

Jews and Christians

Acts 3:11-16

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

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The period between the first Easter and the first Pentecost was one of the most critical in the history of the church. It was also a period of uncertainty and confusion. When Jesus was executed, the leaders of what was left of his band of followers were faced with practical issues – What do we do? Where do we go? There were also major theological questions – Who are we in relation to other Jews? Who are we in relation to people who aren't Jews? We will consider these questions and the ramifications of the church's answers in the weeks ahead, beginning with a question that runs through the entire New Testament: How is Christianity related to Judaism? Or, more personally, how are Christians related to Jews?

Our epistle reading is Acts 3:11-16.

While (the man) clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, 'You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Benjie moved into our neighborhood when I was in high school.

Ours was a working class/middle class, mostly Protestant neighborhood – except for the Catholic Grunewalds who lived across the road. I was related to them in some complicated way that I never understood.

The boys in the neighborhood were interested in cars, sports, and girls -- not necessarily in that order. We played tackle football in our side yard every Sunday afternoon.

Benji wasn't one of the guys. He wore thick glasses, and he hiked his pants high. He sat ramrod straight on the school bus and walked that way too. He was from somewhere else, somewhere up north, I think.

I never got to know Benjie well. All I knew was that he was going to hell, which was too bad because, in spite of what I just said, he seemed like a good guy. Benji, Benjamin Hablutzel, was a Jew. And Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah. They didn't just reject him; they killed him. So, they deserved to spend eternity in hell, they and all their descendants from now until forever. That is what I was taught in the Southern

Baptist Church I grew up in. I guess that's what I believed, though even then I must have wondered what God had against Benji.

Walter Harrelson, who was dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School at the time (1999), and Rabbi Randall Falk, co-authored a book titled "Jews and Christians." The subtitle was, "A Troubled Family."

A troubled family, indeed, with a complicated, mostly depressing history. It has been so from the beginning, the very beginning, the New Testament church.

The tensions are present in the passage from the book of Acts that we just read. Peter and John had come to the temple in Jerusalem at 3:00, which the author tells us was the time for prayer. That little detail is significant because it reminds us that Peter and John were Jews. They had come to the temple to pray. The last paragraph in the preceding chapter says that the small band of believers worshipped in the temple every day. Because they were Jews.

Peter and John were interrupted by a lame man who was brought to the temple every day by friends so he could beg passersby for money. He asked Peter for money and Peter replied famously, "*Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee. In the name of Christ Jesus of Nazareth rise up and walk.*" (Peter spoke impeccably King James English.)

Peter took the man by the hand, and the man got up and walked, then he ran and jumped and danced and praised God and caused such a commotion that Peter felt it necessary to explain what happened.

"*The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors,*" Peter said, letting the people know that he, like they, was a Jew, "*has glorified his servant Jesus.*" This is a Jew speaking to Jews about the one he proclaims as the Jewish Messiah. Then he said, "*But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life.*"

In 1965 the second Vatican council rejected the idea that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, which had been standard Christian teaching for centuries and a prime justification for persecuting Jews.

But where did the idea come from?

We just read it. "*You killed the Author of life.*" "*You, you Jews, killed the Holy and Righteous One.*"

Peter had said much the same thing in his sermon on Pentecost which, according to the book of Acts (chapter 2), was the very first Christian sermon. To a crowd of Jews who were in town for the Feast of Weeks Peter said, "*This man (Jesus), handed over to you (by Judas) according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.*"

A few chapters later in the Acts, Stephen says to a crowd, which will become his executioners, "*Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.*" (Acts 7:52-53)

Matthew's Gospel has the crowd yell to Pilate, "*His blood be on us and on our children,*" (27:25) which was cited centuries later as justification for violence against Jews. After all, they asked for it, right? Incidentally, that line was deemed so offensive that Mel Gibson was forced to take it out of his movie, "The Passion of Christ." Too offensive for a Mel Gibson movie but not for some Christian churches during Holy Week.

In spite of what these scriptures clearly say, Vatican II argued reasonably, “What happened to Christ in his passion cannot be attributed to the whole people then alive, much less to those of today.” Makes sense. What Vatican II did not do was place the responsibility for the death of Jesus where it obviously belongs: Jesus was convicted in a Roman trial that was conducted by a Roman governor in accordance with Roman law, and he was executed on a Roman cross guarded by Roman soldiers. But as far as I know, there has never been a serious effort to hold all Italians responsible for the death of Jesus. (If you quote me on that, please say that I was being sardonic!)

