

# The Desirability of Jewish Conversion to Christianity in Contemporary Catholic Thought

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*I argue that the authors of the December 2015 Vatican statement “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable” both present the Jewish Old Covenant as a good covenant (rejecting traditional Christian supersessionism) and nonetheless view Jews’ conversion to the better Christian New Covenant as desirable. I challenge the assumption that post–Nostra Aetate positive views of the Jewish covenant, including the claim that Jews are already “saved,” preclude a desire for Jews to convert to Christianity. On the contrary, I show that the authors’ claim that the New Covenant is the “fulfillment” of the Old Covenant provides a motive for contemporary Christians to emulate the efforts made by those early followers of Jesus who shared the gospel with their fellow Jews. To support my argument, I first carefully study the writings of Cardinal Walter Kasper. The authors of Gifts draw almost entirely on Kasper’s nuanced and complex views regarding the desirability of Jewish conversion to Christianity, adopting even his approach to and format for presenting this controversial claim.*

**Keywords:** Catholic-Jewish relations, Christian-Jewish relations, covenant, mission, conversion, Judaism, Walter Kasper

**M**OST popular reporting and commentary on the Roman Catholic statement “*The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29): *A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic–Jewish Relations* (2015)<sup>1</sup> focused on the authors’ views regarding Christian mission to and conversion of Jews, and specifically their apparent

<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, (2015), “*The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29): *A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic–Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of “Nostra Aetate”* (No. 4), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/)

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opposition to missionary activity. This widespread interest in mission and conversion, though the subject of only one out of seven sections in *Gifts*, illustrates the concern and controversy they still provoke.<sup>2</sup> Yet most of these responses have misunderstood the nuanced and more controversial views of the authors. *Gifts* is complex, ambiguous, and written in a style that can be daunting to outsiders. It must be read closely and in light of other Catholic statements on Judaism. There is a need to analyze *Gifts* on this topic, especially in light of its importance, and more generally because *Gifts* is the first major theological statement released by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews since 1985.

I will argue that the authors of *Gifts* both present the old, Jewish covenant as a *good* covenant (rejecting traditional Christian supersessionism) and nonetheless view Jews' conversion to the new, *better* Christian covenant as desirable. It is the comparative status of the two covenants—one good (old and Jewish), one better (new and Christian)—that furnishes a motivation to have Jews hear and hopefully believe in the gospel. This motivation does not contradict or undermine the affirmation that Jews are already in a salvific, legitimate, and “irrevocable” covenant (§36, quoting Rom 11:29). The authors admit that, even without belief in Jesus, Jews are not “excluded from God’s salvation.” But while Jews can be saved as Jews (they have a good covenant), there should be an effort to bring them into a better covenant, defined in quite specific terms as “incorporation into [Christ’s] Body which is the Church”

[chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20151210\\_ebraismo-nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html) (hereafter, *Gifts*). Citations of this statement are according to paragraph number.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., “Catholics Should Not Try to Convert Jews, Vatican Says,” BBC, December 10, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35061357>; Bill Chappell, “Catholics Should Not Try to Convert Jews, Vatican Commission Says,” *The Two-Way*, National Public Radio, December 10, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/ssections/thetwo-way/2015/12/10/459223058/catholics-should-not-try-to-convert-jews-vatican-commission-says>; Gaia Pianigiani, “Vatican Says Catholics Should Not Try to Convert Jews,” *New York Times*, December 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/world/europe/vatican-says-catholics-should-not-try-to-convert-jews.html>; Philip Pulella, “Vatican Says Catholics Should Not Try to Convert Jews, Should Fight Anti-Semitism,” Reuters, December 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-jews-idUSKBN0TT1BK20151210>; “Vatican: Catholic Church Must Not Try to Convert Jews,” JTA, December 10, 2015, <https://www.jta.org/2015/12/10/news-opinion/world/vatican-catholic-church-must-not-try-to-convert-jews>; Lisa Palmieri-Billig, “‘The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable,’ a Jewish Perspective,” *La Stampa*, December 13, 2015, <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/12/13/vaticaninsider/the-gifts-and-calling-of-god-are-irrevocable-a-jewish-perspective-NImEjsOAHpoPwSljzeUXDO/pagina.html>. A more skeptical reading is offered by J. J. Goldberg, “What New Vatican Memo Really Means for Jews for Jesus—and Us,” *The Forward*, December 18, 2015, <http://forward.com/opinion/327449/what-everyones-getting-wrong-about-that-vatican-memo-on-converting-jews>.

(§41). Post-*Nostra Aetate*<sup>3</sup> positive views of the Old Covenant, while breaking with a supersessionist tradition, do not preclude a desire to encourage Jews to convert to Christianity. On the contrary, I will show that the authors encourage Christians today to emulate the efforts made by those early followers of Jesus who brought the gospel to Jews.

In order to support my argument regarding mission and conversion in *Gifts*, it is first necessary to study the writings of Cardinal Walter Kasper, who headed the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews from 2001 to 2010.<sup>4</sup> The authors of *Gifts* draw almost entirely on what I will show are his views of the desirability of Jewish conversion to Christianity, adopting his approach to and format for presenting something so controversial. In Kasper's many statements while in office, he repeatedly discussed witness, conversion, and mission.<sup>5</sup> His views lie behind much of what is in *Gifts*, as seen in ubiquitous allusions to his ideas and in quotations of key words and phrases from his writings.<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to understand Catholic thinking on this vital topic, and in particular its treatment in the new statement, without analyzing Kasper's statements. Not only do they elucidate and clarify what is said more briefly in *Gifts*; they present a detailed, nuanced, and also controversial argument for the desirability of Jewish conversion to Christianity.

In this article, I will first focus on Kasper's works and then turn to *Gifts*. I will analyze passages in which they discuss mission and conversion in order to

<sup>3</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*, October 28, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) (hereafter, NA).

<sup>4</sup> Kasper's views on Judaism have received little scholarly attention. Useful summaries of his thought can be found in Elizabeth T. Groppe, "New Paths of Shalom in Christian-Jewish Relations," in *The Theology of Cardinal Walter Kasper: Speaking Truth in Love*, ed. Kristin M. Colberg and Robert A. Krieg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 203–22; Philip A. Cunningham, "Celebrating Judaism as a 'Sacrament of Every Otherness,'" *ibid.*, 223–40. His successor at the commission, under whom *Gifts* was composed, is Cardinal Kurt Koch.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Kasper does not use these terms with precision or consistency or assign them a fixed or technical meaning; see discussion below. Kasper frequently repeats or reuses portions of his earlier statements in later statements, sometimes with small (usually insignificant) changes. There is no indication of any significant development in his views over the course of his tenure regarding the issues I focus on.

<sup>6</sup> Quotations of and references to Kasper in *Gifts*, however, are never attributed to him, and his name does not show up anywhere. For a thorough study of the earlier sources that influenced or are incorporated (sometimes verbatim) in *Gifts*, many from Kasper, see Philip A. Cunningham, "The Sources behind 'The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4)," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–39.

demonstrate that both believe it is desirable for a Jew to convert to Christianity and that Christians should make some efforts to encourage this.<sup>7</sup> This requires close reading of Kasper's work and of *Gifts*, for some claims that seem to express the desirability of conversion are juxtaposed to other claims that seem to downplay such an interest. This complexity illustrates the ambiguities and subtleties (though not contradictions) in their views. While noting statements that discourage conversion, I will highlight those that encourage it. I will argue that their admittedly controversial support for conversion to Christianity—despite sometimes being in tension with other claims—can be illustrated in their interpretations of Scripture and in their theological views regarding the unique and superior qualities of the New Covenant vis-à-vis the Old Covenant. Importantly, I will also consider the context of their statements. All were intended to contribute to improved Jewish-Catholic relations, though their views on conversion could surely provoke Jewish resistance and even anger. This fraught context, I will demonstrate, may explain a reluctance to state this conversionary goal explicitly and to draw out fully the implications of their claims.

However, before showing that Kasper and *Gifts* view Jewish conversion to Christianity as desirable, a preliminary question needs to be answered for both: Why is it desirable for a Jew to come to believe in Christ and thereby enter the New Covenant composed of “those who believe in him” if the Jew is already in a salvific covenant (*Gifts* §14)? To answer this, it is necessary to consider not just how they view the Jewish Old Covenant itself but also how they view it in comparison to the Christian New Covenant. I will show that, despite rejecting supersessionism and affirming the abiding value of the Jews' covenant with God, they nonetheless argue for the superiority of the New Covenant and the benefits accruing to Jews who enter it.

### I. Walter Kasper on the Old and New Covenants<sup>8</sup>

Kasper's views on Jews and Judaism rest on the foundational claim that the Jewish covenant with God remains valid through the present. This marks a

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that other Christian theologians have come to different assessments of the two covenants; see David J. Bolton, “Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45 (2010): 37–60; Mary C. Boys, “The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents,” in *Two Faiths, One Covenant? Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other*, ed. Eugene B. Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 81–110. A comparison of Catholic and other Christian views and how they relate to attitudes toward conversion would be a fruitful area of future research.

<sup>8</sup> See the appendix for a list of the short citation forms used for references to Kasper's writings. For a more detailed discussion of Kasper's and *Gifts'* comparisons of the two

dramatic shift away from centuries-old claims that the covenant was abrogated after Christ. The roots of this shift lie in *Nostra Aetate*, though its implications are still being explored. Kasper continues this revolutionary trajectory. Breaking with traditional supersessionism, he insists the Old Covenant “has not been overtaken and replaced by the new Covenant.” The coming of the New Covenant did not mark the end of the Old Covenant. This is a vital point, made without qualification: “God’s Covenant with Israel has not simply been replaced by the new Covenant. God has not rescinded his contract with Israel; He has not repudiated and forsaken his people” (2004 Relationship).<sup>9</sup>

Kasper explores the nature of the Old Covenant, though seldom in depth. It is a good covenant, valid and beneficial to the Jews. It brings them blessings and support, and reflects the continuing presence of the divine in Jewish life. God is not absent but “is still inclined towards these his [Jewish] people in love and faithfulness, in mercy, judgement and forgiveness; he is with them and among them in the difficult hours and times of their history above all” (2004 Relationship). The Old Covenant is not restricted to exemplary Jews or Christ-believing Jews. Rather, the Old Covenant is made with individual Jews as such: “As a member of his people, each Jew continues to stand beneath the promise” (2004 Relationship).

His soteriological claims are especially striking. Jews’ membership in the Old Covenant, even without belief in Jesus, has “permanent and actual salvific significance” for them (2001 Spiritual). Because God’s word is firm and trustworthy, one should not think that God would withdraw assurances of salvation given to the Jewish people. “The Church believes that Judaism, i.e., the faithful response of the Jewish people to God’s irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises” (2001 Dominus; see also

covenants, see Adam Gregerman, “Superiority without Supersessionism: Walter Kasper, *the Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*, and God’s Covenant with the Jews,” *Theological Studies* 79 (2018): 36–59.

