

TJCII Open Day, Nijkerk: February 13, 2015

Talk 2

How to Promote Dialogue and Reconciliation

TJCII is an initiative of reconciliation. For the Christian Churches, it means first a task of recognition, recognition that Messianic Jews exist, and that they have a significance in God's purposes. TJCII also understands that this reconciliation requires the participation of all Churches and denominations that confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

People will say that the biggest obstacle is the terrible history of Christian contempt and harassment of the Jews. This is true. There has to be a great humbling from the Christian side. But there is another big difficulty in this reconciliation that I want to address in this talk; it is the disparity between the Christian and the Jewish side. So you have almost 20 centuries of Christian faith, centuries in which Christians have mostly excluded Israel from God's purposes, which means 20 centuries of interpreting the Scriptures through Gentile eyes. Despite the great conflicts and quarrels of Christian history, it is nonetheless true that we have centuries-old traditions of theology, doctrine, interpretation. These positions have been held by millions of Christians. On the other side, the Messianic Jews are like a new creation, or they often say, a resurrection from the dead. They are trying to formulate a Jewish understanding of biblical revelation, including the New Testament. There is no tradition to draw on. Even the witness of the Jewish church of the second and third centuries is largely lost – as someone has said, history is written by the victors (winners). Moreover, Messianic Jews are counted in thousands, or tens of thousands, not in millions.

This disparity has been so evident in the Catholic – Messianic Jewish dialogue. It means that it is not very productive to try and utilise the classical dialogue pattern of each side presenting its convictions on a chosen subject. As I indicated the Messianic Jews do not as a movement have a creed to set alongside the historic creeds of Gentile Christianity. What is much more possible and important is to identify the challenges that their existence pose for the Christian Churches and their theology. What is also of real practical importance: how can the Christian Churches help the Messianic Jewish movement to develop in line with the leading of the Holy Spirit, without Gentile domination, without trying to tell them what to do, what to think, and how to do things.

After almost twenty years in this vision, it is clearer to many of us in TJCI that this reconciliation is more difficult and more demanding even than we thought at the beginning. It is difficult because of the 1,700 years without a distinctive corporate Jewish witness to Yeshua. It is difficult because the history of negative relations, of rejection, contempt, and suspicion, has been so long and so complex. This difficult and complicated history has been marked by ever-increasing Christian division. The existing ways of being disciples of Jesus had been in conflict with each other and these models were a mixture of positive affirmations about God, Jesus, and the life of faith, and negative affirmations attacking alternative models. Why am I saying all this? Because I want to emphasize how humanly difficult and almost impossible are two complementary tasks: (1) the task of forming an authentic and communal Jewish witness to Yeshua after all these centuries of rejection and conflict; (2) the task of reconciliation, of re-establishing a right and respectful harmony and relationship between the Jew and the Gentile, the Jew and the Greek.

It shows me that the deepest issue is the reconciliation of Israel and the nations, of the Jewish people and the Gentiles, which we believe can only happen through Jesus and his death on the cross. The task of TJCII is to further this reconciliation. To help us I want to examine different ways in which Jews and Christians block this reconciliation and make it more difficult, sometimes while imagining they are supporting the TJCII vision. The fundamental model for TJCII has been the first Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15. It can be summed up as full acceptance of the Gentiles, refusing to require them to convert to Judaism, imposing the minimum of requirements, in effect to keep the Noachide commandments. It required of all, Jew and Gentile, conversion to and faith in Jesus Christ, and for the Gentiles a rejection of all idols, of emperor-worship, and pagan abominations. TJCII as an initiative of reconciliation is based on the apostolic council in Acts 15. Here the apostles and elders of Jerusalem, reflecting no doubt a range of positions, are led by the Holy Spirit to make a very generous decision about the Gentiles.

