

A Guide for **PREACHERS**



Suggestions for Biblically-faithful
and Jewish-sensitive preaching





Introduction

In recent years many members of the British Messianic Jewish Alliance have been deeply hurt by the negative attitudes towards the Jewish people, thoughtless comments about Jewishness and hostility to the state of Israel they have encountered in churches, university Christian Unions, books and the Christian press. Consequently many British Messianic Jews are beginning to feel disenfranchised from the wider body of Christ to which they belong.

We live at a time when more Jewish people than ever before believe in Jesus. For many of them the road to faith has been difficult and they have had to overcome a number of serious spiritual, emotional and intellectual barriers, not least the history of anti-Semitism which has been a feature of the European Church for hundreds of years. For some

Messianic Jews and Jewish Christians, faith in Jesus has resulted in ostracism from families and friends. To then find themselves in churches where derogatory remarks about the Jewish people and Israel are a frequent feature of the preaching and the Christian press is deeply painful.

There are an estimated 5-7,000 Jewish believers in Britain today. In British churches there are many 'hidden Jews', that is, people who have at least one Jewish parent or grandparent. We recognise that no preacher would deliberately intend to offend Jewish people who may be in their congregation and it is hoped that this paper will serve as a modest contribution to help preachers to be not only Biblically faithful but also Jewish-sensitive.

The Gospel alone should offend

Christian ministers and lay people ought to be aware of Jewish sensitivities and should never assume that there are no Jewish people in their congregations. To Jewish ears, even the term "Jew", when it comes from a Gentile, resonates negatively. Elderly Jewish people remember how the terms "Jew" and "the Jews" were used by the Nazis and are still used by anti-Semites. It carries undertones of "dirty Jew", "Jew-boy", he "Jew-ed me", and so on. Although "Jew" cannot be avoided totally, "Jewish people" is preferable, as it affirms the humanness that was taken away by the Nazis.

Preachers would be more accurate in avoiding negative generalisations about the Jewish people. The authors have heard the following statements from pulpits: "The Jews killed the Lord Jesus"; "Jesus criticised the Jews for their hypocrisy"; "The Jews still reject Jesus", and, "Let's not be judgemental like those Jews". Another sweeping statement heard recently was that if a group of Jews agreed with a Christian exposition of the Old Testament, the preacher had probably gone wrong somewhere. Whatever truth there might be in that claim, it fails to acknowledge that there always have been Jewish people who accept Jesus as Messiah and believe that the Hebrew Scriptures point to Him!

When leading the service, praying in public and preaching on the Gospels, ministers and lay people should distinguish between the Jewish people in general and the corrupt first-century religious leadership who were complicit with Herod and the Romans in the death of Jesus. It is wrong to refer to the Jewish people as "Christ-killers" or to say that "the Jews killed Jesus" because, as well as being deeply offensive, the generalisation fails to reflect the full biblical picture. It should be borne in mind also that there are now legal implications to the charge that the Jewish people bear the sole responsibility for the death of Jesus. The report of the All Party Inquiry into anti-Semitism to Parliament views the charge as deeply offensive and a form of anti-Semitic abuse. It recognises that: "In recent years the Catholic and Anglican Churches have overtly distanced themselves from the themes of traditional theological anti-Semitism, for example the accusation that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ." (p.46)





“The Jews” according to John

Particular care needs to be exercised when expounding the fourth Gospel because John uses the Greek phrase *hoi Ioudaioi* in more than one way. Our English translation “the Jews” is not always adequate as sometimes the term is a reference to “the Judeans” (as opposed to Galileans) or the “Jewish religious leaders”, as the Contemporary English Version renders it. Of course, the gospel is an offence to both Jews and Gentiles but the preaching of the cross should be the only stumbling-block in our preaching. When we preach from John’s Gospel, if we are not aware of the acute sensitivities of our Jewish hearers we may unwittingly reinforce their perception that Christianity is hostile to the Jewish people and thus drive them away from the Saviour instead of drawing them to him. A graphic example of what we mean can be seen in the remark made by a Jewish lady that an evangelical church service she had attended had been an “incitement to racial hatred of Jewish people.”

