



A Case for Romans 1:16...Again!

By Steve Cohen

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A Case for Romans 1:16 . . . Again!

There are thirteen million Jewish people alive today; 99% are unsaved. There are over seven billion gentiles, 80% unsaved.

What Shall We Do?

This article is accompanied by far better theologians than I addressing the implications of whether Christology impacts our ecclesiology which then impacts our missiology, or vice versa. In light of those discussions, I invite you to consider the historic ramifications of the rise, fall and re-evaluation of Jewish missions over the past two millennia.

I am Jewish. I grew up surrounded by Christians. For the first twenty-three years of my life, none of my Christian friends ever spoke to me of Jesus! Finally, one caring Lutheran prayed for my salvation daily for three years and personally risked our friendship to speak to me of Jesus. I am eternally grateful that he did. He lived in view of Romans 1:16—he was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for this is God’s power for salvation to all who believe...to the Jew first.

When I was a new believer in Jesus, my late wife Jan invited me to tag along to the Lutheran congregation where she was an organist. I had many questions, and one day during the Sunday Bible class, I asked, “If you have a friend who does not yet confess Jesus, how do you begin a conversation?” One of the members said, “Mr. Cohen, we are Lutherans. We wouldn’t do that!”

A Brief History

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish. They went to the synagogue first and concluded from the Scriptures that the Messiah had come as promised in the Law and the Prophets. It was the norm to be involved first in Jewish culture and then to follow the Jewish Messiah. It was outside the norm for a gentile to follow Jesus.

The missiological hot-button of the day was “Can a gentile follow Jesus without first becoming Jewish?” Acts 15 revealed that those who called for a pure Jewish community insisted that gentiles convert and become Jewish. The grafted-in community understood that wild olive branches (gentiles) can remain gentile-ish and Jewish believers can remain Jewish. The mystery of the church is that the body of Christ is made up of Jews *and* gentiles. When the number of gentiles in the church became greater than the number of Jews, faulty views of Scripture, prejudices, and anti-Semitic attitudes infiltrated the church.

Institutional changes included:

1. The rejection of the literal meaning of Scripture in its context
2. The subjugation of Scripture to the authority of a gentile (anti-Jewish) Church hierarchy
3. The determination that church doctrine and practice would be in opposition to the Jews
4. The establishment of compulsory conformity in practice



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5. The acceptance of the State and the sword as the means of maintaining purity in the church. (The cross was transformed from a means of victory over sin for the individual to a means of victory over sinners by the society.)
6. The acceptance of the sword of the State, instead of the Sword of the Spirit, the blood of the Lamb and the blood of believers, as the means of triumph in the world
7. The acceptance of the State support of the Church in exchange for the Church support of the State. (The Church surrenders its own prophetic message toward the State.)¹

By the fifth century, any Jewish person seeking baptism and entrance into the church had to renounce everything Jewish:

*I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of Lambs of the Hebrews, and all other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications, and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law rite, and custom...and if afterwards I shall wish to deny and return to Jewish superstition, or shall be found eating with the Jews, or feasting with them, or secretly conversing and condemning the Christian religion instead of openly confuting them and condemning their vain faith, then let the trembling of Cain and the leprosy of Gehazi cleave to me, as well as the legal punishments to which I acknowledge myself liable. And may I be anathema in the world to come, and may my soul be set down with Satan and the devils.*²

Mah Kerah (What Happened?)

Most Christian clergy have studied church history without ever being introduced to this shameful aspect of the church's story. The Jews, however, do know about it. They know about the anti-Jewish polemics of certain church fathers; about the forced baptisms, especially of children; about the church council decree that sanctioned the removal of such children from their parents; about a papal edict encouraging raids on Jewish synagogues by the faithful; about the expulsion of all Jews from a country like Spain; about Luther's hate language directed against Jews when they did not convert according to his timetable; about the prohibition against Jews living in Calvin's Geneva; the Great Synagogue in Jerusalem set ablaze with Jewish folk trapped inside while Crusaders outside sang, —Christ we adore Thee. Christians have felt justified in perpetrating atrocities against the people they called Christ-killers. Is it surprising then that, to so many Jews, conversion came to mean joining the enemy?³

What started as a very Jewish *movement* evolved into an *institution* that removed all vestiges of things past in order to become the Church.

What is the Church's Stand on Jewish Evangelism Today?

It depends on to whom you are talking. Let's take layman John Q Smith, for example. He was born into a Lutheran family, brought for baptism as an infant, went to VBS as a child, then to confirmation class



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starting at age 11. Following his confirmation, he attends with his family until he heads off to college, where he is contacted by a Lutheran campus pastor and joins up for an occasional meal and service. He does not want to rock the boat, and so he never speaks openly of his faith unless someone asks; and today, no one is really asking. He is back to church for his wedding and again when his firstborn arrives, and so the cycle continues. Yes, he knows someone Jewish through school and business. But never is there a thought that he should, would, or even could speak to that person about eternal damnation due to sin and hope through faith in Jesus. That is the pastor's job. They have the training...etc.

