

Finding a “Gospel-Centered” Life

Peter A. Pettit

To help the Jewish community cope with what he calls the conundrum of Evangelical Christianity, Rabbi Yehiel Poupko draws strong contrasts between Evangelicals and liberal mainline Protestants. Poupko’s analysis is driven by his concern about two issues: Israel and the protection of Jews from conversion efforts. On the former, Evangelical Protestants are commended, for they indeed are often strongly pro-Israel in a straightforward, enthusiastic way (“Christian Zionists”). On the latter, they present a case for consternation, explanation, and amelioration, for they indeed are also deeply committed to bringing other people to confess faith in Jesus Christ and hence be assured of salvation.

In regard to evangelism/proselytizing/conversion efforts, there seems little cause for such consternation. A quarter-century ago, participants in the Second National Conference of Evangelicals and Jews heard leading Evangelicals reassure the Jewish community that nothing of coercion or duplicity could be considered “worthy of the name Christian.” They stood with Jews then, as they do now, in shared commitment to religious freedom. Poupko affirms that the effort to convert may be ameliorated through greater interaction with Jews.

Regarding evangelical zeal for Israel, Poupko takes a thoroughly pragmatic view, saying that Jews need all the friends they can get. It is hard to argue with his logic; in the harsh political and social realities facing Israel, expediency and an agile finessing of differences among allies may be the best one can expect.

But is that all one can hope for? This brings us to the differences between Evangelicals and liberal mainliners. First, a correction: Evangelicals and mainliners do not differ on the “doctrines of original sin, eternal damnation, and the role of biblical inspiration.” On original sin there is no difference, except perhaps in its frequency in sermons. On eternal damnation, mainliners must grant that the Bible bequeaths (reveals) its reality to us, even as they wrestle with its significance. And on biblical inspiration, it is not the role but the manner where we differ.

The Evangelical community tends to see the Bible as God’s truth in a transparent and accessible way — a simple reading is insuffi-

cient. For mainliners, the Bible is the key witness to God’s truth, including the fact that we always discern it in fragmentary, contradictory ways that often differ from others’ faithful discernment. While “Evangelical” truth is remarkably clear and certain, mainliners advance their claims of truth with more ambiguity and modesty.

Evangelicals claim to know the role that Jews play in history and the end-times because it has been revealed. Jewish experience — especially post-New Testament experience — has no place in the calculation if it doesn’t fit the Christian schema. Jewish self-definition is irrelevant. Jewish identity is mistaken, unless it recognizes its place in the plan of Evangelical salvation. This is what makes mainliners like me uneasy with the Evangelical-Jewish alliance: Evangelicals cannot take Jews seriously in their own right because Jews do not have the revelation to understand themselves properly.

The conundrum of liberal mainline Protestants today is that generally we take the Jewish community very seriously. We believe God’s covenant with the Jews is irrevocable and that it moves forward in ways that the Christian church has not yet discerned. Most mainliners, moreover, are like the 80 percent of the Evangelicals that Poupko cites: they have an “innate sense of respect and admiration for the Jewish people” and an instinctive support of Israel “that is unrelated to” the more critical voices of their denominational leadership.

Even most of our mainline Protestant leaders, though, are deeply committed to strong mutual relations with the Jewish community. Their challenges of Israeli policy are grounded most often in readings of the biblical prophets that call for justice and decency, and their challenges of Israeli policy are sparked by serious engagement with moral and social values that are deeply Jewish — biblical, rabbinic, and modern.

Those values have been drawn into the mainline understanding of the Christian gospel and thus into what it means to be gospel-centered in life and faith. Just as Jewish political debate sets differing values within Torah and Judaism in tension with one another, so our assessment of Israel, at its best, reflects an ongoing effort to take Jewish expe-


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rience, Jewish history, Jewish values, fears, and hopes into account. That will not make things simple or straightforward, but in time it will knit a strong bond of mutual respect and affirmation, even when full agreement is not possible.

Gospel-centered in life and faith is what “Evangelical” means. Nearly all mainline Protestants would say they strive to be Evangelical, in that sense. Taking others seriously as they define and understand themselves is life-affirming and faithful to God’s gospel purpose, so mainliners are Evangelical precisely when they meet with and learn about Jews, when they see and respect the complexity and richness of Jewish diversity, and when they commit themselves to walking God’s paths together toward a future none of us can yet imagine. 

But there is no expectation that we mute our agenda. Advocacy partnerships should further our own consensus positions. American Jews can and have helped our Evangelical friends to understand why Palestinian self-determination is in Israel’s best interest, but where differences remain, we are free to go our separate ways. In the interim, the support of Christian Zionists touches on many other less political issues, most notably humanitarian support.

A Courtship of Convenience?

Ethan Felson

It is said that in every relationship one party is always a little more smitten than the other. The nascent union between Evangelical Christians and Jews is no exception. Although a honeymoon may be far in the distance, it’s worth exploring why we have such cold feet.

Motives: A mantra of those skeptical of the Evangelical-Jewish encounter is to question motivation. An agenda grounded in theology is considered suspect, all the more so because it may relate to some end-of-days scenario. As Rabbi Poupko reminds us, though, the pre-millennial dispensationalist segment of the Evangelical community is small. Three of the largest Christian Zionist groups, responding to a screed from several Bishops in Jerusalem, wrote “Christian Zionists do not base their theological position on end-time prophecy, but on the faithful covenant promises of God given to Abraham some four thousand years ago not a ‘thirst for Armageddon’ or a ‘claim to know the sequence of events that will lead to it.’”

Strings: The consensus domestic agendas of Jews and Evangelicals are disparate, and Jews fear some quid pro quo. Evangelical support for Israel, however, comes from their own theology and is not the result of anything any Jew has done for a few millennia. We can cooperate on issues like Israel, religious liberty, and the protection of God’s creation and part company on others.

Policy: At the April 2002 Israel solidarity rally in Washington, DC, Evangelical radio host Janet Parshall declared “We will not give back the Golan!” As David Elcott notes, American Jews are far more likely to embrace territorial compromise than Christian Zionists.

Civics: The Evangelical community is diverse, and its leaders do not speak for all adherents. We are not required to partner with all comers. One prominent Evangelical leader said that granting equal protection rights to same-gender couples was “worse than terrorism.” Dialogue can help such spokespeople understand the profound hurt these statements cause — and our willingness to engage other less hyperbolic leaders sends a strong signal that our commitment to civility remains steadfast.

Proselytization: David Neff reminds us of the Christian imperative to share their gospel. Honest conversation can help set appropriate boundaries, especially where evangelizing is aggressive or deceptive. The reality of the encounter, however, is that most Christian Zionist activists have a far deeper respect for our faith than we give them credit. Indeed, the biblical quote most on their minds is not from the Christian scriptures, but rather from our own, the promise of blessing for those who bless us.

Theocracy: American Jews recoil at the idea of America as a “Christian Nation.” A Barna poll indicated that a sizable majority of Evangelical Christians would amend the U.S. Con-

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