We have to face the fact that statements in the New Testament claiming that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus have had tragic consequences throughout history. It’s not a huge step from Stephen saying that Jews murdered Jesus to Christians hundreds of years later saying that Jews were Christ-killers.

We don’t have to go back that far. John Earnest, the 19-year-old man who shot and killed one and wounded three in a synagogue in Southern California in 2019, said he did it in part because the Jews killed Jesus and he wanted to kill Jews, which stunned his church-going family and his pastor. “We can’t pretend as though we didn’t have some responsibility for him — he was radicalized into white nationalism from within the very midst of our church,” the pastor said.

What responsibility did his church have? What responsibilities do churches have? What responsibilities do we have?

Many, beginning with thinking clearly and honestly about our history, grappling with our own scriptures. Did those passages that claimed that the Jews killed Jesus surprise you? Had you ever heard them before? I think a Bible study of Jewish-Christian relations in the New Testament would be a good place to start. A companion guide might be the Jewish Annotated New Testament. It’s the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but the footnotes and 200 pages of appendices are written by Jewish scholars.

Among our other responsibilities, to teach our children respect for one of history’s great religions. To give them more factual information than many of us were given. Of course, that assumes that we have factual information to teach them.

To find ways to work cooperatively with synagogues and temples, especially in areas of peace and justice, areas in which Jews and Christians have, at least in recent decades, locked arms and walked together.

There is an iconic photograph of Martin Luther King on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. To King’s left, their arms locked at the elbow, is Rev. Ralph Abernathy. To his right, their arms also locked, is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great Jewish religious thinkers of the twentieth century.

In 2000 170 Jewish religious leaders and scholars published a document titled (in English) “Speak the Truth.” The statement said, “Jews and Christians, each in their own way, recognize the unredeemed state of the world as reflected in the persistence of persecution, poverty, and human degradation and misery. Although justice and peace are finally God’s, our joint efforts, together with those of other faith communities, will help bring the kingdom of God for which we hope and long.”

Our responsibilities also include to dig deeper into the richness of the Hebrew Bible and to find a way to see Jesus through different eyes, Jewish eyes. Since I am into recommending books, I recommend anything by Amy-Jill Levine, the Jewish New

Testament scholar at Vanderbilt University Divinity, especially her book on the Sermon on the Mount and the one about the parables, The Short Stories of Jesus.

Finally, we have the responsibility to speak up, stand up and show up against anti-Semitism, which seems to survive through the centuries like some ancient irradicable pestilence.

The Anti-Defamation League began tracking anti-Semitic hate crimes four decades ago. According to the ADL, 2020 witnessed the third highest number of anti-Semitic acts in forty years. In a study by the American Jewish Committee, 35 percent of American Jews said they had experienced anti-Semitism in the past five years.

After Charlottesville, where demonstrators marched around Congregation Beth Israel carrying flags bearing swastikas and other Nazi symbols and shouting “seig heil,” threats were made against Temple Emmanuel in Winston-Salem. A call went out for friends – non-Jews -- to come to the Temple on Friday evening and stand on the sidewalk as a buffer between congregants coming for the Shabat service and whoever might drive by with whatever malevolent intentions.

Nikki and I joined a couple dozen people, welcoming friends to the temple and waiting, anxiously I must say, for potential violence that fortunately did not come.

Later, I was asked what I would have done if people drove by throwing rocks or worse. “Got hit probably,” I said. “I’m not as quick on my feet as I used to be.”

Standing on the sidewalk, not knowing what was going to happen but knowing why we were there, why we needed to be there, it all seemed very real and very frightening. A reality our Jewish friends live with all the time at some level.

A friend who is a prominent member of the local Jewish community recently told Nikki that he had done something he never thought he would do – he bought a gun in case he needed to defend himself and his family.

A troubled family? Historically, yes. But there are plenty of signs that the broken places are being healed. There is a phrase you hear when Jews talk about their understanding of Judaism’s mission -- Tikkum olam: to repair the world. A good way to think about our task as well. Perhaps we can do it together.

May the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Ellie Wiesel and Abraham Joshua Heschel, the God of Jesus and Fannie Lou Hamer and Bishop Tutu and Mother Teresa, be with you this day and all days. Amen.