

LCJE Talk: A Retrospective on Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel

Thanks to Jim Sibley, the LCJE. I sure wish I could be with all of you but I'm not able to travel now. But I'm sure I'll see you soon.

When I found out that the theme of this conference was Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel (RJG), I contacted Jim Sibley to offer to speak on the importance of this book since my ministry publishes it.

Jim asked me to give a retrospective on RJG which I am pleased to do. I do believe that the openness from our people to consider Yeshua, that the Pew study discovered, is a result of so many of us doing our part to restore the Jewishness of the Gospel. I'll explain.

First, I'm going to read some of David Stern's intro to his RJG. I think he give us a good reason to RJG, especially how it gives us an additional rationale for Jewish Evangelism, beyond Romans 1:16 and chapters 9–11. Then, I'm going to ask a fundamental question that we who work in Jewish evangelism must ask. Finally, I'll share a few stories that help us realize why RJG is so essential to our work among our people.

First, some thoughts from David's introduction to RJG. I'll be quoting this a lot.

“The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” The Gospel which the Church preaches, the Gospel of God's grace to individuals, expressed so perfectly in the first eight chapters of Romans and sometimes epitomized in four or five “spiritual laws,” is the truth, and it is nothing but the truth. But it is not the whole truth. The whole truth requires restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel.

“When the Church proclaims a Gospel without its Jewishness restored, she is at best failing to proclaim, “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). At worst she may be communicating what Paul called “another Gospel” (Galatians 1:6-9). Moreover, not only Jews suffer from this off-target preaching — Gentiles suffer too. Therefore, I believe I am focusing on an extremely serious problem which has not received from Christians the attention it deserves.

“It has been pointed out to me that there are Christians who experience this book as promoting the Judaizing heresy which Paul condemns in the book of Galatians. But “Judaizing” does not mean encouraging New Testament believers to investigate the Jewishness of their faith. Rather, it means one or a combination of the following three things: (1) insisting that Gentiles cannot be saved by faith in Yeshua the Messiah unless they convert to Judaism, (2) requiring saved Gentiles to follow Jewish cultural practices, and/or (3) legalism, i.e., requiring Gentiles to obey a perverted version of the Torah in which God's Law is seen as a set of rules unrelated to faith.

These words of David Stern's are useful to our look at RJG.

I'm sure we're all familiar with the eye-opening Pew study (*CT* (October, 2013), which some of you helped make happen. It found that 1 out of 3 American Jews today do see belief in Jesus as [compatible with being Jewish](#) (including [35 percent](#) of Ultra-Orthodox Jews).

The report stated that that number may seem surprisingly high for those who follow the fortunes of Messianic Jews (here the article is referring to the opposition CPM received when they moved into a renovated building in Brooklyn). An editorial comment was offered: Believing in Jesus, however, is enough to place one beyond the pale," notes Pew.

Now, I know the Pew study has been widely examined by all of us involved in Jewish evangelism. This study is quite an encouragement to many of us. But we must wonder, what changed since the early days of Jewish missions, when believing in Jesus was enough to get a person disowned by his own family? Now, the Jewish community itself is making room for Yeshua. What happened?

There are several reasons for this that we've discussed many times in our meetings—more and more effective missionaries to the Jewish people, living in the last days when prophecy is being fulfilled, a move of the Holy Spirit. I think it's a combination, but I suggest that one of the more important and possibly overlooked reasons is the restoration of the Jewishness of gospel.

Actually, all the work Jewish missions have done, presenting the Jew, Yeshua, not only as the savior of the world but as the Messiah of Israel, has caught the attention of both Jews and Christians. Both changed the way they look at Yeshua. He's no longer seen only as the god of Christianity; he's now seen as a rabbi within the Judaism of his day and possibly the Messiah of Israel.

This is due, in large measure, to the work of modern-day mission-programs in churches and on TV, social media, new ways to communicate the Good News. Added to the many decades of work by the Hebrew-Christian movement, it's like our message is finally getting heard.

Stern would call this sort of work Contextualizing the Gospel for Jews. He explains:

“The founding of what came to be called the Hebrew Christian movement in England and other European countries during the nineteenth century was essentially an effort at contextualizing the Gospel for Jews. Jewish believers were advised not to leave their people but to stay Jewish, so long as their New Testament faith remained orthodox. They were encouraged to celebrate Passover, Chanukah and other festivals, and, generally, to express their Jewishness. They were also reminded that their observance of elements in the Mosaic Law did not enhance their salvation—like Gentiles, they are saved by faith and not by “works of law.”