<sup>9</sup> The phrases “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” are often used in Kasper’s writings, both positively, to refer to the covenant with Jews and the covenant with Christians. I focus below on the meanings he gives them. However, his discussion of Old and New Covenants coexists with a related but different claim denying that there really are two distinct covenants. The Old and New Covenants, while linked with two different peoples, were made by and with the one God (and also must include in some way a role for Jesus Christ, even if Jews do not recognize his presence) (2001 Jewish-Christian; 2011 Foreword). If God is one, Jews and Christians thus constitute in some sense one covenanted people, who “share the same faith in God: ... the God of the Covenant” and are “partners of God in his covenant” (2001 Theology). While recognizing this other usage, I will continue to speak of two covenants and two peoples, as Kasper consistently does as well.

2001 Jewish-Christian). Kasper says little about the content or nature of such salvation; he is more interested in demonstrating that it remains available to Jews.<sup>10</sup> Unlike idolaters, “Jews are not pagans, they do not repent of false and dead idols to turn to the true and living God” (2011 Foreword, citing 1 Thess 1:9; see also 2001 Jewish-Christian). Having first believed in the God of Israel, they were and are in a unique relationship. Through the Old Covenant they have access to rich soteriological rewards. He repeats Paul’s famous phrase that “all Israel will be saved” (2011 Foreword, quoting Rom 11:26). Nothing—disobedience, faithlessness, or the coming of Christ—can undermine this.

However, his praise is not without qualification. Along with this positive assessment of the Old Covenant itself is a comparative assessment of the Old Covenant in relation to the New Covenant. Both covenants are valid and God-given, but they do not have the same theological value. The New Covenant has unique features and is superior to the Old, for it accomplishes goals that were unattainable through the Old Covenant. Often, Kasper presents these in vague terms of “fulfillment.” For example, he says “the new [Covenant] does not abolish the old [Covenant] but brings about its fulfillment once and for all” (2004 Relationship). Such a claim does not constitute supersessionism: “The New Covenant for Christians is not the replacement (substitution), but the fulfillment of the Old Covenant” (2011 Foreword).

This accomplishment was always intended by God, even when initiating the first covenant. He speaks of the incompleteness of the Old Covenant and assigns it a proleptic role in salvation history. Starting with God’s call to the biblical patriarchs, there then followed a “sequence of various covenants with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Ezra” (2011 Foreword).<sup>11</sup> For Kasper, they were but preliminary parts of the “whole history of the covenant.” The earlier Old Covenant, while reflecting Israel’s status as God’s “beloved people,” only pointed forward to that which it could not attain. Its climax came with the New Covenant. Speaking comparatively, he says the two covenants “stand with each other in a relationship of promise or anticipation and fulfillment” (2011 Foreword). This subordinate role for the Old Covenant was

<sup>10</sup> John Pawlikowski, *Restating the Catholic Church’s Relationship with the Jewish People* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2013), 83–84; Mary C. Boys, “Does the Catholic Church Have a Mission ‘with’ Jews or ‘to’ Jews?,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 3 (2008): 1–19, at 6–7; Edward Kessler, “Covenant, Mission, and Dialogue,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4 (2009): 1–10, at 8. The Catholic tradition of course includes extensive discussions of soteriology, as does the Jewish tradition (to a lesser degree), though these are not relevant to his argument.

<sup>11</sup> While Kasper here speaks of multiple “covenants,” it is more accurate to say that all of these are different historical manifestations of the same Old Covenant.

known long ago, having been “promised by the [biblical] prophets.” This latest and last covenant builds upon but surpasses the earlier one, for it is “the final reinterpretation” and “definitive yes and amen to all of God’s promises” (quoting 2 Cor 1:20).

The superiority of the New Covenant can be seen when considering the “complex issue of the law” (2004 Relationship, for this and all other quotations in the paragraph). Jewish fidelity to the Commandments in the Torah remains an integral feature of membership in the Old Covenant. For Jews, he says, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (quoting Rom 9:4). No one should think the law is “ineffective” in Jewish covenantal life, let alone against God’s will (in a Marcionite sense). Those in the New Covenant, however, are not bound by the law, for the “legal form of the [Old] covenant [was] conditional and for a limited time.” As indicated already in Genesis (and now realized with the coming of Christ), a New Covenant would be revealed, one “directed towards all peoples (cf. Gen 12:3; 17:4 etc.); this universality must not be delimited by a law which is restricted to Israel.” The exclusivity that characterized and even now characterizes life under the law has been broken, so as to fulfill God’s greater goal of giving all humanity “access to the covenant.” It is not that Jews disobey God by following the law. In doing so, though, they remain in a covenant that has now been surpassed by a better, inclusive covenant, in which “fundamental faith constructs of Judaism have been universalized, and Jewish monotheism, the Ten Commandments, and its messianic hope have been exported to the world.”

Kasper’s terminology is ambiguous, but precision is not essential to his argument. More important is his comparative judgment between the two covenants. By both praising and critiquing the Old Covenant, he avoids what he calls the post–New Testament “substitution model” while affirming the superior status of the New Covenant (2011 Foreword). This makes it a better covenant, reflecting the divine will for all humanity and dispensing with the law that exposes Jews to the “danger of becoming too particularistic and reclusive.” Because of the shortcomings of their extant covenant, it is perfectly reasonable to encourage the conversion even of those who are already saved. This is undertaken not because it is necessary—he rejects the claim that “Jews in order to be saved have to become Christians”—but because there is something to be gained (2002 BC).

## II. Walter Kasper on Mission and Conversion

Having explained *why* Kasper can support a mission to the Jews, I next want to demonstrate *that* Kasper believes that today’s Christians, like the

missionary heroes in the New Testament, should preach about Jesus to Jews and encourage their conversion. Despite his prominence, Kasper's views on this issue have gone largely unnoticed. Perhaps because of the ambiguity and terseness of his writing, and because of the intensely divisive nature of the topic (which may encourage these qualities in his writings), some recent commentators highlight those passages where Kasper is critical of some forms of conversion.<sup>12</sup> However, a focus on isolated statements and on theological claims that are not supportive of or see little value in conversion yields an incomplete portrait. Without denying Kasper's ambiguity, I offer a fuller, if more controversial portrait. I focus on his pro-conversion positions that, while not contradictory, nonetheless sometimes appear in tension with other positions. I then consider Kasper's context and how his position as the official Catholic representative to the Jewish community and firm Jewish opposition to any support for Christian mission help to explain this approach.

Before looking at his views, I want to note that generic church teachings on mission, conversion, witness, and other terms offer little of substance for an analysis of Kasper's views. While the church has rethought the idea of mission in general, starting with the Second Vatican Council, statements seldom address the topic of Jews specifically, and some explicitly preclude any application to Jews. For example, the statement *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) from the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue says Jews and Judaism are not dealt with because they have a unique status in Christian theology.<sup>13</sup> Kasper, commenting on the controversial Catholic statement *Dominus Iesus* (2000), adheres to this position regarding Judaism as an exception to Christian theologies of other religions (2001 *Dominus*).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he almost never refers to general church teachings on mission, even when discussing multivalent terms.<sup>15</sup> At most, we can say

<sup>12</sup> Cunningham, "Celebrating Judaism," 227–34; Gropp, "New Paths," 212–13.

<sup>13</sup> Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, May 19, 1991, note 8, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interrelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html). The reader is directed to Vatican statements exclusively about Jews. See John Connelly, "The Catholic Church and the Mission to the Jews," in *After Vatican II: Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, ed. James L. Heft and John O'Malley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 96–133, at 114.

<sup>14</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, June 16, 2000, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html). See Boys, "The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents," 92–93.

<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the authors of *Dialogue and Proclamation*, who early in their statement attempt to clarify and differentiate the terms they use (§§8–13), Kasper's usage of terms such as *witness* and *mission* is neither clear nor consistent (see also below).

that Kasper's statements are like other Catholic statements on mission, sharing basic claims regarding theology (e.g., the gospel is addressed to and therefore relevant to all people<sup>16</sup>) and methods (e.g., proclamations of Christ should be done with humility<sup>17</sup>). These discussions do not illuminate his views or his theological terms. His statements must be analyzed almost entirely on their own and in the specific context of Jewish-Catholic relations.

### A. *Paul as Model Missionary to the Jews*<sup>18</sup>

One of the ways that Kasper answers what he calls the "question of Christian missionary activity [to the Jews]" is by marshalling examples of prominent early Christian missionaries such as Peter and especially Paul (2002 BC; emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> These biblical heroes serve as models for contemporary Christians in their capacity as preachers to the Jews. Kasper's portraits draw on these and other texts from the New Testament and Catholic teachings that contain "affirmations on mission." Though he also cites statements by Paul to buttress a positive portrait of Judaism, Kasper juxtaposes these with explicit references to scenes of missionary preaching to the Jews.

Kasper views Paul as an exemplar, with direct relevance to questions regarding the conversion of the Jews today. He finds instructive for "Christian reflection on this delicate subject" Paul's attempts to convince Jews to believe in Jesus (2011 Foreword). Kasper celebrates the efforts by this indefatigable missionary to preach the gospel in order to convert Jews.<sup>20</sup> For example, he approvingly says that "on [Paul's] missionary journeys he went first (Rom 1:16) to the Jews in the synagogue, and only after

Surprisingly, Kasper nowhere mentions Tommaso Frederici, "Study Outline on the Mission and Witness of the Church" (paper presented at the Sixth Meeting of the Liaison Committee between the Roman Catholic Church and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, Venice, March 28, 1977). This early work, by a consultant member of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, addresses some relevant issues. However, Kasper may refer to it without quoting it (see below).

<sup>16</sup> While this theme is of course ubiquitous, a helpful example appears in *Dialogue and Proclamation* §§20–21, where it is discussed in a section on biblical Israel.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., *Dialogue and Proclamation*, §70.

<sup>18</sup> Discussions of Paul appear in multiple places in Kasper's writings. In this section I draw from all of them.

<sup>19</sup> In this statement (and others) he speaks repeatedly of missionary activity to the Jews as an open "question" (e.g., "The question must therefore be dealt with great sensitivity"; "a question which touches the heart of both of us"; "the question of mission" [three times]).

<sup>20</sup> I consider Kasper's use of narratives about Paul in Acts and in Paul's letters. I do not evaluate the accuracy of his interpretations on exegetical grounds or consider whether it is appropriate to use Acts as evidence of Paul's activities or views.

he met opposition did he then turn to the Gentiles” (2011 Foreword). Paul’s missionary scenario, prioritizing efforts to convince Jewish listeners, is repeatedly noted.<sup>21</sup> Kasper gathers multiple examples of Paul’s vigorous efforts in different cities to encourage Jews to believe in Jesus as Messiah. He cites Acts 13:5, about Paul’s visit to Salamis, which says that he “proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” He cites Acts 13:14, which says “on the sabbath day [Paul and his companions] went into the synagogue” in Antioch in Pisidia and preached that God’s promises to the Jews are fulfilled in Christ. Likewise, he cites Acts 14:1, which says that “Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue [in Iconium] and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers” (2008 Striving).<sup>22</sup> Though the bulk of Paul’s career as narrated in the New Testament was spent preaching to Gentiles, Kasper casts this as a Pauline afterthought or accommodation. These examples from Acts, all referring to preaching to Jews in synagogues, are the only ones he cites in this context, for it is Paul as a missionary to the Jews that interests him.

