

Fundamentalist Christians' evangelism said hurting Jewish-Christian ties

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While Jews and Christians have "come a long way" in achieving understanding of each other, "there is still a long way to go," according to a Mobile Jewish leader.

Rabbi Irwin Cutler, spiritual leader of Dauphin Street Synagogue, presented his views in a dialogue session of local Christians and Jews at the synagogue.

The rabbi said, "We've all come a long way indeed in our feeling, in our respect for each other's ideologies, but there is still a long way to go before Christians and Jews can truly engage in fundamentally real dialogue, a dialogue in which neither side has anything to fear from the other and in which both sides come together to learn from one another how best to bring the presence of God into this world."

The speaker expressed the view that fundamentalist Christians' attempt to convert Jews mars an understanding relationship between Jews and Christians.

Later, in response to questioning from the Rev. Albert S. Foley of Spring Hill College, the rabbi acknowledged relations between Jews and Roman Catholics in recent years have been cordial. The local programs of dialogue were initiated by Roman Catholics.

Nonetheless the rabbi, in his talk, voiced concern about those Christian groups which focus on evangelism among Jews rather than dialogue.

He asked, "How can any dialogue take place between Jews and Christians as long as Christianity continues to insist that one of its fundamental goals is the conversion of the Jews?"

He noted, "The ranks of present-day Christianity are cleaved sharply asunder. There are two giant enemies known technically as fundamentalists and modernists, and both of them are locked in theological combat."

Speaking about fundamentalists, he said, "The Jew has been and remains a very key figure in the minds and hearts of the Christian evangelist. The conver-

sion of the Jew is a logical and emotional necessity if all humanity is to be persuaded to accept Christ.

"Another theological factor that makes the conversion of the Jews so important is the fundamental belief with regard to the Second Coming. For most fundamentalists, the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland, the re-establishment of the Jewish rule there and the conversion of all Jews are indispensable prerequisites of the Christian millennium."

Said the speaker, "Most Christian fundamentalists look upon the creation of the state of Israel as an act of divine intervention in the affairs of humanity and as a clear indication to all the Second Coming is close at hand."

Recounting some history, Rabbi Cutler said, "Changing Jews into Christians became a major activity of the church after it was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in the year 325, but it was not until the latter half of the 17th century that Christian missionary societies specifically designed to win Jewish souls came into being ..."

During the 19th century, he said, "hundreds of societies labored all over the world to make the children of Abraham Christians, and only a small number of these organizations outlived their founders."

Even though the societies dwindled, the 20th century "has been marked by an ever increasing interest in separate missions to the Jews."

According to the speaker, "Practically all of these attempts that have been made by Protestant fundamentalists — judged by the effort expended, judged by the money that was spent, judged by the overall results — have definitely failed."

Some American religious groups "that have had a fairly substantial number of Jews join their ranks" include the Christian Science Church and the Unitarian-Universalist Church, and these have not "made any special effort to attract the Jews. It was just for one reason or another ... they have had something special for the individual Jew ... something that possibly filled something for him, physical or spiritual need."

Rabbi Cutler acknowledged, "Today a number of Jews are being converted to fundamentalist Christianity. It is still small ..."

He said, "The question comes, 'May the American Jewish community hope that any time in the foreseeable future all fundamentalist Christians will cease their attempts to convert Jews?'"

In response to his question, he said, "I personally think 'no.'"

