance as possible between the Jewish and Christian communities are made by blurring the lines between social, political and theological differences between the two. Jewish people tend to be more liberal than most Christians when it comes to politics and social mores. Jewish leaders make the most of those differences to present Christianity in as unappealing and alien light as possible to Jewish people. Unfortunately, many Christians contribute to this impression without realizing that using religious clout to tout a particular party line

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<sup>18</sup> For example, in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a, we read: "R. Abba b. Zabda said: Even though (the people) have sinned, they are still (called) 'Israel.'" The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (s.v. "Jew", 10:24) remarks that, "Throughout the ages the rabbinical authorities have been concerned with the problem of a person who is technically a Jew but subscribes to another religion....the majority of decisors have always felt that such a person must halakhically be considered a Jew." See further Robinson, Richard, "Who Was a Jew?", pp. 33-40 in *Jewish Identity and Faith in Jesus*, ed. Kai Kjør-Hansen (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996). Even counter-missionaries David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod assert that a Jewish believer in Jesus commits idolatry but "does not thereby cease to be a Jew, since a Jew always remains a Jew," albeit a sinful one (*Jews and "Jewish Christians"* [New York: Ktav, 1978], p. 66).

<sup>19</sup> For example, consider these quotes:

"No Jewish organization, religious or secular, acknowledges the Jewishness of Messianic Jews. Furthermore, we find them to be abhorrent.... Why should these people have to masquerade as Jews when their spiritual life is based upon belief in Jesus as their Christ?" (Rabbi Jonathan Miller, Temple Emanu-El, letter to the editor, *The Birmingham News*, April 1, 1997).

"So for a Jew to say, 'I believe in the Christian Messiah,' is to be a Christian. That's the equation. Any Jew who says, 'I believe in the Christian Messiah, and I am still a Jew,' is lying to themselves--and it is lying to every other Christian." (Rabbi Robert B. Lennick, Greenwich Reform Synagogue, comment made at the Fifteenth National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations, October 27-30, 1996. Source: Southern Baptist Conference press release, October 31, 1996, "Phil Roberts Defends SBC Stance in Christian-Jewish Panel Session," by Keith Hinson.

has convinced many Jews that a vote for Jesus is a vote for a political party they may not be inclined to endorse.

#### D. DIALOGUE

A further strategy to protect Jewish resistance to the gospel is dialogue. When Jewish leaders engage evangelical Christians in a dialogue, more often than not it is an attempt on the part of the Jewish community leaders to undermine the evangelical commitment to a forthright gospel proclamation. The ostensible goal of dialogue is understanding, but what Jews want Christians to understand is that Jews don't need Jesus. The dialogues become one sided propaganda machines.

Many evangelical institutions, theologians and pastors have participated in these dialogues with the express hope of building bridges of understanding between the two faith communities. But in order to do so, they must often agree to ground rules that preclude honest discussion of pertinent theological issues. Inevitably the Jewish leaders tell how destructive evangelistic efforts are, how the notion that Jews need Jesus is patronizing, and how the idea that there are Jews who do believe in Jesus is false.

Many dialogues are thinly veiled attempts to secure from evangelical participants statements deploring, "deceptive practices" in evangelistic endeavors. Later on, these statements will be trumpeted as "evidence" that "mainstream evangelicals" are disavowing Messianic groups. So there is an effort to drive a wedge between evangelical leaders and Jewish evangelistic enterprise. What evangelical wouldn't want to deplore deception of any kind? Yet, the specifics deceptive practices are not clearly defined in these discussions. What Christian participants would discover were they to push the point, is that the very existence of Jews who believe in Jesus is considered deceptive, not on the basis of what they do, but because the Jewish community has decided that Jews cannot believe in Jesus. Anyone who dares to contradict this decision will be labeled deceptive. Sadly, many Christians have taken their Jewish friend's view of Jewish Christian groups without checking with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ to see if they have any basis in truth.

Friendships often serve as leverage in dealing with the perceived threat of Jewish evangelism. For example, a pastor will establish a friendship with the local rabbi. He grows to respect the rabbi, as well he might . . . and he enjoys having the rabbi's respect in return. As soon as this pastor invites a Jewish ministry into his church he receives a call from the rabbi. "I thought we were friends," the rabbi might begin. "Perhaps you don't realize that having a group like this one is offensive to our community and will end up destroying the relationship you and I are trying to build." I don't know how many times Jewish missionaries have heard, "We believe in what you are doing but we can't have you speak in our church because we don't want to jeopardize the good relationships we are building with our Jewish neighbors." True dialogue can be worthwhile, but it will

never substitute for evangelism. More often than not, it runs counter to the evangelistic mandate.

What is most telling is the resolute commitment Jewish community leaders have to excluding Jewish Christians from the dialogue. When evangelical leaders agree to exclude Jewish Christians from the discussions, they don't realize that the very integrity of dialogue is violated in the process.<sup>20</sup> One theological institution which sponsored such a dialogue agreed to the demand that a Jewish Christian who was one of their own faculty members be barred from participating in the dialogue. How sad that in an attempt to build trust between believers in Jesus and non-believers, many Christians have spurned their own brothers and sisters and have sown mistrust between believers, Jews and Gentiles within the church.

