

Specialty Areas of Jewish Ministry
Jewish-Gentile Couples
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Ministry to Jewish-Gentile couples

The May 19, 2013 Facebook's Jewish founder, Mark Zuckerberg, and his long-time girlfriend, Priscilla Chan, were married. Though Zuckerberg and Chan had been together since meeting as undergrads at Harvard and living together since 2010, none of the guests knew that they were arriving to attend a back yard wedding. In fact, they were told it was a celebration of the bride's med school graduation. Some also knew it was the groom's birthday and were aware that it followed the initial public offering of his company on Wall Street. Hollywood reporters gushed about "her dress" and "his blue suit." Zuckerberg updated his Facebook profile with "Married Priscilla Chan" and within 24 hours had 850,000 "Likes."

American Jewry no longer considers Intermarriage a news item. The American Jewish Committee officially stopped calling it a "Taboo" after publishing the change in attitude reported in its American Jewish Attitudes survey of 2003. The 2014 Pew research on American Jewish identity observed that the American Jewish intermarriage rate now stands at 58%.

This dramatic demographic change in American Jewish life offers a very real opportunity for Jewish evangelism. By the end of this year, Jews for Jesus will publish a workbook an evangelistic ministry to Jewish-Gentle couples.

What is the opportunity?

Social research has shown that intermarriage between partners of different religious conviction results in disillusion or marital dissatisfaction in 75% of the cases. Roughly 40% of all American Jews are now intermarried. The rate at which Jewish people have married Gentiles has exceeded 50% every year since 1985. American sociologists estimate the Jewish people in cohabiting relationships are with Gentile partners in 80% of the cases. No one has offered statistics about the number of Jews and Gentiles who were simply in dating relationships.

Statistics indicate that a large number these relationships experience significant cross-cultural challenges. Among the most commonly reported tension is the inability to find spiritual harmony. Here is where we have great opportunity to serve these couples and to minister, when appropriate, spiritual hope in the Gospel of Messiah Jesus.

While I am describing a ministry opportunity in the United States, it is not limited by location. Demographic information over the last decade has shown intermarriage rates that are comparable and higher among Diaspora Jews across Europe and Eastern Europe.¹

What is the nature of their need?

In 2004, I completed an ethnographic study of the challenges that were reported by Jewish-Gentile couples. First, I noticed that relational challenges we're reported in the context of four relational stages.

Four relational stages of inter-ethnic tension:

Dating: cross-cultural identity discovery

Wedding: cultural signal systems are at odds

Married without children: cross-cultural identity formation as a couple

Married with children: enculturation of the next generation

Through each of those developing relational stages, couples reported cross-cultural challenges. Tensions could only be categorized in complex and multidimensional categories. They were presented in perspectives that are social, psychological, spiritual, intergenerational, religious, educational and rites/symbols.

The most frequently reported challenge, in my context of ministry, is the inability to find spiritual harmony. In every case, the couples I meet are composed of one Gentile and one Jewish partner. Frequently, the Gentile partner identifies as a Christian. That seems to be a very common configuration of the couples I'm meeting. Often, the Gentile partners are looking for help to explain their faith to the Jewish companions.

¹ Source: 2012, THE JEWISH PEOPLE POLICY INSTITUTE Annual Assessment, P. 26

Where to begin

I am finding a wonderful and open opportunity to care for these couples, but I'm required to respect certain boundaries at the outset.

- Jewish survival is threatened, making it a source of significant tension in Jewish-Gentile couples. Therefore, Jewish partners deserve to know who I am and my spiritual conviction as a *Messianic Jew* at the outset. The Gentile partners need to know I am not available to be their "spiritual hammer" against the Jewish partner. That helps to reduce the fear of manipulation.

- Couples need to be told they are in the majority of Jewish experience in the United States, Europe and Eastern Europe. They are often surprised, having feared being marginalized by traditional Jewish institutions and culture. They need to be told they are not judged by the evangelist/minister.

- I have found the Jewish-Gentile couples feel they are invisible as a cross-cultural group among evangelical churches, though not so much among some messianic congregations. They do not want to feel that they're taken for granted, or an under class, nor that others have a right to lecture them. I have found that I must seek their permission to enter into spiritual conversation and then relate as a co-learner with them.

- I make it clear that I'm not trained in the field of psychology or as a marriage counselor. I can offer them opportunity to create a new level of understanding between them. We can serve as cross-cultural translators, where partners have grown frustrated at their inability to understand the words used in spiritual discussion and the motivations behind those sentiments.

- I aim in this ministry is to be a "signpost." We are convinced that there is only one hope by which they can find spiritual harmony. Messiah Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." (John 14:6) I don't quote that verse to Jewish partners, unless they appreciate the New Testament. I do urge them to pray, calling on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to reveal Himself in the way that He wants to be known. I believe that the sincere hearted person will discover that Jesus is that way.

What are some conversational topics for ministry engagement?

Inability to understand terminology:

I find that couples frequently use terms that they themselves do not understand. I ask them both, for example, to define the word "Christ." Jewish partners either did not know, they presumed it was "Jesus last name" or thought it was a familiar profanity. Surprisingly, Gentile/Christian partners could not come up with a precise definition. It is helpful to explain the English transliteration "Christ" for the Greek word *Christos*, meaning "anointed one" or "Messiah." That, of course, was a translation from the Hebrew term *Mashiach*.

How can we talk about spiritual concerns when we don't understand the terms that are commonly used?

Inability to understand key terminology:

I find it helpful to ask what are the key terms the Jewish partner finds difficult to understand. I might hear the question, "She wants me to be saved, but what is that all about?" That's a great question. At the same time it presumes that "salvation," "heaven or hell" and the "afterlife" are normative to Jewish theology. They are not.

So we have to clarify presuppositions first. What does the Jewish partner believe at the outset? Acknowledging and setting those aside for the moment, we can turn back to explain what the Gentile/Christian partner means by "being saved." We want to avoid using typical Christian terms that might not make sense to the Jewish partner. They might ask, "Saved from what?" It is appropriate to speak of "brokenness, regrets, failure" and "selfishness." People understand those as aspects of sin in practical terms. Many understand separation from God as a result of iniquity. They may not use the theological terms, but they understand personal darkness by experience. The issue is salvation for sin, but we have to find ways to introduce those concepts to people in terms that they can understand at the outset.

The goal of Jewish-Gentile couples ministry

Be honest at the outset about the barriers to finding spiritual harmony and the cost to their relationship. They are at risk if they choose to do nothing.

Insist on mutual respect for both partners and from them. Be honest that you won't take sides as an ally to either partner in an attempt to change the other. Try to get any hidden agendas on the table about changing either one in the relationship.

Listen carefully, to be respectful of Jewish culture and sensitivities about beliefs. The same goes for the beliefs of the Gentile partner. Listening respectfully doesn't require that you agree. However, having cared enough to listen, you earn the right to offer perspective.

Many times I have heard Jewish partners say, "I will never believe like you." In my mind, I think, "Never say never!" I have heard Christian partners complain that their spouse "doesn't even believe in God." In such moments, Jewish partners often respond, "But I do believe in God, just not in the same way that you do." That exchange can be the starting point for a conversation about what we mean by, "I believe in God."

That is the point where I would encourage both partners to seek the one true God in whatever way He says is best to reach him. You already know the way as it has been presented in Scripture (Deut. 6:3, John 14:6 and Acts 4:12). However, we have to allow people to find faith to believe through the leading of the Holy Spirit. We can trust Him to accomplish Spiritual Harmony in the lives He is calling.

Resources

<http://www.JewishGentileCouples.com>

Facebook: Jewish-Gentile couples

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