

Jewish evangelism

Is it conceit or compassion?

ON ANOTHER INFAMOUS SEPT. 11 (1999), MAJOR newspapers across America called the effort to evangelize Jewish people arrogant and scandalous. It was a response to the Southern Baptist summons that we pray for Jewish people to trust Christ. In my hometown of Minneapolis the editors of the *StarTribune* quoted Abraham Heschel's view that "Christians must abandon the idea that the Jews must be converted." This idea, Heschel said, is "one of the greatest scandals in history" (Sept. 11, 1999, p. A20).

Two years later, Jews for Jesus came to town with their "Behold Your God" campaign. Our church supported them in every way. The fallout among downtown clergy was not pretty. In a letter to me and the organizing committee, the leaders of nine large churches wrote, "We feel that efforts by Christians to convert Jews are counter-productive, injurious to Christian-Jewish relations, and contrary to the true spirit of Christ" (March 9, 2001).

I responded to the *StarTribune* position with an editorial in defense of Jewish evangelism—a response that brought another letter from four churches: "Arrogant" is the right word to describe any attempts at proselytizing—in this case the effort of Christians to 'win over' their Jewish brothers and sisters." Such is the spirit of our relativistic time. What shall we say?

We should express sadness because the newspaper and the letters so badly distort the historic Christian and biblical teaching about the relationship between Israel and the church. There is no doubt that many people in Christendom have treated Jews badly over the centuries and often fostered a horrible attitude of anti-Semitism. That we repudiate, for the same reason we repudiate the call to abandon efforts to win Jewish faith in Jesus Christ. It is false to the New Testament.

According to the New Testament Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the hopes of Israel. He is the Yes to all God's promises (2 Corinthians 1:20). He is the Messiah (Mark 14:61-62; Matthew 16:16; John 20:31; Acts 9:22; 1 John 2:22; 5:1). To reject Him is to reject God the Father, and to confess Him as the treasured Lord of your life is to be reconciled to God. "No one

who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2:23).

John and Paul learned this from Jesus. When a non-Jewish centurion came to Jesus for the healing of his servant, Jesus opened his heart and said, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be

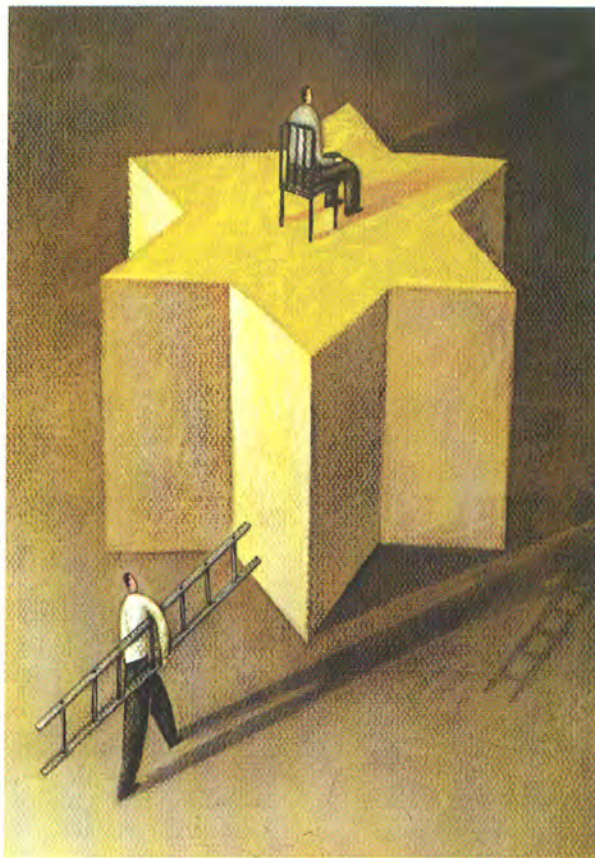
thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:10-12). In other words, a gentile who believes in Jesus will be at the table of inheritance with Abraham in the age to come, but a Jew who does not believe will be cast into outer darkness.

This is what Jesus and the apostles taught: Gentiles become heirs of Abraham's promises by faith in the Messiah Jesus, and Jews forfeit their final inheritance as Jews if they reject Jesus as the Messiah. It is a profound misunderstanding of Christianity to describe this teaching as an arrogant call for Jews to abandon their heritage. The biblical way to say it is that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), and that the promises made to Abraham are the root that supports all salvation (Romans 11:18). The only way for any gentile to be saved is to become a fellow heir of God with Abraham by trusting in the Jewish Messiah.

Judaism is so central to

Christianity that there is no salvation without it. And Jesus Christ is so central to Judaism that there is no salvation without Him. It is not arrogant for Christians to say to Jews: "We have no hope without your heritage and your Messiah; and neither do you." In fact, even though it is perceived as offensive by many Jewish people, the call for prayer that Israel would believe on her Messiah is a profoundly loving act. For "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). That is why the apostles prayed, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).

True Christians lay down their lives for Jewish people, and will not settle for the half-love of seeking only for their well-being in this life. ●



by **JOHN PIPER**