

Do Jews need to be 'perfected'?¹

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WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--Last night, Ann Coulter said on a television program that Jews need to be "perfected," with reference to the teaching of the Old and New Testament. Her talk show host promptly declared himself "offended," and this morning Joe Scarborough, on his show, countered Coulter, saying to his "panel of experts" that "nowhere in the New Testament" did he find the teaching she was talking about. Instead, he said, people would be judged on the basis of whether they fed the hungry, helped the sick, and visited those in prison. He also said we should not judge other people.

I know when I'm out of my league, and so for the most part try not to comment on politics (I'll leave that to pundits such as Ann and Joe), but in this case, they ventured into the area of Christian theology and biblical exegesis, and on this territory I feel a little more comfortable contributing to the discussion. In short, I am going to argue that while I may have wished that Ann Coulter had expressed her view with greater theological sophistication, she did have a point, and Joe's efforts to "clarify" the New Testament's teaching fell, at least in my opinion, flat.

Rightly interpreted, does the New Testament teach that the Jews need to be "perfected," to use Ann Coulter's language? Do Jews need to believe in Jesus the Messiah in order for them to be saved? Or is this belief optional, just for Christians, and is it OK for non-Christian Jews to go on holding to their own beliefs (which involve rejecting Jesus as Messiah)? (In case some of you reading the last sentence are wondering about the phrase "non-Christian Jews" -- as if there were "Christian Jews" -- there were, and are, in fact Christian or messianic Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah.)

To address this issue, we must do better than Joe Scarborough, quoting one or two passages out of context. We need to look at all the relevant passages on the topic in Scripture, and try to understand the biblical theology on this subject. Since the genre of this post is that of a brief column, I will limit myself to a few key passages.

On the one hand, Jesus did acknowledge that "salvation comes from the Jews" (John 4:22), that is, the Jews are God's chosen people per the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), and it is through them that the Messiah, Jesus, came. Jesus was a Jew!

At the same time, Jesus unequivocally claimed to be the Messiah and the only way to God. In John 14:6, he is quoted as saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the

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Father except through me." The same belief is echoed by the early Christians. Thus Luke quotes Peter as teaching, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). So who is this name? "... then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead ... Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone'" (Acts 4:10–11, quoting Psalm 118:22). The name without which no one -- Jew or non-Jew -- can be saved is Jesus. (And notice that Peter was addressing his fellow Jews.)

What will happen to Jews, then, who reject Jesus as Messiah? In John's Gospel Chapter 8, Jesus is quoted as saying that the Jews -- his own people -- are "children of the devil," which, in context, means "sinners." Jews are sinners, just like the rest of us. But if they are sinners, they need salvation. And how can they be saved? By feeding the hungry, helping the sick, and visiting those in prison, as Joe Scarborough is misrepresenting Jesus as teaching? No. According to both Jesus and the early church, salvation -- not only for non-Jews but also for Jews -- is "found in no one else" but Jesus.

So how do Jews get saved? Just like the rest of us -- by believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:31). There is no special arrangement, no exception, no partiality. As Paul wrote, "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." That's what the New Testament says. You didn't hear it on Joe Scarborough's morning show, but check it out -- it's right there in the Bible. Maybe Ann Coulter, in her amateurish way of expressing it, did have a point -- this time.

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