

## **Jesus and the Failures of the Church: Responding to the Church’s Historical Legacy**

One only has to take a brief look through history to see it is sadly full of many examples of the Church, or people bearing the name “Christian”, behaving badly. This historical legacy is a massive stumbling block for many, especially younger generations who are very attuned to the issue of historical injustices. In this session, we’ll take a very honest look at the legacy of the Church—and explore how we can sensitively respond to people for whom this is a major issue preventing them considering Jesus.

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### **I. Introduction**

- A. The problem—the example of the Crusades.

*Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. Men rode in blood up to their knees. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers. This day will be famous through all future generations, for it turned our labours and sorrows into joy and exultation. This day, I say, marks the justification of all Christianity.*  
(Raymond of Aguilers)

### **II. The Ongoing Problem of Religious Violence**

- A. The failure of (some of) the Church in Nazi Germany.
- B. Northern Ireland in the UK and the sectarian violence of “The Troubles”.
- C. How did the message of Jesus *ever* come to be associated with hatred, with violence, with a sword, or a gun, or a bomb.

### **III. The Radical Message of Jesus**

- A. No other figure in history was so critical about the use of violence in the name of religion.
  - 1. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44)
  - 2. “If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek” (Luke 6:29)

B. For the first 300 years of its existence, the early Christians lived up to this teaching remarkably well.

1. (Even more remarkable given the persecution inflicted by the Romans)
2. For example, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (d. early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD), whilst on his way to be executed in Rome, wrote a letter to Christians in the Roman colony of Ephesus, in which he said:

*In response to their anger, be gentle; in response to their boasts, be humble; and in response to their cruelty, be civilised. Do not be eager to imitate them. Let us show by our gracious forbearance that we are their brothers and sisters. Let us be eager to be imitators of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>*

C. Down through the ages, many Christians have followed their example.

1. Martin Luther King Junior

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today! One day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!*

2. In that famous speech, King quoted the Bible many times. King's Christian faith shaped his whole approach to justice, especially his commitment to non-violence.

#### **IV. The Impact of Missionaries**

- A. Lots of myths about their negative impact on traditional societies. But those myths are wrong.
- B. Sociologist Robert Woodberry's 2010 study of the impact of those missionaries who preached for conversion:

*Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* (circa AD107).

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Andrea Palpant Dilley, 'The World the Missionaries Made, *Christianity Today* (8 January 2014) <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/world-missionaries-made.html>.

- C. Furthermore, in places where “conversionary Protestants” were active in the past, you will typically find more printed books and more schools. Whilst, in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia, most of those leaders who successfully led their countries to independence had graduated from Protestant mission schools.

## V. So How Do We Judge?

- A. As we look back through history, the Church has a mixed record—terrible atrocities and failures, but then tremendous impact and a huge force for good. How do we judge?
- B. The analogy of music—how do you judge the quality of a piece of music?
- C. Can only truly assess the Church when we ask what happens when it “plays the music of Jesus well”. We need to look to the *authentic* performances.

## VI. Avoiding the Trap of Performance Based Ethics?

- A. Yet there is still a problem, because if we are not careful, this answer suggests that Christianity is just a code of ethics.
- B. But the problem is we struggle to live up to ethics.
- C. Human beings have a terrible tendency to exclude others and a nasty habit of co-opting religion, politics and even ethics itself into this.
- D. And if we think that we are holier, or cleverer, or more rational, or nicer, or more moral than others, we are especially dangerous, as we tend to oppress those who don’t measure up.
- E. What we need is a basis for *humility*: something that undercuts our tendency to think too well of ourselves and to look down on others.
- F. The radical message of Jesus gives us the best basis for humility as it cuts us down to size.

### 1. Corrie ten Boom:

*“It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blanced face.*

*He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message, Fräulein”, he said. “To think that, as you say, Jesus has washed my sins away!”*

*His hand was thrust out to shake mine. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your Forgiveness."*

*As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.*

*And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on Christ's."<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Corrie Ten Boom, *No Hiding Place* (London : Hodder & Stoughton, 2004[1972]) pp220-221.