What is it about the gospel that should encourage Christians to share it with Jews, just as Paul did? It contains, Kasper says, the message of the “universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ as well as ... the universal mission of the church” (2011 Foreword; see also 2008 Striving).<sup>23</sup> This belief in a mission without bounds was “of course, natural for Paul, too; this is why” he preached in the synagogues (2011 Foreword). Romans 1:16, which Kasper cites repeatedly, supports this focus on Jews, for it not only refers to Paul’s actions preaching to Jews but explains his motivation for doing so. The gospel, Paul says in this verse, is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first” (2011 Foreword; see also 2010 Recent). This claim about the nature of the gospel, here expressed by Paul, is essential to Kasper’s interpretation. Kasper says that it reflects Paul’s belief that the gospel is addressed to Jews and that they should hear preaching about Christ. Paul, driven by this belief, set a vivid example for how all Christians are to live out the “command for mission [that is] as valid for Jews as for pagans” (2010 Recent; see also 2011 Foreword).

Emphasizing solely Paul’s activity in the synagogues, Kasper repeatedly makes him a model for missionizing to Jews not just in the past but in the present: “Such witness [as Paul undertook] is demanded of us today too”

<sup>21</sup> See also 2008 Striving; 2010 Recent.

<sup>22</sup> Other verses cited include Acts 13:42-52; 14:2-6.

<sup>23</sup> Pawlikowski notes Kasper’s insistence that “Christ’s mission as universal needs to be retained”; see John Pawlikowski, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission Forty Years after *Nostra Aetate*,” *Cross Currents* 56 (2006-7): 70-94, at 84.

(2008 Striving). Preaching to Jews about Christ is central to Christian identity and therefore an obligation. Like Paul, Christians “must offer witness before their elder brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham ... to their [Christian] faith and the richness and beauty of their belief in Jesus Christ. That is what Paul did.” The gospel is for both Jews and Gentiles, Paul argued, and thus Christians today “cannot deny the universality of Christian mission to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (2010 Recent).

In addition to affirming Paul’s goals, Kasper affirms Paul’s use of different methods of sharing the gospel with different peoples. Paul demonstrated that mission “must be put into effect differently among Jews than pagans” (2011 Foreword; see also 2010 Recent). Just as Paul famously divided humanity into Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Gal 3:28), Christians must now attend to differences between Jews and Gentiles when preaching to them. The former have a different religious status from the latter—“Jews are not pagans”—and need not first be told about the God of Israel (citing 1 Thess 1:9). Yet this difference in methods does not alter the obligation, for Paul or for later Christians, to preach the gospel to all humanity.

In a revealing statement about navigating the tensions between affirmations of Judaism and support for Jewish conversion, Kasper anticipates (and critiques) one likely objection to his use of Paul as a missionary exemplar. He insists that one should not read too broadly Paul’s claim in Romans that God has not cast off the Jews as if it invalidates the desirability of the conversion of Jews to Christianity. Kasper writes, “In any discussion on mission the well-known text in the Pauline Letter to the Romans chapters 9-11 and the affirmation of the unbroken covenant (Rom 11:29) cannot be the only and isolated points of reference. We must interpret these passages as we must interpret all biblical passages, in the context of the whole New Testament” (2002 BC).<sup>24</sup> Aware of the significance of this passage, and indeed of Paul’s thought generally for arriving at a positive view of Judaism, Kasper nonetheless warns against misapplying it or isolating it from other parts of the New Testament. Particularly in discussions about mission to the Jews, it would be wrong to appeal to it alone, or to give it disproportionate weight. On the contrary, says Kasper, Paul has much more to say that is relevant to this topic.

<sup>24</sup> This verse is quoted in NA §4, and Kasper repeatedly cites it (2001 Dominus; 2002 BC; 2011 Foreword).

**B. Mission to Jews as Testimony to Christ in “The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews” (November 6, 2002; Boston College, Boston)<sup>25</sup>**

Soon after the outbreak of a dispute about Catholic support for attempts to convert Jews prompted by the publication of a 2002 statement, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” Kasper felt the need to address the issue himself.<sup>26</sup> In a lengthy speech, he therefore identifies “mission” as “the most fundamental present challenge” in Jewish-Catholic relations and “the fundamental question which stands between them.” Because it has prompted such “heated debate” among American Jews and Catholics, he cannot avoid it. He is clear the issue is not just a misunderstanding over a minor theological claim or a lack of clarity regarding terminology. Rather, “mission” as he uses it provokes an irreconcilable dispute with the Jewish community, for which, he admits, he has no “convincing solution.” It is a profound clash because of “incontestable differences [that] are constitutive for our respective identities.” These are shaped on one side by Jews’ “painful memories of conversion” and on the other by Christians’ deepest commitments. Kasper expects that Jews will insist that the idea of mission as conversion be discarded. Yet Jews “cannot demand that Christians no longer be Christians,” and thus Kasper will not yield when it comes to the desirability of preaching the gospel even to Jews. In this speech, he therefore chose to offer his own views on mission and conversion even though, he frankly admits, he expects he will face Jewish opposition.

Mission as he uses it here is multivalent. It can refer both to a noncontroversial (i.e., nonconversionary) generic religious responsibility<sup>27</sup> and, more importantly, to support for Jewish conversion. While both uses are present, it is the latter that is significant, theologically and interreligiously. Kasper notes that one type of mission is a “thorny problem” and a “challenge,” for it includes a desire for and efforts to effect the conversion of Jews to Christianity. That is why it is a painful, divisive topic. It “touches the heart

<sup>25</sup> In this section all quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from 2002 BC.

<sup>26</sup> This “strongly contested document” (in Kasper’s words) was issued by delegates of the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Synagogues. See the discussion by Philip A. Cunningham, “Official Ecclesial Documents to Implement the Second Vatican Council on Relations with Jews: Study Them, Become Immersed in Them, and Put Them into Practice,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4 (2009): 1–36, at 26–30.

<sup>27</sup> A noncontroversial concept of mission might include joint service to humanity in sharing knowledge of God, ending conflict, and rejecting hopelessness. “In today’s world, we, Jews and Christians, have a common mission. ... Together we must be ambassadors of peace and bring about Shalom” (2001 Dominus).

of both [Jews and Christians] ... [and] cannot be approached without emotion.”

Because mission is so fraught, Kasper adopts an indirect and sometimes elliptical approach. Noting intense Jewish resistance to Christian mission, he first emphasizes a noncontroversial meaning of mission.<sup>28</sup> In particular, he appears to be keen to show that the term need not always have a conversionary meaning. This has the effect of downplaying the far more controversial meanings he uses further on. Disarmingly, he says that “missionary activity is much more than targeting Jews or others for conversion and seeking new candidates for baptism.”<sup>29</sup> Shifting the focus from these latter, controversial efforts, he explains that mission is a broad term not limited to conversionary activities and goals. His elaboration then suggests a nonconversionary usage: mission “is nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God’s plan, its epiphany and realisation in the world and in history” (quoting the Second Vatican Council’s *Ad Gentes* §9).<sup>30</sup> As used here, mission is universal in scope. Omitting any human role, Kasper gives it an almost passive sense. For this goal, there is no role for individual “missionary activities,” nor is there any expression of the desirability of Jewish conversion to Christianity. Mission *can* have near-cosmic aspirations as a goal (“the manifestation of God’s plan”). However, this effort to broaden the range of the term *mission* says nothing about the other (conversionary) meaning of *mission* that I noted above and that, he admits, is what actually prompted his discussion. The cosmic goal presented here does not indicate whether it is also desirable to encourage Jews to believe in Christ.

Kasper already hinted at where he would go next, having stated that mission can also be “more than targeting Jews ... for conversion.” Despite having begun by avoiding the controversial topic of conversion, his capacious description of a universal mission leaves room for precisely that type of specific mission intended to bring Jews to faith in Jesus. There is no contradiction, for these are two related but different goals. Reflecting his tendency

<sup>28</sup> Earlier in his statement he considered the use of terms other than *mission*, recognizing the confusion it engendered, but then admitted that the problem went beyond “misleading terminology.” Groppe argues for a “technical sense” of key terms such as “mission” and “evangelization.” This both misses Kasper’s own skepticism about the helpfulness of formulating precise terminology and overlooks the absence of any consistent (“technical”) meaning of these and other terms by Kasper; see Groppe, “New Paths,” 212–13.

<sup>29</sup> The word “targeting” unfortunately obfuscates his larger point. Elsewhere, he uses it with a different and pejorative meaning, in contrast to the use of the term here for a benign and noncontroversial form of mission.

<sup>30</sup> Pope John VI, *Ad Gentes*, December 7, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html) (hereafter, AG).

to conflate complex terms, he thus pivots to a use of the term *mission* that does include conversion. In addition to the above usages of *mission*, he says, it also means actively “giving testimony of Jesus the Christ to all and in all places; for Christians this is the mandate of Jesus Christ himself.”<sup>31</sup>

To be clear, Kasper does not simply and explicitly affirm the desirability of Jewish conversion to Christianity. For reasons discussed below (such as his context and commitment to improving Jewish-Catholic relations), his presentation is indirect. However, that mission expressed in terms of “testimony” has a conversionary and hence controversial meaning is indicated in a variety of ways. He had already hinted at a conversionary meaning in his mention of things that mission can include, such as “seeking new candidates for baptism.” This endeavor is another form of mission, even though, as we saw, he initially steered away from the divisive topic.

Also, his discussion of mission, he admits, will be deeply resented by Jews because “Christian missionary activity evokes ... bitter and painful historical memories.” This history is now relevant, and Kasper, concerned for the views of his Jewish interlocutors, demonstrates his sensitivity to the divisiveness of endorsing this kind of mission. Rather than shy away from this issue because of this history, he forges ahead, taking “the bull by the horns and ... [turning to] the issue of mission.” A defense of mission in a conversionary sense will inevitably be contentious, though he insists he cannot but speak boldly as a Christian. He has a “mandate” to preach to Jews about Christ. “Missionary activity” for the purpose of conversion unfortunately conjures up memories of this baleful past, but nonetheless it is vital to Christian faith.

Next, his citations of biblical verses are revealing, for they illustrate a conversionary meaning of this “mandate” to give “testimony of Jesus the Christ to all.” First, he cites Matthew 28:19, the risen Jesus’ demand to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.” While Matthew’s original intention is disputed (does he include Jews and Gentiles among the nations, or only Gentiles?<sup>32</sup>), Kasper does not make such a distinction here. Nor would the citation make sense in this context if Kasper reads it as excluding Jews. On the contrary, he just emphasized the universal relevance of Christian faith and the need to share it with “all and in all places,” including with Jews. (Recall, he is giving a speech prompted by a dispute over mission to the Jews.)

