

The Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today

A non-German, non-Jewish response

By Mike Moor

From 18-22 August 2008, an international task force of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission met in Berlin to consider the uniqueness of Christ and Jewish evangelism. The task force, which included German Christians and Messianic Jews, issued *The Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today*. Echoing the more detailed 1989 *Willowbank Declaration*, the Berlin Declaration endorses the proclamation of the gospel to Jewish people as an act of love incumbent upon all Christians. The authors mourn the history of Christian anti-Semitism and complicity in genocide, which they see as evidences of the reality of sin, a reality that can be overcome only through the transforming grace of Jesus the Messiah. Jews and all other people need to hear this message, declare the authors, cautioning that the proclamation of the gospel should not be disrespectful or coercive. The Berlin Declaration also affirms the positive value of dialogue in conjunction with – but not as a replacement for – evangelism.

My brief is to present a non-German and non-Jewish response to the declaration. As an English Protestant Christian who has been actively involved in mission to Jewish people for more than a quarter century, I heartily affirm the declaration though I wish the document had defined its terms more clearly and that its argument had been more coherent and nuanced. Though acknowledging the need for respect, dialogue and vigilance, each point in the declaration immediately proceeds to evangelism. To Jewish people this may well sound like an exercise in sweeping the dust of past wrongs under a very large carpet in order to justify what they perceive as an anti-Semitic project: the conversion of Jews to Christianity. Indeed, Abraham Foxman, the National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, condemned the declaration as insensitive and misguided: “To issue this declaration from Berlin, where the Nazis directed their Final Solution to exterminate the Jewish people, is the height of insensitivity ... We urge on the WEA to withdraw its call to target the Jews of Europe for conversion and immediately begin serious dialogue with Jewish interfaith representatives, so they can understand the immense pain and anger they are causing with their ill-advised and theologically misguided position.”

The Declaration concludes with a call to action under five heads, each of which in itself could be the subject of a paper. I wish to comment on the points in more, or less reverse order.

1. The paper calls for a “Renewed commitment to the task of Jewish evangelism.” The call is particularly relevant to the English churches. It is ironic that missionaries from across the globe are coming to England, the country where the modern missions movement originated. If English churches are able to regain a vision for Jewish evangelism it will inevitably result in a greater commitment to world mission.
2. “Reconciliation and unity amongst believers in Jesus.” This is somewhat vague; the writers presumably have in mind the unity of Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians rather than a vague ecumenism. In England there exists among the Reformed churches in particular a suspicion of the “Messianic movement”, an unwillingness to understand the difficulties some Jewish believers have trying to integrate into

predominantly gentile churches and an insensitivity to the feelings of Messianic Jews. This will remain a challenge for many years to come and the Berlin Declaration's call is welcome.

3. "Recognition of the uniqueness of Christ as the crucified, resurrected and divine Messiah who alone can save from death and bring eternal life." This point is the crux of the declaration; everything else stands or falls on the truth or falsity of this proposition.

4. The call for "Respect for religious conviction and liberty that allows frank discussion of religious claims" follows from the declaration's affirmation of "the importance of dialogue in promoting mutual understanding and sympathy".

S.C.H Kim defines "Dialogue" as "a conversation which proceeds both from a commitment to one's own faith and an openness with genuine respect to that of others", adding that "Openness and respect do not presuppose agreement, or a search for a compromise, but do mean the willingness to listen."¹

Pragmatically, it makes sense to listen to those we wish to persuade. It is a capital mistake, in any evangelistic encounter, to presume one knows what the other person believes even if that person is wearing *peyot*, a *streimel* and a long black gabardine coat. "Where there are two Jews", goes the joke, "there will be at least three opinions", and when speaking about matters of faith with Jewish people the opinions multiply.

