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**Reformed Perspectives
in Jewish Evangelism**



Theological Accents
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Reformed Perspectives in Jewish Evangelism

Baruch Maoz

Introduction

“Reformed”

We would do best to begin with a definition of the terms used in our review of Reformed Perspectives in Jewish Evangelism.

By “Reformed” we refer to that depository of warm-hearted Christian conviction found in the historic creeds, particularly the Westminster, Helvetic and London or Philadelphia Confessions of Faith. To the consensus of these I ascribe and have every reason to believe that participating members of the PCA 2008 General Assembly do as well. Those are our common grounds and the basis on which our present review is conducted.

Pertinent to the present discussion, the items of faith we most value are our view of God as the eternally (Deut. 32:40, Jer. 10:10) glorious (Psa. 93:2), holy (I Sam. 2:2, Isa. 6:1–5), happy (I Tim. 1:11), good (Ex. 34:6, Psa. 17:7) and self sufficient one (Isa. 40:28, Eccl. 3:14) who exists in and of himself (Isa. 44:6, John 5:26) and for whom all else

exists (I Cor. 8:6, Heb.2:10) ; the one God who is three (Isa. 48:16; John 14:6) equally glorious and divine (II Cor. 13:14) persons, worthy (Rom. 9:5) of and righteously demanding (I Chron. 29:11, Psa. 46:10), the praise and obedient worship of his rational creatures.

God’s self sufficiency is expressed in his absolute sovereignty over all; in a grace that is given solely at his good pleasure and apart from any creaturely desert; in the unique and final authority of scripture in all matters of faith and practice; in the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit regenerating those appointed by God for salvation and resulting in faith, repentance and a new life; in the assurance of adoption and justification; in the law and its ongoing role in the spiritual life; in the necessity and usefulness of church life and the hope of eternal life.

General Eschatology is not an issue for our purposes: regardless of whether we embrace any of the common eschatological schemes, Jews need to hear the Gospel and Reformed Perspectives must guide our every evangelistic effort.

“Judaism”

By “Judaism” we refer to that extra-biblical interpretive and applicatory tradition developed by the Jewish people and represented today by rabbinicism. Judaism so-defined has, in important issues pertinent to the Gospel, moved further from biblical verity than did the Catholic Church before the Reformation.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism is not a creedal faith but for the contours where it comes into touch with polytheism or Christianity. Its two best known affirmations constitute a denial of polytheism on the one hand, of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity, the deity and saviorship of Jesus on the other.

Judaism is a highly eclectic religion, with a broad consensus. It is possible to find Jewish traditional support for contradictory theological and orthopractical issues, rendering Judaism a wax nose for the modern liberal study of religion. We will here assume the consensus that is generally recognized as representing Judaism.

Judaism is that national religion which is to dominate the world, with the gentile nations according the Jewish people their priestly role to mankind in their distinct but God-ordained worship of the Creator.

Judaism consists of a set of rules, primarily ritualistic, by which Jews should conduct their daily lives and in reward for which they obtain and retain God’s blessings. It is best known by its aforementioned denials of polytheism and of

Jesus’ deity and Messiahship. The rabbi, not God, now have the right to prescribe and to proscribe Jewish faith and conduct. Sin and holiness are issues of relative balance, achievable by man.

We do not presume to attempt, in the short space available, an exhaustive discussion of the subjects before us, nor of a single issue among those we will need to raise. My hope is to whet your appetite and to excite you toward an active involvement in preaching the Gospel to the Jewish people, particularly in your own areas of ministry, precisely because you affirm a Reformed Faith.

Common Grounds

Reformed perspectives share common ground with Judaism in areas that render communication between the two Faiths meaningful and render the Gospel potentially attractive to Jewish people but for the barrier of sin. Of course, we cannot overcome this barrier. That requires an act of God. But the extent to which we are able to demonstrate common ground is a basis of appeal because it indicates a shared commitment to the Bible, which both religions affirm as the arbiter of spiritual truth. That, in itself, is a helpful.