<sup>31</sup> On “testimony,” see below. Relevant as well is his citation of AG §9 in the sentence preceding this excerpt, for that statement includes the requirement that “the Gospel must be preached to all nations.”

<sup>32</sup> On various interpretations, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 38.

Matthew's missionary charge, when cited by Kasper to explain "our mission," presents Jesus' demand that Christians share with Jews the gospel in the hope that they might convert ("be baptized").

Second, Kasper cites a line from a missionary speech in Acts that explains why Christians should preach Christ to Jews. In the biblical scene, Jesus' followers are brought before an exclusively Jewish audience. After preaching about faith in Jesus, they then insist this message must be shared with Jews: "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Many Jews then respond positively.<sup>33</sup> As with the biblical citations of Paul's practices and motives, this citation from Acts, along with the citation from Matthew, explicitly endorses Christian preaching to the Jews. In this section of Kasper's statement devoted to mission, these early heroes furnish models of ideal practices and seek desirable goals. They offer, he says, "testimony" (intended to lead Jews to belief) and "a mandate" (an obligation on all Christians). No Christian can refuse "to give account of this hope," even if it will not be welcomed by Jews.<sup>34</sup>

These biblical citations are important. Because Kasper can be terse and ambiguous, and because he uses terms such as *mission* and *testimony* that can be understood only in context, the biblical passages clarify his views. In this case, they consistently indicate the desirability of bringing Jews to believe in Christ, a clearly conversionary meaning of mission. This is not a responsibility left to God, nor does one passively wait for the end of days: "for Christians this includes giving testimony," just as Jesus and his followers gave testimony to and about Jews. Mission is cast as a present obligation, incumbent on all Christians.

***C. The Good Friday Prayer Dispute and the Requirement to Witness Today, in "Striving for Mutual Respect in Modes of Prayer" (Published in L'Osservatore Romano on April 16, 2008)***<sup>35</sup>

Kasper, in an article in the semiofficial Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, again addressed the topic of mission in the wake of controversial changes that Pope Benedict XVI permitted to be made to the Good Friday Prayer in 2008. Between 1959 and 1970 this prayer had been significantly reworded and edited in order to remove earlier anti-Jewish

<sup>33</sup> While it is not stated explicitly in this scene that Jewish listeners responded to the speech by believing in Jesus (Acts 4:21 says, "All of them praised God for what had happened"), this seems to be the obvious conclusion.

<sup>34</sup> Were Kasper looking to exempt Jews from those who should hear the gospel and believe, there are many other biblical verses (from Acts or elsewhere) on preaching to Gentiles but not Jews that he could cite. For example, Acts 13:46-47; 18:6; 28:25-28.

<sup>35</sup> In this section all quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from 2008 Striving.

elements and explicit hopes for the conversion of the Jews. Pope Benedict, while allowing the continued usage of the revised extant version, then approved another revision that included the prayer that God “illuminate [Jews’] hearts so that they may recognize Jesus Christ as savior of all men.”<sup>36</sup> This introduced a conversionary hope that was not present in the current Good Friday liturgy.

Many Jews, Kasper says, felt the changes were “offensive.” They sparked “fresh irritations” between the two religious groups and “raised fundamental questions” about Catholic views of Jews and Judaism. Though this liturgical change was the impetus for his statement, Kasper used it to offer a more general discussion of the topics of mission, witness, and conversion of Jews.<sup>37</sup> He discusses when conversion is inappropriate and also when it is desirable. In this case, the focus is on clarifying the nature of Christian *witness*, a term he uses repeatedly. Like the term *mission*, it too has no fixed meaning for Kasper but is defined by its context.

In sections 3 and 4 Kasper reaches his main topic: “The really controversial question is: Should Christians pray for the conversion of the Jews? Can there be a mission to the Jews?”<sup>38</sup> While stated bluntly, his initial approach to these fraught questions is again indirect, as in his 2002 speech in Boston. He does not immediately answer the question of the desirability of converting Jews. Instead, he first directs the reader’s attention to a different if related and noncontroversial topic: when *not* to support the conversion of Jews.

For example, he says hopes for “the realisation of the mystery of salvation are not by nature a call to the Church to undertake missionary action to the Jews.” This outcome can be achieved only by God. Efforts to convert individual Jews bring such “realisation” no closer. Continuing in this vein, he writes, Christians should not try to “orchestrate the realisation of the unfathomable mystery [of God’s ultimate will for the Jewish people.] ... [The Church] lays the *when* and the *how* [of the salvation of the Jewish people] entirely in God’s hands” (emphasis in the original). This means Christians should not be

<sup>36</sup> On the dispute regarding the Good Friday Prayer, see Hans Hermann Henrix, “The Controversy Surrounding the 2008 Good Friday Prayer in Europe: The Discussion and Its Theological Implications,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 3 (2008): 1–19; Marianne Moyaert and Didier A. Pollefeyt, “Israel and the Church: Fulfilment beyond Supersessionism?,” in *Never Revoked: “Nostra Aetate” as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Didier Pollefeyt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 159–83, at 173–81.

<sup>37</sup> While I focus not on the prayer itself but on Kasper’s statement about it, it obviously provides some evidence of Catholic hopes for the conversion of the Jews.

<sup>38</sup> There are two questions here, the first about intention (i.e., prayer), the second about action (i.e., missionizing).

unduly ambitious in bringing to fulfillment the achievement of the plan of God. This would intrude on a realm reserved for the divine: “God alone can bring about the Kingdom of God in which the whole of Israel is saved and eschatological peace is bestowed on the world.” This hope is for the end of days, which Kasper explains by recalling Paul’s eschatological vision in Romans 9-11: “God will bring about the salvation of Israel in the end, not on the basis of a mission to the Jews but on the basis of the mission to the Gentiles, when the fullness of the Gentiles has entered.”<sup>39</sup> Kasper says that at least for the achievement of eschatological goals and the salvation of Israel in toto (“the whole of Israel”), there is no need for conversionary activity.<sup>40</sup>

The details of these remarkable scenarios need not be unpacked. Rather, we should note generally how Kasper shifts the discussion away from the questions he first asked about the desirability of converting Jews. This shift has the effect of suggesting his opposition to these forms of mission. As we saw, the forms he initially did support serve cosmic or eschatological goals that are not furthered by converting Jews. This sets the bar at a supremely high level. By offering such cosmic scenarios and repeatedly using totalizing or all-encompassing language (e.g., “realisation,” “peace is bestowed on the world,” “Kingdom of God”), Kasper highlights what conversion of Jews to Christianity cannot accomplish. It is important to be precise here: those who aspire to *these* goals (if not others) will not reach them “even [by] mission [to the Jews].” He quotes Bernard of Clairvaux’s encouragement of restraint if one aspires to the goal of saving “the whole of Israel”: “We do not have to concern ourselves with the Jews, for God himself will take care of them.” Christians should respect the fundamental divine mystery at work in God’s dealings with Jews and not overestimate the human influence on *these* scenarios, some of which will be completed only at the end of days.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> On Kasper’s views of the eschatological message of the Good Friday Prayer, see Moyaert and Pollefeyt, “Israel,” 180.

<sup>40</sup> In footnote 6, Kasper offers a brief but important comment regarding the 2008 prayer. He says that the Jewish salvation prayed for does not mean “the entry of Israel into the Church,” contrary to what some “Jewish critics” said. By using “Israel” here, he refers only to the entire Jewish people, to whom (he says) the prayer does not refer. This explanation appears intended to allay these Jewish concerns. Likewise, his explicit focus on corporate Israel then appears in his claim that the prayer hopes for “the salvation of the greater part of the Jews” at the end of days without having to convert to Christianity. One sees in all of Kasper’s carefully phrased explanations an effort to limit his nonconversionary interpretation to corporate Israel, that is, to the Jewish people as a whole; he says nothing about the conversion of *individual* Jews.

<sup>41</sup> He appears inconsistent in his use of the term *mission*, for the sense it has here seems at the very least to depart from the more positive use elsewhere.

If “the issue ... is the glorification in adoration of God” or the eschatological salvation of “the whole of Israel” (a term he uses repeatedly), then a conversionary mission is neither appropriate nor effective.

Continuing in this vein, Kasper adopts another approach to suggest opposition to a conversionary mission. He criticizes some forms of conversionary activities directed at Jews because of the methods used. In an apparent effort to assuage Jewish concerns, he notes approvingly that “in contrast to some evangelical circles, the Catholic Church has no organised or institutionalised mission to the Jews.” Some methods of mission he deems inappropriate. It is clearly an important message for him to convey, for he repeats it for emphasis here and elsewhere.<sup>42</sup> It indicates a church-wide ban on a formal, bureaucratic program structured to bring Jews into the church.<sup>43</sup> Such an approach, he knows, would surely prompt strenuous Jewish resistance, especially in light of the “traumatic memory of the Shoah.” In this context, he says, he hopes this opposition to such methods will allay Jewish concerns raised by the dispute over the Good Friday Prayer.

However, in the fifth section his approach changes markedly, as he explicitly signals a shift away from such nonconversionary and noncontroversial scenarios. Having noted the inappropriateness or ineffectiveness of *some* forms of mission, he then strongly insists this does not mean that Christian “witness” must cease. Do not think, he insists, that “Christians should sit about with their hands in their laps.” Before looking at what they should do, we should note that this clear shift should not be surprising. Though Kasper first sought to reassure Jews, nothing he had said so far in opposition to *some* forms of mission applied either to the individual Jew (rather than to the entire Jewish people, as noted) or to the present time. On the contrary, his earlier scenarios, with their carefully defined and distant goals, do not preclude other, more modest efforts (e.g., those not aimed at bringing the “Kingdom of God”), including a conversionary mission. Such efforts come into view with Kasper’s return to the controversial questions he first asked. Having highlighted nonconversionary, often eschatological meanings of mission in the previous few sections, he then introduces the important,

<sup>42</sup> In a similar discussion of “institutional missionary work,” he speaks ambiguously about the church’s rejection of conversion as a “strategic goal,” which also seems to indicate opposition to some type of formal, bureaucratic program; see 2011 Foreword; 2001 Dominus.

<sup>43</sup> Connelly, “Mission,” 97. By contrast, some churches, such as the conservative Protestant Southern Baptist Convention, do use such methods. See the Southern Baptist Convention’s 1996 “Resolution on Jewish Evangelism,” <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/655/resolution-on-jewish-evangelism>. This and other statements have provoked highly critical Jewish reactions.

active term *witness* when situating his discussion in the present rather than at the eschaton and when focusing on individual Jews.<sup>44</sup>

Witness, he says, is a religious obligation on all Christians. Rather than, in effect, ignoring Jews (the first approach, above), this other form of witness includes direct engagement with contemporary Jews. Its conversionary nature, as noted above, was illustrated by Paul's missionary efforts among Jews, when Kasper spoke of his going "to the synagogue ... [to] witness" there. Paul's example remains relevant. His efforts to make converts of Jews is the form of witness that "is demanded of us today too." That is why "Christians must offer witness before their elder brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham." Christians cannot fail to speak, for their faith is a universal faith "in Jesus as the Christ and the Redeemer of all mankind." It is appropriate in a range of settings, such as during "[Christians'] encounters with Jewish friends ... [in] the [Catholic-Jewish] dialogues."<sup>45</sup> Formal and informal settings are suitable for witnessing to Jews.

