

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND DANGERS OF EVANGELISM

a talk given in tandem with Rev. George Miller
at the Baptist-Anti Defamation League Assembly, April, 1978
Shenandoah Baptist Church, Miami, Florida

by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, DHL, DD

Before the development of Judaism, it was customary for people to believe in the existence of many gods. As the great empires of Egypt and Babylonia formed, it was part of the political reality that the god who ruled over the city of the Emperor or King was regarded as the chief god of the pantheon.

When a powerful nation conquered a lesser nation, the usual procedure was for the conquered people to surrender their old god and to give their allegiance to the god of the conqueror. This transfer of allegiance followed naturally, for the conquered people assumed that their god had proven himself to be a failure and inadequate to their purpose.

When the Hebrews were conquered by the Babylonians, they turned out to be exception to this rule. Instead of surrendering their God, the Israelites renewed their dedication to Him, and instead of assuming that their God had been inferior to Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonians, the Israelites took the burden of their defeat upon themselves and said, "We were defeated by our enemy because we failed to follow the laws of our God, not because He was unable to stand up to Marduk".

Basic in the religious structure of paganism was a certain kind of tolerance. There were hundreds of gods all around, even though some of them were more important than others. Intolerance was demonstrated in the pagan situation only when the conquerors insisted that their chief god be accepted by the defeated people as the chief of all gods.

Basic to the religious structure of Judaism was a certain kind of intolerance, for Judaism taught that there were no other gods but that very God of Israel who was also Lord of the Universe. The pagans spoke about higher and lower gods while the Jews spoke of the only and true God.

The two daughters of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, inherited from their mother religion the attitude of intolerance towards other religions. It is perhaps implicit in a monotheistic religion that other religions be regarded with suspicion and perhaps even with scorn. If there is only one God and if a certain people has been selected as the mediators of His teaching, then it follows that other peoples must join these mediators or be guilty of rejecting that which is most truthful and most consistent with God's wishes.

If Judaism had been propagated by a nation mighty in military and political power, it might have become progressively more intolerant, but as fate would have it, the Jewish nation gradually dwindled in military and political power. The Jews had, perforce, to learn tolerance, and as the people suffered more, its religion deepened and broadened. Finally the prophet could say in the name of God, "Let each people walk in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God, forever".

It is clear from the life of the prophet Mohammed that, at first, he was very tolerant towards both Jews and Christians. He expressed his admiration for them as learned peoples who taught the ways of God, but as the power of Mohammed increased, and as the Arabs became the great conquerors of both Christian and Jewish communities, Islam became more intolerant. Finally, Mohammed condemned the Jews to hell because they would not accept him as their prophet, and he was almost as severe in condemning the Christians.

Similarly, the early founders of Christianity were very liberal towards Jews. Jesus spoke primarily to his own people and advised them not to hide their marvelous light under a bushel. Paul made it clear that while God had opened His heart to the followers of Jesus, He was in no way rejecting his own people, the Jews.¹ Paul did not feel that the Jews had to accept Jesus in order to be beloved of God, although, of course, he would have preferred this.

Some of the later church fathers however, were not so liberal as Paul. Perhaps their greater intolerance reflects the political climate under which they operated. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the officers of the church spoke out with complete assurance that their religion was the only religion and all others were untrue, and therefore, unreal. A special wrath was reserved for Jews, since they had the audacity to continue to quote scripture and to challenge the divine authority of the church fathers.² While some church fathers³ seemed friendly to the Jews, St. Chrysostom and St. Augustine condemned them.

The fate of the Jews in relation to Christian religious leaders has risen and ebbed with the power held by the Christian leaders. When Luther was on the outside challenging the Catholic Church, he turned to the Jews for support in claiming that Scripture and not the Church was the higher authority. When Luther came to high power, he turned on the very Jews who had been his friends, because they would not subject themselves to his authority.

Only in modern times, and especially in the United States of America, have Jews and Christians worked together with some regularity as brothers and as relative equals. The fact that religious groups in America have been separated from political power seems to have made some difference in their tolerance of other religions. This tolerance has grown in many instances to respect and understanding and fruitful cooperation.

1. Romans 11:28-29
2. In the early days of the separation of Church and Synagogue, arguments and villification on both sides occurred, and, perhaps, was inevitable. See E.H. Flannery, "The Anguish of the Jews", pp 29 ff
3. Flannery, "The Anguish of the Jews", pp 47 ff

Even in America, however, there is an occasional break through of the old intolerance. I was listening to our local public television station a few years back when an old woman from Miami Beach called in a question to a Presbyterian minister who was on the air. The lady asked the minister, "I have been told that because I am a Jew I am going to hell. Do you hold with that view?" The minister replied, "The scripture says that if you have not been informed about Jesus, you will not go to hell. But now you can't say that you haven't been informed". Obviously, this gentleman was playing with this old woman, but I wonder if Jesus himself or Paul or many of my current Christian friends would as lightly have condemned this woman to so miserable a fate.

In the great law code known as the Talmud, there is a small chapter of Rabbinical teachings, one of which is this: Rabbi Hillel taught, "Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it, loving all fellow creatures, and thus bringing them nigh to the Torah".¹ The teaching implies that Rabbi Hillel, who lived about half a century before Jesus, was anxious to convert non-Jews to Judaism. He wanted to bring them nigh to the Torah, to the specific Jewish moral law; but Hillel taught that the way to do this was by example. Show your love for your fellow creatures, he taught, and, perhaps, they will want to follow your example and become students of the Torah.

Few of us, I think, would be opposed to this kind of proselytizing or missionarizing. What each of us, irrespective of his religious background, opposes is when someone comes after him and attempts to force him to convert by one means or another. I submit to you that advising someone that he is condemned to hell unless he believes as you do is employing a most devastating kind of coercion.

Judaism does not teach now, nor has it ever taught that the non-Jew, even if he has been exposed to the Jewish message, is condemned to hell. On the contrary, the Talmud expressly says that a non-Jew who follows the laws of Noah, the six ethical laws expressed in Genesis, is considered worthy in the eyes of God. This view is consistent with the teaching of the prophet Amos who said in the 9th century BCE that all peoples were precious in the eyes of God and "choseness"² meant only that the Israelites had to meet God's more strict requirements.

If we remove from the word evangelism, that part of its meaning which implies the need for conversion, we have a word which calls for teaching the message of a great teacher. Jews have always admired Christians who have taught the message of love and forgiveness. Such teaching serves to bring the Jew closer to the Christian, but when the end of the message is - but now if you will surrender your life - long faith in exchange for mine, we promise you extra blessings in God's heaven, Jews, as a rule, will begin to close their ears and shut their hearts.

We understand, of course, that the Christian who wants to convert us is thinking of all good things. We know that he wants to help us, but we want him to understand that from where we stand, he is not helping us; he is causing us great conflict of conscience; he is tearing us from our family, and he is troubling those Jewish spirits of the next world who risked all rather than surrender their faith.

1. "Sayings of the Fathers"
2. Amos Ch. 9:7; Ch. 3:1-2

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It would be my hope that we would all try to live up to the best in our particular faith. It would be my hope that we would respect each other both for the great deal that we share together and for the important differences that we have. It would be my hope that we would try to evangelize or missionarize by setting that kind of loving and tolerant example of which the scripture speaks when it says, "Behold the day comes when many will take your garment by the hem and say, 'I have heard that God is with you, let us come with you.'"