

An Open Invitation?

Get Real, Get Resourced and Get Focused:
Making Missional Connections within
Jewish Contexts

Rev. Alex Jacob



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Setting the Scene

This Olive Press Research Paper is based upon and develops some of the ideas, practical advice and teaching that are presented in JET, the online teaching resource of the Church's Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ UK). This updated JET training resource consists of five main modules. First, my introductory session (An Open Invitation?), on which this Olive Press Resource Paper is based, followed by four more teaching modules, each with four video themes. These teaching modules explore key issues, namely, Kingdom, Culture, Care and Calendar. These modules are led by Oliver Sims. Oliver serves CMJ as a Community-Based Evangelist (CBE) and is also currently undertaking post-graduate studies at the Feinberg Center in New York, supported by Chosen People Ministries.

What Oliver does so well, in my view, is to give Christians insight and encouragement to begin to 'bridge the gap' that has arisen for many reasons and throughout many centuries due to the wedge that has been driven (and continues to be driven in some contexts) between the Church and the Jewish people.

Please look at all of these JET modules (with various links to other resources, study materials and helpful websites) and use them in the way that works best for you. In most cases, some kind of 'pick and mix' approach will probably work best and hopefully these resources will prove helpful for both personal study, and for training and reflection in Church group settings.

This JET material will certainly not be the 'final word' on any of these in-depth and, at times, sensitive issues. These issues focus on making genuine missional connections and enabling 'bridge-building' and 'outreach' to flourish, but hopefully this online teaching resource (and this Olive Press Research Paper) will be viewed by many as timely and helpful, based upon the experience and core values of the Church's Ministry among Jewish People.

The initial challenge in terms of making missional connections and enabling culturally sensitive encounters is to **'Get Real'**.

Get Real

There is a pressing need to act now, for Jewish people remain one of the most significant 'unreached groups' in world evangelisation. Current research shows that, of the current world-wide population of Jewish people (14.7 million), only about 1.03% have a public faith in Jesus as Messiah and LORD. Within the Church, some people also seem unaware of, or opposed to, the need to make missional connections and to enable culturally sensitive evangelism among Jewish people to take place and to flourish. So, let's get back to basics. For me, the fundamental question concerns the issue of motivation. Why do we want to invest time, emotion and resources in making connections and in sharing the Gospel with all people, and specifically (but never exclusively) in the CMJ context with Jewish people? A range of good answers is possible, such as 'concern for the truth', 'concern for the lost', 'the honouring of God's Name' and 'obedience to the call of Scripture'¹. However, sometimes bad answers lurk within our own experiences and consciences, such as guilt, a desire to manipulate, an agenda for cultural dominance or vain ambition. At the very core of all our good answers must be our relationship with God and our enjoyment of God Himself, which is uniquely and supremely made real in the person and work of Jesus (Yeshua). Our convictions and vision about the nature of God will shape, resource and drive all of our missional work and our ongoing discipleship. The wellspring of faithful, happy and healthy evangelism is God Himself. A happy mission presupposes happy Christians. There can be a kind of evangelism that is doctrinally correct, well-resourced and carefully co-ordinated, but that can reflect the emptiness and anxieties of our own hearts, rather than the 'fullness of life' flowing from the life of God Himself. There are a number of helpful books that help us to explore the questions concerning motivation, but as we start this process I want to draw your attention to one book in particular, *God Shines Forth* by Daniel Hames and Michael Reeves².

I found this book to be especially helpful, as so much in evangelism and missional teaching is about practicalities, namely the 'how' to do it! Often these insights, methodologies and personal advice can be very helpful³, but we should never start with practicalities, rather we must always start with a clear and Biblically astute theology that empowers and shapes our motivation. Our motivation and aspiration should be to do what God desires and to do this in ways that reflect God's grace and goodness.