The Christian witness to Jews is about "their faith and the richness and beauty of their belief in Jesus Christ." Having argued earlier in this statement for the universality of salvation in Christ for Jews and others, he now explicitly discusses sharing the gospel with Jews. This goal is explicated in terms of Paul's hopes and actions, specifically his exhortations to Jews to believe in Jesus. This endorsement is unqualified. While Kasper often notes that historical events require a rethinking of Catholic views, here he applies a first-century practice of witness directly to Christians in the twenty-first century.

While Kasper's endorsement is terse, a palpable shift in his tone indicates the divisiveness and also the utter seriousness to both Jews and Christians of this idea of witness. Kasper, aware of deep Jewish resistance to conversionary forms of witness, makes his own uncompromising statements about the Christian obligation to witness. He proposes a sort of dialogic quid pro quo. Just as Jews have asked Christians to understand their concerns, he says,

<sup>44</sup> Bolton is correct that Kasper has (vague) eschatological expectations for Jews and Catholics and that these culminate in "an eventual Christian eschatological triumph." However, Kasper's views are not limited to the end of days, and his eschatological focus does not preclude conversionary activity; see Bolton, "Catholic-Jewish Dialogue," 46–47.

<sup>45</sup> This is of course not the sole or even primary goal of Jewish-Catholic dialogue, but rather an additional goal; they are not mutually exclusive. Earlier, Kasper said that "the aim of dialogue is not for Jews to become Christians or Christians to stop being Christians. ... This is the only way they can speak to each other and mutually enrich one another. Dialogue has nothing to do with proselytism" (2001 Theology). This reasonably reflects the primary focus of his office on dialogue itself, while accommodating missionary witness so long as it avoids "proselytism" (a term that seems carefully chosen so as to preclude specifically coercion or deception).

“we expect [from Jews] the same [tolerance] towards us.”<sup>46</sup> To ensure that Christians are given a hearing, Kasper emphasizes just how much is at stake for them. If Christians “remained silent about their faith or denied it” when talking with Jews, they would betray the gospel. The universal nature of the Gospel, that which impels him to speak about it to Jews too, is “from the Christian perspective ... inalienable.”<sup>47</sup> Kasper’s views are strong and unyielding. This is not surprising, as is clear from Kasper’s own characterization of a conversionary mission as “the really controversial question” for Jews and Catholics. Especially on this issue he expects no agreement between them, but nonetheless says Christians cannot forsake “the witness that is demanded of us today.” Jews should show “respect for the fundamental distinction” between them about this issue and not reject any engagement with Catholics, despite his now endorsing precisely the type of controversial mission he deemphasized earlier.

There is another topic about which we see both opposition to some forms of a conversionary mission and support for others. These are not mutually exclusive. As noted above, Kasper rejects a formal, church-supported conversionary endeavor (also called here “institutional”). He appears to want to reassure Jews by demonstrating that Catholics, unlike some Protestants, place some limits on conversionary methods. Now, he makes a distinction between forms that mission and witness can take. He writes, “One must distinguish between intentional and organised mission on the one hand and Christian witness on the other.” This contrast, expressed in precise language, reflects differences in *how* one preaches to Jews.<sup>48</sup> It is the *methods* of the former (presumably who supports it and how it is done), termed “intentional and organized,” that are inappropriate, not the goal.

He corroborates this point elsewhere, in an interview on the Good Friday Prayer, saying that the eventual hope that “all of Israel will be converted ... does not mean that we have the intention of conducting a mission to the Jews, *in the way* that we have a mission to the Gentiles” (emphasis added).<sup>49</sup> Here he emphasizes different methods (“ways”) but not different goals regarding Jews and Gentiles. He even frankly—one might say surprisingly—admits that such methodological distinctions, which he hopes will calm Jewish “hypersensitivity,” only “clarify the question of a mission to the

<sup>46</sup> On such a demand in Jewish-Catholic dialogue, see Henrix, “Controversy”; Adam Gregerman, “Jewish Theology and Limits on Reciprocity in Catholic-Jewish Dialogue,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 7 (2012): 1–13, at 4–13.

<sup>47</sup> This quote appears in footnote 5.

<sup>48</sup> As noted above, these terms for inappropriate forms of mission are used often and indicate Kasper’s efforts to formulate carefully just what is (and is not) acceptable.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Connelly, “Mission,” 122.

Jews factually [i.e., regarding the methods used].” They do not, he says, clarify the question “theologically,” referring to the deeper issues about the goals of mission. With this explicit contrast, he indicates that one should not incorrectly deduce from statements about restrictions on some means and methods of mission an opposition to mission as such.

He offers another difference between appropriate and inappropriate forms of mission. “Christian witness” is legitimate as long as it is done “tactfully and respectfully.” One who preaches Christ to Jews must not be crude, blunt, or indifferent to Jewish sensitivities (presumably the problem with “organized mission”). As is common in Kasper’s writings, his distinction in approach indicates both opposition to one practice and support for another. Most importantly, his opposition does not lead him to forsake his theological commitment to the universal gospel, only the ways this is expressed. Jewish sensitivities, for which he expresses sympathy, nonetheless cannot mean that Christians remain passive and idle about communicating their faith. On the contrary, witness requires that Jews be encouraged, kindly and without coercion, to consider faith in Jesus. This meaning of witness is paralleled in an earlier statement: “In dialogue I want to communicate something that is important for me and for my life; ... I want to share it with others so that they too may be blessed. ... [This is] a witness which *proposes* but by no means *imposes* one’s own faith” (2001 Jewish-Christian; emphasis added). Witness as a gracious invitation to experience the benefits of Christian faith, even by those in an extant covenant with God, cannot be neglected, but it must be done in a suitable way.<sup>50</sup>

#### *D. Excursus: Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone on Kasper’s Views and the 2008 Good Friday Prayer Dispute*

An official letter on May 8, 2008, from the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel following the dispute over the Good Friday Prayer was intended to clarify church teachings on the conversion of the Jews.<sup>51</sup> It was released a few weeks after Kasper’s statement discussed above. It gives some indication of what Kasper meant, for Bertone explicitly relies upon the views Kasper expressed in what Bertone calls a “substantial and detailed article.” Kasper, Bertone says, has “particular prominence” on this issue, noting that “a sign of the importance” of Kasper’s article for the church was its placement on the cover of *L’Osservatore Romano*.

<sup>50</sup> See Gavin D’Costa, “What Does the Catholic Church Teach about the Mission to the Jewish People?,” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 590–613, at 599.

<sup>51</sup> See <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-today-s-dialogue/conversion/bertone08may14-1#ges:searchword%3Dtarcisio%2Bbertone%26searchphrase%3Dall%26page%3D1>.

Like Kasper does in many statements, Bertone insists at the start that relations between Jews and Catholics be characterized by “profound respect, sincere esteem and cordial friendship.” He largely paraphrases Kasper’s statement emphasizing dialogue about both what Jews and Catholics share (“our common faith in the one God”) and what they disagree about (“faith in Jesus as Christ and Redeemer of all mankind”). He then shifts to the contentious topics of mission, witness, and conversion in light of Pope Benedict’s recent changes to the prayer. Basing his views on Kasper’s “clear” interpretation, he says that there can be no “proselytism” of Jews, a term here used pejoratively to refer to inappropriate (e.g., coercive) efforts to bring others to believe in Christ.<sup>52</sup> Obviously, this would not be compatible with respectful and friendly dialogue. He also notes briefly that Kasper “opens up an eschatological perspective” in his interpretation of the changes to the prayer, perhaps suggesting that Catholics’ hopes will be fulfilled at the end of days. While neither idea is explicated, Bertone, like Kasper before him, presents claims that are intended to minimize dissension between Jews and Catholics regarding Catholic views of conversion.

He then moves in a different direction with a highly controversial claim, one with parallels to Kasper’s but explicitly expressing support for the conversion of the Jews. He writes, “Christians, however, cannot but bear witness to their faith, in full and total respect for the freedom of others, and this leads them also to pray that all will come to recognize Christ.” Just as in Kasper’s writings, Bertone’s earlier positive statements about Jews and Judaism are followed by this statement regarding the desirability of Jewish conversion to Christianity. Christians are to “witness” to Jews, which in this context has clear practical significance and “*also*” aims at the same goal as the prayer to which it is linked: Jews will “come to recognize Christ.” This is not an eschatological goal, as evidenced by the shift away from the “eschatological perspective” and by the intervening disjunctive “however” and the use of the present tense for “witness.” Rather, he expresses a desire that such recognition happen not at the end of days but in the present. Likewise, he encourages Christians both to pray that Jews convert and to strive actively to accomplish that; this explains his practical guidance regarding how one witnesses. As with Kasper, he insists on using appropriate methods of preaching (respecting Jews’ “freedom”), though this does not alter a conversionary goal. At most, it evinces a commitment to religious liberty by breaking sharply with earlier unacceptable methods employed to convert Jews.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the term “proselytism,” and especially its negative connotation, see Frederici, “Study Outline,” II:a:1–19.

<sup>53</sup> A recent statement regarding the views of Norbert Hofmann, currently secretary for the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, in an interview after the release of

***E. Kasper's Context and Form of Presentation: Showing Sensitivity and Avoiding Controversy***

As noted repeatedly, Kasper presents his views on the controversial topic of mission to the Jews cautiously and vaguely. He can appear reluctant to state the conclusions his arguments lead to, and he seems both to reject and to affirm aspects of mission and conversion. His favorable assessments of Judaism, while frequent and far reaching, do not come without qualifications or limitations. This is inherent in his comparison between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant and becomes especially relevant to the topic of conversion. Without ignoring Kasper's statements that are positive about Judaism and seemingly critical of some forms of missionary activity, one must note that what he does not say, as well as what he does say, profoundly challenges Jews (as he frankly admits). It even threatens the dialogue he is tasked with supporting. It is possible not to grasp the full force of these latter claims because of his genuinely warm tone and substantive steps toward rapprochement. However, when his statements are read with a critical lens we see how he consistently both makes room for and also expresses the desirability of Jews' converting to Christianity.

One can reasonably speculate why he presents his views as he does. First, Jewish-Christian relations are inherently complex, for both historical and theological reasons. Much remains unsettled. Statements on mission by Kasper and others seem to illustrate some of these tensions in Christian reassessments of Judaism.<sup>54</sup>

Second, and much more important, he refers often to angry Jewish resistance to any hint of Catholic missionary motives.<sup>55</sup> Kasper, as head of the

*Gifts* is relevant here as well: "Father Hofmann said the Church can still pray for the Jews' conversion, which the Church used to explicitly do in the pre-conciliar liturgies, but said there is no longer 'a call to conversion' for the Jews"; see Edward Pentin, "Pope Francis' Synagogue Visit Underscores New Document on Catholic-Jewish Relations," *National Catholic Register*, January 16, 2016. He appears to distinguish between a formal liturgy and the general desirability of Jewish conversion.

