

STATEMENT DR501

Witnessing to Rastafarians (Part Two: Reaching Out)

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Rastafarianism presents Christians with a challenging evangelistic opportunity. The popular Afro-Caribbean religion is centered on devotion to Haile Selassie I, the deceased emperor of Ethiopia. Dreadlocks, ganja, reggae music, a rejection of “Babylon society” (political, economic, and cultural imperialism), and the promotion of “I-ness” (black pride) often (stereo)typify Rastafarians. What is most typical of Rastafari, however, is an incredible diversity of religious beliefs that crowd under its umbrella.

Part One of this two-part series described this modern phenomenon as a decentralized black consciousness movement with no universally acknowledged leaders and no universally agreed upon defining religious principles. In fact, the roots of this popular front can be traced to the Ethiopian consciousness movement of the late 1800s and 1900s, which involved a looking back to Africa as the “motherland” and a promulgation of the hope that out of Africa would come a black Messiah.

When Ras Tafari Makonnen became emperor of Ethiopia and took the name Haile Selassie I in 1930, he was lauded with the titles “Lion of Judah, Elect of God, King of Kings.” Many believed the Messiah had arrived.

Throughout his life, however, Selassie persisted in denying that he was divine and directed people instead to his Lord — Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, devotion to the emperor continued to grow and has increased since his death in 1975.

Today, there are two primary tracks within Rastafari. One sees Selassie as the second coming of Jesus Christ. The other, more Hinduistic in its theology, views Selassie as an avatar of sorts. This second track embraces a pantheism that looks for the Lion Spirit or Christ Spirit in all. In addition, coexisting along with these two tracks are a dizzying array of beliefs on the nature of the divine.

The movement’s greatest continuity lies not in doctrine but in the sociological threads running through it. These include the movement’s Afro-centrism; its rejection of Western imperialism; its hope for a black Messiah; its desire to provide adherents with a positive self-identity; and its will to effect change in social and political structures, in the natural environment, and in each human being. All of these principles need to be kept in mind when presenting the gospel to the individual Rasta.

There are several other points to remember in witnessing. Rastas often believe salvation in witnessing. Rastas often believe salvation to be earthly (in terms of systemic change) and have a sketchy theology of the afterlife. Rastafari’s appeal often centers in its social consciousness rather than in its religious principles, and the prime purveyor of Rastafarian theology is reggae. Reggae music “speaks” to people outside of Jamaica, William David Spencer says, because it is a music of protest. “Those who are experiencing oppression within their respective countries relate.”¹

Some members of the movement have a deep antagonism toward those they view as the oppressors. Rastafari is a post-colonial phenomenon that can trace some of its roots to Christianity. In fact, many who have embraced this system of belief came out of the churches and see Rastafari as a reform movement within Christianity.

When sharing the gospel with Rastafarians, one should view each Rasta as an individual and not as a “member” of a system. The first step, therefore, is to embrace the Rasta as a friend and to ask questions to discern who the person is and what he or she actually believes. What will count is your own authenticity and your willingness to share yourself.

A presentation of the gospel to a Rasta must be divorced from any Western definition of the gospel. In *Defending Black Faith*, Craig S. Keener and Glenn Usry address the question, “What do you say when someone claims that Christianity is a white religion?”² They cite Philip’s presentation of the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch, as recounted in Acts 8:26–36, noting that the first Gentile Christian was an Ethiopian. In this book and in *Black Man’s Religion*, Keener and Usry trace the movement of Christianity in Africa prior to the arrival of the European missionaries. Because Christianity is for everyone, that means it is a black person’s religion as well. It is a faith that is “contextual to each of our cultures...yet [is] supracontextual in Christ in that we enter a new context: the transcultural reign of God.”³

One should also avoid trying to defend or excuse the evil done in Jesus’ name in the past. William Spencer advises, “When evangelizing Rastas, move to the parable of the wheat and tares: the farmer plants the field and weeds spring up in the midst of the wheat. Simply say, ‘This is what happens in the Christian church. The evil one has put false people in who engage in lying, cheating, stealing. These weeds are not Christians...’”⁴

We must also admit that genuine Christians have not always behaved in ways that honor the Savior. We must not defend the indefensible.

