

The Return of Christianity to Its Jewish Roots

For the first time in almost 2,000 years, Jews and Christians are learning how to be friends and relate to one another with respect and appreciation. To fully understand how new and how delicate this relationship is, we must know our history and what has brought us to this moment.

If charted out graphically, the history of Jewish-Christian relations would look more like a circle that is about to be completed but still has an open gap. The beginning of the circle some 2,000 years ago is from the time of Acts 2 when the early church was born and was an internal sect of the Jewish faith.

The various stages of the relationship included a separation into two totally separate faiths who then became enemies. Over the last 500 years the trajectory began to change, and the circle began to close as a large segment of Christianity returned to its biblical foundations. While we have made tremendous progress in mending the breach that was our history, we still have a way to go before it can be described as repaired.

Early Jewish Christianity Becomes Increasingly Gentile

Today, most Christians understand Jesus was Jewish, as were His disciples, the apostles and even all Christianity. This is where the early church and our journey begins. All that we hold dear as Christians came through the Jewish people, and the better we understand the Jewish roots of our faith, the stronger our Christian faith becomes.

The early Christian movement—known as “The Way”—was entirely Jewish for almost 10 years after the Resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The book of Acts chronicles early tensions

between the mainstream Jewish community and the early believers in Jesus. In fact, there were times when Jews persecuted the apostles for preaching Jesus. For example, Steven was stoned to death, and when a Jewish mob sought to kill Paul, the Romans put him into custody in Caesarea to save his life. But at this point, these were internal squabbles within Judaism.

Within a few years, gentiles began to join the early church, and tensions surfaced within the movement itself—between the Jewish believers in Jesus and the gentile converts coming in from the pagan, Roman society. Many of Paul's epistles address matters of disagreement between these different groups inside the early church.

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire it endured periods of intense persecution. As long as it had been a sect of the legal Jewish religion, the believers were safe. But this became impossible as the two faiths developed quite separately from the other. Christians were not just persecuted by zealous Jews but also the Roman authorities.

In addition to an ideological separation, the two faiths also became separated geographically. After Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, the headquarters for the Jewish faith moved north into the Galilee at Yavne; Jewish leaders began to look inward as they focused on the survival of Judaism while in exile and without a temple. The headquarters for the Christian faith began to develop in Alexandria, Antioch and Rome, where churches and their leadership were quickly becoming less Jewish and predominantly gentile.

Christianity Severed from Its Roots

Once the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in A.D. 312, everything changed for Christians. The once persecuted faith became the official state religion. The

church now had political power and lost its spiritual purity over time.

Early church fathers took advantage of their power and began to preach against the Jewish religion. It was time to get back at the Jews for their rejection of this new faith and draw a clear line of distinction between the two religions. This line of demarcation actually severed the Christian faith from its Jewish roots.

The apostle Paul had warned against this very thing in Romans chapters 9-11. He admonished the believers in Rome to guard against arrogance and honor the Jewish roots of their faith. He likened the relationship to a tree of faith that Christians had been grafted into as wild olive branches. Christians were to be mindful that they were merely branches and it was the root supporting and nourishing them. If only the early church fathers had heeded Paul's warning.

Over the centuries the sermons against Judaism developed into antisemitism that condoned maltreatment of the Jewish people as "Christ-killers." Because of the political power of the state church, antisemitism produced centuries of anti-Jewish legislation, persecution, ghettos and even expulsions. The Jews were often forced out of one country into another, only to be later expelled from there as well—often by a king who was also the head of the state church.

Christianity Begins to Find Its Roots

The very thing that brought about a major change and began the closing of our circle of history was also strongly resisted by these same state churches—the translation of the Bible into the common languages. William Tyndale was executed for his English translation, which was then adopted by the church of England several months after his death at the stake.

Once the people could read the Bible for themselves, not only did the church lose its control over them, but they discovered

the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. They learned that Jesus was Jewish, and they found the Bible was full of prophecies that one day the Jewish people would return to their ancient homeland. They began to pray for that return, and a whole movement of Protestants in Britain became known as Restorationists because of their expectation of the restoration of the Jewish people to their land.

Numerous preachers taught about this future restoration of Israel, and over the years several key individuals were involved in that return. A few examples are Rev. Hechler, who befriended and assisted Theodore Herzl; Lord Balfour, who penned the Balfour Declaration; Prime Minister Lloyd George, who was in office at the time of Balfour; General Orde Wingate, who trained the Jewish troops in Palestine; and many others.

While Christianity was making this tremendous and slow turnaround, Jew-hatred developed from an entirely different place: the Nazi movement in Germany. While Nazism had its own strange beliefs opposed to Christianity, Hitler knew how to silence the church in Germany: by distributing their anti-Semitic teachings to justify his plan of a final solution.

The Jews had already started returning to their homeland, and Christianity itself was finding its ancient biblical roots, but not quickly enough. Six million Jews died in the Holocaust, and centuries of Christian antisemitism had made it possible.

Thankfully, the story does not end with the Holocaust, and much has happened since then to mend this breach between Jews and Christians. We will discuss this great turnaround in Part 2 of this series on *Jews and Christians Learning to Relate*.

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