The theological premise that underpins this 'open invitation' is that Jewish people, like all people, need (and have the right) to hear the Gospel in ways that are both accessible and sensitive. This can be challenging and often difficult, yet the theological conviction is that this is neither wasteful nor inappropriate. In fact, the Bible gives this work of sharing the Gospel among Jewish people a specific priority⁴. For example, Romans 1:16 declares that there is an unavoidable call to share the Gospel with Jewish people. The text reads, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile"* (NIV).

This text (Romans 1:16) is written in the present tense and is therefore applicable to every generation. In my understanding, the logic is convincing, for if the Gospel is still the power of God to salvation and is still for everyone who believes, then the Gospel is still *"first to the Jew"* (NIV) or *"for the Jew first"* (NKJV) or - as David Stern helpfully (in my view) translates this phrase - *"to the Jew especially"* (CJB). The Greek word translated as 'first' in most translations (or 'especially' courtesy of David Stern) implies an active priority rather than a simple order of sequential events. The same Greek word is used in Matthew 6:33 when Jesus tells us: *"seek first his kingdom"* (NIV). Jesus Himself in His teaching ministry based an argument on the logic of the tense used by a Biblical writer (Matthew 22:31-32, Exodus 3:6). This demonstrates Jesus' concern to uphold not only the content of a Biblical text, but also the correct application of its linguistic form, and we should do the same in our engagement with Romans 1:16 and with all Scripture.

The other key point for me in reflecting on this text is this - namely the focus on not being 'ashamed'. Shame is a powerful emotion and can be a major behavioural driver. This is especially clear in some 'honour cultures' that existed in Biblical times and continue to exist today in some contexts. Not being ashamed may seem like a rather 'low bar' of affirmation. For example, I would rarely talk of not being ashamed of my children, but rather I would often speak of my love for them. However, I think the phrase 'not ashamed' chosen by Paul in this text is very poignant. It is true for many of us who, from our natural viewpoint, have felt a sense of shame that has held us back from sharing the Gospel. This shame is often rooted in our awareness of Church history (often with anti-Semitic traits) and the relative weakness and disunity of the Church, alongside our own personal failures and doubts as disciples. In moving forward with this, we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the grace of Jesus and the support, discernment and empathy of fellow disciples. These realities give us a confidence, a confidence that both overcomes our shame and failings, and gives us renewed hope and guidance.

I have also found it to be very helpful to see missional connections and evangelism as processes and only seldom as single events, encounters or conversations. These processes involve us trying to share God's story of restoration, redemption and renewal alongside our own stories (personal experience and testimony) with our friends, family and wider contacts. Walter Brueggemann, in his thoughtful book on evangelism⁵, makes a similar point and states: "*The drama of evangelism is no once-for-all event but it is a narrative that moves repeatedly through victory - proclamation - appropriation*" (Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*: 129).

The theological and historical roots of the Gospel and of our calling require us to love the Jewish people and to stand with them as we seek to be part of God's work in bringing Jewish people into the reconciliation that is fundamental to the big picture of God's plan for the restoration of the whole of the created order.

In seeking to be part of God's work we are presented with an unavoidable Biblical call to reach out to Jewish people with the Gospel. Sadly, we cannot assume that this important and unavoidable call will always be apparent to all (or many) within the Church.

In all of this we are seeking to present a message of hope and Biblical spirituality, rather than seeking to 'rearrange the mental furniture' in someone's head or engaging in a religious recruitment drive. From my experience, I understand that Jewish individual and communal resistance to the Gospel is reduced when the Gospel is presented primarily as a message of hope and Biblical spirituality rather than as a 'religion' to follow or as an 'institution' to join. For this message of hope and Biblical spirituality to be real, we need to cultivate the following characteristics and values: humility, patience, authenticity, intentionality, spontaneity, consistency, prayerfulness and kindness. As we cultivate these values we need to be consecrated (set aside for a purpose) to the LORD and open to the daily leading of the Holy Spirit.

