Towards an Evangelical Doctrine of the Church: The Church and Israel[1]

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Introduction

When the Church begins to think seriously and theologically about herself, her origin, nature, vocation and relationship to the world around her, then it is inevitable and correct that she think about Israel and the Jewish people, and her relationship to them. The Church's search for self-identity canot by-pass an examination of Israel's identity, although the results of such a search may of course differ, depending on the theological stance of the interpreter.

When he was an old man, Karl Barth accepted an invitation to address the Roman Catholic Church's Secretariat for Christian Unity. He spoke encouragingly about the ecumenical movement, and concluded with these words:

> There is finally only one genuinely ecumenical question: our relations with the Jewish people.

Why then does the Church need to begin by looking at Israel? At a deceptively simple level we may say because she was not planted on earth in vacuo. We have a context. Our first and ultimate context of course is that of the loving purposes of God Himself, since our life and mission flow from Him, but God began His very particular work of creating a people to be His special children, servants, and witnesses with Abraham, not John the Baptist. On the one hand there is the maximalist view, associated especially with Covenant Theology, which says that we can speak of the Old Testament Church just as soundly as we can of the New Testament Church. Here are a few typical quotations:

> Adam and Eve . . . constituted the first Christian church.[2]
>
> The Church under the New Dispensation is identical with that under the Old. It is not a new Church but one and the same covenant, the covenant made with Abraham.[3]
>
> . . . the Church existed in the old dispensation as well as in the new, and was essentially the same in both.[4]

According to this view there is no essential difference between Israel and the Church on a theological level, and all true Believers in all

periods of history are members of the Church. On the other hand there is the minimalist view that though the Church is different from Israel, Israel is indispensable for the Church. If God had left the Hebrew slaves in Egypt there would have been no nation of Israel living in the Promised Land, no prophets, no king David, no Temple, no priestly administration, and so on. But nor would there have been the Church. Every act of deliverance by God recorded in the Old Testament from that of Joseph, through the Exodus, the defeat of Goliath, the thwarting of Haman's plans and to the promises of Malachi for a coming deliverance, was just as real a deliverance for the Apostles as for the Rabbis. Dare we say that Israel is so much the indispensable context of the Church that without Israel there would have been no Jesus son of Joseph son of . . . ?

Our context is not that of Greece or China, but of Israel, and our very vocabulary is that of Israel in her relationship to God. When a non-Jew becomes aware of the jargon of the Church, either as a child growing up in church life or as an adult coming cold to faith in Christ, then that person has to learn the meaning, context and significance of Jewish words in translation, even if these or similar words exist in other cultures and languages; words like Messiah, Christ, covenant, election, holiness, redemption. But when a Jewish person comes to faith in Jesus then the concepts and issues of a lifetime come alive with startling revelation. In short, even when the minimalist view claims that there is a difference between Israel and the Church, the essential calling and nature of the Church cannot *contradict* that of Israel.

Jewish theology teaches clearly that the kingdom of God is greater than Israel, and the evangelical is just as sure that the kingdom of God is greater than the Church. Indeed it would have enhanced this conference had there been a major session on the doctrine of the kingdom of God, since, as stated above, the rule and purpose of God is the Church's first and ultimate context. Neither Israel nor the Church can claim to be identical with the kingdom, and indeed Paul's metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11:16–24 states that the kingdom or the rule of God, is greater than both Israel and the Church together. Without doing an exegetical study of that passage, it is surely true that this is being said there, that Christ is the all-important root of the tree, in, by, and from whom the trunk and branches receive their character and nature.

As Paul Minear affirms, the very images of the Church in the New Testament contextualize the Church in the history of God's dealings with Israel. The early Believers understood that the central concepts were that of the Kingdom of God and then that of God's covenant action, both being the ground of the being and becoming of the chosen people of God, and so the beginnings of this people of God were not dated with Pentecost, vital though that event was, but with

Abraham and Israel at Sinai. The images found are Israel, a chosen race, a holy nation, the twelve tribes, the patriarchs, the true circumcision, Abraham's sons, exodus, David's house and kingdom, remnant, the elect.[5] This is the starting point for the theology of many scholars involved in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, for example, Paul van Buren, who says that whether Christians care to think seriously about it or not the one we call God is

> the One designated in the Scriptures as the Holy One of Israel . . . This is the One Jesus of Nazareth called Abba, Father. We mean always and only the God of Israel . . . The assertion that the church adores Israel's Lord is fundamental for all . . . its theology.[6]

The Mission of Israel

As stated above, the choice of Israel was to serve God's purposes for all His creation, to help bring about the redemption of His creation. God's gracious nature involved Him in a covenant relationship with the whole of creation, and Israel was called by God to be the particular historical agent of God's revelation. By definition this made Israel special, and indeed unique, being God's representative and messenger on earth, and being involved in a particular covenant relationship with God (Exodus 19:5–6), this relationship being paradigmatic for the offer of God to all nations.