### The Temptations Against Full Reconciliation

An obvious temptation from the Jewish side is to repeat the stance of those Jewish believers who came down to Antioch and said, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15: 1). The apostles and elders of Jerusalem rejected this position, and so does TJCII. But the same spirit can show up today in other ways. The first Jerusalem Council was not discussing issues about the practice of Jewish believers, only the question of the admission of Gentiles. In the vision of TJCII, a second Jerusalem Council would be focused first on the acceptance and recognition of the Jewish believers in Jesus. It would not be focused on the different practices of the Christian Churches. Undoubtedly, the return to Jewish origins, the

recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus, and the church of the first generation, these will have a powerful reforming effect on the Christian Churches. But it is not the calling or role of TJCII to tell the Churches how they should change, other than to insist on the rightful place of the Jewish believers and on repentance for the sins of the Churches and of Christians towards the Jewish people and the church of the Jews in particular.

Thus, there is no place in TJCII for people to insist that the Churches replace the Christian feasts by the feasts of Israel, though it is appropriate to insist that the Churches respect and learn about the feasts of Israel. There is no place in TJCII to insist that the Churches abandon Sunday and worship on the Shabbat instead.

There is some Messianic Jewish literature that lacks scholarly foundations but is often spread uncritically. For example, books and booklets arguing that Sunday observance is replacement of Shabbat. The honouring of the first day of the week started because it was the day of the resurrection, the beginning of the new creation in Messiah. Later as replacement thinking spread it was assumed that Sunday replaces Shabbat. Christians did not invent Sunday to replace Shabbat. When we understand that, we have to ask what reconciliation means between Messianic Jews worshipping on Shabbat and Christians worshipping on Sunday. Reconciliation does not mean telling the other to stop their practice and do what we do. It calls for an integration of what is holy and from God in the honouring of Shabbat and in the honouring of Sunday.

The question arises here about Gentile enthusiasts for Israel who want only to do Jewish things and who may be tempted to oppose them to Christian ways. So here in the Netherlands you have some congregations without any Jewish members

that are called Messianic congregations. In general, the spirit of TJCII is against Gentiles just copying Jewish ways. Gentiles are normally called to be Gentiles, that is to live their faith in Jesus as people from the nations, as Jews are called to be Jews. This requires in the TJCII vision a great respect for the Jewish believers, and a desire to support them. It also means working for the removal of all replacement thinking and behaviour. This is different from copying the Jews. This is also a question in the USA, where many Messianic Jewish congregations have a higher percentage of Gentile members than Jewish. So what to say? It is possible that the Lord calls some Gentiles so to identify with the Jewish people that they make this a total lifestyle choice. It is a form of conversion to Judaism. What is not appropriate is copying Jewish ways but without the total life and identity commitment. An important point here is that Gentiles acting like Jews does not impress the Jewish community. It is one reason why many in the Jewish community see the Messianic movement as superficial, people wearing tallith and kippah without any rooting in the Jewish tradition.

As the TJCII vision is for the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, between Israel and the nations, any approach which reduces or weakens the proper contribution of both is to be avoided. I often hear anti-Greek sentiments being expressed that manifest an attitude "Hebrew good, Greek bad." We cannot think in these simplistic ways. First, the process of Hellenization had been going on for a time before Jesus came, so the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Tanakh, was completed in the second century BC. The New Testament is written in Greek, and when it cites passages from the Old Testament, it uses the Septuagint. Second, the election of Israel is not a condemnation of the nations. The riches of the nations are to be brought into the New Jerusalem. "The kings of

the earth will bring their splendor into it. ... The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.” (Rev. 21: 24, 26). But “Nothing impure will ever enter it” (Rev. 21: 27). The riches and splendour of the nations need purification – and for this they need the Word of the Lord that goes out from Jerusalem, and the cleansing blood of the Messiah. In the New Testament, Greek represents the surrounding Gentile world at that time. Today we have to take into account other major cultures besides the Greek. But in all cases, there is a gift of God stemming from creation that then needs redemption and purification through the revelation to Israel and through their Messiah. A healthy approach recognizes the riches and gifts in the nations, while seeking this purification. The nations do not have to abandon their cultures to copy Israel. But they have to receive from Israel, from the biblical revelation, everything that concerns the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; everything that concerns the destiny of man and the mystery of Messiah.

Coming back to the issue of Jew and Greek, is philosophy beloved of the Greeks something to be rejected by Christians as alien to the heritage of Israel and alien to the Gospel that took shape in Israel? I think not. But for Christians, an acceptable philosophy has to be one that submits itself to the historical, incarnational, eschatological faith transmitted in and through Israel. The apostle Paul’s rhetoric at the end of 1 Corinthians 1 is not anti-Greek: it is that the person and message of Jesus is profoundly challenging to both Jew and Greek: “For Jews request a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, both to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Cor. 1: 22 – 25).

