

What about the Jews?

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This is the question St. Paul addresses in Chapters 9-11 of his greatest work, his “Letter to the Romans”, a scant five verses of which we just heard. It is a crucial question for believers in Jesus to ponder, then and now. What we now call Christian-Jewish relations is Christianity’s oldest, closest, most important and historically most problematic relationship – usually to the shame of Christians. To consider this requires understanding both theology *and* history.

First, we need to understand that St. Paul himself did not think of himself as having “converted to Christianity.” Paul believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who he – and his fellow Jews – had been anticipating would come. Neither he (nor, let us remember, *anybody* else) had expected that God’s Messiah would die a shameful death on a cross at the hands of the Romans after being rejected by the great majority of the official leadership of his own people. (Even the original apostles, to whom Jesus predicted his death and resurrection three times, felt “blind-sided” by these developments.) Neither Paul (nor *anybody* else) had expected the Messiah to rise again to new and awesomely greater life three days after his ignominious death. Neither Paul (nor *anybody* else) had expected that the long-promised Messiah would in fact be God incarnate as a human being. And finally, neither Paul (nor *anybody* else) had expected God’s Messiah to open the doors to membership in the family of God to the millions of Gentiles who had never observed God’s holy laws, read his scriptures or had any previous relationship with God at all if they simply turned their lives toward God by a statement of faith.

Paul himself originally believed that those who followed Jesus were dangerous subversives who were perverting the traditional teachings of Judaism and *trying to change Judaism* – not replace it. After his visionary experience of Jesus while on the road to Damascus, Paul did a 180 degree turn in his attitude toward Jesus – but he continued to understand himself to be a Jew. He spent enormous effort trying to persuade his fellow Jews to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and at the same time persuade his fellow Jewish believers in Jesus (who included, remember, *all* the apostles) to let Gentiles be converted to belief in Jesus and membership in the Church without requiring them to obey Jewish dietary and ceremonial laws.

This was indeed radical. If the followers of Jesus had been successful in their initial attempt to persuade a majority of their fellow Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, had risen from the dead, was God incarnate and wanted the Gentiles converted and welcomed on an equal footing – if all that had become mainstream Jewish belief – it would have been the most radical change in the faith of Israel at least since Moses, if not since it all began with Abraham.

And, paradoxically, as Paul anticipated, if belief in Jesus as Savior had become the belief of a majority of *Jews*, the majority of believers in Jesus probably would have continued to be Jewish – and the effort to “convert the world” would have failed. Only when what started as a radical movement within Judaism was rejected by a majority of Jews did the movement itself fully embrace the mission to the Gentiles – so much so that the Church, once 99% Jewish, became overwhelmingly Gentile within two generations and became clearly identified as a separate faith by the end of what we call the First Century.

At the same time, Paul expresses what he calls his “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart” for *his people*, his fellow Jews. He uses the strongest possible terms for this: if it would bring *them closer* to Christ, he wished that he *himself* “were accursed and cut off from Christ” – so much does he long for his fellow Jews to know the Lord. He was willing to “cash in” his own salvation if that would help! But as he goes on to say later in these chapters, the rejection of Jesus, the Jew of Nazareth, by so many of his fellow Jews had made possible the *inclusion* of the Gentiles, who were the ones who responded most to the evangelistic preaching of Paul and the other apostles.

So there we have the paradox of God’s providence: what looked like a defeat for the spread of the Gospel – its rejection by a majority of Jews – is actually a victory, for it strengthened the position of those (like Paul) who wanted the Church to grow by converting anyone from any background or nation who wanted to become a follower of Jesus.

We always need to keep in mind that it takes faith to become a Christian no matter what one’s background, and while many Christians today may think it’s obvious that Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures, it is *believable*, but *not* obvious. If it was obvious, like the results of a proof in geometry, it wouldn’t take faith! We should try to inspire and persuade others to know Christ but never condemn them as stupid or stubborn if they don’t accept him as Lord and Savior. And a particular logical consequence of Paul’s argument is that Christians should never persecute Jews, since only Jewish refusal to join in following Jesus spurred the Church toward the incredibly successful mission to the Gentiles. And the latter is why all of us are here in church at all.

