

Any law enforcement office will tell you that a policeman would rather try to stop a bank robbery than to intervene in a domestic argument. More people are murdered by relatives than by strangers. Family feuds are the worst fights.

Jesus tells (Luke 15) of a family feud in which an older brother and a younger brother contend with one another for their father's love. The younger one left home and wasted his inheritance in prodigality. When the boy returned, his father welcomed him, but not his older brother who pouted bitterly in the darkness and refused to go to his homecoming celebration.

Often when we read the New Testament, we are listening in on a family feud that has lasted centuries, a feud in which there has been little fun and much bitterness, even bloodshed—a family feud between Christian and Jews.

“Will the Jews be saved?” That question is sometimes asked in the church and may be of interest to us but it is of little interest to the New Testament. The question of the status of the Jews had already been answered by Scripture beginning with the promises to Abraham and Sarah, reiterated to Jacob, made manifest to Moses and the children of Israel in the Exodus, and the birth of Joshua (Jesus) at Bethlehem. As Paul says in Romans, “Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs...”(15:8).

The New Testament question, is: Will the Gentiles be saved?” In what way is the good news of the Jew, Jesus, addressed to his fellow Jews, our good news? How do we stand in relation to the people who first taught us to look for a Messiah?

The gospel which first enabled Jews to welcome Gentiles became perverted into the separation of Gentile from Jew. By crusader's sword, Hitler's ovens, or even Christian evangelism, the once persecuted church became the persecutor of Jesus' own people. Our infidelity, our perversion of the Gospel, transformed the cross of Christ from a symbol of salvation to the symbol of oppression and death for millions. It is a bitter irony that the instrument used for the torture and death of Jesus (not the first and, alas, not the last Jewish martyr) has been perverted into a sword of oppression for Jesus' kinfolk.

The presence of the Jews poses a stark and threatening question to us Christians: We look back upon the centuries of Christian cruelty to the Jews and wonder why our gospel failed to give more of us the resources rightly to live with, defend, and even to die for the brothers and sisters whom our Lord dies to save. Under the Nazis, some Christians risked their lives to help Jews. Why weren't there more Christian families who supported their Jewish kinfolk in their time of trial?

This does not deny that we Christians really do have differences with the Jews. The church is not the replacement for Israel. The Jews look at Jesus and do not see what we see. Rather, the Jew still asks us Christians, “If Jesus is the Redeemer, why doesn't the world look more redeemed?” It is a tough question. We must not answer it in ways which forsake the religion of Jesus—with hatred, violence, or resentment.

We must answer it in the way that Jesus answered: by living lives which do not blatantly contradict the truth of which we speak.

If I am to welcome the Jew, I must welcome the Jew as a Jew, in all his or her difference and he or she must welcome me in the same way. We cannot render up our belief in Jesus as the Christ as a sort of guilt payment for our past sins against the Jews. That solves nothing.

The way for Christian and Jew to live together is for us both to be more faithful to our beliefs. The more we Christians come to see our Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, the more keenly we feel the unmerited quality of our amazing inclusion into those promises, the more quickly will be healed the tragic separation within the Family of God. The only way I can be hospitable to any stranger is constantly to be reminded that I was a stranger, I was out in the cold, I was taken in even when I didn't deserve to be.

Luke told a story about a troubled family in which a younger son, after a lurid sojourn, returned home in rags and smelling of the cheap perfume of harlots. The waiting father received him with joy (Luke 15:1-32). A party began. But the older brother—the one who never left home, who remained in the field, faithfully working for the father—refused to go to the party. The father came out in the darkness and pleaded with the brother to come in, but to no avail.

In our day, the story has taken a sad and unexpected turn. The younger brother soon lost his repentant, contrite spirit. The shock of his father's gracious reception wore off. He came to resent his older brother's failure to join the party at his homecoming. He even resorted to locking the brother out of the house. He bolted the door and the party which had been a celebration for the reception of a stranger became the victory bash of the arrogant usurper.

But outside in the December darkness stood the Father where he had left him out in the darkness, standing where he had always been, beside the older brother.

In locking out his brother, he had the whole house to himself but, alas, he had locked out his loving father as well.

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