If the first step is to '**Get Real**', the second step is to '**Get Resourced**'.

Get Resourced

Hopefully some of the books already listed in the endnotes and the bibliography of this Olive Press Research Paper will be helpful and inspiring. In addition to this, the online JET material, which is available via the CMJ UK website (www.cmj.org.uk), offers some excellent insights to help to make missional connections and encourage culturally sensitive evangelism. Other online resources that colleagues and I have used widely and would warmly recommend include the 'I found shalom' (YouTube) testimony videos and 'One For Israel⁶' (www.oneforisrael.org) online resources. If you are a Church leader, why not invite a CMJ staff member to speak at your Church community? This process to get resourced should ideally include both individual and community-based actions, and is a life-long task for all of us.

The third step following on from getting resourced is the call to **'Get Focused'**.

Get Focused

A key text for me to get focus is 1 Peter 3:15, where we read: *“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect”* (NIV). This verse reminds us of the need to be intentional and consecrated (revere Christ as Lord). It also sets the tone of gentleness and respect, implicitly implying that our lifestyle will lead to conversations and will generate key questions on issues such as hope, truth and justice. We will not all be called to be front-line evangelists, but we are all called to support the work of evangelism and to be witnesses - witnesses to the hope we have. This hope is birthed in, and flows out of, our saving faith in Jesus, who made atonement for us and rose victoriously from the dead. Part of getting focused is to engage with what has been called the four **Bes** of missional discipleship. I see these four **Bes** as providing a useful checklist to cultivate discipleship values and promote effective witness.

The first **Be** is - **Be a friend**. This reminds us that we are looking for genuine relationships and authentic conversations. I think that, for the vast majority of us, ‘Friendship Evangelism’ will be our most natural and effective form of witness.

The second **Be** is - **Be patient**. Most effective missional bridge-building and evangelism are long-term investments. As stated earlier, we rightly see most of this work as processes rather than as single events. Our attitude must include patience and a discernment of the Lord’s perfect timing.

The third **Be** is - **Be faithful**. In this context I think we especially need to be faithful to Scripture. We need to have a clear and compelling Biblical view of the Gospel. In our conversations, we need to avoid being side-tracked and consequently focus on secondary issues. We must keep focused on Jesus. In this, we need to discern when questions are genuine and pressing. When this is the case, we must try to answer as helpfully as we can.

However, often questions are not genuine and pressing, but rather are they not aimed to distract or trap? Try not to answer an insincere question with a sincere answer, but respond with a sincere question. You should be faithful to your personal story (testimony) and to the stories of others. There is also a place for the use of logic and reason in our witnessing. However, in our outreach conversations, we are not trying to impress someone with our knowledge or seeking to win an argument, but rather we are seeking to build relationships and to present the Gospel. Finally, at times we need to be prepared to say that we don't know how to helpfully answer some of the genuine questions with which we may be presented, but at such times we can (and must) offer to try to find out, and to offer to follow up in the best way we can. The fourth and final **Be** is - **Be prayerful**. We need God's help, for sharing the Gospel is not, as stated earlier, about selling a product, promoting an organisation or trying to rearrange the mental furniture in someone's head. It is far greater than this, it is a deep transformative work of God. Such work must be handled with prayer!

The 'gold standard' in evangelism is to discern and develop genuine points of contact. Some of you reading this may already have some of these contact points in place. You may be a Jewish Believer in Jesus and have meaningful contacts with your immediate and wider family. Or you may have a good network of Jewish friends and colleagues. You may live in, or attend, a Church within a location that is 'home' to many Jewish people. You may have genuine connection points with Jewish people via outlets such as work, sport, social media, cultural and political links. For all of this and more, we can be thankful to the LORD. Such genuine points of contact need to be recognised, celebrated and invested in, for these connection points are so often starting points to share the Gospel.