<sup>54</sup> See Bruce D. Marshall, "Christ and Israel: An Unsolved Problem in Catholic Theology," in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2013), 330–50, at 330–33.

<sup>55</sup> Alon Goshen-Gottstein has summarized this perception: "Suspicion of a hidden missionary agenda is probably still the greatest impediment to advancement in Jewish-Christian dialogue. ... One cannot overestimate the significance of [missionizing] for a Jewish public"; see Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Jewish-Christian Relations: From Historical Past to Theological Future," *Jewish Christian Relations*, [http://www.jcrelations.net/Jewish-Christian\\_Relations\\_From\\_Historical\\_Past\\_to\\_Theological\\_Future.1577.0.html?L=4](http://www.jcrelations.net/Jewish-Christian_Relations_From_Historical_Past_to_Theological_Future.1577.0.html?L=4). Some Jews have insisted that "if they dialogue with Christians there should be no hidden

Vatican commission whose “role ... is to promote dialogue,” is far from indifferent to the painful and likely dialogue-ending effects a frank endorsement of mission might provoke (2002 BC). He knows just how “highly controversial [the] question of Christian mission among the Jews [is]” (2010 Recent). He forthrightly and sympathetically recognizes, he says, that “Christian missionary activity evokes among Jews bitter and painful historical memories of forced conversions” (2002 BC).<sup>56</sup> In the wake of the “unprecedented crime of the Shoah,” he is palpably and understandably cautious. For Jews living after the event, he says, conversion is a “very delicate and sensitive question, because it implies for them the existence of [the people of] Israel itself” (2010 Recent). He knows Jews feel the stakes could not be higher, for they view “a [Christian conversionary] mission to the Jews” as a “threat to their existence” and even “a Shoah by different means” (2008 Striving). Though there are of course many topics that divide Jews and Catholics, only when discussing a conversionary mission does he offer such blunt descriptions of how intensely fraught dialogue could be.

His advocacy of his views is colored by his reluctance to provoke conflict with his Jewish dialogue partners. (Many of his statements were speeches to at least partially Jewish audiences.) Kasper thus reasonably and repeatedly signals his awareness of this deep sensitivity and clearly aims to avoid a bitter clash if possible. He pleads with Jews and Christians not to “turn their backs to each other [but to] stand shoulder to shoulder” (2002 BC). While he seldom discloses much personally, on the topic of mission he uses stark and vivid language to capture just how contentious discussions might get. At an address regarding the dispute over “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” he said he hopes “to get out on the other end [of his presentation] with unbroken skin.” Recalling past discussions about conversionary mission, he said he faced “the risk of getting caught between fire from all sides” (2002 BC). In an unusual expression of anger and annoyance, he critiques Jewish “misunderstanding” for undermining dialogue: “The sensitivities aroused on the Jewish side by the revised Good Friday Prayer are to a large extent based on emotional rather than rational reasons” (2008 Striving).

Further, his method of presentation illustrates his elliptical and indirect approach. While in general Kasper sometimes quotes from the Bible and sometimes provides only a citation of a passage, on the topic of mission to the Jews he almost always only *cites* passages rather than *quoting* them. This is always the case for those passages that he cites to illustrate

missionary agenda or desire for their conversion”; see Edward Kessler, *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 182.

<sup>56</sup> See Groppe, “New Paths,” 204–8.

praiseworthy missionary activity among Jews (including those presented earlier from Matthew, Acts, and Paul's writings). Whether intended or not, this has the effect of minimizing a full appreciation of their controversial implications for dialogue with Jews today, as when he approvingly cites but does not quote passages where early followers of Jesus successfully encourage Jews to believe in him. These become evident only if one reads the verse; without doing so, one can miss important evidence for Kasper's support for missionary activity.

In sum, Kasper consistently seems to downplay the implications of his controversial views or pairs them with other views likely to be well received. His primary interests—to develop a broadly positive view of Judaism and to cultivate an ongoing Jewish-Catholic dialogue—sit uneasily alongside the topic of mission. Given this context and history of disputes between Catholics and Jews about this issue, his indirection and lack of clarity are understandable. Nonetheless, he refuses to compromise on his insistence that Jews, despite being in a valid covenant, can benefit from hearing and believing the gospel and that it is a responsibility of Christians to share it for this purpose. It is not surprising that he characterizes his discussion of a conversionary mission as both a “mandate” and a “burden” (2002 BC).

### III. *Gifts on the Old and New Covenants*

As was the case with Kasper's statements, when analyzing *Gifts*, it is necessary to begin with a preliminary presentation of the authors' views of the Old and New Covenants in order then to explicate their views of mission to the Jews. And just as with Kasper, they affirm the abiding value of the Old Covenant while insisting on the superior value of the New Covenant. It is this comparative superiority that provides a motivation to encourage Jews to convert. The authors of *Gifts* are indebted to Kasper not only for their ideas but even for their phrasing and terminology. Despite some minor differences, *Gifts* is a compressed but more formal recapitulation of the claims made over nearly a decade by Kasper.

They speak very positively about the Old Covenant itself, continuing a trend begun with *Nostra Aetate* (*Gifts* §2). The Jewish people, going back to the biblical period and up through the present, stand in “a unique relationship with God” (§27). To describe this relationship, the authors employ powerfully emotive language and biblical terminology: “The Church does not question the continued love of God for the chosen people of Israel” (§17). The claims are straightforward and rooted in an affirmation of continuity between biblical Israel and later Jews: “Israel is God's chosen and beloved

people of the covenant" (§34; cf. §22). Decisively breaking with a supersessionist tradition, they hold that the two covenants are not mutually exclusive, as if the New Covenant replaced the Old Covenant. On the contrary, the covenant "that God concluded with Israel has never been revoked but remains valid on the basis of God's unfailing faithfulness to his people" (§33). So-called "replacement theology ... is deprived of its foundations" (§17; cf. §§35, 37, 39).

There is much that is good about the Old Covenant. Its members receive divine guidance through the Torah. By observing its commandments, they "have life in its fullest" (§24). The postbiblical rabbinic tradition has a validity of its own (§31). More boldly, the authors of *Gifts*, like Kasper, affirm the soteriological value of the Old Covenant. In an inversion of the traditional Christian claim that the Jews lost their covenant and their salvation after Christ, the authors insist that the Jews' covenant remains salvific: "That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable" (§36).<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Torah observance for the Jews is described in striking language as a "response to God's word of salvation," akin to the faithfulness of the Christian (§25). Remarkably, the authors insist on this, even though it leads to serious questions for Christian theology: "How that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery." Specifically, it raises tensions with the authors' rejection of both the idea that salvation of any kind can ever happen entirely independently of Christ (§17) and the claim that there are two "paths to salvation" (§25). Nonetheless, they do not feel they must fully resolve this "mystery" to make such a soteriological affirmation.

However, when offering comparative judgments about the Old Covenant vis-à-vis the New Covenant, the authors' assessment, just like Kasper's, shifts markedly. Without rejecting or undermining their favorable views of the Old Covenant itself or succumbing to supersessionism, they nonetheless argue for the clear superiority of the New Covenant. This is often done using "fulfillment" terminology. Claims of fulfillment are intended to demonstrate that the New Covenant is superior to, but not a replacement of, the Old Covenant. They state this carefully: "The Church does not replace the people of God of Israel, since as the community founded on Christ it represents in him the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel. This does not mean that Israel, not having achieved such a fulfilment, can no longer be

<sup>57</sup> On soteriology in the statement, see Ruth Langer, "'Gifts and Calling': The Fruits of Coming to Know Living Jews," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–10, at 8–9; Philip A. Cunningham, "Gifts and Calling: Coming to Terms with Jews as Covenantal Partners," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–18, at 3–6.

considered to be the people of God" (§23). They say little about the nature of fulfillment (though see below). It is more important that there be fulfillment, indicating valuable or unique features of the New Covenant that are lacking or remained unrealized in the Old Covenant. It is a better covenant, not "the annulment nor the replacement, but the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Covenant" (§32; cf. §33).<sup>58</sup>

It is sometimes possible to discern some hints regarding the nature of fulfillment. For example, they argue for a "discontinuity" between the two covenants. The emergence of the New Covenant, despite its rootedness in the history of Israel, is not simply another stage in salvation history. Rather, Jesus "fulfils the mission and expectation of Israel in a perfect way [and] he overcomes and transcends them in an eschatological manner" (§14). That which formerly was not (able to be) accomplished finally has been. This is because Jesus, though a "Jew of his time," also "transcends time, history, and every earthly reality." The New Covenant, founded on faith in one with these unique attributes, differs qualitatively from the Old. Without directly deprecating the Old Covenant, they nonetheless insist on an at least partial break with it, after the inauguration of a New Covenant composed not solely of Israel but "of [all] those who believe in him."

Fulfillment is not necessarily discontinuous. The authors posit temporal scenarios in which the Old Covenant (inaugurated in the time of the Hebrew Bible) plays a sort of preliminary or preparatory role to the New Covenant (inaugurated later, and with a present and a future [eschatological] role). For example, they write, "God entrusted Israel with a unique mission, and He does not bring his mysterious plan of salvation for all peoples (cf. 1 Tim 2:4) to fulfillment without drawing into it his 'first-born son' [Israel] (Ex 4:22)" (§36). Here, they look "back" to God's claiming Israel as his covenanted people at the burning bush and "forward" to Jesus and the universal New Covenant. The Old Covenant is not extraneous but is integrated into God's larger "plan." This is sometimes cast in terms of stages in a linear "history of God's covenant with mankind" (§34). In this scenario, following the inauguration of the Old Covenant, there appeared "a new reality and a new dimension of God's work of salvation." The "new" builds on, but surpasses, the "old" in a (secular) historical sense and, more importantly, in terms of salvation history.

The most detailed presentation of the nature of the New Covenant's superiority concerns its universality. The Old Covenant was limited to just one

<sup>58</sup> For a critical analysis of "fulfillment" terminology in *Gifts*, see Elena Procario-Foley, "Fulfillment and Complementarity: Reflections on Relationship in 'Gifts and Calling,'" *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1-12.

people, who were given their own “law ... which distinguishes them from other peoples” (§21). It was God who “set them apart” (§21), yet they need to take care so as not to become “too particularist” (§33). Though this exclusivity is not a failing of the Old Covenant itself (indeed, it was intended by God), this quality makes it comparatively inferior to the New Covenant, which is distinguished by its inclusivity. It is now clear, they say, that “God’s will for salvation is universally directed [as] is testified by the Scriptures (cf. e.g. Gen 12:1-3; Is 2:2-5; 1 Tim 2:4)” (§25; cf. §§22, 35). Importantly, they deny that such universalism invalidates the Old Covenant, or that it was not a legitimate covenant initiated by God. God’s intention had always been to give one covenant, and then to give another covenant. They are linked, though one is superior to the other: “Through the New Covenant the Abrahamic [Old] covenant has obtained that universality for all peoples which was originally intended” (§33). This transition to a better, more inclusive covenant was signaled already in Scripture. This undermines support for supersessionism: “The New Covenant can never replace the Old but presupposes it and gives it a new dimension of meaning, by reinforcing the personal nature of God as revealed in the Old Covenant and establishing it as openness for all who respond faithfully from all the nations (cf. Zech 8:20-23; Psalm 87)” (§27). They carefully balance continuity (“reinforcing”) and discontinuity (“new dimension”).