The eminent New Testament scholar D.A. Carson recognises this problem in *The Gagging of God*: “Granted the deeply ingrained and odious anti-Semitism that seeps through much of Western culture, it is vital that extra care be taken with our translations of the Bible, so that translators do not unwittingly generate harmful impressions among the untutored or the bigoted.” (p.337)

Stephen Motyer concludes in *Your Father the Devil?*

“The Jews” is not a global designation of all Abraham’s descendants. We have suggested that the lexicography of this word is complex, but that in essence it would be heard - and its usage in the Gospel [of John] reinforces this - to refer to a distinct group within Judaism, the Judea-based, Torah-loyal adherents of the Yavneh ideals, the direct heirs of pre-70 Pharisaism. This view has the advantage of covering virtually all the occurrences of [hoi Ioudaioi] in the Fourth Gospel - all except the handful of places where it has a purely ethnic force, particularly in the phrase “King of the Jews”. (p.213)

Other New Testament terms need to be approached with care and the Greek originals consulted. For example, in James 2:2, where the context is neutral, our English translations usually render the Greek word *sunagoge* as “assembly”, whereas in Revelation 2:9, where the context is negative, the same word is simply transliterated as “synagogue”! Though *sunagoge* can be translated as “assembly” or transliterated as “synagogue” we must remember that the English word “synagogue” was not current at this point in history and the fully formed synagogue of modern day Judaism had not yet fully developed. Christ’s reference to the synagogue of Satan in Revelation 2:9 should not be interpreted to mean that religious Jews worship the devil. The reference may be a dramatic underlining of an undisclosed blasphemy of some Gentiles in Smyrna who were pretending to be Jewish - “which say they are Jews, and are not”. The phrase may be nothing more than a hyperbolic statement to the effect that whoever these people were, they were “the assembly” of Satan and not a Jewish synagogue. Dogmatism on the issue should therefore be avoided.

Painful History



It is not only wrong, but in some cases also illegal, to use terminology and verbal or visual illustrations that employ negative racial stereotypes of Jewish people. Gross caricatures were used by the Nazis to demonise the Jewish people and thus grease the wheels of the Holocaust.

Be aware of issues that may be of particular sensitivity to Jewish people, such as the Holocaust, the Crusades, the Pogroms and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even the Parliamentary All Party Inquiry into anti-Semitism recognises that “a discussion needs to take place within the media on the impact of language and imagery in the current discourse on Judaism, anti-Zionism and Israel and we call upon them to show sensitivity and balance in their reporting of international events and recognise that the way in which they report the news has significant consequences on the interaction between communities in Britain.

We conclude that whilst many have pointed out that criticism of Israel or Zionism is not necessarily anti-Semitic the converse is also true: it is never acceptable to mask hurtful racial generalisations by claiming the right to legitimate political discourse.” (p.54)

Many Christians rightly admire Martin Luther as the great defender of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But for many Jewish people the mere mention of the great reformer’s name sets their teeth on edge because of the vitriolic diatribes he issued against the Jewish people in his later years. Jewish people are very conscious that Luther’s anti-Semitic treatise *On the Jews and their Lies* had a profound influence on Adolf Hitler. This does not mean, of course, that preachers should never quote or allude to Luther, but they should do so carefully, tactfully and with qualification where appropriate.

Whose Land?



Insensitive references in church to the Israeli-Arab conflict can be an additional stumbling-block to Jewish people. Irrespective of one’s personal perspective on the politics of the conflict, the problem has a long and complex history and any comment on the issue should be made with extreme caution. Blanket condemnation of Israel should be avoided.

This is not a call for preachers to approve all that Israel does; it is simply a plea to be aware that in the opinion of many Jewish people the state of Israel has become “the Jew” among the nations, whose very existence is questioned. Many Jewish people, such as the columnist and author Melanie Phillips, interpret some Christian criticism of Israel as hatred of the Jews and see it as the latest manifestation of historic anti-Jewish theology. We must choose our words carefully and be aware of their implications.

