

Conversion of Jews to Christianity remains thorny issue for both Jews and Christians

by *Bill Berkowitz*

As Christian evangelicals in the United States grow their support for Israel, conversion of Jews to Christianity continues to be a thorny issue for both Christians and Jews.

The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest U.S. Protestant denomination, has made the conversion of Jews official policy, while the San Francisco-based "Jews for Jesus" exists solely to convert Jews to Christianity. Bill McCartney, a former University of Colorado football coach who co-founded the evangelical Promise Keepers movement for men, now runs The Road to Jerusalem, an organization whose mission is to convert Jews to Christianity.

While many U.S. Jews still consider conversion a huge problem and an impediment to interfaith relations, these days some Jewish leaders, not wanting to jeopardize Christian support for Israel, maintain that conversion isn't a major issue for Christian Zionists.

David Brog, a well-connected Washington insider, was recently tapped by Texas evangelist Rev. John C. Hagee, pastor of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, to be the executive director of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), a high-profile pro-Israel lobbying effort that Hagee founded a few months back.

In a recent interview, Brog, who is Jewish, pointed out that, "All activities of CUFI are strictly non-conversionary. Christians who work with Jews in supporting Israel realize how sensitive we are in talking about conversion and talking about Jesus."

"So those who work with us tend not to talk about Jesus more, but talk about Jesus less. They realize it will interfere with what they are trying to do -- building a bridge to the Jewish community to insure the survival of Judeo-Christian civilization."

In the preface to his new book, "Standing with Israel: Why Christians Support the Jewish State," Brog gives Christian Zionists his stamp of approval, writing that he was "convinced that the evangelical Christians who support Israel today are nothing less than the theological heirs of the righteous Gentiles who sought to save Jews from the Holocaust."

Regardless of Brog's assertion, the question of whether Christian evangelicals should continue to try and convert Jews is still unsettled, and one that makes many Jews wary of the motives of Christian evangelicals.

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein is the head of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, made up of a core group of 450,000 Christians, in addition to 6,000 Jews. Last year, Eckstein's organization received nearly 70 million dollars -- mostly from U.S. Christians -- to help poor Israeli Jews with their basic needs, and to help Jews immigrate to Israel.

In a recent interview with the South Bend Tribune, Eckstein acknowledged that the question of conversion is "a big issue," but he insisted that "it's just not true" that evangelicals are interested in converting Jews.

"We did a study, a formal study, that found that the primary reason for (evangelicals') support is the shared values of freedom and democracy that Israel has," he said.

J. Lee Grady, the editor of Charisma, a prominent evangelical magazine, is also a strong supporter of Israel. He, however, has a different take on the conversion question. In a recent commentary for Charisma Online, Grady wrote that while it was good that Christian evangelicals were "expressing solidarity with the nation of Israel like never before... our coziness with Israel has created an awkward theological dilemma."

"Although we feel a biblical obligation to protect Jews from ethnic hatred (and we should), we also have been given a mandate to share the gospel with Jew and gentile alike. After all, the apostle Paul himself -- the most celebrated Jewish convert to Christianity ever -- told us that the message of Christ was sent 'to the Jew first'."

"To complicate things," Grady added, "some Jews believe that Christian evangelism is a form of anti-Semitism -- as if converting a person to faith in Jesus strips them of their Jewishness. For that reason, some Christians who have become involved in pro-Israel activism actually have stopped sharing the gospel with Jews altogether. Some have even developed strange doctrines that suggest that Jews, because of God's Old Covenant promises, are granted special tickets to heaven as if they don't need Jesus to save them from their sins."

Grady recognizes that he's treading on dangerous ground by raising the conversion question, and he insists on using "logic" to resolve the issue: "Do we believe the Bible or not? If the Christians in the book of Acts -- most of whom were Jews who converted to Christ -- aggressively shared Jesus throughout Israel and beyond, why should we back off from that assignment?"

He cites the recent conversion campaign in New York City conducted by the San Francisco-based Jews for Jesus (JFJ), one of the major organizations working to convert Jews to Christianity. Its July action in New York City, Long Island and northern New Jersey resulted in the distribution of "1.8 million gospel pamphlets on the streets, sen[ding] 450,000 brochures through the mail and show[ing] a movie about Jesus to 80,000 Yiddish-speaking Chasidic Jews."

According to JFJ, 241 Jewish people "prayed to receive Christ as their Messiah during their Behold Your God campaign." In addition the campaign garnered reports on 13 television stations and articles in "every major newspaper ... including the Jewish press."

While vigorously supporting Israel's right to exist and its need to combat terrorism, Grady is also mindful about "car[ing] about our Arab neighbors -- and to share Christ with them as well. Arab Christians living in places such as Bethlehem, Beirut and Baghdad often are sidelined and forgotten in the midst of Middle East violence. They know, perhaps better than anyone, that Jesus is the only hope for reconciliation in that war-torn region."

Ultimately, Grady concludes that "Any pro-Israel work we do cannot be truly biblical if we compromise our mandate to share the love of Christ with those He first came to save."

Members of Christians United for Israel and other so-called evangelical Christians "are forgetting one thing -- one very important thing," Laurence M. Vance, a freelance writer and an adjunct instructor in accounting and economics at Pensacola Junior College in Pensacola, Florida, wrote in a recent commentary posted at LewRockwell.com. "Christians in the Bible were involved in Jewish evangelism."

According to Vance, "Other evangelical Christians [in addition to Hagee]... are exchanging evangelism for dialogue."

Some Christian leaders appear to be exchanging evangelism for a place at the podium. In mid-June, Rick Warren, the author of the bestselling "The Purpose Driven Life" and a very popular and influential mega-church pastor, spoke at the Friday Night Live Shabat services at Sinai Temple. According to Rob Eshman, the editor-in-chief of The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, "Warren managed to speak for the entire evening without once mentioning Jesus -- a testament to his savvy message-tailoring."

Warren told Ron Wolfson, the Rabbi that invited him to speak, that "his interest is in helping all houses of worship, not in converting Jews."

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