### III. CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

Church history is littered with examples of wrong responses to Jews and Jewish resistance to the gospel. These wrong responses have evolved from hostility and even violence to indifference . . . and finally to cozy compromise. There have always been some right responses to the Jewish community, but those responses are becoming all too rare. It is time for evangelicals to reconsider their relationship to the Jewish community in light of Christ's mandate from (Mt. 28)

The growing presence of the remnant--that is, Jewish believers within the body of Christ--should serve to encourage evangelicals that Jewish people can be won to Christ. These Jewish believers can also be a tremendous resource to the larger body of Christ, helping Christian brothers and sisters understand how Jewish objections to the gospel can be overcome. Evangelical churches need to utilize the knowledge and experience of such Jewish believers. Christians who respond to the Jewish community without any regard to their own Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ are repeating the mistake some foreign missions have made in failing to consult and work through indigenous Christian leaders overseas.

Much of the "cozy compromise" that evangelicals have made with the Jewish community is a direct result of what is known as dialogue. Ideally, dialogue might afford evangelical leaders an opportunity to interact and bear testimony to Jewish

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<sup>20</sup> "Gerald Anderson, a United Methodist official with the Overseas Ministries Study Center, criticized the workshop's leadership for refusing to include a Messianic Jew on the panel....I find an attitude toward Messianic Jews--or Hebrew Christians--that smacks of contempt, intolerance, lack of respect and theological denial." From the Southern Baptist Conference press release, October 31, 1996, "Phil Roberts Defends SBC Stance in Christian-Jewish Panel Session," by Keith Hinson, concerning events at the Fifteenth National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations, October 27-30, 1996.

community leaders.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, it can just as easily be used to shame Christians into silence. Christian leaders must be willing to risk the displeasure of Jewish community leaders if there is to be honest interaction with no strings attached. Jews who believe in Jesus have traditionally been barred from the dialogue table, and evangelical leaders have been all too quick to comply. They need to question why they, as Gentiles are to be accepted representatives of the Christian faith, while Jews who believe the same thing are to be excluded. Christian leaders need to stand firm and insist that a fair dialogue will include local Jewish believers in Jesus, providing there are such believers in the area.

Likewise, if a rabbi tells a minister that he stands to lose the respect and friendship of the Jewish community by welcoming a Jewish believer in Jesus to the pulpit, that minister needs to question the basis of the supposed respect and friendship. Ignoring, avoiding or even politely refusing to hear from Jewish believers in Jesus for the sake of maintaining friendship with unbelievers is wrong. It is contrary to Scripture, hurtful to the body of Christ and ultimately, hurtful to the Jewish people who might have come to hear the gospel. Ministers who separate themselves from Jewish Christians and who eschew opportunities to tell Jewish people about Jesus out of respect and friendship for rabbis must ask themselves, how good a friend they are to the cause of Christ. He sacrificed all so that Jews and Gentiles could be saved. What sacrifices are ministers of His gospel willing to make?

Christians can rightly respond to Jewish resistance by reaching out and learning what they can from Jews who have embraced the gospel. Another right response to Jewish resistance to the gospel is simply to publicly acknowledge the existence of those Jewish believers. Literature, even Christian literature, traditionally presents Jews as non-Christians. If Christian journals, magazines, even Sunday School lessons, would recognize the presence of a Jewish remnant within the church, it would be an important step toward undermining the myth that Jews don't believe in Jesus.

Another way to acknowledge the existence of Jewish believers is to take a positive stance toward Messianic congregations. These local congregations provide Jewish oriented institutions and houses of worship where Christ is central, but culture and community remain distinctly Jewish. Christians should be supportive of this movement whenever possible. Some questions remain to be answered and not all Messianic congregations are alike, but the ideal is worth striving for.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance Tanenbaum, Marc H., Marvin R. Wilson, A. James Rudin, eds., *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation on Scripture, Theology, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); Rudin, A. James and Marvin R. Wilson, eds., Wilson, Marvin R., ed. *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans; Austin, Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> One of the earliest publications on messianic congregations was Goble, Phillip E., *Everything You Need to Grow a Messianic Synagogue* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974). See also Schiffman, Michael, *Return of the Remnant: The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore, MD: Lederer Publications, 1992), originally entitled *Return from Exile: The Re-Emergence of the Messianic Congregational Movement*. The movement is young and on questions of ecclesiology and



majority of Jewish believers in Jesus worship in mainline evangelical denominations. Yet Messianic congregations do seem to meet a need for Jewish believers, particularly as they are discovering their new identity in Christ.

