

Roots and Records

Editorial

In this issue of *Mishkan* we read about eight individuals who are very different, but share a common involvement in Jewish evangelism during the 19th and 20th centuries. The articles are different in style and length, but each sheds light on a person who has contributed to the history of Jewish missions. The biographies are not exhaustive, but contain sufficient detail to inspire those of us now involved in the same ministry. Perhaps one or more of the articles could serve as a foundation for further research. In a later issue of *Mishkan* we hope to focus on others who also have made a contribution to Jewish evangelism.

Thorough study of mission history helps us understand our own identity. We are part of a movement which has a history. We are not the first ones to contemplate difficult issues regarding the relationship between Jews and Christians and Jesus-believing Jews, although at times we act and talk *as if* we were. In so doing we only prove our lack of appreciation and understanding of history. We demonstrate our unwillingness to debate and struggle with other points of view, many of which we reject before due deliberation occurs. German and English mission magazines and reports from mission conferences from the late 19th and the early 20th century are all good examples of great theological resource material which has not been given the attention it deserves.

Historical studies done by insiders run the danger of touching up history. This alone makes an outsider's views valuable and needed. Although the motives behind any retouching of the history of an organization or a person might be good, we do not do ourselves a favor by omitting negative or exaggerating positive elements. Personally, I have never found much benefit in reading the history of saints, but I have been encouraged by an honest history of men and women who, under the difficult circumstances that make up real life, have remained faithful to their calling.

W.T. Gidney offers a principle for a good writing of mission history in his preface to *The History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews* (London 1908: ix-x). Gidney writes:

The reader of this History must not expect to learn of large numbers of converts gathered in at one time, but rather of one here and another there. Whatever the results are, they are narrated with profound thankfulness to Almighty God, for what He has graciously permitted His servants to achieve by the power of the Holy Spirit, and, it is believed, they will prove a source of encouragement to those who are, or may be, engaged in this work. The failure and mistakes of those who have gone before – due to the weakness of mortal nature, and to circumstances over which they had no control, or were not wise enough to turn to good account – have not been concealed or minimized. To have done this would have destroyed the value of the History as a guide for the years to come.

Gidney hopes to be “of encouragement to those who are, or may be, engaged” in Jewish mission. However, this encouragement is not based on success stories or covering up mistakes, but on the conviction that God wants the gospel presented to the Jews—regardless of our success. The fact that God uses flawed people in his service makes room—even for us!

Even an author who has secondary motives for writing mission history can still offer inspiration and encouragement. An example of this is A. Bernstein who in his introduction to *Some Jewish Witness for Christ* (London 1909: 5-6) writes:

The aim of this work is to shew that God had at all times in the history of the Christian Church a considerable number of believing Israelites who, after their conversion to Christianity, rendered good service to their fellowmen and to the Church of Christ at large.

Louis Meyer also had multiple motives when he wrote his 21 brief biographical sketches under the title: *Eminent Hebrew Christians of the Nineteenth Century* (Edited with an Introduction by David A. Rausch, New York and Toronto, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983). The conclusion of Meyer’s preface exhorts:

May this volume stimulate those who are already zealous in the evangelization of the Jews. May it shame those who uphold that labor spent in preaching the Gospel to the Jews is lost labor, that it is impossible to bring a Jew to Christ, or that Hebrew Christians come only from the lowest class of Jews. (p. xxxiv)

Against such a background one can understand why the author talks about *eminent* persons in Jewish missions—or about *Famous Hebrew Christians*, as J. Gartenhaus does in his anthology (Grand Rapids, 1979). There are persons who have made history and set the agenda in a special way. We should, of course, occupy ourselves with them. However, I miss the description of *ordinary* Jesus-believing Jews, their everyday life, their relationships to their surroundings or a description of life in an ordinary congregation—i.e. realistic descriptions lacking glossy colors and touch up. A history which occupies itself with only the *eminent* will remain an amputated history.

Regardless of our view of eschatology, our present involvement in Jewish evangelism is important. This raises the question of how much we invest in preserving the history of our own work—with its failures and successes. Let me give a 19th century example. One of the reasons that we know—or can know—much about both famous and non-famous mission workers’ lives and deeds is that they were requested to write reports and journals about their work. This is what the Committee for the London Jews Society required of its employees:

They [the Committee] would wish you to keep a daily account of your proceedings. In these Journals you will record, not only the events and transactions in which you are engaged, but the feelings of your minds, and your reflections upon the various objects, around you, and in the great work upon which you are occupied, its difficulties, and the means of its

advancement. These Journals are to be considered as the property of the Society, and are to be sent home as opportunities occur. Besides these Journals, the Committee wish you to keep up a regular correspondence with them, in which you will give extracts from your Journals as will be interesting to the friends of the Society, before you may be enabled to transmit the Journals themselves. (General Instructions by the Committee of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst The Jews to their Missionaries. London: 1824, p. 19)

Mission magazines would often publish lengthy excerpts from the missionaries' journals. If the issues were sensitive some editing was done. Had these journals not been published we would today suffer a lack of resources. It is ironic that the committees requesting these regular reports (so that they could make the best decisions regarding the work) seem to have had no policy on how to preserve these journals for the future. Clearly some valuable material has been lost. Leaders themselves might even have destroyed some of the material. When an organization moves its headquarters to a new location there is always a danger that valuable historical files will be lost.

This prompts the question of what we must do to preserve the records of our work for the future. In a report from the Billy Graham Center Archives it says:

Many evangelical agencies/organizations/leaders do not recognize the need for preserving an account of their ministry. The immediate demands of the day take precedence over preservation of their records. As a result, the entire Christian body suffers from this loss. (www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/EAC/eac6.html)

In *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (vol. 38, no. 2, April 2002, p. 168-175) Robert Shuster, director of the Billy Graham Center Archives, offers some guidelines. Under the title "It's Your History. Guidelines for Establishing Your Mission Archives" Schuster writes:

Consider the Benefits. To be the steward of a mission's history is to care for and protect material that records the work of God acted out in the lives of men and women. Now is the time to decide how best to retain the documents that identify your group as unique and provide you with the means to continue to respond to God's call faithfully and productively. A mission archives will:

- *Serve as a resource for current work*
- *Remind individuals of the lessons from the past*
- *Supplement fund-raising projects and publications with illustrations, photographs and relevant documents*
- *Facilitate training new missionaries*
- *Enrich anniversary celebrations*
- *Enhance visual and audio appeal to web sites and exhibits*
- *Provide answers to legal queries*

Although small mission organizations might not be able to fully live up to this standard, the people at Billy Graham Center Archives should be thanked

for reminding us to preserve our own records. Even a modest beginning is better than none at all.

If we don't know our history we stand in danger of becoming rootless and without our records future generations will be rootless. If we know only the retouched version of history we easily lose hope. It becomes impossible to identify with those who went ahead of us. An honest history can serve as an encouragement to continue the blessed work of sharing the gospel with the Jewish people.

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