“Clearly, contextualization was an improvement over requiring Jews to renounce everything Jewish,” writes Stern. Listen to what Jews had to say just to become part of congregation of believers at one time. This is the profession required by the Church of Constantinople which Jews had to affirm if they wanted to join the holy Community of the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua:

I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the 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 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.

Obviously, we know that this sort of “evangelism” is not where we are these days, but where exactly are we?

In *Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel*, Stern explains the way he sees evangelism in general, concluding with what he calls Type 4 Evangelism, which is essentially restoring the Jewishness of the gospel. Here are his thoughts on restoration, over against contextualization.

Type I, Type II and Type III Evangelism

“Missiologists have come up with a threefold classification of the cultural and linguistic barriers across which the Gospel must be proclaimed.

Type I Evangelism is sharing with nominal Christians in one’s own culture. These are people who not only share one’s language and cultural background but may have grown up going to church, hearing the Gospel and reading the Bible. In short, they are “Christianized” but not born again. In terms of ease of communication, this type of evangelism is the simplest. (Whether it is easiest in terms of getting people to experience the new birth in Yeshua the Messiah is another question.)

Type II Evangelism is with people who share one’s language and perhaps live in the same or a similar society, but whose cultural and religious presuppositions may be very different. Suburbanite white upper middle-class Christians bringing the Gospel to unsaved lower-class blacks in the inner city—and inner-city black Christians bringing the Gospel to unsaved whites in the suburbs—are both engaged in Type II Evangelism. So are Japanese Christians in Japan, where the religious milieu is Buddhist and Shinto.

Type III Evangelism brings the Gospel across cultural and linguistic barriers that at times can seem all but insurmountable. The idea is conveyed well by the traditional picture of the missionary in a primitive jungle tribe learning the language, inventing an alphabet, translating the Bible, fighting the alien cultural and physical environment, all in order make God’s grace known. Likewise, the on-fire Christians of Korea or Indonesia who preach to the blasé youth of Europe may find themselves doing Type III Evangelism.

Each of these types requires its own approach to contextualization. To give one example, consider the verbal presentation of important theological concepts. In Type I Evangelism one can use “Christian language,” with such terms as “sin,” “born again” and “saved,” the object being to deepen the hearer’s spiritual understanding of what these terms mean so that he will respond with faith. In Type II Evangelism such terminology seems peculiar and troublesome. These ideas

must be conveyed differently to un-Christianized hearers, with examples from life, not jargon from church. In Type III Evangelism the language and culture may make it difficult to express the concepts at all.

Where do the Jews fit into this schema? If one regards Jewish people as candidates for Type II Evangelism, as un-Christianized members of the same society and language-group, then one is assuming that the Church is proclaiming the true Gospel, so that the task is only to contextualize it. Someone who takes this approach will argue that if a Samoan can be Christian and remain Samoan, why can't a Jew be Christian and stay Jewish?

Nevertheless, there is something strange, even wrong, in talking about contextualizing the Gospel for Jews, because the Gospel was completely Jewish in the first place! If Christianity's roots are Jewish, if the Gospel itself is Jewish in its very essence, why should it need to be contextualized for Jews?

The answer is that it doesn't need to be—provided the New Testament Gospel is actually being proclaimed properly! In fact, the Gospel had to be contextualized for Gentiles! [in the first centuries of the Church].

What Type IV Evangelism requires is not a gentitized Gospel contextualized for Jews, but a restoration of the Jewishness, which is in fact present in the Gospel, but which has become obscured. Moreover, Christians too need aspects of the Gospel which a restoration of its Jewishness will bring them.

Simply put, Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel means filling out the content of the Gospel in all its fullness as it pertains to Jews and to the relationship between the Jewish people and the Church. In other words, it means offering, in relation to these things, “the whole counsel of God,” not just part of it.

I suggest that this restoration is making the New Testament and its central figure more acceptable to Jews and more understandable to Christians.

When David and Martha were in Singapore many years ago, meeting with leaders from around the world, each person was asked to give a five-minute talk on what they were all about. David presented a one-page paper on what became the basis for his Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel in which he presents both the blessings and pitfalls that arise from such restoration.

