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No simple solution to uneven relations between Christians and Jews

Bill Tammeus | Aug. 6, 2014 A small c catholic

Catholics and Presbyterians have had terribly uneven relations over the years with our Jewish sisters and brothers.

In fact, as an essay I've posted on my "Faith Matters" blog [1] notes, for most of its history, Christianity has considered the Jews pestilent Christ-killers who have earned God's wrath by not affirming that Jesus of Nazareth is their longed-for Messiah.

It took the Catholic church until the 1965 publication of the Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate* [2] to acknowledge officially that Jews should not be held individually or collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

Since then, both Catholics and Presbyterians (and, of course, members of some other branches of the faith) have worked to improve relations with Jews.

One product of the Catholic-Jewish work that has emerged from this is the 2011 book *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* [3], written and edited by a group of scholars. It's a fascinating read.

On the Presbyterian side, members of my denomination have worked closely with Jews on many projects, including ways to support Israel. In fact, because we Presbyterians want members of local congregations to be engaged in this relationship, we put on our denomination's website a document called "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews [4]." The website also offers a running account [5] of PCUSA stands on Holy Land matters.

Given all that, what are we to make of the Jews who've been lambasting Presbyterians in recent years? Well, the current trouble started in 2004, when our national governing body, the General Assembly, began a move to divest from companies doing business in Israel and profiting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- not a wildly unreasonable thing to consider.

This move seemed to come with no prior consultation with the Jewish community, which expressed shock and outrage -- not so much over the idea of selling stock in a handful of companies but because the move came without warning. Indeed, it was a terrible way to treat long-valued partners.

This conflict bubbled along in various ways until earlier this year, when the Israel/Palestine Mission Network, which the General Assembly created a few years ago to study these issues and report to the denomination, issued a report called "Zionism Unsettled [6]." It concluded that the primary problem in the Middle East is Zionism itself. Jews were almost unanimous in denouncing it as a radically biased work that blamed Israel for almost all the suffering of the Palestinian people -- suffering that I believe is both real and unnecessary.

But when the General Assembly met this summer, it wisely declared that the report "does not represent the

views of the Presbyterian Church (USA)" and the denomination quit selling it on its website. Nonetheless, a resolution favoring divestment passed by a narrow margin. And, again, Jews in the U.S. and abroad have been complaining, though sometimes without reading through the full list of what the denomination said in this action, such as the PCUSA reaffirming Israel's right to exist and the denomination's commitment to a two-state solution.

So much like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a subset of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Presbyterian-Jewish conflict gets more entangled and less easy to solve. Part of the reason is that it involves both theology and geopolitics, disciplines that don't lend themselves to simple solutions.

I have no easy solution to offer. Still, any solutions require careful self-examination. When that reveals that we have injured the other party, we must apologize and atone. We Presbyterians should begin that internal work immediately, all the while reaffirming our mandate to speak with a prophetic voice when we see injustice. And no doubt there is room for Catholics, Jews and Muslims to do similar Ignatian-like examinations.

What I'm proposing is nothing new, however rarely it's used. Christians propose the same thing every time they sing, "Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me."

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and award-winning former faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [7] for the *Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book is *Woodstock: A Story of Middle Americans* [8]. Email him at wtammeus@gmail.com [9].]

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