

The Evangelical Mind

A Conflicted Christian

By Richard Mouw

I was once interviewed by a Jewish reporter who, when she wrote her story about our interview, described me as "a conflicted man." She portrayed me as caught between a sincere respect for Jewish people and a commitment as an evangelical Christian to attempt to persuade Jews to accept Jesus as their savior.

She was right. And I feel the conflict acutely in responding to David Wolpe's reflections on Jesus. I respect the integrity and sincerity with which he speaks to this subject. Obviously, I also disagree with him on some key issues. And I am conflicted as I attempt to articulate my own perspective.

Let me say at the outset that I believe Jesus is the messiah and the Son of God. The objections Rabbi Wolpe raises against this belief are familiar ones--this debate has been going on for 2,000 years now--and we will not settle them here. And, as he well knows, some of the concerns he raises against Christianity have also been voiced in a slightly different form against Judaism too, by people who do not like either faith.

Just as Rabbi Wolpe finds it offensive to think that God would judge people on the basis of their beliefs about Jesus, many people have expressed outrage over the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures that in ancient times God chose one particular nation as His favorite, promising Abraham that all who curse his descendents would be cursed by God, and also encouraging the children of Israel to seize a Promised Land whose present occupants had been there a long time.

Christians and Jews stand together in espousing a religious perspective that is--to use the contemporary jargon--highly "particularistic."

While we have many beliefs in common, disagreement is over the question of how we understand the role of Jesus of Nazareth. Rabbi Wolpe uses some of his harshest language, for example, for Jewish people who accept Jesus as the messiah. For them to continue to call themselves Jews, he insists, is "nonsense," and for Christians to defend their claim "is presumption of the highest order." The sensitivity of the issue is highlighted by the fact that Jews who embrace, say, Buddhist practices or New Age teachings are not treated with comparable harshness.

The only failing grade I ever received was during seminary. The course was on Paul's epistle to the Romans, and much of the grade depended on writing a paper. I chose to write on Romans 11, where the writer discusses the status of Jews since the coming of Christ. I eagerly set about to complete the assignment, reading commentators who espoused a variety of interpretations. I also worked through the chapter in Greek, reading it over many times.

I never wrote the paper. It is one of the few times in my life when I simply could not put my thoughts on paper. The more I read Romans, the more I was convinced Paul was not setting forth a clear perspective.

This awareness was deeply distressing for me. I wanted him to be absolutely clear about the status of the Jews. I was committed to being evangelical in my theology, and I had no room for messiness in what I saw as the Bible's teaching on an important topic.

I was raised in an environment dominated by an unqualified belief that when Christianity came on the scene it superceded Judaism. So I was eager to demonstrate that the promises associated

with God's Old Covenant with ethnic Israel have now been transferred to the church of Jesus Christ. But I did not know how to make the case confidently.

I went on to study philosophical ethics and began my teaching career in Christian social ethics. And in my writing and lecturing, I continued to espouse the belief that Christianity superceded Judaism.

I gave a speech once, for example, on the topic "Where Is Israel Today?" I began by explaining my question: I wanted to understand where we are to find the people today who are the intended beneficiaries of the promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament. Then I explained what I took to be two wrong answers that Christians often give to the question.

The first answer is the present-day Jewish people. In this view, God's promises to the Jewish people are still in effect. The Lord wants them to be a flourishing nation, and he has brought them back to their original homeland where, as the Zionists teach, they are reaping benefits promised to them in ancient times--and where, as many evangelicals believe, they will someday acknowledge Jesus as the true messiah of Israel.

The second answer is Americans. I pointed out the deeply entrenched pattern in the United States of seeing the American people as comprising "a chosen people." Jonathan Edwards was explicit about it. Many Old Testament prophecies were now being fulfilled, he said, in North America. I also talked about how I saw this theme influencing our American foreign policy; we have often acted as if we were a nation with a messianic mission in the world.

I rejected these two answers, and set forth a third as the only proper way to understand who "Israel" is today: the church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel. But in setting forth this view, I always had a nagging sense I was cheating a bit--that I had no right to state my case so boldly unless I could make my peace with Romans 11.

Well, I have made my peace--after a fashion, that is. I can now read Romans 11 with an easy conscience, because I have learned how to live with some messiness in my theology. I do not see the apostle Paul as making a perfectly coherent case on the subject of the Jews. He goes back and forth: Their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah is seriously displeasing to God; they are branches that have been broken off and wild shoots have been grafted in their place. But gentiles should not take this as cause for pride, since the Jews are still the "natural branches" who will eventually be grafted back into the tree.

Does this mean, then, that Israel as a people will be saved? Having read Paul thus far on the subject, I want desperately to have him answer a few more important questions for clarification because I cannot put all this together into a coherent package. But instead, he starts singing a hymn, at the end of Romans 11, about the mystery of God's ways. And I have learned at this stage of my theological journey to set aside my questions and simply sing along.

Much of my internal conflict has to do with a sense of being out of step with the thinking of many evangelicals. I have a non-negotiable commitment to evangelism--and this includes witnessing to Jewish people about my firm conviction that Jesus is the promised messiah. The Southern Baptists took much criticism a few years ago for their evangelism to Jews; I hope this controversy will at least serve to inform the larger world that some of us are convinced that we have an obligation to present what we believe about Jesus to non-Christians. This cannot be negotiated away for the sake of inter-religious civility.

But I also feel obligated to keep reminding my fellow evangelicals that faithfulness to the Gospel also requires more than evangelism. We have much to learn from the Jewish people. We share with Jewish people a common spiritual heritage. Rabbi Wolpe rightly points out many of the ways,

for example, that Jesus' teachings were in line with rabbinic thought. And we Christians must also learn about the suffering of the Jewish people. Evangelicals need to think more about how our evangelism sounds to Jewish ears in light of the Holocaust.

Much has happened in Jewish-Christian relations since the New Testament was written. As Rabbi Wolpe points out, Christians have often committed atrocious deeds against Jews.

Instead of arrogantly presuming that we know who is or is not going to hell, we Christians must repent of our sins against the Jews, even as we continue to testify about our belief in Jesus. When Jews complain that our evangelistic efforts sound like threats to destroy them as a people, we must listen. None of this cancels our obligation to evangelize, but it highlights our obligation to avoid unnecessary offense and to be clear about the challenges we face.