

REACHING FAMILIES FROM DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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Jewish-Gentile couples present an interesting case study for reaching families from different religious traditions. It has humorously been said, “Jews are like everybody else, only more so.” A thoughtful approach to Jewish-Gentile couples and their families may provide valuable insights for reaching couples and families from other mixed religious traditions as well.

What does this remarkable opportunity for evangelistic ministry to intermarrying Jewish people look like? What are the challenges that Jewish-Gentile couples face? What are some practical approaches that can reach couples and their families for the sake of the gospel?

TERMINOLOGY

A cross-cultural case study has specialized terms. Jewish-Gentile partners are distinguished by *ethnic* backgrounds. Their different *religious* traditions add a unique cultural complexity. Let us start with the difference between *ethnicity* and *religion*.

Ethnicity is the classification of a nation as people. Jewish ethnicity refers to the people who came from Jewish parents going back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So, ethnicity is the common connection of people by a bloodline. It does not change except in children, through ethnically mixed marriage.

On the other hand, *religion* is a component of culture. Cultural variations are learned. Religious beliefs can change. Therein do couples from different religions experience a key source of tension.

CASE STUDY: JEWISH-GENTILE COUPLES

Jewish-Gentile couples are a good case study for reaching families from different religious traditions. They are also a population that presents a wonderful missiological opportunity since they are in the midst of transition.

Demographic studies of Jewish people reveal surprisingly high rates of intermarriage. A 2005 study of world Jewry estimated intermarriage rates over the last twenty-five years.¹ Jews of the former Soviet Union (FSU) intermarried at a rate of eighty percent. Jews in Europe had married Gentiles in forty to sixty percent of the cases. In Australia, the rate was fifty-five percent; in the United States, fifty-two percent; and in Latin America, forty-five percent. Even in Israel, at least ten percent of the marriages since 1980 were to non-Jews. This growing population of couples from different religious traditions presents an opportunity for evangelism.

CHALLENGES

Formulating an appropriate approach for gospel ministry to Jewish-Gentile couples begins with understanding their challenges. Social research has revealed that religious faith is an important factor in marital stability. Without spiritual harmony, couples face a greater threat of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. Studies have shown that Jews who are married to Gentiles are twice as likely to divorce than those who are married to other Jews. Spiritual help is needed.

How do we begin to extend Great Commission hope to Jewish-Gentile couples? Reaching Jewish people with the gospel is typically difficult; however, it is absolutely necessary. There is no other name by which anyone, including Jewish people, will be saved (Acts 4:12). Although Jewish people are normally gospel resistant, we are finding a much greater openness among Jewish-Gentile couples and their families.

So what are the challenges that Jewish-Gentile couples face? Through a qualitative research study², I found five key challenges:

Confusion about Their Different Identities

Stereotypes and wrong assumptions about what the other was “supposed” to be led to misunderstanding and poor communication. Jewish partners were unfamiliar with the religious beliefs of their Gentile partners. And Gentiles had a difficult time understanding Jewishness as an ethnicity as opposed to a religion.

Unbalanced Interest in Religious Differences

Jews generally did not want to know as much about Christian religious beliefs and practices as Gentiles, who were much more curious about beliefs and practices of Judaism. Religious tensions impacted in-law relations and spiritual formation for children.

Disagreements about Life-Cycle Celebrations

It seemed like every ritual, holiday and family gathering presented a gauntlet of conflicting cultural choices and sacred signals. Planning a wedding ceremony was often one of the most significant cross-cultural ordeals.

Differences in the Pursuit of Family Harmony

A couple has to agree on an identity that suits them and their children. That difficult effort is compounded when parents, in-laws and extended family bring to bear their expectations about religion, child rearing, rituals and holiday celebrations. A foundational marital threat was the inability of couples to find spiritual harmony. At the same time, this may be the most fruitful entry point for application of gospel ministry to Jewish-Gentile couples. The gospel presents hope for reconciliation of individuals with God. From there comes a potential harmony between

marriage partners and their family members. Obviously, this is a good approach to reach all couples from different religious backgrounds.

Diverse Ideas Regarding Spiritual Formation of Children

Couples need to provide answers about the ethnic heritage of the children and how to express their religious culture as rituals and life-cycle practices. Passing culture on to children was particularly tough when it involved two dissimilar religious traditions.

These five challenges give us a better appreciation for the cultural experience of Jewish-Gentile couples and their families. They are most likely cultural universals at least for couples in the United States. With this knowledge, we are better prepared to think about appropriate evangelistic ministry to couples and families from different religious traditions.