David Torrance has attempted to explain the God-given particularity and indispensability of Israel's mission to the world, including the Church, in a ten-fold analysis. Here are his conclusions about Israel's unique knowledge and witness:

1. Israel is a witness to God's continuing covenant of grace with Israel and the world . . .
2. Israel witnesses to the historical nature of divine revelation . . .
3. Israel witnesses . . . to salvation as a gift of God's grace . . .
4. Israel witnesses to man's antagonism to, and rebellion against God . . .
5. Israel witnesses to God's mercy and judgement . . .
6. Israel witnesses to God as person whom we consider today in history.
7. Israel frequently is the focus of man's anger with God and thereby highlights that anger.
8. Israel witnesses to the fact that there is a hidden process of judgement going on all through history . . .
9. Israel witnesses to the coming day of the Lord and to a positive new creation.
10. Israel, by her presence in the Promised Land, witnesses to the fact that God is about to do something great and dramatic in history.[7]

The Church and Israel

If it is true, then, that the One God has one basic covenant relationship with the nations, and one covenant people in continuity,

it must also surely be true that there is some measure of discontinuity between BC and AD. Jesus has made all the difference, and some have welcomed him whereas others, indeed the vast majority of the Jewish people, have rejected him as God's only way of salvation. Against those who have claimed that there is a total rupture between Israel and the Church, evangelicals must be faithful to the New Testament's witness that the basic relationship is one of continuity, albeit further defined by a crucial discontinuity.

I think this is the too often forgotten aspect of the continuity list given by Paul in Romans 9:4–5, since what Israel is said to have that we must be grateful for (and grateful in perpetuity), are all gifts which Israel received from God and hold in trust, as it were, for Him, not things or qualities they have in themselves. Notice how Paul even stresses that it is the *human* side of the Messiah that has its roots in God's chosen people. God is the true root of our life together, not Israel as such, a point also made by Paul in Romans 11:16b–24, where it is a relationship with God, and in the context, with Christ, that decides who is part of the tree of life. There is a discontinuity within the continuity. What makes the Church who she is is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, indispensable and inestimable, and the Church relates to the Jewish people, as to all others, on this basis.

This Gospel is the heart and goal of what we know as the New Testament/New Covenant, a name taken from Jeremiah 31:31, where God promises to give this new covenant to Israel, not to Greece or Rome or Geneva. How then do we relate the uniqueness of Jesus and the covenant he instituted with Israel? God promised through Jeremiah that Israel's very covenant relationship would change in structure and impact. It is really the renewing of that covenant relationship, its reconstitution, not a hitherto unknown and new covenant which abrogates the old way. The fundamental definition and goal of the covenant relationship, revealed in the formula, 'I will be your God and you will be my people', was to be fulfilled in this new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31ff.; 32:38ff.; Ezekiel 11:19ff.; 36:26ff.). It might be put this way, that the most 'natural' process in the spiritual world is that of a Jewish person becoming a follower of Jesus.

Surely this is what lies behind Paul's anguish in Romans 9–11? Most sermons on Romans 9:1–5 seem to move as soon as possible to the application of the approval of this passion for his people to each of us and the passion we should have for our own ethnic or social group, an application not without its merit, but not in fact a tight exegesis of the passage. There is something especially tragic when the people of God do not recognize God's next stage of growth for them to continue as the ministers of God's grace to the world.

As we know, when the Church has forgotten its constitution in God's grace, and the irrevocable call of God on Israel, then the most awful treatment of Jewish people has followed. What began as a

theological supercessionism, that is, when the Church began to maintain that it worshipped and adored the one who *was* Israel's God, developed into theological and moral contempt for the Jewish people. To assert its uniqueness the Church felt a need to deny Israel its identity and call. This in turn led all too often to the actual de-personalization of the Jewish person, sometimes to the demonization of the Jewish people, and to horrendous persecution, humiliation, and murder. As one historian has said, the Church said that the Jews may not live among us as Jews; then she said the Jews may not live among us; finally she said the Jews may not live.