Alas, people are often not logical, and that, combined with ignorance of Scripture, lack of appreciation for Judaism’s indispensable role in the history of salvation, plain sinfulness and bigotry and the intoxicating effect of wielding earthly power all combined to make religiously-motivated anti-Semitism an almost uniquely Christian sin. It may surprise people whose understanding of Jewish-Muslim relationships is based just on the last 60 years of history in the Middle East, but until the middle of the 20th Century, Jews were almost invariably *safer* and more tolerated in Muslim countries than in majority Christian countries.

Anti-Semitism came to its most horrifying climax at the hands of the Nazis – nearly every one a baptized Christian – from 1933-45, but Hitler reaped his horrific harvest of hate in fields which had been sowed with hatred by Christians for hundreds of years.

Jews were restricted and more or less systematically persecuted all across Christian Europe until relatively recent times. All Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and were not permitted to live in England again until the mid-1600's, under Oliver Cromwell. So when Shakespeare wrote "The Merchant of Venice," neither he nor any other English person had ever actually met a Jew on English soil – which didn't stop centuries of handed-down stereotypes and prejudices from shaping attitudes.

There were massive expulsions of Jews from France in 1306, from Germany in 1348, Austria in 1421, Lithuania in 1495, Portugal in 1497 and, most famously, Spain in 1492. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella's *main* project that historic year was to make Spain "exclusively Christian," which they aimed to do first by conquering the last Muslim country on the Iberian peninsula (Granada) and then by requiring Spanish Jews – who were 10% of the population and had lived there since the days of the Roman Empire – to be forcibly converted to Christianity or leave the country. Those who stayed and accepted baptism were subsequently worked over by the notorious Spanish Inquisition to see if their conversions were genuine. Those expelled from the aforementioned countries went primarily to Poland (where they thrived despite often bloody persecution), to Italy, to the Netherlands and especially to Muslim countries around the Mediterranean.

Jews only experienced full civil equality under the law in many countries *centuries* later: in 1790 in revolutionary France, 1796 in Holland but not until 1870 in Italy, 1871 in Germany, 1890 in Great Britain and 1917 in Russia. Before 1871, for example, Jews were prohibited from going to college in Great Britain, and legal restrictions on where Jews could live, what professions they could pursue, whether or not they could own land and what, if any, citizenship rights they had were commonplace in Europe.

And over all hung the specter of mob violence, often sanctioned and encouraged by governments – "pogroms" in which Jewish homes and sometimes entire villages were burned and their inhabitants murdered. (Anybody see the show or movie "Fiddler on the Roof"?) Lest anyone miss my point, the most popular time of the year for pogroms was Holy Week, especially right after Palm Sunday services, when Jews were usually portrayed (in sermons and in Passion Plays) as the ones who were collectively responsible for the torture and crucifixion of Christ – *a position which was not changed by the Roman Catholic Church until the early 1960's* during Vatican II. There are Jews still living today who remember spending Holy Week hiding in basements, fearing for their lives. One such survivor is Nobel Prize winner Eli Wiesel who, before he survived Auschwitz, had to survive his Christian neighbors.

Much has been done in recent years by Christians to lay bare this truly pathological behavior by Christians against the blood relatives of our Lord and Savior, and I credit the late, great Pope John Paul II especially for his considerable efforts to face history and change the attitudes of his Church and of Christians generally.

So where are we now? I began by reminding us that it takes faith to accept Christ, and faith cannot be forced – on anybody. Believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and lord takes profound and ongoing commitment and recommitment, and we need to recommit ourselves and enliven uncommitted Christians-in-name-only before we spend energy wondering why "the Jews" have not accepted Jesus. In any case, there is a huge weight

of historical pain which blocks any systematic Christian effort to evangelize Jews. Let us remember, too, that Jesus, Mary, Joseph and all the apostles were Jews, and we should respect and honor Jews today as their kin as well as on their own merits. Paul, too, reminds us of the paradox that Jewish rejection of the Gospel made the success of the evangelization of the Gentiles both possible and necessary. Finally, it is clear that the Jews are part of God's plan for the world – not just historically but *now*. They are still keeping a covenant with God which has never been repealed and has been sanctified further through 4,000 years of faithfulness under extraordinary circumstances. While we as Christians declare that the fullness of God's will for the world is revealed in Jesus Christ, God's revelation to the world through the people of Israel continues, and I am sure that God will take care of *all* of his Chosen People, in God's good time and in accordance with God's grace and love.

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