In sum, it is the comparative superiority of the New Covenant that explains why, I will argue, they view as desirable the conversion of Jews to Christianity. The Old Covenant, while of value, is lacking in comparison to the New Covenant, due, for example, to the former’s temporal precedence or its inherent qualities (e.g., nonuniversalism). That Jews may be “saved” in the Old Covenant does not mean it is undesirable that they—like all humanity—join the New Covenant. The Old Covenant itself pointed this way, promising greater spiritual benefits to all, including to Jews.

#### IV. *Gifts on Mission and Conversion*

The authors’ most sustained discussion of mission and evangelism appears in section 6, entitled “The Church’s mandate to evangelize in relation to Judaism” (§§40–43), though other sections are relevant as well. Just like Kasper, the authors use various terms, such as *mission*, *witness*, *conversion*, and *evangelism*, without clearly defining them. It is by seeing them used that one can understand what they mean. Turning to their arguments for viewing positively the conversion of Jews to Christianity, we can start by showing that it is this that is at issue.

In section 6, they indicate a shift to the topic by demonstrating their awareness of the uniquely controversial nature of mission and conversion and of the theological challenges they raise for their contemporary views of the Jewish covenant (much as Kasper did). They situate their claims about conversionary mission in an admittedly fraught interreligious context. They had earlier singled out as the greatest barrier to a “shift in the relations of the Church with the Jewish people ... [past] attempts at forced conversion” of Jews (§1). The present discussion is thus entered cautiously, reflecting an awareness of strong Jewish opposition to missionary activity. Such activity is “a very delicate and sensitive matter for Jews” who think it “involves the very existence of the Jewish people” (§40). For no other issue short of physical violence, to which mission was often linked in the past, are the stakes as high. Making a striking connection, they underscore that this opposition is now especially deep “in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.” The authors indicate their genuine sympathy for and understanding of Jewish concerns over views and actions that they perceive as threatening. Far from ignoring them, the authors repeatedly show they understand the pain Christians’ views of the desirability of the conversion of Jews caused and still causes.

Revealingly, the authors’ frank demonstration of their awareness of Jewish sensitivity indicates the significance of this issue not only to Jews *but to Christians*. Such a demonstration makes sense precisely because they endorse a conversionary mission. They suggest that they would not support something that can provoke such dissension and threaten a delicate relationship with the Jewish community were the stakes not extremely high for them as well. Having repeatedly stressed their commitment to improved Jewish-Christian relations (e.g., §§2, 13, 44), they do not raise the issue lightly. They affirm that “the Old Covenant has never been revoked” (§39), and yet they simultaneously speak of a competing religious obligation: “Christians are *nonetheless* called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews,” despite Jewish sensitivity (§40; emphasis added). This juxtaposition between Jewish and Christian concerns makes clear they are aware of the deep tension between the missionary mandate and Jewish resistance.

However, mission is not a marginal responsibility or one that can be intermittently heeded. Rather, “the universal mission of the Church [is] of fundamental importance” (§40). For the authors, this mandate is obligatory. It applies not just in the abstract but, they insist, to contemporary Christians, and even during “dialogue between Jews and Christians” (§41). That is why they insist the “concept of mission ... be presented correctly” (§41).

### A. *Conversion in the New Testament*

Turning more specifically to mission to the Jews, the authors cite (but, like Kasper, do not quote) texts from the New Testament and official church statements (§41).<sup>59</sup> They first cite Matthew, writing, “[Jesus] gives his disciples a share in this [missionary] call in relation to God’s people of Israel (cf. Mt 10:6).” In this important verse, Jesus commands his disciples to strive to bring Jews to believe in him. They are told to avoid Gentiles and to “go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and to “proclaim the good news” (10:5, 7). This call underscores the Jews’ special religious status in both past and present.<sup>60</sup> When cited here, Jesus’ command illustrates the authors’ view of “Christian mission [which] has its origins” in Matthew 10, an effort to share the gospel exclusively with Jews. The responsibility to do so falls on all of Jesus’ followers. Just like his first disciples, today’s Christians “share in this call,” for it is precisely this command that the authors cite when presenting mission to the Jews “correctly.”

The authors’ support for Christian mission to Jews is next illustrated with another citation from Matthew, of Jesus’ final missionary charge. They write about the command to Jesus’ disciples, given by “the risen Lord with regard to all nations (cf. Mt 28:19)” (§41).<sup>61</sup> In the Gospel passage they refer to, a postresurrection appearance brings the narrative to an end with a final command to spread faith in Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). In this penultimate verse in the Gospel, there is no rejection of the disciples’ mission to the Jews (e.g., Matt 10:6, just cited). The authors read the final charge inclusively, with a new Gentile mission complementing the extant Jewish mission. With this addition, they write, “the people of God attains a new dimension through Jesus,” for it enables the growth of a community of Jewish and Gentile believers. Moreover, this inclusive view of the expansion of mission in 28:19 fits the authors’ comparative view of salvation history generally (see above). A covenant with the Jews is followed by a better “new” covenant with the Gentiles, with membership now open to all (e.g., §22). The narrow focus on Jews early in Matthew (in 10:6) is thus widened but not rejected. There is a call to preach to all people, Jews and Gentiles.

<sup>59</sup> Strictly speaking, first-century Jews did not “convert” to Christianity, but their coming to believe in Jesus (as Lord, Messiah, etc.), being baptized, and joining a community of those who shared this view resembles in its essentials what we call “conversion” in the present context.

<sup>60</sup> Jews’ unique religious status vis-à-vis Christianity is a prominent theme throughout the current statement (e.g., Pref.; §§14–15, 20–21).

<sup>61</sup> This verse is cited by Kasper (in 2002 BC) to make a similar point.

Following citations of Matthew's missionary commands, the authors turn to Ephesians because of the support it provides for efforts to bring Jews to believe in Jesus and to enter the church. It illustrates what it means to say that Jesus "calls his Church from both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Eph 2:11-22)." This is of course a prominent theme in Ephesians. It portrays a community composed not just of Jews ("the circumcision") but of Gentiles ("the uncircumcision"; v. 11). It is formed by the preaching of the Gospel to those "who were far off" (Gentiles) and to those "who were near" (Jews; v. 17). While focused on the inclusion of Gentiles (the primary audience; see vv. 1-3), Ephesians emphasizes that the two peoples can share belief in Christ (v. 14). Just as in Ephesians, where such a diverse community has already been born (vv. 11-13), the statement's authors do not see the emergence of such a "people of God" as a distant eschatological hope but as an (ideal) present reality. Jewish and Gentile believers should form one people "on the basis of faith in Christ and by means of baptism, through which there is incorporation into his Body which is the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 14)" (§41). This is an explicit and present conversionary goal, including the necessary ritual of inclusion (baptism), just as in Ephesians.

By citing from the Second Vatican Council statement *Lumen Gentium*, in this section on proper understanding of mission to the Jews, the authors of *Gifts* illustrate precisely such a conversionary vision.<sup>62</sup> The cited section contains a present, not eschatological, hope that non-Christians be "united with [the Church] as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ" and that they do so "through baptism as through a door men enter the Church." In this context, it appears that the authors cite this text with both Jews and Gentiles in mind. They make no distinction between the two peoples, signaling only the comparatively late welcome offered to the Gentiles. As with the citations from Matthew, the citations from Ephesians and *Lumen Gentium* indicate more fully what the authors have in mind. Repeatedly citing texts endorsing mission to the Jews and only later to the Gentiles, they fill out the sparse presentation in *Gifts*. However, the authors' citation rather than quotation of these biblical and Catholic texts has the effect of downplaying the provocation of a mission intended to bring Jews to faith in Christ. It is not stated explicitly and becomes fully apparent only if one consults the cited texts.

<sup>62</sup> Pope John VI, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (hereafter, LG).

### *B. Appropriate and Inappropriate Forms of Mission*

A similar ambiguity appears in statements that criticize some types of conversionary activity but support others. Specifically, the authors' opposition to some forms of mission as neither appropriate nor effective should not be read as opposition as such. On the contrary, their critiques, phrased with precision, both prohibit some things and allow others. For example, they do not endorse an active, formal mission to the Jews: "The Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews" (§40). This is carefully worded, with an apparent emphasis on "institutional," thus rejecting (without explanation) what seems like organized, church-sponsored conversionary efforts.<sup>63</sup> That this is their emphasis is evident in the subsequent phrase, an endorsement of mission when done differently, meaning when not done under the auspices of and directed by a church office. Such a permissible mission, they say, should be undertaken, but "in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's Word." Their critique of mission here is circumscribed. They reject only certain missionary forms or methods, especially ones that are triumphalist or appear insensitive to Jewish concerns. A critique of specific means, though, says nothing about goals. On the contrary, they insist they must "bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews," a goal that would be identical to that of an institutional mission. Limitations on method or opposition to official church offices dedicated to converting Jews thus do not reflect opposition to a conversionary mission. Rather, they appear to make space for it when done appropriately.<sup>64</sup>

The authors make a second distinction about proper and improper methods. Just as they insist that one should not forget that "Jews are bearer of God's Word," they also insist that Christian "evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, [should be done] in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views" (§40). Jews have a unique religious status because of their membership in their Old Covenant. When engaged in evangelization, one should not approach Jews as one approaches, for example, polytheists or pagans. Christians need not introduce Jews to the one God or to Scripture.<sup>65</sup> However, it remains desirable and obligatory to engage in evangelization. In the language of the section heading, it is the "Church's mandate," to be practiced differently for Jews, who already are in a saving covenant, but

<sup>63</sup> This resembles Kasper's view (e.g., 2008 *Striving*) and also may have been influenced by Frederici, "Study Outline," II:a:18.

<sup>64</sup> See Gavin D'Costa, "Supersessionism: Harsh, Mild, or Gone for Good?," *European Judaism* 50 (2017): 99–107.

<sup>65</sup> See Cunningham, "Gifts and Calling," 9. See also LG §17.

to be practiced nonetheless. This mention of “evangelisation” of (non-Jewish) non-Christians makes clear again that the topic is conversionary missionizing.

### *C. Human and Divine Responsibilities in Mission to the Jews*

Evincing a sensitivity to Jewish concerns about Christians’ support for and efforts to effect the conversion of the Jews, the authors, like Kasper, appear to minimize the human element of missionary activity: “Christian mission and witness [require] trust in God, who will carry out his universal plan of salvation in ways that only he knows, for [Christians] are witnesses to Christ, but they do not themselves have to implement the salvation of humankind” (§42). The words and phrases in this complex sentence are vague and undefined, especially “implement the salvation of humankind.” Even without clear definition, this final phrase appears to have been chosen to represent the highest of religious goals. Furthermore, it is not attainable by humans “themselves,” but is a goal for God. Mission is therefore unnecessary for this goal.

