

The conference on Jewish evangelism in Budapest 1927

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80 years ago an important conference on Jewish evangelism was held in Budapest. Indeed two important conferences were held in 1927: one in Budapest (April 7-13) and one in (April 19-25). In this paper I will give some glimpses from them.

The Eighth International Jewish Missionary Conference was held in Stockholm in 1911. The next in Hamburg in 1914. These conferences were hosted by different Jewish mission societies. The conferences one in Budapest and one in Warsaw in 1927 were arranged, and supported, by the International Missionary Council, whose chairman was the prominent Dr John R. Mott from the USA. He was president for the two conferences.

Each of the conferences had just under 100 participants. Some people attended both conferences. If we deduce the repeat participants, the number of individuals then roughly corresponds to the number gathered here in 2007, when we are a little over 160 participants. A number of “Jewish Christians” or “Hebrew Christians” attended. Neither now or in my other contributions here at the conference about Jewish believers in the past will I engage in a terminological criticism or assessment of designations used about Jesus-believing Jews; nor when they are called “converts” and also not when the term the Jewish “race” is used. Terminologies need to be assessed in their context. And new historical contexts can give a word a new content, and sometimes make use of it impossible.

A professionally planned conference for professional mission leaders

I have found a photo of the participants in the Budapest conference. It would be tempting to dwell on the photo and the list of participants, for there were many interesting individuals. But I would never get finished if I did that. And I have, like all other speakers, an allotted time to observe. By the way, listen to how they dealt with this issue in 1927:

“No speech was allowed to exceed five minutes, with the exception of the leader who introduced each special topic; and, as Mr Basil Mathew remarked, ‘Those who were more succinct were more popular’.” Here at Lake Balaton we are also very strict. There is no mercy: speakers have to stay within the allotted time limit.

And here is one for all of us: “The Conference had three daily sessions – morning, afternoon, and evening; and the delegates, keen on their work, attended with fine fidelity.” We all heard that about attendance, right?

Before they met in Budapest and Warsaw, several years of preparatory work had preceded. 18 months before the conference a detailed questionnaire was prepared and sent out. When the replies were received “a digest of the information was skilfully drafted” and, even more, “and when published was distributed to every delegate.” This was before the meeting. Impressive! And I who, till now, have been proud that all papers at our conferences are distributed each night – the same day they are delivered!

“Answers to Questionnaire” are divided in 11 theme groups. In the report after the Budapest meeting there are nine topics.

- 1 Evangelisation and Message
- 2 Christian Education
- 3 Medical Missions, Philanthropy and Community Centres
- 4 Christian Literature
- 5 Occupation of the Field
- 6 Training and Welfare of Workers
- 7 Spiritual Power
- 8 Co-operation
- 9 Work among Jewish Women

At the plenary sessions the topics were presented and then a general discussion followed. Next the delegates were allotted in fairly equal numbers to various “Findings Committees.” After that the themes were discussed again at plenary sessions and the result was published as “Findings” in the official report *The Christian Approach to the Jew*, which appeared, well – in 1927.

Quite impressive and professional. It is not hard to imagine that it must have cost hard work with all the different responses the committee had received before the conference and all the discussions that took place at the meeting. And it goes without saying that not all delegates were equally pleased with the final result. This is the way it is with common statements. We who have participated in LCJE's international conferences know how difficult it is to formulate a conference statement.

But let us look at some of the answers to the questionnaire sent out before the conference.

“Answers to Questionnaire”

“Answers to Questionnaire” are collected in an appendix to the book. It is possible that some of the answers, and terminology, make us in 2007 smile. Can it really be that they were not wiser 80 years ago? Why this disagreement? If this world exists 80 years from now and if there are people who occupy themselves with us and our conference here at Lake Balaton, I would not be surprised if that also made them smile. Had they really not come any further in 2007? They were fundamentally agreed about the importance and necessity of Jewish evangelism, but why then did they differ and disagree on so many other points?

One of the questions they wanted to answer dealt with employment of Jewish *versus* Gentile Christians in Jewish mission work. Here are some of the answers:

“Jewish Christians more suitable.”

