

Sharing the Messiah with Your Jewish Neighbor

✖ In my book, *You Bring the Bagels; I'll Bring the Gospel: Sharing the Messiah with Your Jewish Neighbor*, I used a standard communication model to organize all the material into four sections: You, The Gentile Christian; Your Message, the "Jewish" Gospel; Your Audience (Your Jewish neighbor) and The Feedback: Barriers to Belief.

In the first section, I made the point that to effectively communicate a message, the messenger must have credibility, and that one of the key aspects of credibility is "identification." In order to reach his own people, Paul explained, "With the Jews I put myself in the position of the Jews in order to win Jews" (I Cor 9:20).

He identified with his people, not in a false way, but in a sincere way. Clearly, when he was in Rome, he did (some) of what the Romans do, getting into philosophical dialogue. But with his own people, since he felt at home, he emphasized his Jewishness.

In order to share with your Jewish neighbor, you too need to identify with the person to have credibility. That will make you a more effective communicator. As one gentile member of my congregation here in Maryland said to me recently: "We need to make Emmanuel Messianic Jewish Congregation a place where Jewish people feel comfortable." He got it right. Messianic congregations need to create "Jewish space" for visitors, space with which they can identify.

Christians, too, need to identify with Jewish people, especially since the One they follow is a Jew and came "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Even Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, told the Roman believers "to provoke

the Jewish people (the natural branches) to jealousy for their own Messiah (Romans 11:11).

This is the Gentile Great Commission and it's not being fulfilled very well. Christians need to identify with Jewish people to have more credibility, thus winning them to Messiah. But how can Christians do this?

One way is by participating in Jewish community activities. When there are movies on Jewish themes or talks by Israeli speakers, attend and let your Jewish neighbor know you are sincerely interested in them and the Jewish people.

You might even suggest that you and your Jewish neighbor go together and discuss what you heard. Discussion (even arguing) is a very Jewish thing to do. You will be identifying and also learning about matters near to the heart of God. However, from my experience, there are several problems non-Jews have with identification, which affects their credibility, and their witness.

The first is that, in their zeal to identify, some Christians misuse Jewish symbols. For example, instead of following the centuries old custom of lighting two Sabbath candles on Friday night, they light three, to affirm their Trinitarian theology, while expecting to identify by lighting these candles. Christians are free to create any sort of image to help their faith, but when they invite a Jewish person to dinner, and light three Shabbat candles, that is misusing a Jewish symbol and is offensive.

Over-identification

The second, over-identifying with Jewish people, i.e. being more "Jewish" than most Jews, can backfire. Well-meaning Christians may learn how to speak Hebrew fluently, but since most American Jews don't, it can make them feel inadequate, at least initially. Unless a person knows you, and trusts your

sincerity, it might breed suspicion. Of course, discernment is called for.

A gentile believer in my congregation has been wearing a kippah (a yarmulke or skull cap) ever since I've known him. I asked him if he might be over-identifying, risking offending Jewish people. His response was that he wore a kippah for the same reasons Jews do: to show reverence to God. I've never asked him about it again. He was not over-identifying. He was sincerely identifying.

Refusing to Adjust

A third challenge in the identification issue is refusing to adjust. The congregant who said we should make our congregation a place where Jewish people would feel comfortable was surprised when I pointed out that at our oneg (lunch after morning services), someone brought delicious corned beef, but no rye bread.

Whoever brought the corned beef (very Jewish) didn't know that you just "couldn't" eat a corned beef sandwich on any bread other than rye bread—along with good mustard (not mayonnaise). He didn't know that, but because he wants to identify with my people, he was willing to adjust. He'll enjoy his next corned beef sandwich, like the Jewish people who come to services. This is unlike someone who used to be in my congregation and just refused to adjust.

Several years ago, when I was explaining identification to my congregation, I mentioned the Miracle Whip/Hellmann's Real Mayonnaise controversy. For the most part, Jews do not use Miracle Whip, rather preferring Hellmann's Real Mayonnaise. It's not that Miracle Whip isn't tasty, it's just not one of those foods that Jews eat, and I'm not sure why. One woman got so incensed, that she left the congregation, never to return. I guess she just liked her Miracle Whip so much she refused to adjust, although she undoubtedly had other issues, too.

So, in terms of reaching out to Jewish people, Christians need to think about credibility, specifically identification, not misusing Jewish symbols, not over-identifying, and being willing to adjust. Knowing the heart of Paul, an observant rabbi, toward his people, identifying with his people will enable you to be the most effective messenger you can, and truly “provoke the Jews to jealousy” for the faith you have. You just need to step into Jewish space, which, by the way, is a wonderful place to be.

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