

A CURRENT ISSUE



# Jesus Himself Must Be Our Theme

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*This article is part of the opening speech of the Eighth International LCJE Conference at Lake Balaton, Hungary, in 2007.*

The conferences on Jewish evangelism in Budapest and Warsaw in April 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 from the conferences: "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 were seeking, looking for other answers than the ones given by Judaism. It was said that the "leaders of Judaism have complained bitterly of a desertion of worship and a disregard of authority." This observation was followed 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 vision 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 was aware that a new picture of Jesus was 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 future work among the Jews.

One of the delegates at the conference in Budapest, Professor Frederik Torm, Chairman of the Danish Israel Mission, commented 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 part? His answer was, "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 was important for Torm that false expectations about results not be raised; therefore he said, "Mission work requires the same patience as until now."

In his opinion, that aspect was too weak in the conference statements. As he said, "... 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 reality is always expressed in our newsletters when we describe our results. Torm did not want to contribute to the creation of false expectations, for they can break workers. Mission to Israel will continue to be a long, tough haul in the future, requiring "persevering patience." Don't forget that, says Torm.

### **Jesus Himself Must Be Our Theme**

At the conference in Budapest, A. Lukyn Williams spoke on the theme "Literature as a Means of Winning Jews to Christ." He asked, "What do Jews of today need?" His answer focused 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."

This is an expert 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 they are one-sided and seek 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 Professor Frederik Torm had certain reservations about the conference's optimistic expectations for mission results in the future, he wrote that 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."

So, what is the old gospel according to Budapest and Warsaw 1927? It is described 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 "Hungary's creed," which a pastor associated with the Danish Israel Mission saw on posters in the trams in Budapest during a visit in January 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 in 1927 they did not express 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.

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