From a theological perspective, certain trends within the evangelical community have undermined the case for the Messiahship of Jesus. Old Testament scholars need to reexamine their approach to the prophetic passages as well as to those passages that speak of God's covenants with Israel. Too many Christians have accepted the notion that these covenants could somehow affect atonement for sin and personal salvation for Jewish people when in fact God's irrevocable promises had to do with land, the perpetuation of a people, and the reign of David's seed. To use the covenants which actually predict the messiah Jesus to say that Jews need not believe in Him is ironic indeed. The church needs to develop new scholarship that takes into account the Jewish need for Christ, and deals with objections to His Messiahship head on.<sup>23</sup>

On a historical and sociological level, it is important for Christians to understand and to deal honestly with the horrors of anti-Semitism. Yet there must be a balanced approach to this history. The Scriptures teach, "No longer will it be said the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." Christians do not bear responsibility for past horrors of anti-Semitism any more than Jews today bear responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ. Christian leaders must not be ashamed of sins they did not commit. When they are confronted with Jewish prejudices toward the gospel, they must be willing to refute those ideas rather than politely accepting them as a difference of opinion. A loving and gracious offer of friendship should be extended with integrity. This means a willingness to speak of Christ when it is convenient and when it is not convenient, as well as a commitment to train leaders and laymen alike in the task of sensitively bringing the message of the gospel to Jewish people they encounter.

The church has been most comfortable with the mission enterprises that allow us to meet a need in addition to the need for salvation. For example, we go to India and build a clinic or hospital which we staff with medical missionaries and nurses. As we tend to the physical needs of the people we seek to tell them about the Great Physician who can heal the sickness of the soul. Or maybe we will send our agricultural specialists to Africa where subsistence farming and drought have wreaked havoc on the population. As we teach them to provide through modern agricultural techniques we hope to sow the precious seed of the gospel. These are fine avenues to travel so long as they lead to the gospel proclamation, which they very often do. But what if these avenues are not available?

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practice a wide variety of viewpoints can be found.

<sup>23</sup> The last book-length compendium to respond in a fairly comprehensive way to Jewish objections to the gospel was Williams, A. Lukyn, *A Manual of Christian Evidences for Jewish People* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919)--nearly 80 years ago! However, the various Jewish missions and umbrella agencies such as the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism have produced numerous articles and smaller studies of Christian apologetics for Jewish people.

What does the church have to offer the Jews? Many Christians seek medical help from Jewish physicians. Jewish people don't need our medical expertise. Christians who have visited Israel and have seen the way the Jewish people have made the Negev to bloom know that Jews don't need our agricultural help, either. So what can the church bring to the Jewish people? The simple, unadorned, life-changing gospel message.

This puts Jewish evangelism on the cutting edge of missions. In our seeker sensitive culture we prefer to offer people those things for which they immediately recognize their need. We do not like to risk rejection, and we particularly don't like to present the gospel in the context of dispute. But that is exactly the context within which Jewish evangelism will by definition take place. The best possible Christian response to Jewish resistance to the gospel is loving confrontation that is willing to risk offense, willing to be vulnerable, willing to give a gentle yet firm answer for the hope that is within us.

Finally, the power of prayer works miracles in overcoming Jewish resistance to the gospel. A dear Christian couple prayed for my father's family every day for 7 years without seeing any openness to the gospel. Suddenly, within a period of 2 weeks my father and his entire immediate family came to faith in Christ. I am a bit skeptical when I hear someone describing miracles coming down as abundantly as rain in the spring, but in 18 years of ministry I am fully convinced that God is still performing miracles. Paul tells us, "Jews require a sign." God has been gracious to provide those signs time and time again. I have met too many Jewish people who have been gloriously saved and forever changed by the miraculous power of God to dismiss such events as merely anecdotal information. The Christian who seeks to be effective in Jewish evangelism must be willing to pray with an expectation that God will answer with a miraculous demonstration of His power.

Some miracles are more obvious than others. One person awoke at 3 am, his room filled with an orange glow, and whereas he had never been inclined to accept the gospel, he suddenly knew it was true. Fred Wertheim, a survivor of the Holocaust, is now a Christian because, as he tells it, "Jesus visited him in his home." Other miracles are more subtle.

I was handing out gospel tracts in front of Macy's department store one bright sunny day in New York City. The big bold four inch letters on my T-shirt proclaimed, "Jews For Jesus," A well-dressed woman in her mid to late 60's approached me and began to yell, "You should be ashamed of yourself. Do you know what you are doing? Does your mother know you're doing this?" Then she spat out words that cut like a knife. "You are trying to complete the work that Hitler began." She rolled up the sleeve of her dress to show me the numbers tattooed on her arm. Ruth is a survivor of Auschwitz. I understood Ruth's anger but there seemed very little I could say to her at the time.

Weeks later, an older woman walked into the Jews For Jesus Friday evening chapel service. I recognized her immediately but couldn't remember where we had met. After the service I approached her and Ruth reminded me where we had met. I asked, "So what brings you here tonight?" She replied, "I have an open mind." Indeed. Ruth returned week after week and eventually it was my privilege to pray with her to receive Jesus as her Messiah.

How can someone who is totally opposed to the gospel, so resistant and so hardened, turn and receive God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ? It is simply this: the same power that raised up Jesus from the grave is at work in the world today. God's power to save is the only real hope we have of overcoming anyone's resistance to the gospel--Jewish or otherwise. The good news is, God is as mighty to save today as He ever was--and He can cut through any amount of resistance in the blink of an eye. The question is, will we be conduits for that saving power?

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