The Jewish people are heirs to an intellectual and spiritual heritage that was intended to bias them against the message of Jesus. The sages of blessed memory fenced not only the Torah but also Judaism itself with emotional and prejudicial barriers that make it difficult for Jewish people today to respond positively to the Gospel even if they cannot refute it:

Dialogue implies a willingness to listen but Jewish-Christian dialogue often takes place on the assumption that Judaism (presumed to be a "living" faith, older and richer than Christianity by a millennium-and-a-half) has little to learn from its "daughter". At times dialogue is predicated on an "I'm OK, you're OK" assumption as in, for example, Harrelson & Falk's *Jews and Christians: A Troubled Family*. Rabbi Falk is prepared to say to Christians: "Glory in the teachings of Jesus. Pray his prayer daily, follow in his footsteps to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and extend a helping hand to all who have lost their way in the world. Strengthen the church, that its clarion call to salvation may be heard in the market place, and in the high places of government and commerce. Challenge bigotry and oppression, greed and lust for power, through your missions on every continent. Lead the way for men and women of every race and nation and creed to discover the glorious heritage we share and to build on its sturdy foundations a civilization committed to freedom and to peace"². The Christian message is wonderful, so long as it is not preached to the Jews.

I welcome the declaration's carefully worded call to dialogue but dialogue, if it is to be meaningful, must be honest, frank and tough-minded, as in Kendall and Rosen's *The Jew and the Pharisee*, in which both parties vigorously defend their own beliefs while allowing themselves to be challenged by the claims of the other³.

5. "Repentance from all expressions of anti-Semitism and all other forms of genocide, prejudice and discrimination." I address this particular call first as a Christian and then as an Englishman because English anti-Semitism has expressed itself in both

religious and secular forms and has contributed to genocide, prejudice and discrimination beyond its own coasts.

Anti-Semitism in England was initially a Roman Catholic phenomenon. The two major pretexts for the persecution of England's Jews in the Middle Ages centred around an alleged Jewish thirst for non-Jewish blood. First, the Church accused Jews of stealing the consecrated host – which, according to Catholic dogma, had been transformed into the actual body of Christ – in order to torture it. Allegations of host desecration served to simultaneously bolster the belief that the eucharistic wafer, when consecrated, was literally transmuted into the body of Christ and to demonstrate beyond peradventure that Jews were eternal and implacable enemies of Christ.

Secondly, in mid-twelfth century England, a new and more insidious variation of the blood-libel developed. At Passover, it was said, Jews abducted and crucified Christian children in order mix their blood with matzah. Accusations of ritual murder became common in England and led to violent riots against Jewish communities often leaving Jews dead.

Having never been a Catholic I find myself unable to identify with a form of anti-Semitism founded on the theology of that church. As an Englishman, however, I am conscious that the blood-libel, which is now common in many countries, particularly Islamic lands, originated in my own country. I am also conscious that England gave birth to and nurtured a particularly urbane and sophisticated anti-Semitism⁴ that has continued to the present day, traces of which may be found in the Church.

In 1290, England made history by being the first country to expel all its Jews, an example emulated by France in 1306 and Spain in 1492. Though there would be few Jews in England for another 150 years, the idea that Jews lusted after the blood of Christians, in particular children, would remain a potent image in the minds of English people for many centuries, reinforced by the writings of Chaucer (*The Prioress's Tale*), Shakespeare (*The Merchant of Venice*) and Dickens (*Oliver Twist*). The blood libel became a staple of Nazi German propaganda⁵ and on 17th May 1934 an entire edition of the rabidly anti-Semitic *Der Stürmer* was dedicated to “The Jewish murder plot against non-Jewish humanity”.

Though few English people today believe that Judaism requires the mixing of the blood of Christian children with Passover matzah, the blood libel has been adapted by anti-Zionists. Scottish writer Tom Paulin's poem “Killed in Cross Fire”, which appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2001 following the death of Muhammad al-Durrah charged “the Zionist SS” with gunning down “another little Palestinian boy.”⁶ In 2009, *The Guardian* claimed that an Israeli doctor had admitted harvesting Palestinian organs in the Gaza conflict⁷, a claim the paper would later retract, and when Israel set up a field hospital in Haiti, rumours quickly circulated on the Internet that the IDF was there to harvest the organs of Haitian children⁸.