When people do respond positively and fully to the Gospel, three discernible steps can often be identified within this response. The first discernible step is a growing friendship with a Christian, who may be a Christian (or a group of Christians) they like and learn to trust.

The second step is a **serious engagement** with the central message of the Bible. We can help with this process of engagement by encouraging people to read the Scriptures and to study them with us (or with our wider Church community). In terms of some Jewish friends and enquirers, it may be helpful to offer to study the set weekly Torah readings with them or to look at some of the key Messianic prophecies⁷. My own little study book on Luke's Gospel⁸ may also be a helpful entry point for some Jewish enquirers reading the New Testament, although the book is designed more as a discipleship resource than as an evangelistic tool. Church events such as 'Alpha' can be helpful, although some extra cultural and pastoral care may well be required when engaging with some Jewish enquirers.

The third step is when enquirers and searchers experience a **'supernatural' confirmation** of their Bible engagement and inner seeking - perhaps through a vision, dream, answered prayer, or a deep conviction of sin. This third step is something only God can do.

Moreover, we all need to grow in our understanding of and living out of our faith in Jesus. Hopefully this Olive Press Research Paper and the resources highlighted within it will help in this regard. In terms of making connections within Jewish contexts, we need to appreciate that the Jewish world is very diverse and has within it a rich and complex history, spanning over 4000 years.

We need to understand the importance in Jewish identity of belonging, of surviving and of celebrating. We need to be sensitive to, and be aware of, the profound shadow the Holocaust (Shoah) and ongoing anti-Semitism cast over Jewish communities today. We need to recognise and be able to engage with some of the tough questions that many Jewish seekers will ask⁹.

Questions such as, who is Jesus? Is Jewish Monotheism different from Christian Trinitarian faith¹⁰? If the Messiah has come, why is the world still so full of suffering and injustice? Can Jewish people be true followers of Jesus without revoking or distorting their Jewish identity?

How does keeping Torah connect with or contradict being a disciple of Jesus? All of these questions and many more provide the context for many outreach conversations and ongoing encounters within Jewish-Christian relations.

An Invitation to the Church

As I draw this Olive Press Research Paper to a close, I want to widen the focus away from what we can do as individuals (see for example the four **Bes**) and try to focus on what we can do as communities of Christians. In this community witness, we can at times see something achieving far more than the sum of its parts. In a broken, hurting and divided world, a united community of individuals from diverse backgrounds can speak volumes about the reconciling power of the Gospel. How then can we enable our Churches to be welcoming places for Jewish people, especially Jewish seekers? Above all, we desire to see all Churches as safe sacred spaces that provide a genuine welcome to all, within a transformative Gospel culture. It is this culture that needs to be sought and cultivated, rather than simply adopting a missional strategy or outreach programmes. As the well-known saying reminds us: 'culture eats strategy for breakfast!'

Building missional connections and evangelism are not just about individual actions, as these must also be linked with and embedded within community-wide initiatives, a reaching out together beyond ourselves. This requires us to look into ourselves and our own communities, to look at our practices and traditions and ask what needs to change in order for the Church to be a welcoming missional community for Jewish people. Maybe one way is to explore and invest in the Jewish (Biblical) roots of faith. As we do so, we need to develop a new and radical appreciation of Jesus as both fully the 'Light to the Gentiles' and also as the 'Glory of Israel'. We may also develop a growing awareness of sabbath, of festivals, of God's covenantal faithfulness. All of this and much more will help the growth of authentic, healthy, welcoming Gospel-centred communities.

One Church-based resource that CMJ has recently pioneered is an order of service to celebrate the identity of Jewish Believers in Jesus within the Church¹¹. Many see this resource as a key component in terms of affirming Jewish Believers in Jesus and in helping to 'reposition' the Church with regard to our understanding of the election of Israel and the true calling and composition of the Church.