“It is a mistake to send out Hebrew missionaries. Non-Jewish missionaries have advantage of more spiritually developed characters, and do not raise such prejudices as Jews.”

“In some cases Hebrew Christian missionaries are very effective and desirable.”

“Very few Hebrew Christian missionaries are fit for leadership.”

“Hope for evangelisation of the Jews lies in Hebrew Christians.”

“Well-trained Gentile Christians are the better missionaries to the Jews.”

In conclusion this is said in “Answers to the Questionnaire”: “The balance of opinion is in favour of the Gentile missionary.” But how does it sound in James Black's written summary after the conference? “In the last resort, with adequate training, the Jews will make the best apostles to the Jews.”

Many avoided the comparison between the two sides and saw the ideal system in co-operation of the two.

“A combination seems desirable, 80 per cent Jewish Christians and 20 per cent Gentile.”

“Jewish Christians are better for colportage and itineracy; for station work a Gentile as head with Hebrew Christian colleagues.”

“Gentile and Hebrew Christians should work together, the one giving the initiative, the other supplying ‘local colour’.”

I do not know if the submitted answers have been preserved for posterity. I would like to get hold of them, and I am convinced that an examination of these answers would give us some surprises as to who said what.

A wealth of statistical material

A wealth of statistical and demographic information has been gathered. Here is one, in my opinion, interesting example of how they worked up the material and asked some self-critical questions to the theme “Occupation of the Field”.

In “Addendum on Palestine” it is said by way of introduction: “Palestine contains 1 per cent of the Jewish population of the world; yet, if we take mere numbers into account, it draws to itself 12 per cent of the missionary man-power. The fact is that, though there are many ‘missions’, there are few ‘missionaries’ in the sense of men qualified for direct and profitable contact with the Palestinian Jew.”

It is assumed that the total of Christian workers among Jews is one thousand. The question is: Are these one thousand workers distributed in an expedient way? I quote:

“For example, a conservative estimate shows that there are over 400 towns and cities in the world with Jewish populations varying from 5000 to 300,000 or more, but the total numbers of places in which there are established Missions does not seem to exceed 160, and in a

considerable proportion of these there is only one individual worker.

Further, when we find that Mission Stations total about 270, it is at once apparent that more than one Mission is at work in many of the occupied places. Indeed, in some of them three or more Missions are at work. Besides, some of these Missions have large staffs, showing that a large proportion of the agency is concentrated in a relatively small number of towns and cities. To give an instance or two: Hamburg seems to have at least 30 workers, and there are as many employed in Budapest; in Bucharest there are over 20, In Constantinople 15; Safad has 12, Tiberias 24, Haifa 11, and Jerusalem over 40.

For present purposes the list need not be extended, but here we find over 180 agents employed in only eight of the occupied cities.

The most extraordinary concentration seems to be in Palestine, which, with only 160,000 Jews, contains more Jewish missionary agents than there are in the Slav lands of Europe, where over 6,000,000 Jews have their homes.

It is not too much to say that many of the great Jewish areas lie entirely fallow. It is doubtful if more than twenty cities in Russia, Ukraina, Poland, and the Baltic States, together are occupied by Missions. Czechoslovakia, with 360,000 Jews, has only an occasional worker; Transylvania, with a quarter of a million, has only one regular worker."

And the list continues with further examples following the same pattern. Therefore they cannot recommend that more missionaries be sent to Palestine and, "after all, if effective mission work is to be done in Jewry, it should be self-evident that missionaries must be sent where the people are."

This is the way we do today, isn't it? We have missionaries "where the people are" and we do not focus on just one place – or what? It could be interesting to get an overview of how our workers are distributed today.

Document and delegates

It is one thing to study mission documents and learn from them – both positive and negative lessons. But if you want to feel the "vibe" of a conference, you have to go to the personal reports that some of the delegates wrote afterwards. I have allied myself with the Englishman Samuel Hinds Wilkinson, General Director of the Mildmay Mission to the Jews, the Norwegian clergyman Gisle Johnson in Budapest, sent out by the Norwegian Israel Mission, and Professor Frederik Torm, chairman of the Danish Israel Mission. By the way: I would appreciate all personal reports from this conference and keep them in my archive. Thank you!