Having said this, however, all evangelicals would condemn anti-Semitism, but would want to say that although we must love and respect the Jewish people and their faith-relationship with God, the New Testament revelation is in fact the fulfilment of that of the Hebrew Bible, and this is a relationship of both continuity, since fulfilment presupposes the indispensability of whatever preceded it, and also discontinuity, since the New Testament cannot be ignored or by-passed in seeking the true relationship with God that He wants and enables.

Other evangelical traditions avoid the language of supercessionism because they see the Church and Israel as basically not in any form of competition but as simply different agents of God, each with a distinct nature and purpose. On the one hand there are the Dispensationalists with the classic claim that the Church did not exist in the times of the Hebrew Bible, but only began on the Day of Pentecost.[8] The Church was always a part of God's historical purpose, but it only consists of those who believed in Jesus and were baptized with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, and indeed before the Rapture of the Church. Before and after this period of the Church God's primary dealings are with and through Israel, the Jewish people. So there are two peoples of God in this the single overall purpose of God.

On the other hand are those who hold to a theology of two covenants, one with Israel and one with the Church, each distinct, each valid in its own right, and each as necessary as the other. The key Christian scholars here would of course include James Parkes, Gregory Baum, Rosemary Reuether, John Pawlikowski, Paul Van Buren, Roy Eckardt.

At the very least it must be seen that the Church's relation to Israel is *sui generis*, uniquely unique. Only Israel can, and does, claim priority over the Church in matters of Biblical theology. Israel claims priority in regard to knowing the God who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures, in regard to the Hebrew Bible itself, in regard to the central concepts of the New Testament, and we must take this seriously even in the face of the fallacious and undisciplined claims made frequently that Judaism is the mother of Christianity, or that

'Christianity emerged out of Judaism'.[9] We could benefit from an examination of the unique relationship that the Church has to Judaism within its overall relationship to other faiths generally. The Church and Israel are irrevocably linked within the one missionary movement of God in grace and revelation to the world.

God's Covenant and the Church

The Covenant of God is fundamentally universal and messianic, and Jesus certainly fulfils the purpose of this covenant, though it is also reconstituted in and through him. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was inaugurated by his coming (Mark 1:14ff.), and he went to the Cross in the vicarious ministry of the Servant of the Lord (Luke 22:37; Mark 8:31). St. Paul was convinced that his vocation was as an Apostle to the other nations of the world (Acts 9:15ff.; Ephesians 3:8ff.), but even he insisted that the Gospel be presented first of all to Israel, since the Church has no separate vocation apart from that of Israel. To put it more rhetorically, if the Church has nothing to say to Israel then it has nothing to say to any people. When Jewish people say 'no' to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul says, they make themselves 'God's enemies' for the sake of the Gentiles, but because they are part of the irrevocable covenant of God they remain loved by God and are assuredly not cut off from God's election purposes.

Conclusion

The premise of this paper has been that the Church has no identity or purpose apart from that of Israel; the New Testament has no identity or purpose apart from the Hebrew Bible; Jesus has no identity or purpose apart from the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. If I may be so bold as to quote an article in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Dan G. Johnson concludes from an exegetical study of Romans 11 that:

> In Paul's view any church which exists independently of Israel ceases therein to be the Church as a part of God's salvation plan and becomes simply another religious society.[10]

My proposition is that all Evangelicals should be involved with the Jewish-Christian Dialogue circles, almost entirely devoid at present of evangelical scholarship and witness, in searching out the full meaning of the identity and purpose of Israel, both in the days of the Hebrew Bible, and today.

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NOTES

1 A paper delivered at a Conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians held in Germany, July 1988.
2 R.B. Kuiper: *The Glorious Body of Christ*, n.d., p.22.
3 Charles Hodge: *Systematic Theology*, 1968, 3:549.
4 Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology* (second revised and enlarged edition), 1941, p.571.
5 P.S. Minear: *The Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 1960, pp. 70–82.
6 Paul M. van Buren: *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, Part 1, 1980, pp. 32–33.
7 David W. Torrance: ed. *The Witness of the Jews to God*, 1982, pp. 2–12.
8 See, for example, Earl D. Radmaejer: *What The Church Is All About*, 1978, p. 201.
9 *Christians and Jews Today*, a Report of the Church of Scotland Board of World Mission and Unity, 1985, p. 54.
10 Dan G. Johnson: 'The Structure and Meaning of Romans 11', Catholic Biblical Quarterly 46, 1984, p. 100. See also A. Roy Eckardt: *Your People, My People: The Meeting of Jews and Christians*, 1974, pp. 182–183; Peter von der Osten-Sacken: *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*: Theological Foundations, 1986, pp. 119–134.