Then there is Jane R. Liberal Christian who is focused on social justice. She accepts her church's position that there are two covenants, one for the Jewish people, in which salvation is available apart from faith in Christ, and the other for the gentiles, for whom Christ came and offered His life. Thankfully, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), of which I am a member, rejects the Two Covenant Theory. ⁴

If you are talking to John V. Pastor, you find a serious individual besieged on many sides for his time and attention: Bible studies, new member classes, church meetings, annual preaching schedules, church meetings, special holiday services, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, caring for the infirm, shut-ins and dying, funerals, grief groups, (did I mention church meetings?), divorce groups, counseling, pastoral meetings, circuit, district, and synodical gatherings, budgets, building new buildings, keeping the school running, family concerns and, to be sure, visiting those who have visited the church in the past week. It is not that they are disinterested in reaching out; it is rather that they are not prepared to struggle to make the time and have little energy to invest in yet *another* endeavor. Just keeping the day-to-day operations maintained is more than a full-time job.

It is no wonder that, in the past decade, the adult conversion rate for our 6,000+ congregations is less than one adult per church per year! This is a tragedy of immense scale.

In 1932, the Synod affirmed the Brief Statement. Section 42 under *adiaphora* rightfully rejects millennialism, but in my opinion, wrongfully rejects a mass conversion of Israel:

42. With the Augsburg Confession (Art. XVII) we reject every type of millennialism, or Chiliasm, the opinions that Christ will return visibly to this earth a thousand years before the end of the world and establish a dominion of the Church over the world; or that before the end of the world the Church is to enjoy a season of special prosperity; or that before a general resurrection on Judgment Day a number of departed Christians or martyrs are to be raised again to reign in glory in this world; or that before the end of the world a universal conversion of the Jewish nation (of Israel according to the flesh) will take place. ⁵

A quick review of Romans 9–11 shows Paul's passionate plea for the church to include Jewish people in the mission of the church. This runs against the tide of Romans caring at all for the Jews, since they are such a peculiar people: they did not work on the Sabbath and did not serve in the Roman army; their gifts went to the Temple in Jerusalem; their diet was different, holidays foreign, manner of dress strange; and they worshiped only one God. *Secular anti-Jewish attitudes prevailed in the culture.* Even so, Paul sought to win the Roman hearts to pray for and speak to the urgent need of salvation for the Jewish people.

Romans 11:24-26:



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After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! 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 has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.

Dr. Martin Luther himself held out great hope for the mass conversion of Israel. With the spread of Protestantism, Luther naively looked for mass conversions by the Jewish populations, which were not forthcoming...Luther saw the Jews as a people that had not embraced Christianity and he believed that he now knew the REAL reason that they had not embraced Jesus as their Messiah. Luther concluded that the Jews all along had seen the corruption of the Church in Rome and would have never agreed to become part of that unrighteous body. But now that the Reformation had addressed this corruption and come against it, any barriers to Jewish conversion had been removed and Luther believed that the Jews would come to faith en masse. ⁶

The Authority of Scripture

The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey conducted by the [Pew Research Center](#) surveyed 1,926 adults in the United States that self-identified as Lutheran. The study found that 30% believed that the Bible was the Word of God and was to be taken literally word for word. Forty percent held that the Bible was the Word of God, but was not literally true word for word or were unsure if it was literally true word for word. Twenty-three percent said the Bible was written by men and not the Word of God. Seven percent did not know, were not sure, or had other positions. ⁷

I recently received a letter from a concerned former LCMS member who had read my personal story of coming to faith. He viewed the efforts of The Apple of His Eye Mission Society as misdirected in reaching our people and equipping the church to do the same because of the missteps of past history.

The LCMS should build bridges to the Messianic Jewish community and learn how to interface with Jewish people...Why does not the LCMS participate in the Walk of Remembrance, or in activities commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day, or why does not the LCMS contribute to the Israeli equivalent of the Red Cross?...It seems to me that instead of trying to convert Jews, the LCMS would better gain the ear of the Jewish community by more active condemnation of past sins of omission.

Y'shua said that...he who would lose his life for My sake will gain it. And Y'shua said...he who would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven must be the least. Likewise, to reach the Jewish people, Christians must stop trying to reach the Jewish people. I know this doesn't sound like something the LCMS would support. But as a congregational leader at a Messianic Jewish congregation, I believe to educate the church in the Jewish roots of Jesus and align the gospel with its Hebraic foundation is a message that will also reach Jewish ears - and do so without threatening conversion.⁸

Since the Holocaust, many have shifted from Jewish missions by substituting Dialogue. Dialogue can never replace the biblical mandate to go and make disciples as some have in this post-Holocaust era.



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In 1973, the LCMS, through an omnibus resolution, established a Task Force on Witnessing to Jewish People. Dr. Erv Kolb, then Secretary for the Board for Evangelism, was the point person. He assembled a team of well-intentioned pastors and lay leaders. They produced a *Workbook on Jewish Evangelism* for congregational use. One of the appendices included a horrible caricature of Mr. Stereotypical Jew—a man with a large hooked nose.