Of course, these common grounds are relative. Differences of emphasis, of theoretical and practical perception, must also be taken into account. Nevertheless, common grounds do exist. However, appearances deceive. There are semantic similarities that veil

broad differences of meaning. God, sin, redemption, law, Messiah – these are all familiar terms to both Jews and Christians. But they convey markedly different to the members of the two faith communities.

There is no denying that there are other faiths which share a common ground and, in some cases with Judaism or Christianity. We recognize that other religions also have one kind of appeal or another to Jewish people. My purpose in this paper is not to engage in a theoretical exercise in Comparative Religion, but to review some Reformed perspectives *visa vie* Jewish Evangelism.

The Need for a Divine Self-Revelation

Judaism and Christianity affirm without hesitation that man cannot, by searching, find out God (Job 11:7). Anything of substance man can know about God or his will must be the product of divine disclosure (Ex. 19:9, I Ki. 8:12, Isa. 46:5). That authoritative standard is to be found in a book (Ex. 34:27, Deut. 17:18) that does not narrate man's search for God but God's gracious revelation of himself to man.

Further, that book is firmly grounded in the tangibility of historical reality from creation to its intended culmination in the Day of Final Redemption. More than any other view, Reformed Christianity insists on these characteristics of the Bible, its nature and its authority, subjecting human reason, tra-

ditions, intuitions and other presumed sources of revelation to the scrutiny and evaluation of the scriptures.

Earthiness

Judaism and Christianity are, therefore, creation orientated and for that purpose taken up with history and with the purpose of history. Both religions are grounded in historical narrative, with issues of time, place, culture, and of political and economic realities. True, these all do not have ultimate weight. The ultimate is with God. But both religions are deeply engaged with reality.

Being so, both are inquisitive, rational and practically useful Faiths. Only to the extent that Christianity, Judaism or their influences prevailed in society was a basis available for scientific enterprise. This is most particularly true of Protestant and especially of Reformed Christianity. Look at the facts: where did science develop? The issue is not where technology could be found or where discoveries were stumbled upon; but where is the concept of a rational, ordered universe most coherently to be found if not in the context of Reformed Christianity? We will have occasion to return to this issue as we proceed.

Theocentricity

Both Judaism and Christianity are not only monotheistic religions, but

they share a similar though not identical theocentric focus. Islam's theocentric focus is of a very different, impersonal and fatalistic kind. Judaism and Christianity address God as loving Father who enters into covenant with his people. No other religion views God in such a way. God's glory, wisdom, strength and holiness, his kindness, goodness and truth are all aspects of his divine loveliness and worth. Of all versions of Christianity, none is more taken up with this view of God than the Reformed.

This theocentric view puts God at the centre of both Judaism and Christianity. Both religions teach that man's efforts are to be directed primarily Godward, and that man's obedient faith is the necessary and proper response to his eternal deity. Here, too, Reformed theology shines out. Man is not only to believe to be saved, but his unbelief is in itself a form of sinful rebellion. He who does not believe is already condemned precisely because of his unbelief.

The Need for Divine Intervention

Judaism and Christianity both recognize that, in an ultimately religious sense, man cannot save himself; divine intervention is needed. They both focus that intervention in the coming of a Messiah, and both perceive of his coming as the turning point in the history of the world, when the mankind will be transformed into an obedient community.

A Sense of Community

Judaism and Christianity both affirm the importance of community (nation in Judaism, church in Christianity) and therefore of communal responsibility. Both religions are known for their family values, their love of their children and for the close family ties cultivated and maintained. They are noted for the importance they attach to community and the value of an individual within the context of community; the duties of individuals toward their community. These are all emphases to be found in Judaism and in Christianity, particularly so among Reformed Christians where the church is far more than a social context for believers but the context in which God is obediently and lovingly served; his will taught and corporately executed; and his honor sought.

All this without denying the value of the individual, who may approach God, be heard by him and is called upon to act in ways that do not lead to self-destruction but to the cultivation of his God-given gifts and abilities, as well as those of his fellow.

