

## Israel and the Church

Second Talk given in Lyon at Ecumenical Day, January 21, 2012

### The Biblical Evidence

#### I: The first wrong solution: two-covenant theology

In the Scriptures, the new covenant is not made simply with the nations (Gentiles), but is made first with Israel, the people of the first covenant.

Jer. 31: 31: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with **the house of Israel and the house of Judah ...**”

Luke 22: 20: “And likewise the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’” See also 1 Cor. 11: 25.

There is no suggestion in the New Testament that Jesus died only for the sins of the Gentiles.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Rom. 1: 16).

“be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4: 10 - 12).

“We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus .... Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.” (Acts 13: 32, 38 - 39).

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1: 17).

#### The second wrong solution: Two totally separate religions with totally separate identities and their own integrities

In one way, this language is trying to express something valid, for in fact Christianity and Judaism have developed over many centuries in quite different ways. If we are to respect a people and their faith heritage, we have to respect them as they are and as they have developed. But what is false is to make these distinct historical identities something **absolute** that corresponds to the **full will of God**.

In the Scriptures, God has **one plan**. This plan is centred on his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. So Paul refers to this plan as *the mystery of Christ* (Eph. 1: 9 - 10; 3: 4 - 6, 9; 5: 32; Col. 1: 27; 2: 2 - 3; 4: 3). It is summed up from the universal angle in Eph. 1: “For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Eph. 1: 9 - 10).

If you absolutise the distinct identities of Judaism and Christianity, it can in fact be denying that Christianity and Judaism have any inherent relationship with each other.

Pope John Paul II addressed this issue very delicately when he made the first ever visit of a Pope to a Jewish synagogue, in Rome in 1986. Notice the very careful wording of the Pope:

It is understood that our two religious communities are connected and closely related at the very level of their respective religious identities. ... The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion.

The Pope speaks of "their respective religious identities" but then he shows that to separate them entirely is to falsify the faith of Israel and the faith of the Church.

The biblical vision here is that God first called Israel and made a covenant with Israel, and that then through Jesus this covenant is renewed and reshaped but not abolished so that God's salvation is taken to the nations.

### III. Key Elements in a Proper Biblical Understanding of Israel and the Church

#### 1. Jesus is Jewish

Matt. 1: 1; Luke 2: 21, 32, 34; Rom. 1: 3; 2 Tim. 2: 8.

Rev. 5: 5 "the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David".

#### 2. Jesus identifies himself fully with his people Israel including their sins;

He receives the baptism of repentance (Luke 3: 2) from John, whose ministry is totally within Israel (John 1: 31).

#### 3. In his earthly ministry Jesus is sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15: 24);

He chooses twelve apostles clearly because there are twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19: 28; Rev. 21: 12, 14); the apostles are first sent to the towns and villages of Judea, not to the Samaritans or the Gentiles (Matt. 10: 5 - 6).

#### 4. Only after the resurrection of Jesus are the twelve sent to the nations (Matt. 28: 19).

#### 5. Paul's order is first to the Jews, going to the synagogues, then to the Gentiles.

#### 6. The first total pagans to be converted and baptized are in Antioch (Acts 11: 19 +); only after this does Paul have his vision of the Church of the "one new man" made up of Jew and Gentile, reconciled through the cross (Eph. 2: 14 - 16).

#### 7. In Jesus, Israel is transformed through the Holy Spirit.

#### 8. The Church is "transformed Israel" fulfilling its calling as a priestly people to bless the nations by the opening to the Gentiles.

### IV: Can the Church recover the original unity of Jew and Gentile in one body?

The total separation of the Church and the synagogue has existed for the biggest part of the history of the Church. So they have understood themselves as totally separate and distinct religions/faiths. During the time of separation, their situations were very different. In most places where the Church spread, the Church became closely aligned with the Empire and political authority, while the Jewish community was a minority, whose status varied from tolerated to oppressed and persecuted. The major exception were the lands that came to be ruled by Muslims from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, where Jews and Christians were both minority dhimmi communities subject to the restrictions of Islamic law. But in most places that situation did not bring them any close to each other.

Because of this history, the Jewish community has had to defend itself against Christian power and pressure in order to survive. Any suggestion that a Jew could believe in Jesus and be baptized (for them the definition of a Christian) was a total contradiction and a big threat. Yet as we have seen in the Lord's purposes the people of the new covenant were to be a renewed Israel into which Gentile believers were welcomed. So how can we move beyond the total resistance of the Jewish religious community to acknowledge Jewish believers in Jesus as still being Jews and the reluctance of the Churches to endorse Jewish expression of faith in Jesus?

First, the Christian Churches and their people need to develop a great love and respect for the Jewish people. This is absolutely necessary for the Jewish fears and suspicions to be overcome. This love includes a sympathetic approach to their long suffering at the hands of Christians and the Church.

Second, the Christians and their Churches need to humble themselves and confess their sins against the Jewish people and against God's purpose for the Church made up of Jews and Gentiles. Without this repentance coming strongly from the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches in particular the Jewish resistance to everything associated with Jesus will continue. This confession has to begin from the way we have de-judaised Jesus.

What role can Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews play? I think we have to see the hand of God in the rise of the Messianic movement and of Jewish members of the Churches rediscovering the importance of their Jewishness. Only the Holy Spirit can truly bring this about. But they have to avoid all triumphalism and be healed of any anger for their rejection by the Jewish and especially the Orthodox Jewish community. The Messianic Jewish movement is a witness, a prophetic witness. But it is not yet a real bridge between the Jewish and the Christian worlds. It is not accepted by either community. It is not anchored in the life of either community. This is a serious weakness as Israel and the Church are by their nature and calling embodied socio-historical realities. Fr Weksler story.

Only as there is a deep humbling of the Synagogue and of the Church, but starting from the Church, can there be the purification in both traditions that separates the authentic that comes from the God of Israel [and from his Son Jesus Christ] through the Holy Spirit from

the problematic, the distorted and the sinful that comes from our opposition and suspicion of each other, from the distancing and ultimately total separation that should never have happened.

Israel and the Church: two ways or one? to the	Only one way, Jesus, the Jew who opens Israel nations.
Old (First) Covenant or Two Covenants? transformed	One renewed and deepened covenant from within.
One Faith/Religion or two? been be,	Two faiths/religions that should never have two? Two called to be what God called them to namely one.