

So-Called “Christian Anti-Semitism” by Rev. Fred Klett

Some Jewish leaders today are recognizing that the best friends the Jewish people have are the conservative evangelical Christians. Admittedly, some see Israel in prophetic terms, but this is not the primary reason for sympathy toward the Jewish people. It is rather because they take their Bibles seriously, read about the history of Israel, realize that Jesus is Jewish, and also have a biblically rooted sense of justice. All that being said, there has been a sad history, within European “Christendom” of mistreatment of the Jewish people. (Though, thankfully, there have been some bright spots, such as Bernard of Clairveaux, who protected Jews during the Crusades.)

The average seminary graduate knows much less than the average Jewish person about the unfortunate history of Christian-Jewish relations. Few church members know about the persecution the Jewish people have suffered at the hands of professing Christians. The bloody history of “Christian” persecution of the Jewish people and forced conversion to Christianity continued for centuries, but few Christians today know anything of this lamentable history. Beyond question, such treatment of Jewish people is completely contrary to anything Jesus taught! Some would say “No true Christian did such things!” However, that is too simplistic an approach. In fact, even true believers can and do sin. King David was a “true Jew” and a prime example of a man after the heart of God, yet David sinned terribly, committing, covetousness, adultery and murder. True believers have fallen into sin, in spite of it being in contradiction with their faith.

During the first three centuries of the church Judaism and Christianity competed for the pagan mind. There was an active polemical debate between Christians and Jews, but it was on a theological level. Tertullian’s apologetic work, *Adversus Judaeos*, was an intellectual refutation of Jewish arguments against Christianity, but written with no anger or hatred. Flannery calls the works of this period “moderate” in their “general attitude toward Judaism” and that their “condemnations are usually tempered with a note of sadness and hope for reunion.”¹ Flannery says the fourth century brought a turn for the worse.

Augustine started the idea of the Jewish people as a “witness people,” that is, whatever happens to them demonstrates God’s blessing or judgement. Though he would have not approved, this idea served in later centuries as a rationale for persecution of the Jews. Augustine also said Judas is the picture of the Jewish people. The Jews are destined to be slaves, yet we should love them and lead them to Christ. He advocated preaching to the Jews with a spirit of love.

Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin, wrote that the Jews are the image of Judas and haters of all men.

John Chrysostom wrote that the Jews are “most miserable of all men” (Homily 4:1), Jews are to live “under the yoke of servitude without end” (Homily 6:2) and that God hates the Jews and has always hated the Jews. He also said, “He who can never love Christ enough will never have done fighting against those [Jews] who hate Him” (Homily 7:1). Jews are “lustful, rapacious, greedy, perfidious bandits....inveterate murderers, destroyers, men possessed by the devil” whom

¹ Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, ©1985, Paulist Press, page 41.

“debauchery and drunkenness have given them the manners of the pig and the lusty goat.”²

Gregory of Nissa (331-96) said the Jews are “slayers of the Lord, murderers of the prophets, enemies of God, haters of God, adversaries of grace, enemies of their father’s faith, advocates of the devil, brood of vipers, slanderers, scoffers, men of darkened minds, leaven of the Pharisees, congregation of demons, sinners, wicked men, stoners, and haters of goodness.”³

The Seventh Council of Toledo (694) ordered all Jewish children above the age of seven to be taken from their parents by force and raised as Christians.

The Crusades began a new wave of persecution in the name of Christ. Jews were murdered by the thousands in the name of Christ.

According to Flannery, from January to July of 1096 1/4-1/3 of the Jewish population of Germany and northern France were massacred.⁴ Charges of ritual murder and "desecration of the host" were used to justify the slaughter of Jewish people in hundreds of incidents.

In 1298 100,000 Jews were killed because of this charge. The Yellow identifying badge we associate with the Nazi era began in thirteenth century France.

Forced attendance at sermons became more frequent in the 13th century and was even taken up by some Protestant reformers.

In 14th century Spain 50,000 Jews were killed by a mob inspired by Martinez, Archdeacon of Seville. During the Spanish Inquisition, Isabella expelled Jews from Spain along with the Church. In Portugal during the Inquisition all Jewish children were ordered baptized and taken from their parents. Many Christians were so appalled by this that they came to the aid of the Jews. (Flannery, pages 90-141, passim)

The Pogroms sanctioned by the Russian Orthodox Church, persecuted and uprooted whole Jewish villages.

Lest Protestants think themselves beyond reproach, consider the words of Martin Luther: "What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews?...First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or a cinder of them...Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed...Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn like the Gypsies...Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them. Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth

² Flannery pages 50-51

³ Flannery, page 50.

⁴ Flannery, p. 92

on pain of loss of life and limb...Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews...Sixth, I advise that lending money at a high rate of interest be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. The reason for such a measure is that...they have no other means of earning a livelihood than usury, and by it they have stolen and robbed from us all they possess... I wish and I ask that our rulers who have Jewish subjects exercise a sharp mercy toward these wretched people, as suggested above, to see whether this might not help (though it is doubtful). They must act like a good physician who, when gangrene has set in, proceeds without mercy to cut, saw, burn flesh, veins, bone and marrow. Such a procedure must also be followed in this instance. Burn down their synagogues, forbid all that I enumerated earlier, force them to work, and deal harshly with them,, as Moses did in the wilderness, slaying three thousand lest the whole people perish!"⁵ Luther was responding to a medieval Jewish fiction called *On the Generations of Jesus*, a horribly blasphemous work, but I do not think we can excuse him. Luther, like King David, fell into sin. The statements of Luther were used by Nazis to justify the Holocaust during the Nuremberg trials.⁶ Thankfully, Lutheran denominations have emphatically and officially renounced Luther's statement!

Though Calvin was generally very positive in his views of the Jewish people (see quotations on this web site), even Calvin, says J. Verkuyl in *Contemporary Missiology* (alluding to a study by a Dutch pastor) "could at times revert to a medieval penchant for abusive name-calling. His description of Jews was shameful." (p. 126) Historically, however, countries and churches influenced by Calvin have had a positive history in terms of Jewish-Christian relations.

Clearly, anti-Semitism on the part of professing Christians has contributed to the difficulty we have in sharing the good news of salvation with the Jewish people. Almost every week Jewish news outlets have at least one article mentioning anti-Semitic remarks or actions associated with those perceived as Christians by the Jewish community.

White supremacist groups often characterize themselves as "Christian." Most Jewish people can relate an incident when they were slapped, insulted or ridiculed because they "killed Christ." My brother's Jewish boss had his driveway spray painted on Easter with the words: "You Jews Killed Christ." I have even heard some pastors and seminarians in ignorance use racial stereotypes in describing the Jews, describing Jews as rich and shrewd, and using expressions such as "Jewing down the price." Remember Bailey Smith's insensitive remark to the effect that God does not hear the prayers of a Jew?

"Christian Anti-Semitism" is an absolute oxymoron. A Christian is someone who worships and serves the King of the Jews! Christian means "follower of Messiah" --the *Jewish* Messiah! To the extent that we fail to radically purge anti-Semitism --and all forms of racism-- from the church we fail to follow our Savior. We all long to see progress of the gospel in the world, but such progress will be delayed and hindered if we fail to radically expunge this sort of thing from our midst.

⁵ Martin Luther, On the Jews and their Lies, Luther's Works volume 47, pages 268-272.

⁶ see David A. Rausch, A Legacy of Hatred, pages 28-29, Moody Press, Chicago