Many Rastas are open to a consideration of the Bible and to discussions of Jesus Christ. In fact, one branch of the messianic track of Rastafarianism — the Twelve Tribes — appears to have moved in a more biblical direction in recent years. As was noted in Part One, the more these particular followers have delved into Selassie’s writings and his life, the more they realize that he was a follower of Jesus. Spencer insists that the best opportunity for evangelism is with such people and that the work involves “moving them from worshipping Haile Selassie as God to worshipping Haile Selassie’s God — Jesus.”⁵

Tommy Cowan, one of Jamaica’s foremost reggae concert and record producers, was baptized in Kingston’s Family Church on the Rock (an independent charismatic church) in 1998. At that time he said, “The supreme being is God Almighty. His Majesty (Haile Selassie) pray to God Almighty and I know that has always been a part of his undertaking’...[a local Ethiopian Orthodox Church] spokesperson Tessa Mikeal Poyser said, ‘He (Emperor Selassie) is not God, he is defender of the faith...a Christian just like I am, a normal man like me.’”⁶

Many within Rastafari also look to Marcus Garvey as a prophet of the movement. When witnessing, it might be helpful to share the following from an address Garvey delivered in 1928 at the Century Theater in London:

*I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; I endorse the Nicean Creed; I believe that Jesus died for me; I believe that God lives for me as for all men; and no condition you can impose on me by deceiving me about Christianity will cause me to doubt Jesus Christ and to doubt God. I shall never hold Christ or God responsible for the commercialization of Christianity by the heartless men who adopt it as the easiest means of fooling and robbing other people out of their land and country.*⁷

In contrast to such confessions of the Christian faith, many Rastas are, as I’ve noted, more New Age or Hindu in orientation. Consequently, the approach with these people should be to counter the concepts of pantheism (or self-divinity). One approach is to take the individual through the Bible to demonstrate the inconsistency of pantheism with the Scriptures. Another is to use the “world-view-independent principles of evaluation” posited by David K. Clark and Norman L. Geisler in their *Apologetics in the New Age*.⁸ They suggest that philosophical ideas be tested to see if they meet reasonable standards of consistency, coherence, comprehensiveness, and congruity.

We’ve seen that Rastafari speaks to the desire to bring about justice and equity in society and political structures, as well as to the desire to heal the planet and heal the self. Christianity is about nothing if it is not about transformation — through Jesus Christ. In recent years, however, Judeo-Christianity has been blamed for the world’s environmental crises as critics have misread the biblical mandate of Genesis 1:28 to subdue the earth. Christians also have been faulted for their part in the spread of Western imperialism, and individual Christians have not always presented the best witness for Christ.

Again, all of these failings must be acknowledged and overcome. First, Christianity should not be blamed for the abuse of the world’s resources. Rather, sinful human beings have disobeyed the Lord’s command to be stewards of the earth. Second, we must admit that some missionaries were “blind to their own ethnocentrism” and were thus “predisposed not to appreciate the cultures of the people to whom they went” and subsequently “developed them

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according to Western standards and suppositions.”⁹ Of course, this has not been true of all missionaries. The vast majority were well-intentioned, desiring only to share Jesus Christ.

As we admit the imperfect outworkings of the faith through the past centuries, we can also admit that *we* are not perfect ourselves and this is why we all need the Savior Jesus Christ. Only through Him is true transformation possible, and only through Him can we have eternal salvation.

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1. William David Spencer, personal interview with the author, 12 April 1999.
 2. Craig S. Keener and Glenn Usry, *Defending Black Faith: Answers to Tough Questions about African-American Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 13.
 3. Aida Besancon Spencer and William David Spencer, eds., *The Global God: Multicultural Evangelical Views of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 17.
 4. William David Spencer, personal interview.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Reginald Allen, “No Change for Born-Again Tommy: Yes Indeed!” *The Sunday Gleaner*, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 May 1998, sect. E.
 7. William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1999), 134.
 8. See David K. Clark and Norman L. Geisler, *Apologetics in the New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 137–38.
 9. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 9th ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 294.