However, this statement does not preclude lesser efforts to spread the message of Christian faith. Rather, it simultaneously affirms them, though they are more modest. Alongside a passive trust in God to achieve God’s remarkable goal as stated above and for which Christians have no reason to missionize, the authors then *also* encourage Christians to act with “zeal for the ‘house of the Lord’” (§42). Even if God has exclusive responsibility for the salvation of humankind, individual Christians have an active responsibility to “confess and proclaim the historical realisation of God’s universal will for salvation in Christ Jesus ... to [individual] others.” There is no tension here between a (seemingly higher) goal achievable only by God that does not require human efforts to convert Jews and a (seemingly more modest) conversionary goal assigned to Christians. These two goals belong together, but by structuring the section this way and first insisting on God’s responsibility, the authors appear to downplay the divisive nature of the topic of Christian mission. Individual missionary activity appears second, after multiple statements encouraging passive trust in God (which makes mission moot). Yet after having shown what Christians should not and cannot do, they then turn to what individual Christians should do.

As noted, the distinctive phrase “in ways that only he [God] knows” seems intended to emphasize God’s overall control of salvation and hence implicitly to minimize human efforts to convert others. However, *Ad Gentes* §7, cited in the same section but not quoted and from which this phrase is taken, strongly supports conversionary missionizing. In its original context, the authors of this statement insist that a recognition of God’s exclusive knowledge does

not exempt the individual Christian from making efforts to convert others: “Therefore though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to find that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (1 Cor. 9:16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the Gospel. And hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity.” Even if much is unknown about salvation generally, this encouragement of a conversionary mission in *Ad Gentes* §7 clarifies the meaning of “zeal” in the previous sentence (in *Gifts* §42). And again, their views are not explicit, for *Ad Gentes* is cited but not quoted (just as with other passages), even though the authors of *Gifts* pair passive “trust in God” with encouragement of missionary activity.

A similar form of presentation is found in a relatively lengthy and complex section on the eschatological salvation of the Jews (§§36–37). I will first show that the authors’ claims and citations have the effect of downplaying the appropriateness and necessity of human missionary activity in the present. I will then argue that this apparent opposition is circumscribed, and that they also endorse missionary activity in other (i.e., present) circumstances.

On the one hand, they look to the future when discussing soteriology. They say that God will bring “his mysterious plan of salvation for all peoples (cf. 1 Tim 2:4) to fulfillment” (§36). In this scenario, there is necessarily much that is out of Christians’ hands. Not humans but “the Lord will bring about the hour when we [Jews and Christians] will all be united” (§37). Jews, with their valid covenant, will be included in this future plan. The authors admit they do not fully understand how Jews, without confessing faith in Christ, can be saved. Nonetheless, their confidence is firm. They call this the “mystery of God’s work” and recognize limitations on their own understanding of it and on their responsibility to bring it to fruition. This has the effect of downplaying the importance of Christian mission.

For support, they provide two brief quotations that emphasize God’s exclusive control of a vague eschatological scenario that includes Jew and Gentile alike. First, they quote Bernard of Clairvaux regarding human ignorance about the “irrevocable redemption” of corporate Israel. The authors say that all we can know about such redemption is that “for the Jews, ‘a determined point in time has been fixed which cannot be anticipated’” (§36, quoting *On Consideration* III:I:3).<sup>66</sup> Salvation surely will come to the Jews, though it appears that there is little that humans can explain or know about

<sup>66</sup> This quote from Bernard is in Kasper’s writings (2008 *Striving*) and was used by Pope Benedict to make a similar claim about an eschatological salvation of corporate Israel; see Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 44–46.

it. Second, they quote *Nostra Aetate* §4, which contains a similarly ambiguous hope for the future when “the Lord will bring about the hour when we will all be united, ‘when all peoples will call on God with one voice and serve him shoulder to shoulder’” (§37, quoting Zeph 3:9). Though this final image, like Bernard’s, offers little clarity about what such unity entails, it is an undeniably positive climax to history yet out of human hands.

The implication most relevant to our topic of mission is the authors’ recognition in these examples that the accomplishment of God’s mysterious eschatological goals “is not a matter of missionary efforts to convert Jews” (§37). Individual Christians, unable to contribute to or to understand fully the end-time unification of humanity, should at least know what does not bring this specific goal closer. To achieve it, there is nothing Christians can or need do; a conversionary mission does not contribute to this process.

On the other hand, these claims regarding limited human contributions are circumscribed. As the authors say repeatedly, an active conversionary mission is not of help for *eschatological goals*. The statements just quoted are exclusively focused on the future (“the hour when all will be united”; “the salvation of humankind”; “a determined point of time has been fixed”). Perhaps this elaboration of scenarios involving no missionary activity could be reassuring to Jewish readers. Yet the authors’ insistence that conversion is ultimately effected by God does not logically preclude any human efforts. Rather, it reflects a straightforward idea that true conversion is never *only* a human accomplishment, especially in eschatological scenarios. On the contrary, individual believers do have a role to play as witnesses and evangelists, one deemphasized here by the authors’ discussion of the future but otherwise taken as obligatory throughout the statement.<sup>67</sup> That is why we saw the insistence that while it is God alone who will ultimately “implement the salvation of humankind,” nonetheless today “all Christians [must] confess and proclaim” the gospel (§42). A uniquely important event has occurred—“the historical realisation of God’s universal will for salvation in Christ Jesus”—and the proper response is not passivity but “zeal.” This is not meant to supplant God’s actions. Christians should trust in God’s plan and control, while also recognizing that active conversionary preaching is required of them as well: “Christian mission and witness, in personal life and in proclamation, belong together” (§42).<sup>68</sup> Both God and individual Christians have complementary roles to play.

<sup>67</sup> Again, among examples cited above, recall the section heading “6. The Church’s mandate to evangelize in relation to Judaism.”

<sup>68</sup> This conversionary meaning of the term “proclamation” (used only here) is indicated by its usage immediately after the reference to LG §14 and the authors’ expression of hope

## Conclusion

Kasper and the authors of *Gifts* continue the remarkable trajectory begun at the Second Vatican Council. They present positive assessments of Jews and Judaism, affirming not just the legitimacy of the Old Covenant but the abiding value and even joy of Jewish religious life. It is their hope to help long-estranged communities be “reliable partners and even good friends” (*Gifts* §2). They are sensitive to Jewish concerns, above all regarding Christian efforts to convert Jews. Especially after the Shoah, they know how much is at stake for Jews.

Having demonstrated this awareness, they nonetheless insist that there is much at stake for Christians as well. This introduces a real clash regarding a conversionary mission to Jews, for, according to Kasper, “there are also Christian sensitivities and there is a Christian identity also at stake” (2002 BC). Jews’ sensitivities are relevant but do not necessarily trump those of Christians. They cannot ignore Jesus’s missionary command, which encourages preaching to the Jews: “The word ‘mission’ is central in the New Testament. We cannot cancel it, and if we should try to do so, it would not help the Jewish-Christian dialogue at all. Rather, it would make the dialogue dishonest, and ultimately distort it” (2002 BC). Refusing to do that, they defend conversionary mission, even though “‘mission’ raises for Jews still today often insurmountable misunderstandings, suspicion and resistance.”

Because the topic of conversion is so controversial, I have shown that Kasper and the authors of *Gifts* often present their arguments for the desirability of converting Jews to Christianity indirectly and elliptically. They cite but do not quote verses and statements endorsing or illustrating the conversion of Jews. They elaborate complex eschatological scenarios for which there is no need to convert Jews, before more succinctly presenting arguments in favor of converting Jews. They expound upon inappropriate means and methods of conversion without actually forswearing conversion. These all have the effect of downplaying the divisiveness of their views. Similarly, their great praise for the Old Covenant itself coexists with a less favorable view of it when compared to the New Covenant. The former positive view illustrates the stunning modern shift in Catholic views of Judaism. The latter comparative view, which illustrates the inferiority of the Old Covenant, provides a motivation for efforts to bring Jews into an even better covenant. That is why one should try to convert Jews, even though they are already saved.

for the creation of a new people, “both Jews and Gentiles,” through baptism and incorporation into the church.

Although these authors admit that Jews will likely find much that is objectionable in their support for the conversion of Jews to Christianity, their fears seem not to have been realized. For example, nearly all summaries of the main claims in *Gifts* as illustrated at the start of this article (including those by Jews) focus only on statements of opposition to some forms of mission. Similarly, Kasper's views seem never to have provoked the outrage he feared or prompted a breakdown in dialogue. On the contrary, his successor, Cardinal Kurt Koch, has reiterated much of what Kasper said (as is clear from the content of *Gifts*, as well as in his own statements). The absence of such responses may be a tribute to the ways that they present their controversial claims. By this standard they could be said to be successful. In reading these statements with attention to forms of presentation, context, and important details, I do not intend to provoke that outrage that has until now been missing. However, I do hope to have demonstrated that the views of Kasper and the authors of *Gifts* deserve more careful and critical attention. Their implications for Jewish-Catholic relations remain to be fully considered.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Appendix: Walter Kasper's Writings and Speeches

2001 Dominus = "*Dominus Iesus*," May 1, 2001, Seventeenth Meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York, <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/kaspero1may1-1>.

2001 Spiritual = "Spiritual and Ethical Commitment in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," July 12, 2001, Annual General Meeting of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Montevideo, Uruguay, <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/wko1july12>.

2001 Jewish-Christian = "The Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Foundations, Progress, Difficulties, and Perspectives," November 21, 2001, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20011123\\_kasper-jews-christians\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20011123_kasper-jews-christians_en.html).

2001 Theology = "The Theology of the Covenant as Central Issue in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue," December 4, 2001, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/wko1dec4>.

2002 BC = "The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: A Crucial Endeavour of the Catholic Church," November 6, 2002, Boston College, Boston,

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20021106\\_kasper-boston-college\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20021106_kasper-boston-college_en.html).

2004 Relationship = "The Relationship of the Old and the New Covenant as One of the Central Issues in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," December 6, 2004, Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge, England, <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/kaspero4dec6-1>.

2008 Striving = "Striving for Mutual Respect in Modes of Prayer," *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 16, 2008, pp. 8–9, <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/kaspero8apr16-2>.

2010 Recent = "Recent Developments in Jewish-Christian Relations," May 24, 2010, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, England, <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/kasper2010may24>.

2011 Foreword = Foreword to *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, edited by Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Herman Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), <https://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/kasper2011mar20>.

## Acknowledgments

I greatly appreciate the help I received from Philip A. Cunningham, Gavin D'Costa, Ruth Langer, William Madges, Marianne Moyaert, and Matthew Tapie while I was researching and writing this article. I alone am responsible for the views expressed here.