These and other areas of common ground between Judaism and Christianity enable us to address Jews, religious or otherwise, in terms they can understand. They also carry an appeal to Jewish hearts because they lay at the core of Jewish self-understanding and of a Jewish world-view, however secular.

There are also important areas of difference, and we must now turn briefly to explore these.

Distinct Reformed Advantages

Having explored some of the perspectives shared by Judaism and Christianity, we need to look at the perspectives of Reformed Christianity *visa vie* Judaism on the one hand and other versions of Christianity on the other. It is in these areas that Reformed Christianity has an appeal and an attraction to Jewish hearts and minds that no other Faith can share. Let it not surprise you that some of these address issues common to humanity, for Jews are human too. Yet, a Reformed understanding of certain truths sharpens one's ability to present the Gospel to Jewish people in the way that other Christian views cannot.

We begin with areas discussed above because there are as many and as important differences between Judaism and Reformed Christianity in these areas as there are shared perspectives.

The Need for a Divine Self-Revelation

True, both Faiths share a common book and a common conviction as to the nature of the book and its theoretical authority. But there are major differences. Judaism does not believe in the sufficiency of scripture, nor in its perspicuity. It therefore establishes an interpretative authority between God's word and the believer. Like Roman Catholics, Jews are bound to understand the Bible as it is explained to them by those in authority. Most of them do not

study the Bible. They focus, rather, on the interpretive tradition. So much is this the case that Jewish tradition has a collegium of Rabbis silencing God when he would intervene to explain the meaning of a text!

Reformed Christianity calls upon man to stand before God as a rational, moral individual who is responsible for his own views and actions.

What is more, Jewish attention in the study of the Bible has always been primarily ritualistic: what constitutes working or carrying on the Sabbath, how much of a field is a fringe, what one is to wear and how the religious calendar is to be calculated. Morality and spirituality take second place at best.

Judaism does not understand the role and purpose of the law as a spiritual and moral guide (it's "third use"). Judaism's perception of the role of the law undermines a truly biblical concept of sin by persuading its adherents that the primary issue is their ritualistic consistency. It therefore cannot address the sense of guilt that nags at every human heart and falls short of the need created by that mercifully insistent nag that evidences the truth that man was created in the image of God and will find no rest until restored to that image.

Earthiness

Both Judaism and Christianity share in a wonderful, heartwarming earthiness that expresses itself in the hope of a resurrection. Such a viewpoint joy-

fully submits all that is to the service of whom who gave us all things richly to enjoy, and who intends the redemption of our very bodies as well as the restoration of all creation, destined one day to share in the blessing of the Adoption.

Yet that hope has lost its grip in all but highly mystical forms of Judaism today. There is no real hope beyond what is expected on earth. Witness a Jewish burial service and you will see the grim, despairing sorrow that characterizes most of such events.

Other forms of Christianity are often semi-gnostic in that they teach that spirituality has to do with escaping the earth and rejecting earthy joys.

Reformed Christianity, on the other hand, bravely loves all God has made and believes in subduing the earth to his service. It exults in earthly joys with a sense of gratitude to God and, at the same time, is willing to forgo temporal earthy pleasure to gain the heavenly and eternal.

In other words, Reformed Perspectives in the moral and practical implications of the Doctrine of Creation appeal to the inner senses of Jewish people to the extent that they identify, consciously or otherwise, with the truths of that doctrine as found in scripture.

Theocentricity

Judaism's theocentricity is faulty. Its understanding of monotheism leaves God alone in a universe, with no one to love or to love him unless he creates

a world of beings. It perceives of a God who prefers moral behavior (witness the message of the biblical prophets), but is willing to be satisfied with ritual (this, in spite of a major emphasis in the biblical prophetic message!). Heart involvement is desirable but not necessary. So long as the lips move, one's heart can be engaged in other things. Eating of leaven in one's home during Passover desecrates the street more than all the acts of infidelity, unkindness and brutality that might have occurred there.

