

# To the Jew First—Christian Mission to Abraham's Children: How Are the Gentiles Doing?

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The purpose of this project is to bring some sense of analysis to the question of Christian denominations' attitudes towards the task of Jewish evangelism.<sup>1</sup> The last 50 years of the history of Christian missions in this category has seen a quantum sea change that should be noted. This shift in priorities and rationale for taking or not taking the gospel to the children of Abraham also serves, it appears, as a bellwether for the various theological influences afoot in representative Christian confessional bodies. Attitudes towards this assignment likely will and do mirror particular denominations towards evangelism of all types of religious groupings. What is possibly at stake here is the very essence of Christian evangelism itself and the continued witness of the gospel of Christ.

Three genres of Christian denominations will be reviewed and then some attempt at analysis will be undertaken. The groupings to be surveyed briefly are: (1) mainline Protestant denominations (i.e. affiliates of the World Council of Churches); (2) The Roman Catholic Church; (3) representative groups of evangelicals.

First, mainline Protestant denominations will be considered. A. H. Baumann in his very able article, "Recent Statements on Jewish Evangelism," published by the Lausanne Conference on Jewish Evangelism in 1991, chronicled developments in the WCC from 1948 until the end of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Amsterdam in 1948 reported on "The Christian Approach to the Jews." It

<sup>1</sup> Much of this original article was published in the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism offprint for its sixth international conference (104-112). The paper in its present form was presented at the Evangelical Theological Society's 2002 meeting in Toronto, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Lausanne Council on Jewish Evangelism, 4th International Conference (Zeist, Holland, August 8-9, 1991).

acknowledged the recent horrors of the holocaust but went on to state that “the fulfillment of the commission,” i.e. Matthew 28:19-20, “requires that we include the Jewish people in our evangelistic task.”<sup>3</sup> The report continued,

In spite of the universality of our Lord’s commission and of the fact that the first mission of the church was to the Jewish people, our churches have with rare exceptions failed to maintain that mission. Owing to this failure our churches must consider the responsibility for missions to the Jews as a normal part of parish work, especially in those countries where Jews are members of the general community . . . we recommend: that they seek to recover the universality of our Lord’s commission by including the Jewish people in their evangelistic work.<sup>4</sup>

In 1954 the Second Assembly commented, “To expect Jesus Christ means to hope for the conversion of the Jewish people, and to love Him means to love the people of God’s promise.”<sup>5</sup>

Such explicit calls for the evangelization of Israel and compassionate appeals for the need of Jewish people for faith in Christ are not expressed quite so clearly again in WCC literature. Tenuousness and temerity begin to mark many statements regarding Jewish evangelism. Within a generation the communication of the gospel was diluted. By 1967 the WCC Commission on Faith and Order noted: “Perhaps even the only way in which Christians today can testify to the Jewish people about their faith in Christ may be not so much in explicit words but by service.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1982 the term “evangelism” was dropped from WCC publications related to Jewish ministry. That concept was replaced by “witness” which was interpreted as being both “word and deed.”<sup>7</sup> Other WCC-related churches ventured further from the biblical concept of evangelism. “The phrase ‘mission to the Jews’ puts Jews on a par with heathens and undervalues the specific position of the Jewish people among the nations,” stated the Central Board of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation (1977), while paradoxically at the same time maintaining that “Christians have to bear witness of their faith in Christ also to the Jews.”<sup>8</sup> Dialogue was increasingly affirmed as the principle

<sup>3</sup> First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948, 7; cited in A. Brockway and P. van Buren, et. al, *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23. Originally found in The Commission on Faith and Order, from a report of its committee on the Church and the Jewish People, August 1967.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

means of “relating” to Jewish people. The Texas Conference of Churches in 1982 declared the “avoidance of any conversionary intent or proselytism in the relationship.”<sup>9</sup>

Questioning of the legitimacy of Jewish evangelism continued into the 1980s. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church stated in 1987 that Christians and Jews are in a covenant relationship with God and that the “implications of this reality for evangelism should be explored.”<sup>10</sup> It goes on to maintain that “difficulty arises when we acknowledge that the same Scripture which proclaims that (i.e. Jesus’) atonement and which Christians claim as God’s word clearly states that Jews are already in a covenant relationship with God . . . ”<sup>11</sup>