Samuel Hinds Wilkinson

Wilkinson was very much in doubt whether he should attend the two conferences at all. "I should in no case have attended them had I not had the authoritative assurance in advance that there would be no surrender of the right of personal judgment by so doing."

What does he think after the conferences? He writes: "It is difficult to estimate the probable effects of such Conferences. Much will go on as before. There may be – probably will be – a more definite attempt made in the direction of centralization and co-ordination. There will be good and evil in this." And then follows a sentence which shows that Wilkinson sees a danger but also a possibility. The sentence is a long one and shows that Germans do not have a monopoly on long sentences. Here it comes: "If it be true that the best, the most spiritually fruitful of God's work has never been effected by machine-like human policy and plan, it is also true that work prosecuted in the light of the fullest possible knowledge of the facts related to it need be no less Spirit-impelled and guided on that account, and will be likely to be better directed, and to avoid the losses produced by friction."

Well, Wilkinson had after all been inspired by the conferences, where he served as interpreter – from German to English. Two stories by him.

He tells about an "amusing and significant incident" that occurred in Warsaw. Pastor August Gerhardt from Basel had raised a protest against "oneman missions". Wilkinson translates faithfully and then asks permission to address the conference. "[I] informed it that a one-man

mission was actually represented at the Conference, and that the culprit stood before them to appeal to the mercy of the court!" Of course August Gerhardt had to withdraw his remarks and he said that were not directed against the Mildmay Mission, and the President, Dr Mott insisted, "that some of the most God-honoured, God-prospered undertakings in mission history were one-man missions."

The following moving story also comes from Wilkinson. One day he is to translate the German Professor Alfred Jeremias' paper, and he writes in that connection: "There were passages in his address with which I was in little sympathy, though I sought as interpreter faithfully to reproduce them: but to one passage all my heart responded, as it reflected, I believe, the deepest feeling of the Conference and the life-impulse of the great theologian who uttered it. 'Fifteen years ago, I laid all my philosophies at the feet of Jesus'."

Gisle Johnson

Johnson, missionary in Budapest attended, like Wilkinson, both conferences. He thought that the religious Christian devotional element was given better opportunities in Warsaw. He also thought that they went more in depth with the topics at that conference. In his opinion the reason could be "that the core of the participants in Warsaw already knew each other from the Budapest conference where they had had their first clashes [*sic*] and formed the first friendships." He mentions that two big contrasts were expressed: first between the American and the German Lutheran views of mission, and second between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. He does not have a lot of good to say about the Jewish Christians and their contributions. However, this may well reflect on himself. He is, nevertheless, pleased with the conference. It has contributed to a greater interest in a Jewish Christian gathering in Budapest. Therefore five meetings for Jews and Jewish Christians were held in the time between the two conferences.

It is also Johnson that tells the story of what he calls "the most embarrassing moment" during the two conferences: it happened "when one of the Jewish Christians leaders launched a rather uncontrolled attack on the German Lutheran churches and was reprovved with a reference to 1 Thess 2:15." What does 1 Thess 2:15 say: "[The Jews], who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men." Can this be true? Or is 1 Thess 2:15 a slip of the pen for 2 Thess 2:15 – I really hope so: "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you ..."? I do not know. In any case we may begin to feel in some way the "vibe" of the conference.

Frederik Torm

There is also "vibe" in the story Frederik Torm tells and it is telling both of the attitude to anti-Semitism at the conference and to Dr Mott, the president of the conference. It should be interposed that Hungary, the host country, had seen a brief Communist uprising in 1919 under Bela Kun. He and many of his top commissars were Jews. During his regime, which lasted only 133 days, a number of Hungarians were executed, including some fellow Jews. Several Jews had taken part in this rebellion, which fuelled anti-Semitism in the following years. The conference deliberately comments on this sensitive topic. Anti-Semitism is condemned in no uncertain terms.