We have referred to the biblical message of the prophets. They, I think, are the main reason why there is so much social consciousness among Jewish people and why so many of them are at the forefront of socialist efforts to achieve an ideal society. Yet Judaism's practical emphasis leaves them high and dry. Christianity, particularly Reformed Christianity, is noted for its active social concern as an expression of God's common grace and as an aspect of every Christian's duty to society. This Reformed distinctive should never be employed as a means to any other end, and normally is not. But it shines bright and clear in the religious ideological hemisphere.

The Need for Divine Intervention

Judaism contradicts itself. It knows nothing of the power of the Holy Spirit in the regeneration of individuals, yet it looks toward a regeneration of human society. It does not teach that man

needs individual redemption in terms of the spiritual and moral transformation of his nature while affirming that human society is in such a need.

Judaism believes that individual man can transform himself whereas society is in need of divine intervention, focused on the person of Messiah. That intervention will not bring about the transformation of individuals but their submission to Messiah's reign, much like the Millenarian Rod of Iron Rule. Where are the grounds for a holy happiness under such an imposition, and how can society be transformed without affecting those who belong to society is a conundrum Judaism declines to address.

Reformed Christianity addresses it effectively. It reminds us that society is the shared life of individuals and that it cannot be redeemed apart from the redemption of those individuals. It lays the basis for the redemption of man by declaring all men equal in worth, equal in sin and in guilt, equal in inability and equally in need. It declares all men the object of God's common grace and the potential object of his saving grace, calling upon all men to repent and believe.

Judaism believes in man's ability to storm the walls of heaven – and of his own heart – and overcome them. But it can only do so as do some versions of Christianity, by lowering the standards to bring them within reach of human effort. Judaism provides an insufficient basis for praxis precisely because it knows nothing of the Spirit's regenerating, sanctifying work in a human

heart. It knows nothing of the love for God's moral law that the Spirit evokes in a regenerated heart, nothing of the blessedness of adhering to that law from the heart.

In other words, Judaism knows little if anything of real grace. Its views of divine intervention have more to do with human relations and of the material creation – acts of power. It knows nothing of the sufficiency of salvation that Reformed Christianity proclaims, of the savior who is able to fully save all who come to God by him; nothing of his sacrifice, offered once and for all; nothing of the Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son to glorify the Son in the lives of the redeemed. Reformed Christianity, on the other hand, most clearly insists precisely on these points.

A Sense of Community

Judaism's sense of community is inevitably unsatisfying because it both includes and excludes some of the worthy and of the unworthy. It is nationally based and assumed to be the product of national worth that reality tends to belie.

Reformed Christianity responds by presenting to the regenerated believer a life of increasingly redemptive experiences, from faith to faith and from glory to glory within the context of church life, where society sanctifies its members through the push-and-shove of individuals who labor alongside and with each other and with their sin,

seeking to learn to put God first. In the process, society is itself redeemed, as men and women grow in grace, in the knowledge of God and in the practice of their faith. Slowly, they and their society are being remade into the image of him who first made them, until they arrive – together – at the fullness of the stature of Christ and he is seen to be the Firstborn among many brethren.

Reformed Theism

Reformed Christianity speaks of God as the eternal one, glorious, holy, happy, good and self sufficient. It insists that he exists of necessity, in and of himself and that everything apart from him that exists, does so by him and for him. It points to God as the source and object of all that is. No view of God is more satisfying or truer.

Reformed Christianity insists that the one God is three persons, equal in deity and equally worthy of and righteously demanding the obedient worship of all his rational creatures. Here we have monotheism at its highest. The church becomes a reflection of the eternally holy, happy society that is God, called upon to show forth the praises of him who has called her out of darkness into his marvelous light. Life becomes meaningful in a way it could never be before.

Reformed Christianity affirms God's self sufficiency and unabashedly believes such divine sufficiency is

expressed in God's absolute sovereignty over all; in a grace that is given solely at his good pleasure, apart from creaturely desert; in the unique and final authority of scripture in all matters of faith and practice; in the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating those appointed by God for salvation, resulting in faith, repentance and a new life; in the assurance of justification; in the necessity and usefulness of both the law and of church life, and in the eager expectation of eternal life, where the Son has delivered up the kingdom to the father and God is all in all.