Brockway and van Buren noted in their commentary on these documents: “In the last decades a clear shift is visible in the documents of both the WCC and its member churches away from the missionary approach to the Jews towards a dialogical relationship between the church and the Jewish people.”<sup>12</sup> In 1982 the WCC was straightforward enough to acknowledge “that a mission to the Jews is not part of an authentic Christian witness”;<sup>13</sup> and argued that “it is possible to regard the church and the Jewish people together as forming the one people of God, separated from one another for the time being, yet with the promise that they will ultimately become one.”<sup>14</sup>

Since 1988 the trend away from Jewish evangelism in WCC-related churches is more marked. A sampling of official statements demonstrates this fact. They include the WCC statement of November 1988 entitled, “The Churches and the Jewish People.” Here the WCC affirms “the uniqueness of Christ and the truth of the Christian faith,” but denounces “coercive proselytism directed toward Jews” as “incompatible with Christian faith.” No mention of biblically-based evangelism is made.

“Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations” by the Episcopal Church (1988) renounces “coercive proselytism” while embracing dialogue which is described as witness “of one’s faith conviction without the intention of proselytizing.”<sup>15</sup>

“A Statement on Relations Between Jews and Christians” produced by the Disciples of Christ in 1993 urges that “Christians today have an

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97. The statement went on to note “this does not exclude Jews and Christians from affirming to each other their respective beliefs and values.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 173.

urgent responsibility to converse and cooperate with, and to affirm Jewish people as the special kindred of Christians.”<sup>16</sup>

The United Methodist Church’s declaration, “Building New Bridges in Hope” (October 1996), notes that while

we as Christians respond faithfully to the call to proclaim the gospel in all places, we can never presume to know the full extent of God’s work in the world and we recognize the reality of God’s activity outside the Christian church. . . . We know that judgment as to the ultimate salvation of persons from any faith community, including Christianity and Judaism, belongs to God alone.<sup>17</sup>

“Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations,” issued by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, demonstrate a concern to be sensitive to “most Jews” view that sees “‘Jews for Jesus’ or ‘Messianic Jews’ . . . as having forsaken Judaism, and consider efforts to maintain otherwise to be deceptive”; it encourages all “to understand and respect” Jewish concern that “intermarriage and conversion” threatens their survival. None of the aforementioned documents express any commitment or concern for Jewish evangelism.

The Society of Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Hamburg, Germany in February 1995 went so far as to produce a document entitled “Renunciation of Mission to the Jews” which claimed that Matthew 28:18-20 was directed only “to the gentile nations” and that it “is not for the Jews.” In conclusion the piece encourages churches to “an intense process” to “induce a consensus about the renunciation of mission to the Jews.”

An obvious devolution in the biblical mandate for Jewish evangelism is traceable in the positions reflected by these WCC-aligned groups. First, beginning with the 1948 WCC statement, it is clear that there was a solid commitment to take the gospel to Jewish people. This stance was followed within a generation by an endorsement of dialogue and action being of equal value and apparently of the same nature as the spoken witness or gospel. Then, follows thirdly, an advocating of dialogical encounter without “the intention of proselytizing.” The fourth stage is that reflected most clearly by the Hamburg Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation which encourages “an intense process” for the “renunciation of mission to the Jews.”

It may well be argued that a final pattern of open opposition to not only Jewish evangelism but also the task of gospel proclamation generally has emerged. In November of 1999 the Chicago Council of

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<sup>16</sup> First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948, 7.

<sup>17</sup> “Building New Bridges,” 4.

Inter-religious leaders openly voiced opposition to Southern Baptist efforts to do church planting and evangelism in that city. The stated rationale for the council's concern, led in part by Jewish participants, was that such efforts would "foment hate crimes."

Clearly the post-modernizing of Christian evangelism so as to interpret such efforts as hate-filled and bigoted claims to possess the truth and insensitively to force it down the throats of unsuspecting converts has begun.

Secondly, we review broadly the Roman Catholic position. The Roman Catholic position on Jews' faith and Jewish evangelism reveals the same trend towards non-evangelism. *Nostra Aetate*, issued by Vatican II, is the trend-setting document for clarifying the Roman Catholic position toward non-Christian religions.<sup>18</sup> It states:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts, and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn. 14:6). In him (2 Cor. 5:18-19), men find the fulness (sic) of their religious life.<sup>19</sup>

The latter half of the above statement seems to preserve the centrality of Christian evangelism in the Roman Catholic sense and implies that Christ provides the "fullness" of religious life however that may be interpreted. One searches in vain for an exhortation to share the gospel with members of other faiths, including Jews. Instead the following proviso is included:

The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians . . .<sup>20</sup>

A missiological and theological tension has emerged within the Roman Catholic Church. On the one hand, emphasis may be found on affirming the uniqueness of the Roman Catholic faith while arguing for salvific exceptions for those who are not members of it. For instance, the

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<sup>18</sup> "Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," Vatican II, October 28, 1965.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: the concilian and post concilial documents* (Northport, New York, 1975), 739.