But Torm says that during the negotiations a participant argued that the Jews were partly to blame for the anti-Semitism and that it would therefore be wise not to phrase the condemnation of anti-Semitism too strongly. But then Dr Mott said in his characteristically quiet, authoritative manner that there was no area where he was more reluctant to weaken or tone down the language than in the statement about anti-Semitism.

The Ghetto of the past – the walls of Jericho have fallen

The conferences in 1927 were characterized by great optimism. World War I was in the past. Great economic and social progress had been made. Many Jews were leaving the synagogue. As it is said in the report: "It is stated that in America 80 per cent of the Jews are outside the Synagogue, while in the city of Berlin approximately 65 per cent have given up Judaism ..." The Jews are seeking, looking for other answers than the ones given by Judaism. As it is said: "Leaders of Judaism have complained bitterly of a desertion of worship and a disregard of authority." This observation is followed up by the remark: "This is not a matter for any rejoicing on

our part. It will be a bitter day if good Jews are only converted into bad Jews!”

The mood that characterized the conference and its visions is expressed in the following words: “The Ghetto and all the deplorable things it represented are things of the past. The walls of Jericho have fallen. Praise God!” And: “But the point is, for their [the Jews’] own good or ill, *they are out in the open.*” And: “This is Christ’s great chance.” Or as they said in Warsaw: “We are convinced that the Church of Christ is facing a new day in Jewish missions. The signs of the times awaken new hope for the future.”

The conference is aware that a new picture of Jesus is emerging. Joseph Klausner’s book *Yeshu ha-Notzri* had appeared in Hebrew five years earlier, in 1922. In 1925 the English translation of it, *Jesus of Nazareth*, had been published. The general opinion was that this new view of Jesus boded well for the future work among Jews.

Torm comments that “essentially all this may be true, as it is also indisputable that new opportunities are opening for mission work, but we should be careful not to exaggerate these things.”

Why this reservation on Torm’s side? His answer is: “Klausner’s book has not only met with approval but also with sharp protests from Jewish quarters.” And the fact that Jews can admire Jesus as the great Jew does not change their prejudices about the church and against missions.”

It is important for Torm that false expectations about results are not raised. Therefore he says: “Mission work requires the same patience as until now.”

In his opinion that aspect is too weak in the conference statements. As he says: “... they seemed to be afraid of weakening the appeal to the churches to take up mission work if they did not as strongly as possible accentuate the new opportunities for mission. But it is better to face reality squarely as it is.”

I wonder, to pursue the same idea, if it is reality that is always expressed in our newsletters in 2007 when we describe our results? Torm did not want to contribute to the creation of false expectations, for it can break workers. Mission to Israel will also in the future be a long, tough haul requiring “persevering patience”. Don’t forget that, says Torm.

Baptism and careful instruction

And then a statement from the conference about baptism. It says:

“We call attention to the fact that baptism, prematurely performed, often makes the baptised Jew a stumbling-block to other Jews, and a reproach to the Mission and to the Church.

When a Jew applies for baptism, the missionary should do his utmost to test his profession and observe his life, lest there be any ulterior motives in his mind.

The aim of missions is not to ‘make propaganda,’ but to win souls for Christ and lead them to holy living. The missionary ought, therefore, to show special caution in admitting for baptism those for whom there is no community of Christian people prepared to receive the converts and give them the necessary spiritual help and guidance. A period of wise and careful instruction should precede baptism, and, where possible, an accurate register of baptisms should be kept.”

Why this statement? The official material from the conference does not give a clear answer to that. It was a hot potato to touch. How so?

In brief: In 1919, the year of Bela Kun’s revolution, the official number for baptisms in Hungary is 7,146. In 1920 it is 1,925. Add to this non-registered baptisms. Large figures are causes for joy, right? But not so! The Scandinavian and German Lutherans thought that the English and Scottish missionaries were too rash and did not sufficiently test the faith of the converts before baptism. The facts were that many baptized Jews later returned to Judaism. Before the conference there was some anxiety as to whether the conference would dare to deal with this burning question. Gisle Johnson, for example, refused to be co-convenor of the conference since he could not be sure what would be the conference’s position on the question.