As such, Reformed perspectives are necessary to Jewish evangelism and should not be shirked as we present the Gospel to the Jewish people. We should have the courage of our convictions and dare live by them as we engage in any form of Christian ministry, including that of the evangelization of the Jews.

Rom. 1:16

Paul dared to act upon what he believed and the fruit of his labors is with us to this day. In Romans 1:16 Paul declared,

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Ever so briefly, I invite you to explore this passage with me.

Paul had faith in the power of the Gospel to win hearts. That is why he was not intimidated by those forerunners of the modern Messianic movement nor did he engage in any other form of manipulation. He proclaimed the Gospel boldly without submitting to the prejudices of his audience, whether it was wisdom they sought or power, because he believed the Gospel.

He also preached to all with his own people in mind, not because he was motivated by narrow or noble patriotism but because he believed the Gospel to be *first for the Jew*. Whatever else that might imply, it unquestionably implied that the Gospel was particularly pertinent to Jewish people. Peter put it this way:

all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways (Acts 3:24–26).

Paul put it thus:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised (Rom. 9:4–5).

Did I say Paul believed that the Gospel “*was*” particularly relevant to the Jewish people? That requires a correction. In Romans 1:16 Paul is telling the Roman Christians why he is not ashamed of the Gospel. He does so by describing ever so briefly (he will enlarge in the rest of his letter) its essence – what the Gospel is. He says that the Gospel is

- The very power of God;
- God’s power to save;
- God’s power to save all regardless of the depth of their sin, guilt or national identity;
- God’s power to save all apart from any contribution of their own (even their faith is the product of their election).

Paul does not end his description of the essence of the Gospel there. He makes one more point, to which he returns extensively in chapters 9–11. He insists that, as to its very essence,

- The Gospel is God’s sovereign power to save *the Jew first* as well as the gentile.

The reason for this is clear: If salvation is all of God’s gracious, sovereign doing (Chap. 4–8), regardless of the guilt or unworthiness of the redeemed (Chapters 1–3) and of their present inability to be perfect in spite of their duties (chapters 6–8), then this must be demonstrated in the history of Israel (9–11) no less than it should be exemplified in the community of believers (12–16). If God forsook Israel for their

sin, what grounds for confidence do we struggling Christians have? We are no better.

But God is always like himself, and, with regard to Israel, he is acting in a consistent manner. He will prove himself savingly faithful according to his covenant with them. God's stubborn faithfulness is no less an expression of his eternal sovereignty: he is subject to no factors, and none exists but those he creates and wishes to employ. Paul explains:

Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

As far as the Gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearcha-

ble his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"; "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever, Amen (Rom 11:23–36)!

This confidence in God, I propose, brethren, is no less of a Reformed perspective.

The Author

Über den Autor



American-born Jewish Christian converted in Israel while serving in the army in 1963. Married to Bracha, father of three. Pastor since 1976 of Grace and Truth Christian Congregation. (He pastored the church until his retirement, at the age of 65, in January 2009.) Authored nine theological and expositional books in Hebrew and one in English, another of his works is being prepared for publication in English. Two of his works have been translated into Dutch. Contributor to numerous books and author of numerous articles, including the extensive Jewish Christian Occasional Papers. Editor of the Modern Hebrew Bible, member of the editorial team for the New Hebrew Translation of the New Testament and of the Annotated New Hebrew New Testament. Initiator of Mishkan; the International theological forum on Jewish evangelism, Founder and Chairman of the International Jewish Evangelical Fellowship and of Keren Tkuma, the national social aid fund in Israel. Founder of the Fellowship of Hebrew Speaking Congregations in Israel, Instructor at the Israeli College of the Bible. Founder of the Messianic Action Committee which led the successful international protest against proposed anti-Christian legislation in Israel.

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