The Greek tendency, at least the Platonic tendency, is to think in terms of the present life being a shadow of the realm above, and of forms here on earth participating in the eternal divine forms. The danger is that this leaves out or weakens the profound Hebrew sense of history moving towards the fulfilment of God's promises. So the language of the New Testament speaks of "the age (aiōn) to come," which actually combines the Jewish conviction about what is to come with the Greek concept of aiōn. See Matt. 12: 32 and Heb. 6: 5. But the Greek idea of participation, which is very important in the Orthodox Church, is found in the New Testament, for example the phrase "partakers of/sharers in the divine nature" (theias koinōnoi phuseōs) in 2 Peter 1: 4.

Let me mention a strongly Jewish characteristic that is related to what I have just said. The Jewish approach, most evident in rabbinic writings, is to resist total systems that explain everything. This characteristic is closely related to the Jewish horror of idolatry. The tendency of the human mind to want to explain everything is viewed as a form of idolatry – it gives rise to ideology that is the idolatry of the mind. This pattern is manifested in the Jewish lack of embarrassment about conflicting data or apparently conflicting data. So the tendency in both Old and New Testaments, as characteristically Jewish literature, is for the contrasting or conflicting data to be mentioned alongside each other. The logical Gentile mind wants to eliminate all inconsistencies, and to harmonize everything. This is where we Gentiles need to listen to the Hebrew voice – and not be worried that we cannot harmonize everything to our satisfaction: four Gospels, John really different to the synoptics, two versions of the Our Father, sermon on the mountain, sermon on the plain, etc. This point is highly relevant to the interpretation of prophecy.

It is to the great credit of Evangelical Christians that they really study every book of the Bible. It is a great weakness of Catholics that we rarely do so. But Evangelical Christianity has been heavily marked by the rationalism of the modern age, even without fighting against its unbelief. So we find many Evangelical teachings that show how all the prophecies fit together. This is where we need the wisdom of the rabbis. I have learned much from Evangelical Bible teachers, but I have learned to suspect the harmonizing systematizing process that pieces together texts from different periods and environments in the quest for total explanation. Prophecy is full of vivid imagery, profound poetic forms of expression, and cannot be collapsed into one time frame with only one “right” interpretation. The challenge here is for those of us from the historic churches to take the biblical prophecies about Israel, the land, Jerusalem, seriously. The challenge for Evangelicals is resist trying to fit everything into a neat explanation, and to treat prophetic visions like a precise timetable or an architect’s plan.

Another point of great importance in giving first place to the Hebrew and the Jewish concerns our understanding of the human race. In the biblical view, strongly anchored in the Old Testament, the bodily–physical order is foundational. It is the whole person who is called by the Lord and who worships God. It is the whole person intrinsically related to fellow humans who is called and who serves. By the time of the New Testament, there were competing philosophies of man that exalted the “spiritual–inner” at the expense of the bodily–outer. We can see Paul fighting this kind of thinking in 1 Corinthians: people who argued that sexual sin is just something external touching the body but not the spirit. “Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know



that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you ... therefore glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor. 6: 18 – 20). The Jewish understanding protects us from any tendency to view the bodily–physical order as inferior or tainted. Something similar applies to protect us from individualistic tendencies that minimize or forget that each person belongs to a family, a tribe, a people, a race.

Priority of the Hebrew/Jewish framework, calling for Gentile purification. But call for Gentile purification is recognition of Gentile riches and not outward imitation of Israel.

For Christians, the key questions in differences between Jews and Christians are: (1) what Christian differences are a consequence of faith in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world? (2) what Christian differences are a consequence of replacement thinking, and of the idea that God has rejected the Jewish people? (3) With the Christian spiritualization of the Jewish heritage, what elements are an authentic spiritualization genuinely present in the New Testament, for example the spiritual transformation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus? (4) what elements are the result of a false spiritualization resulting from an attempt to make God’s promises to Israel of land, kingdom, city transferable to a Gentile Church?