Roman Catholic Church in *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) excuses ignorance of the necessity of the church for salvation:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who nevertheless seek god with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – these too may achieve eternal salvation.<sup>21</sup>

The document continues,

Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life.<sup>22</sup>

The following statement relative to the Jews should be read in light of the above:

As holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize God's movement when it came (cf. Lk. 19:42). Jews for the most part did not accept the Gospel; on the contrary, many opposed the spreading of it. (cf. Rom. 11:28). Even so, the apostle Paul maintains that the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.<sup>23</sup>

It is necessary to conclude that the Catholic Church teaches that if Jewish people strive to lead a good moral life, follow the dictates of their conscience—albeit without explicit faith in Christ—salvation for them is achievable. They also may be excused from faith in Christ given possible barriers to belief. Missions to them would therefore, in many cases, be redundant and unnecessary.

It is understandable therefore why Roman Catholic bishops would agree with Lutheran and Anglican colleagues that there is no conflict between “a dialogue based on mutual respect for the sacredness of the other and the Christian mission to preach the Gospel.” They explained, however, “An aggressive direct effort to convert the Jewish people would break the bond of trust.”<sup>24</sup> Vigorous and passionate evangelism to the Jews is not part of the bishops’ agenda.

In the summer of 2002 a bishop’s committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops established an even firmer stance against

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 367-8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 741.

<sup>24</sup> “Statement on Christian - Jewish Dialogue,” June 25, 1996.

Jewish evangelism—stating quite boldly that it was unnecessary and counterproductive to the growth of Christ’s kingdom. The committee, meeting together with representatives of various Jewish groups, including representatives from the National Council of Synagogues, stated:

Neither faith group believes that we should missionize among the other in order to save souls via conversion. Quite the contrary: we believe both faith groups are beloved of God and assured of His grace.<sup>25</sup>

The Catholic committee opens the door to a very broad inclusivism by noting, “Though the Catholic Church respects all religious traditions and through dialogue with them can discern the workings of the Holy Spirit, and though we believe God’s infinite grace is surely available to believers of other faiths,” it more specifically states—“it is only about Israel’s covenant that the Church can speak with the certainty of the biblical witness.”<sup>26</sup> While the church apparently endorses the concept that God’s covenant with Israel includes the guarantee of personal salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ, the committee states that converts from Judaism “will be welcomed and accepted.”<sup>27</sup> The Jewish “witness to the kingdom . . . must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity.”<sup>28</sup> A stronger but nonetheless more duplicitous statement could hardly be penned.

While the Catholic position vis-à-vis Christian mission to the Jews mirrors that of the WCC-based groups, it is possible that the work of Vatican II was the primary theological impetus behind changes in both confessional groupings. At least it is obvious that the Roman Catholic Church has given itself to far more serious theological reflection, although convoluted from the biblical perspective, than has mainline Protestantism.

It is clear that serious slippage in Jewish evangelism has occurred both within the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Their documents have emphasized dialogue over against evangelism. In the case of the Roman Catholicism, a highly refined, but

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<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, Executive Director of the National Council of Synagogues, commenting upon the committee’s public release of the text, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission” (August 12, 2002). This document was drawn up by the Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (NCS/BCEIA). This information was originally found on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at <http://www.usccb.org>. Accessed: August 2002.

<sup>26</sup> “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

obvious inclusivism has become its official position. One should not expect, therefore, much if any emphasis to be put on Jewish evangelism among these denominations. And it may be that more outspoken opposition to Jewish evangelism will be forthcoming in the years ahead.

Third, it is only when attention is given to the evangelical wing of Christianity that any serious involvement in the sharing of the gospel to Jewish people can be discovered. Two or three examples will suffice to demonstrate that this is the case. First, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) in 1973, 1977, 1979, 1981 and 1989 issued resolutions on Jewish evangelism. The one for 1983 reads:

Resolved, that the LCMS affirm its belief that the Messiah, Jesus, is the only way for all people to be reconciled with God and affirm its desire that Jewish people be included in the proclamation of this truth.