The question was tabled at the conference at Frederik Torm’s request. If it had any effect I do not know. Perhaps Wilkinson’s word came true: “Much will go on as before.”

This whole matter requires a paper of its own. And I do not know why this makes me wonder how we, in 2007, count Messianic Jews in Israel. Perhaps it is a mere digression. Or is it a relevant association?

Jesus Himself must be our theme

A. Lukyn Williams dealt with the theme: "Literature as a Means of Winning Jews to Christ." He asks: "What do Jews of to-day need?" His answer focuses on literature but can also be applied to other areas: "They need to see in all our writings Sympathy and Jesus. For, alas, with very few exceptions it is difficult to find either the one or the other in our literature present and past."

It is an expert who is speaking. Let us listen to what he says:

"I have read, I think, practically all our modern, and a great deal of the early and mediæval, missionary literature, and I am always impressed with the fact that while there is in it much about the teaching of the Old Testament, and the wonderful way in which this foretells the coming and life of the Messiah, there is very little indeed about Jesus Himself. Our missionary writers have been so intrigued – to use the cant phrase – with the preparation for Jesus that they seldom tell us anything about Him as He was and is.

And yet, when you come to think of it, it was not proofs from the Old Testament which won the first Jewish converts, though, of course, the Old Testament confirmed their faith. It was Jesus Himself who attracted them; His personality, His character, His graciousness, His actions, in a word, His life, and then His death, and His further Life seen of them, and known in its effect within them.

We need, in fact, to reproduce Jesus. In our life? Yes, above all else; but also in our words, and, that our words may go far, much further than we ourselves can possibly go, we must write and print descriptions of Jesus as He was and is. There is no harm in referring to the Old Testament and to Jewish literature as we do so. Both are absolutely necessary, but they must both take a very secondary place. Jesus Himself must be our theme."

These are strong words. Some may even say one-sided and wish to moderate them saying that the themes we deal with must throw light on Jesus Himself. But I will leave them as they are and not diminish their challenge.

The message to the Jews in 1927 – and in 2007

Even though Torm had certain reservations about the conference's optimistic expectations about mission results in the future, the conference did not yield to the temptation to "modernize the gospel in order to win the Jewish youth's interest and approval. On this point the conference stood firm; it is the old gospel that needs to be proclaimed," he wrote.

So, what is the old gospel according to Budapest and Warsaw 1927? It is said in this statement:

"Our message to the Jews is the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, glorified, the fulfilment of the law and the true Messiah. He is the incarnate Word, the Redeemer of the world, the Saviour from sin, who is bringing Israel to her destiny – viz., to become a blessing to all humanity.

This message should be presented with humility and love and with self-sacrificing service, so that the Jews may be awaked from the mere expectancy of a Messiah or a dependence on self-righteousness to true repentance and confession of sin, praying for regeneration, receiving pardon through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, and becoming His sincere disciples."

This statement is rather different from the poster with "Hungary's creed", which a pastor associated with the Danish Israel Mission saw on the trams in Budapest during a visit in January – precisely in 1927. According to Benjamin Balslev the "creed" read like this:

"I believe in a God.

I believe in a fatherland.

I believe in eternal truth.

I believe in Hungary's resurrection."

Amen.

No, at the conference in Budapest 1927 they did not express a belief in "a God" but belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They did not talk about the "resurrection" of a country but about the resurrection of Christ. And they knew that without "spiritual power" it would all be in vain.

Even if we, here at Lake Balaton 2007, cannot lay *all* our philosophies at the feet of Jesus – then perhaps a few of them!

It is possible that “much will go on as before” when we return to our work. But could we not here during the conference open the door a crack so that some changes might be considered?

When the last word has been said at this conference, I hope that we will have got new courage and boldness so that we together can say: “Jesus Himself *is* our theme in Jewish evangelism.”

OK? Until the next International LCJE Conference in 2011? Or – allow me – *at least* until Christ comes!

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