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Do Jews Really Need Christ? Controversy over Jewish Evangelism

Thursday, July 16, 2009

Given the current controversy between the Southern Baptists and the American Jewish community, you might think that Baptists had proposed to force their way into synagogues during the High Holy Days. Major Jewish organizations and liberal Christian groups have accused the Baptists of “spiritual intolerance” and “theological genocide.” What is this all about?

The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has published a series of prayer guides tied to non-Christian religions and their observances. The guides are intended to assist Baptists to pray for the salvation of all persons through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to learn about other religions in order to reach their adherents for Christ. In this case, a special prayer guide was designed to help Southern Baptists to pray for the conversion of their Jewish friends and neighbors as the Jews observe Rosh Hashanah.

The guide was sensitively written, informative, and intended only for use by evangelical Christians. The flap occurred when secular media trumpeted claims that the Southern Baptist Convention was launching what the Washington Post called “a new, aggressive campaign aimed at converting Jews to Christianity.”

Within days, the expected storm hit the nation’s papers and television networks. The controversy tells us a great deal about the current state of Jewish-Christian relations, and the erosion of the gospel among some denominations and churches.

For the past fifty years, leading Jewish organizations have followed a strategy of crying “intolerance” when Christians preach the gospel to Jews. Abraham Joshua Heschel, perhaps the most influential Jewish philosopher of the century, argued that Christians must give up the hope of converting the Jews, and called Christian attempts to witness to Jews “one of the greatest scandals in history.”

Abraham H. Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League accused the Southern Baptists of projecting “a spiritual narrowness that invites theological hatred.” Rabbi James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee has called efforts to evangelize Jews “spiritual annihilation.”

“It is pure arrogance for any religion to assume that they hold ‘the truth,’ especially on the eve of the holiest days for the Jewish faith,” said Foxman. Here we see the line being drawn. It is permissible for any religion-or all religions-to claim truth, but none can claim “the truth.” This relativistic understanding of truth is central to modern Judaism, which may help to explain the phenomenon described by Harvard’s Alan Dershowitz as The Disappearing American Jew.

The majority of American Jews are now thoroughly secularized, with only a minority confessing belief in a personal God. Major Jewish leaders-Dershowitz included-argue that Jews do not need to believe in God, only in Judaism. The major Jewish groups have closed ranks on the question of Jewish converts to Christianity. A good Jew may be an atheist, but no Jew can believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and remain a Jew.

The controversy also reveals just how far many denominations and churches have moved from the gospel. If the Jewish response was as expected, the liberal Protestants also offered no surprises. The mainline Protestant denominations,

now long under the domination of liberal theologians, have generally forfeited any conversionist theology, transforming missions into interfaith “dialogue.” Most have disavowed any efforts to evangelize Jews. Then again, they show little effort to evangelize anyone.

Disaffected liberals on the fringes of the Southern Baptist Convention also chimed in. One pastor responded by stating that “the Jews are, as they always have been, a people with a very special relationship to God.” The SBC prayer guide, said this pastor, displays “an appalling lack of sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities.”

The theological moguls of the mid-century, including Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, accepted the so-called “two-covenant” theology which denied that Christians should seek the conversion of Jews. At the same time, the liberal denominations were giving up on the conversion of virtually anyone to faith in Christ. Universalism and pluralism became the norm. Claims that salvation comes only by faith in Christ are decried as outdated, intolerant, imperialistic, and disrespectful of other religions.

Some denominations have bucked this trend, and remain committed to the evangelization of all persons-including the Jews. The Southern Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod have each adopted statements of conviction on the necessity of Jewish evangelism. This may be deeply offensive in post-Christian America, but evangelicals cannot compromise on this issue and remain evangelicals in any genuine sense of the word.

The Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Fellowship have also affirmed the Christian mission to the Jews. The WEF’s “Willowbank Declaration” (1989) states, “As the supreme way of demonstrating love, we seek to encourage the Jewish people, along with all other peoples, to accept God’s gift of life through Jesus the Messiah.”

The New Testament is unambiguous in its declaration that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and that all those who are saved must enter through the narrow gate of belief in Jesus as the Christ. The Christian church owes a great debt to the Jewish people-God’s chosen people. Most importantly, we owe them the gospel.