He had not intended to write such a book, but a friend of theirs, Ruth Heflin, was on the plane back from Singapore. She went to David and encouraged him to write a book.

So, David, an excellent thinker and experienced writer turned his 5-minute talk into a one-hundred page book that has been translated and published in the following languages and lands: Russian, Italian, Polish, French, German, Hungarian, Japanese, Dutch and more to come.

I'm not suggesting that this book itself gained the recent wider acceptance of Yeshua in the Jewish community, or the salvation of more of our people, but it has made many inroads into the

consciousness of more and more of our people who are beginning to see Yeshua for who he is—a Jew who was the Messiah of Israel and became the savior of the world.

A few years ago, an orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Eli Cohen of Jews for Judaism, attended a UMJC conference in LA (I think). Naturally, as a publisher, we always set up book tables where we can present our publications. On this occasion, I was talking with Eli at our booth about the old days when there was so much suspicion between Messianic congregations and Jewish missions, and non-messianic Jewish groups.

David and Martha walked by, stopping to say hi to my wife, Lisa, and me. Eli asked me if that was really David Stern. When I said yes, he jumped up, gave David a huge hug and blurted out, “I’ve read everything you’ve ever written. I love you.”

I could be wrong, but I think Eli Cohen was expressing his appreciation and affection for the man who had done more than anyone else he knew to restore the Jewishness of the NT, something that has been lost for 2000 years.

Restoring the Jewish background and context of the New Testament, shows Jewish people that there is an important Book they have missed that contains vital information about life now and in the hereafter. It also shows Christians how they can connect with our people in a legitimately biblical way as they too understand the New Testament better.

As a result, more Jewish people will meet the Messiah and more Christians will become supporters of our people. In this way, because David Stern was able to express so clearly the fact that the Gospel message came to and through the Jewish people, more people are awakening to this fact. Clearly, the best way to understand a biblical passage is to understand it in its historical and cultural context, which was essentially Jewish, for the most part.

And I should mention in this retrospective on *Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel*, that this little book, published in 1988, laid the groundwork for David’s *Jewish New Testament* published in 1989, his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (1992), the *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998) and the book I co-published with Hendrickson Bible Publishers in 2016, called the *Complete Jewish Study Bible*.

These books are distributed all over the world and are being licensed by international publishers. This is not just good news for Messianic Jewish Publishers. The spread of the information in these and other books we’ve published is breaking up the hard soil so the gospel seed can be more effectively planted and presented to Jews and the NT is more understandable to Christians. I see this as God’s plan for this time in history.

As one of several publishers of Messianic books and bibles, I am well-aware that the preponderance of purchases of our books are by Christians, not Jews. But that’s OK. The CJB, the CJSB and our other books have opened the eyes of many Christians. Nearly every day we get a letter or an email from someone telling us how glad they are to read the bible through Jewish eyes. And we get pleasure from seeing other publishers, both Christian and Jewish, expand upon what we’ve done in their own publications.

Rabbi Matt Rosenberg, son of Rabbi David and Helene Rosenberg, posted on Facebook:

When your theological hero promotes your book, the Yiddish expression that describes how I felt is kvelling, “to be extremely proud.” The only reason my books exist is because David H. Stern wrote Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel in 1988. His wife, Martha, said, your book is a “hip Matt version of Restoring.” I am grateful to be carrying a baton passed to me by a theological giant like David Stern.

The introduction to *Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel* presents the extreme importance of restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel, Type IV evangelism, i.e., presenting the New Testament as it was initially intended to be presented—a Jewish book, written by Jews, initially for Jews, about Jewish (and eternal matters), centered on Israel, not Italy.

The results of the Pew study show that our people are encountering a “kosher” Yeshua for the first time since the first century CE. The few anecdotes I shared show that something new is happening between Jewish people and the Messiah of Israel and the savior of the world.

I am convinced that much of this is due to the work of Jewish missions, especially as they seek to Restore the Jewishness of the Gospel, while presenting Yeshua to our people. Additionally, the work of Messianic publishers is having a huge impact on the hearts and minds of both Jews and Christians. It appears that both the natural and wild olive branches are growing together as the New Testament I restored to its original Jewish roots.

Thank you for your attention and interest.

Rabbi Barry Rubin
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