More recently in 1989 the Synod encouraged,

That we . . . continue to pray for a mission concern for Jewish people throughout the world and encourage congregations and districts with larger concentrations of Jewish people to reach out to them with the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

The LCMS published a handbook titled *Witnessing to Jewish People* (authored by Bruce J. Lieske), conducted training for Jewish evangelism, supported missionaries to the Jewish people, and appointed a staff person for Jewish evangelism as a part of their action in 1989.

The Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) is another clear illustration of a denomination that has maintained a heart for taking the gospel to Jewish friends and neighbors. At their 20th General Assembly (1992), an overture regarding Jewish evangelism was passed. In part, it read:

. . . the 20th General Assembly of the PCA reaffirms that . . . “salvation is found in no one else (i.e. Jesus Christ) and that it is our duty, as Messiah’s people, to take the gospel to all the peoples of the earth, including the Jewish people. We call the Jewish people, . . . to join us in faith in their own Messiah . . . and in the proclamation of His gospel to all peoples.

In that same assembly the PCA matched its words with action by recognizing CHAIM—an evangelistic ministry to the Jewish people and expressing its willingness to support it.

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<sup>29</sup> Found in Bruce J. Lieske, *Witnessing to the Jewish People* (Orlando, FL: Lutherans in Jewish Evangelism, 1995), 19.

Likewise the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) passed a similar resolution (in fact, partly based on the PCA overture) in 1996. It read, in part:

Whereas, our evangelistic efforts have largely neglected the Jewish people, both at home and abroad;

Whereas, there has been an organized effort on the part of some to deny that Jewish people need to come to their Messiah . . .

Be it resolved, that we commit ourselves to prayer, especially for the salvation of the Jewish people . . . and . . . that we direct our energies and resources toward the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish people.

This action, along with the decision of the denomination's national mission board to appoint a national consultant, or missionary, to the Jewish people, created a firestorm of media attention. A major article in the *New York Times* announced the action and that was followed by national television, evening news attention, talk radio programs dedicated to the issue, news clips on NPR radio, guest editorials in various newspapers and journals as well as mentions in the *World Book* and *Encyclopedia Britannica* yearbooks. Additionally, various ecumenical and Jewish gatherings expressed their disdain for the action.<sup>30</sup>

Why was there such an enormous response, largely negative, at the SBC's decision? Possibly some of it was due to the size of the SBC which was possibly perceived to be more of an influence for Jewish evangelism. Simultaneously there was disappointment expressed that suddenly Southern Baptists had stepped away from ecumenical and non-evangelistic dialogue. Dialogue should, in Southern Baptist understanding, involve participation by elements of the Hebrew Christian community. Apparently it was thought by the liberal ecumenical wing of the Jewish movement that much ground had suddenly been lost to the SBC and that it once again would be an aggressive force for Jewish evangelism.

Southern Baptists have published materials encouraging Jewish evangelism, have held numerous training events for the laity, pastors and seminarians, and have spoken forthrightly in several significant contexts about the need to continue to share the truths of Christ with the Hebrew people.

Notably the two splinter elements within the context of the SBC have taken different positions on Jewish evangelism. The most liberal group, the Alliance of Baptists, called for dialogue as the only appropriate

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<sup>30</sup> The writer enjoyed the privilege of representing Southern Baptists at several of these, including the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the national meeting of the Anti-Defamation League.

response to relating to Jewish people, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, while calling for the evangelization of all people, has not articulated any specific position regarding Jewish evangelism.

Finally, in regards to evangelism, the Lausanne movement solidified and clarified its position regarding Jewish evangelism and the need of Jewish people for the gospel in its Manila Manifesto of 1989. Section three of its commentary on the whole gospel is entitled, “The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ.” Regarding Jews and the gospel it reads:

It is sometimes held that in virtue of God’s covenant with Abraham, Jewish people do not need to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah. We affirm that they need him as much as anyone else, that it would be a form of anti-Semitism, as well as being disloyal to Christ, to depart from the New Testament pattern of taking the gospel to ‘the Jew first.’ We, therefore, reject the thesis that Jews have their own covenant which renders faith in Jesus unnecessary.<sup>31</sup>

This statement is thorough in its rejection of dual covenantism and is forthright in stating the primacy of Jewish evangelism. Given the variety of international denominational and parachurch leaders who signed and affirmed this statement, its impact is significant and strategic.