Pray publicly for “the peace of Jerusalem” and the salvation of the Jewish people. In the Church of Scotland in the nineteenth century, prayer was offered every Sunday for the salvation of the Jews, recognising that the “Almighty and Eternal God” does not “reject from His mercy His ancient people the Jews”. During that same century some 250,000 Jewish people came to faith in their Messiah. (A Book Of Common Order, 1896, p.272.).

When praying for Israel it should be remembered that the term “Holy Land” is not as neutral as one might imagine. Because the state of Israel is a legally and internationally recognised democracy with a UN charter, to refer to “the Holy Land” is, albeit unintentionally, a snub to the nation, as if it did not exist. The term “Palestine” also has a political connotation, therefore until the United Nations charters a new country called “Palestine”, it would be safer to refer to the “Palestinian Authority”. Pray for “Israel” and “the Palestinian Authority-controlled areas”, as these terms reflect the current legal status of the region.

“That they may be saved”

It is necessary to distinguish between “Judaising”, which the New Testament condemns, and “Jewishness”, which the New Testament celebrates. We should not encourage Jewish disciples of Jesus to forsake their God-given Jewish identity. One of the most difficult obstacles that Messianic Jews have had to overcome in their journey to faith has been the claim from the Jewish community that it is impossible to believe in Jesus and be Jewish. To have this canard reinforced by their newly-gained Gentile brothers and sisters in Jesus, or to be expected to prove the genuineness of their faith by eating what they have always believed to be unclean food places a great emotional burden on them that would not be imposed on believers from any other background. Care should also be taken when referring to “Jewish converts to Christianity”, as the term “conversion” has been tainted by the memory of forced conversions in the Middle Ages. It is helpful to remember that there are no “converted Jews”, only “converted sinners”. Jewishness is not a sin to be repented of; we must all convert from sin to Christ.

According to *Summary of anti-Semitism in the European Union* (updated version December 2006), “In Europe anti-Semitism is a very old and deeply rooted cultural trait” (p.18). We must learn, therefore, to abandon any natural prejudices and wrong attitudes.



Above all, we must remember the injunction of the Church’s greatest missionary, who was a Jewish man: “Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved”. (1 Corinthians 10:32)

Resources:

Maurice G Bowler. The New Testament: A pro-Jewish Book, available online:
http://www.shalom.org.uk/pro_jewish_book.htm

Michael L Brown. Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Vol 1. General and Historical Objections, Baker Books, 2000.

Beatrice Bruteau (Ed) Jesus Through Jewish Eyes: Rabbis and Scholars Engage an Ancient Brother in a New Conversation, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001.

D.A. Carson. The Gagging of God, Zondervan, 1996.

Robert P. Ericksen. Theologians Under Hitler, Yale University Press, 1985.

Robert P. Ericksen & Susannah Heschel. Betrayal, German Churches and the Holocaust , Fortress Press 1999

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novack, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel & Michael A Signer (Eds). Christianity in Jewish Terms, West view Press, 2000.

Jacob Jocz. The Jewish People and Jesus Christ After Auschwitz, Baker Book House, 1981.

Graham Keith. Hated without a cause? - A Survey of anti-Semitism, Paternoster, 1997.

Steve Motyer. anti-Semitism and the New Testament, Grove Books, 2002.

Steve Motyer. Your Father the Devil, Paternoster, 1997.

Perceptions of anti-semitism in the European Union
<http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/AS/AS-interviews-EN.pdf>

Post Vatican II Papal advice on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html

Report of The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into anti-semitism
<http://thepeca.org/Report.pdf>

The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia working definition of anti-Semitism <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/56589.htm>

David Stern. Jewish New Testament Commentary, Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992.

Summary of anti-Semitism in the European Union
http://eumc.europa.eu/eumc/material/pub/AS/Antisemitism_Overview_December_2006_en.pdf .