That caricature caught the attention of Rabbi Rudin, recently retired from serving as the American Jewish Committee's Senior Interreligious Adviser. In order to express his concerns, he asked for a private meeting, no media involved, with Dr. Kolb and a few LCMS leaders. Following that gathering, Rabbi Rudin held a press conference denouncing the efforts of the LCMS to include Jewish people in the mission of the church. For the next couple of years, LCMS pastors responded by avoiding involvement in reaching Jewish people for fear that someone might take notice, take offense, and raise a ruckus.

Jewish leaders still complain about witnessing bodies under the flag that the Holocaust had removed the right of the church to speak to Jewish people about Jesus. They propagandize by claiming now the church seeks spiritual genocide by making Jews into Christians. ⁹

Perhaps we have our priorities upside down? Perhaps for the sake of being good neighbors, we respect co-religionists by eschewing Gospel proclamation?

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Mt 5:10–11)

Jesus said we would be persecuted. That is to be expected in our sinful world. I believe we must intentionally be vulnerable and available to those who are lost.

In Acts 4, we read:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus...What are we going to do with these men? they asked. Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name...But Peter and John replied, —Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard. (13–17, 19–20)

We are in a War

Not for oil or money or territory, but for souls. Millions of Jewish people and billions of gentiles born in sin are facing a Christ-less eternity. If we continue the status quo of less than one adult convert per church per year, are we fulfilling our mandate to reach the world? Are we taking God at His Word by going to the Jew first or even at all? Or are we lulled into arguing among ourselves over this or that issue



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which has absolutely no eternal value at all? The enemy of our souls has succeeded in dividing Christians over issues of no *eternal* import. We must resist the enemy and proclaim the Gospel!

21st Century Mission Strategies?

Mission strategists hold that some people groups can be reached by piggybacking the Gospel on a medical mission, an agricultural mission, an educational mission, or Bible translation. Not so when it comes to reaching the Jewish people today. Jewish medical professionals lead in advances; Jewish people are literate; the Scriptures were given in their language, Hebrew. There can be no piggybacking. We must be lovingly direct! Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. The only strategy, if it can be called that, is to give God's Word a hearing that His Spirit might convict of sin and work faith in unregenerate hearts.

Conclusion

Our present day ecclesiology has muted and subjugated our mission zeal. I believe we must urgently refocus the stewardship of the saved to care for the lost through prayer, witness, and personal involvement. In 1973, one gentile reached me, a Jew. Now this Jew is urging the church to get back to the Bible and reach those who are lost before it is too late. There are great opportunities available with God's help!

We pray for His blessing on this important work. He has said that He would bless those who bless the Jewish people (Gn 12:3), and there is no greater blessing than the blessing of the Gospel. Never before have we needed so desperately God's blessing on our work. As has so often been the case, the answer may well be with how we respond to God's call to reach the Jewish people.

I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for this is God's power for salvation for all who believe, To the Jew first...



Endnotes

¹ Dan Gruber, *The Church and the Jews—The Biblical Relationship* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Serenity Books, 1997), vii.

² James Park, *The Conflict of The Church and The Synagogue* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 397–398.

³ Isaac C. Rottenberg, *Should There Be a Christian Witness to the Jews?* *Christian Century* (April 13, 1977): 352–356.

⁴ For a seminal article on this issue, see: Joseph P. Gudel, *To The Jew First' A Biblical Analysis of the Two Covenant Theory of the Atonement*. *The Apple of His Eye*, last modified 2012.

⁵ *Of the Holy Scriptures, A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932) <http://www.creeds.net/lutheran/missouri.htm>.

⁶ Jeffrey Gutterman, *The Reformation and the Jewish People: Part VI* *Scofield Prophecy Studies*, last modified 2012, <http://scofieldprophecystudies.org/Columnists/Gutterman6.htm>.

⁷ *Pew Research Center Answers*, accessed April 22, 2012, <http://www.answers.com/topic/pew-research-center>

⁸ Alan T., personal correspondence to author, February 18, 2012.

⁹ Since anti-Semitism is universally condemned by Christians, it is useful to ask about the connection, if any, between evangelism of Jews and anti-Semitism. Are evangelistic efforts among Jews anti-Semitic?

The answer to this question hinges upon how Judaism and the Jewish people are viewed. It has been said rightly that Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people, but the Jewish people is not defined by Judaism. Unlike with Christianity and Christians, it is not necessary to practice or even believe in Judaism in order to be a Jew. On the other hand, Jews who become committed Christians are considered by Jews to be apostate, that is, they have abandoned the Jewish people and are lost to it. The conversion of Jews is therefore seen as spiritual genocide, for if it succeeded on a large enough scale, the Jewish people, as Jewish people, would cease to exist. Allan R. Brockway, *Should Christians Attempt to Evangelize Jews?*



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