For me, I see this resource as theologically essential and part of the ongoing responsibility of all Believers in Jesus to be considerate and supportive of one other, in order to keep and deepen the unity of the Church (within appropriate diversity). From the very earliest generation of the Church, it has been essential to celebrate the fact that the Church consists of both Jews and Gentiles. The specific context of the New Testament period led to discerning that Gentile Believers should observe a number of Old Testament instructions (Acts 15:23-229; cf. Lev 17) and that Jewish Believers should not practise some Jewish cultural norms (Galatians 2:11ff). The reason for all of this was to maintain the unity of the emerging and growing Church, and by doing so make possible genuine fellowship between all Believers and to be a sign of the reconciling power of the Gospel. Today this order of service is part of this ongoing Biblical pastoral tradition of treating each other with honour, consideration and respect.

Some closing thoughts

I have been a Believer in Jesus for 46 years, an ordained Church Minister for 37 years, and a CMJ staff member for 16 years. Throughout this time and these experiences I have begun to glimpse in the Bible a deep mystery and a beautiful profound reality, namely the interdependence and mutuality between Jewish people and non-Jewish people, between Israel and the Church within the redemptive purposes of God. It is for these purposes and for the glory of God - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - that our missional bridge-building and evangelism seek to bear a faithful witness, a witness rooted in the past, active in the present and open to the opportunities and responsibilities the future may bring.

The Church today, despite, or perhaps because of, the wider dominant culture of 'tolerance' and pluralism must seek to restore the ministry to Jewish people to its true Biblical place. Let us therefore get real, get resourced and get focused - and above all be encouraged that effective missional bridge-building and effective Gospel outreach within Jewish contexts are not 'out of reach'. The past (and present) sins and errors of the Church, or the apparent lack of results, cannot nullify the urgent Biblical mandate of the Gospel: to the Jew first and equally to the Gentile.



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The CMJ UK Jewish Engagement Training is available to access online. Please email office@cmj.org.uk for the login details.

End Notes

1. See texts such as Matthew 28:18-20 and Romans 10:5-15.
2. See bibliography for full publication details.
3. I have found the following two books to be helpful in regard to practical insights and strategies: *Introducing Your Jewish Friends to Yeshua*, Daniel Nessim & Mark Surrey (CPM, 2010), *Sowing Reaping Keeping, People -Sensitive Evangelism*, Laurence Singlehurst (IVP, 2006)
4. For a helpful overview of the importance of Jewish Evangelism and the outworking of Romans 1:16 see the *Lausanne Occasional Paper: Jewish Evangelism* (2021). This document is available online at <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/jewish-evangelism-lop-67>. The printed version is available from the CMJ UK online shop - www.cmj.org.uk
5. Brueggemann Walter, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* (Abingdon Press, 1993). In this book Brueggemann sees the urgency of evangelism and focuses on three distinct groups, namely; the 'outsider' (with a Biblical focus on Joshua 24) , the 'jaded insider' (with a Biblical focus on Nehemiah 8) and 'children of believers'. He also links (helpfully in my view) three key steps in Israel's history, namely; Promise, Deliverance and Gift with the three central steps of evangelism, namely; Victory, Proclamation and Appropriation.
6. A community initiative of native-born Israelis (Jews and Arabs) proclaiming salvation to Israel.
7. A good starting point for this may well be Isaiah 53. A helpful book on this is by Mitch Glaser - *Isaiah 53 Explained* (CPM, 2010).
8. Alex Jacob - *100 Days with Luke* (Christian Publications International, 2019).
9. The JET online material (via the CMJ UK website) presented by Oliver Sims is an excellent resource in helping us to respond to these questions and to appreciate the contexts from which many such questions arise.
10. My book *Walking an Ancient Path* (Glory to Glory Publications, 2016) is a helpful starting point in this area of study and reflection.
11. This pioneering resource can be purchased from the CMJ UK website shop. Also if you would like to discuss any issues around the use of this resource please contact me in confidence and directly via email alexj@cmj.org.uk

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