### Conclusion

There are several conclusions that emerge from this limited overview of denominational attitudes towards Jewish evangelism and the need of Jews for the gospel. The first is that dilution of commitment away from Jewish evangelism on the part of mainline Protestant denominations has occurred both in American and European churches. This trend is also clearly evident within the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, it may be said that Roman Catholicism has articulated more thoroughly their position that many Jews may not need the gospel.

Secondly, several evangelical denominations have maintained a consistently biblical position and in some instances have strengthened it. Dual covenantism has been rejected in the cases cited while the need for a clear commitment to taking the gospel to Jewish people has been expressed. The LCMS and the PCA passed forthright resolutions related to sharing the gospel with Jewish people, but have also continued significant support for Jewish evangelism. As well, the Lausanne Movement since Manila has been a particularly clear voice maintaining the uniqueness of Christ, his atonement and the need for Jewish faith and belief in the historical Jesus of the Bible. Notably, Southern Baptists

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<sup>31</sup> Lausanne Committee Staff, *Proclaim Christ Until He Comes* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1990), 29.

have revived dramatically their commitment to Jewish evangelism. There has been as well a noted surprise and even outrage expressed at this renewed commitment.<sup>32</sup> This type of opposition is reflective of the trend within professedly Christian denominations towards a more postmodern and relativistic attitude regarding Christian truth.

Lastly let us consider some issues that need to be addressed within evangelicalism. The above facts demonstrate the need for every denomination to revisit their commitment to Jewish evangelism from time to time and publicly re-express it. It should not be taken for granted that this is an issue that all Christians understand and to which they are committed. It is therefore vital that there be a regular public expression of support for the Jewish ministry that would call Christians to rally around the cause of Jewish evangelism. Such statements and resolutions as issued by the LCMS, the PCA and the SBC serve as a prophetic voice within our culture for the uniqueness of the gospel and its particular relevance for the Jewish people.

Secondly, new generations of pastors and evangelistic leaders need to be trained and sensitized for Jewish evangelism. Within Southern Baptist ranks we are seeing seminary courses on Jewish evangelism being offered for the first time in our history. Knowing the particular problems and challenges of sharing the gospel with the sons and daughters of Abraham and the need to educate students on the theological basis for Jewish evangelism, it is critical that seminary training be emphasized.

Thirdly, Jewish believers need to be led to understand their unique and vital role as evangelists and missionaries, not only to their own people, but also to the world at large. Some mission organizations are discovering and realizing the particular fruitfulness of using Jewish evangelists. It is true that many Jewish believers have a particularly unique ability to express the gospel and their appreciation for it is often deep rooted. Also, the general public is often greatly interested in the message of *Yeshua* (Jesus) shared from a Jewish heart. Hence, Jewish manpower and resources ought to be utilized to the furthest possible degree.

Fourthly, the biblical role of the place of Israel in God's stated purpose needs to be re-expressed, not only to denominations and churches, but also to the general public. This trend will be vital for two reasons. (1) It is essential as an apologetic for biblical truth. The survival and indeed the calling of Israel to Christ in these days is clearly an apologetic that affirms once again the truthfulness of the word of God. It demonstrates that God's covenant is without revocation but not to the exclusion of the demands and promises of the gospel. (2) It would also

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<sup>32</sup> See "Group asks SBC to retract resolution on Jews," an Associated Baptist Press release published in *Word and Way*, January 23, 1997.

serve to fight the horrible plight of anti-Semitism that rears its ugly head too often within the cultures of the world. David Gushee demonstrates in his important book, *The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, that a clear understanding of Israel's biblical role and its place in God's purpose in history is the best antidote to anti-Semitism. It is vital that in our evangelizing we are also forthright in our call to renounce the hatred and animosity often expressed to the children of Abraham and to show how Israel is still a part of the biblical plan of history.<sup>33</sup> In this way we can best express our love to them along with the sublime task of pointing them to the one who is the Messiah and Savior.

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<sup>33</sup> Along with the resolution on Jewish evangelism passed by the SBC in 1996 was a resolution against anti-Semitism passed in 1972 and 1981. Both serve as clear expressions of love for the Jewish people as well as a sense of their biblical call and place in history.