SOME PRACTICAL APPROACHES

In spite of Jewish reaction against the gospel, salvation in Jesus is the only hope of reconciliation with God and eternal life. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life for everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike (John 14:6). If Jesus is not the Messiah for the Jewish people then neither is he the Christ for the nations. The only hope for genuine spiritual harmony for Jewish-Gentile couples is when each partner comes to repentance and finds salvation in the Messiah Jesus. Below are some things to consider when being a good witness for Christ with couples and families of different religious traditions:

Be a Good Listener

Missiologist Donald K. Smith has said that all communication is cross-cultural. Many of the challenges between Jewish-Gentile couples are the result of different cultural expectations, missed signals and misperceptions. Therefore, Christians who care to minister the gospel among

Jewish-Gentile couples should train to become good listeners and to serve as cross-cultural translators.

Before we earn the right to speak, we need to listen and to learn the cultures of the partners from two different religious traditions. This holistic approach to evangelism allows us to fulfill the Great Commission while engaged in the greatest commandment, expressing the love of Christ. We love people by listening to them and learning their culture. In that process, we can effectively apply gospel truth in language that matters to them.

Include a Strong Spiritual Mentor

Other Jewish-Gentile couples who have become Christians are suited to do this. They understand the dual culture environment and the possibility for spiritual harmony. Gentile Christians have a wonderful capacity to learn the cultural differences of intermarriage partners.

Community is important to this process. Partners feel isolated from respective communities. Therefore, churches and Messianic congregations of Jewish believers should be intentional about reaching Jewish-Gentile couples. They should train cross-cultural spiritual mentors to help create understanding between partners from different traditions. Congregational mentors can help couples comprehend spiritual truth in the midst of a welcoming community.

Have Workers Trained in Family Unit Ministry

Missions, like congregations, should be training workers specialized in ministry to family units for reaching couples from different religious traditions and their children. This can be done in small groups or by couple-to-couple mentor relationships. I recommend three areas in focusing on ministry to family units.

a. Establish definitions for the cross-cultural conversation. Help partners from different religious traditions comprehend the cultural terminology of their partner. For example, Gentiles

often miss that their Jewish partner uses the word “Christian” as a synonym for “Gentile.” And many Christians assume that the term “Jewish” is synonymous with the religion known as “Judaism.” So, start by establishing meanings for unique cultural terms for communication.

b. Provide biblical answers for the challenges that the partners experience. Describe God’s design for marriage and the family (Genesis 1:27; 2:22-24). Reinforce God’s intent in the covenant of marriage (Matthew 19:4-6). Help marriage partners see their responsibilities to one another (Ephesians 5:21-33). A discussion about God’s expectations should include the impact of sin on each person’s relationship with God. The hope of reconciliation with God follows in Christ’s atonement. Repentance and reconciliation with God can lead to interpersonal changes that resolve many cross-cultural tensions between marriage partners.

c. Extend gospel ministry specifically for their children. Mature couples who have raised children of their own can provide spiritual advice about child rearing. We need to help parents nurture spiritual formation in their children. Kids’ Bible clubs can communicate spiritual content along with rich ethnic traditions and spiritual heritage. Ancient Israelite parents were told to tell the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power and the wonders he has done in each generation (Psalm 78:4). The intent was to lead children to put their trust in God.

Include Small Group Ministry

Small groups for couples from different religious traditions set apart within congregations or sponsored in partnership with mission organizations are appropriate. They help couples grapple with feelings of isolation resulting from not fitting into any traditional religious structure. Small group ministries for Jewish-Gentile couples give them a sense of identity and belonging. In a safe environment, partners can explore the truth of reconciling faith in Jesus.

Develop Helpful Cultural Services

We can also help cross-cultural couples navigate the choices for symbols in various rituals, life-cycle events and appropriate religious holidays. We see such a ministry starting with premarital counseling for Jewish-Gentile couples. We urge them to seek spiritual harmony before a wedding takes place. We can also provide skillful advice about providing a wedding testimony in a culturally diverse environment.

Appropriate religious holiday celebrations are a wonderful way to embrace couples and their families. In the Jewish-Gentile context, we have sponsored Passover banquets. Jewish partners are culturally comfortable as the gospel of the Lamb of God is introduced.

CONCLUSION

Missiologist Paul Pierson observed that spiritual breakthroughs and renewal movements usually begin in the margins of a society. Couples from different religious traditions often see themselves as marginalized from traditional contexts. However, experience with Jewish-Gentile couples convinces me that the life-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the message that effectively can reach them.

Endnotes

1. Sergio DellaPergola, Yehezkel Dror and Shalom S. Wald, *Jewish People Policy Planning Institute Annual Assessment* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2005), 12.
2. Tuvya Zaretsky, "The Challenges of Jewish-Gentile Couples: A Pre-Evangelistic Qualitative Study," Dissertation submitted to the faculty of Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, 2004.