Echoes of the new form of the blood libel have appeared on the blog of Rev Stephen Sizer, the evangelical vicar of Christ Church in the Surrey town of Virginia Water⁹. In March, Rev Sizer's blog carried a report of a visit he and Colin Chapman made to “Ghetto Bethlehem”. The checkpoint they passed through, said Sizer, “reminded” him of Apartheid South Africa, of Nazi Germany and of a “cattle abattoir”. On his website, under the heading “Herod's Soldiers Operating in Bethlehem Today”,¹⁰ Sizer posted several photos of Israeli soldiers. In an email, I asked Rev Sizer if the title

suggested that the Israeli Prime Minister was Herod and that Israeli soldiers were the murderers of Bethlehem's children.

Sizer responded quickly: "I didn't say that so please don't put words in my mouth."

I pointed out that I had put no words in his mouth; I had simply asked a question and, if the caption was not an allusion to Matthew 2:16-18, what did it mean? I received no reply.

Another peculiarly English contribution to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust (albeit an unwitting one) was Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which provided a "scientific" pretext for the oppression of the weak by the strong. Robert E.D. Clarke notes that "Evolutionary ideas—quite undisguised—lie at the basis of all that is worst in *Mein Kampf*—and in [Hitler's] public speeches"¹¹. Though England's Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, while recognising that "Hitler was a great admirer of Darwin", feels Darwin "would have been horrified at this *perversion* of his ideas"¹² (my emphasis), the full title of Darwin's best-known work was *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (my emphasis). In *The Descent of Man* Darwin was even more forthcoming about the meaning of natural selection or "the survival of the fittest" as it is commonly known: "At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the *civilized races* of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the *savage races* throughout the world" (italics mine).

In Hitler's Germany the philosophy of "the survival of the fittest" was inculcated into the people. The Aryan race was superior to all other races and the Jews were the lowest, being almost "pure ape", and in a speech at Nuremberg in 1933, the Führer declared a higher race would always defeat a lower race.

Evolutionary thinking percolated into every academic discipline in the German universities, including biblical studies and Julius Wellhausen's evolutionary approach to the study of the Bible undermined the divine origin or Scripture and Israel's status as Yahweh's "chosen people". That the Jews were inferior was thus confirmed not only by science but also by religion.

For me as an English Christian, therefore, the Berlin Declaration's call to repentance resonates. The issue is not theoretical. In February I sat next to a fellow Englishman man on a plane, "a Methodist" who had read *Mein Kampf* and was of the opinion that "if Hitler had been able to kill all the Jews the world would be a far better place". However, for Christians who have never expressed prejudice or discrimination, the term "repentance" is inexact and inappropriate. It must be the duty of Christians to repudiate, denounce and expose anti-Jewish attitudes and sentiments where they exist in both the world and the Church. Christian Witness to Israel recently adopted as its mission statement: "Sharing the Good News of Jesus with the Jewish people, combating anti-Semitism and to making the Church aware of its material and spiritual debt to the Jews."

Respect for the Jewish people and their beliefs (however much one might disagree with them), repudiation of anti-Semitism, dialogue without compromise, affirmation of the core principles of the gospel message and a commitment to evangelism are values I endorse wholeheartedly and to which I, with the formulators of the Berlin Declaration, commit myself.

1. S.C.H Kim, "Dialogue" in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, John Corrie (editor), Inter-Varsity Press, 2007
2. Walter Harrelson & Randall M. Falk, *Jews & Christians: A Troubled Family*, Abingdon Press, 1990. p.17
3. R.T. Kendall & David Rosen, *The Christian and the Pharisee*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2006
4. See: Antony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England*, Oxford University Press, 2010
5. *Ibid.*
6. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/feb/18/poetry.features1>
7. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/21/israeli-pathologists-harvested-organs>
8. See for example: <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread539330/pg1>
9. <http://stephensizer.blogspot.com/2010/03/crossing-israeli-checkpoint.html>
10. <http://www.sizers.org/photos/soldiers/index.html>
11. Robert E.D. Clark, *Darwin: Before and After*, The Paternoster Press, 1958.
12. Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense: A Vision for Jews and Judaism in the Global Culture*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2009, p.100.