

# Confronting Anti-Semitism: What Would Jesus Do?

*by Patrick Dankwa John*

October 27, 2019 marked the one year anniversary of the October 27, 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. On April 27, 2019, there was another synagogue shooting in the San Diego area. The shooting in San Diego was done by John Earnest, a devout, church-going Christian. The response of the Christian Church, as an institution, to anti-Semitism, has been tepid and half-hearted.

Even the anti-Semitic shooting spree of a devout Christian, John Earnest, has done little to awaken the Church to its institutional bigotry. Earnest belongs to a denomination called Orthodox Presbyterian Churches of America (OPC) and many other churches, have of course condemned Earnest. But they've done nothing to actively dismantle the anti-Semitism that's part of church culture. Even now, a visit to the website of OPC, and Earnest's local congregation, Escondido Orthodox Presbyterian Church, finds not one word about bigotry or anti-Semitism.

Wonder what Jesus would have to say about the Church's lackluster response to anti-Semitism? Well, we don't have to wonder too much, because Jesus actually did confront religious intolerance among his own hand-chosen Disciples. Jesus didn't condone religious intolerance and neither should we. There are at least three instances in the New Testament where Jesus addressed the issue of religious tolerance directly.

The first story is found at Matt 10:14. Jesus tells the Disciples that if they're rejected at one home, they should simply move on to another home. What's interesting in this first story is what Jesus does not tell them to do. He does not tell them to pray that those who reject them will change their minds. He does not tell them to force their view on others. He does not tell them to revisit the homes of those who reject them and try to wear people down with kindness. Rather, Jesus just tells them to share the message and then get lost.

GET LOST. This is so different from many in mainstream Christianity, who are very concerned with "winning souls for the Kingdom." Interesting language. If the goal is to "win souls," then does that mean if we fail to convert someone we are "losers"? No one wants to be a loser. The very language shows mainstream Christianity has departed from what Jesus taught. Jesus told us to make sure everyone hears the message, then make ourselves scarce.

Mainstream Christianity often views the mission of spreading the gospel to include a duty not just to communicate the gospel, but to "win souls." In other words, many of us believe it's our job to get people to believe our message, to change their minds. In this way, evangelism gets reduced to salesmanship. The goal isn't just to share the message but to convert people, often by force if necessary. Because, after all, nothing is more important than saving peoples' immortal souls. Anything done to win souls is justified, including beating them, enslaving them, stealing their property, and colonizing their country.

Lest you think the days of Christian colonization are over, consider that in 2019, the African Union's ambassador to the U.N., Dr. Arikana Chihombori-Quoa, was fired for speaking bluntly about how France (a White Christian nation) continues to oppress its former African colonies. France feels entitled to take resources from Africa on France's unilateral terms because France brought "Christian civilization" to the Africans.

Consider also that in America, Donald Trump's most blindly loyal fan base is White Evangelical Christians. That alone speaks volumes about how entrenched bigotry is within the White Church.

In recent years, I have noticed a much more subtle form of coercion that's easy to miss. There are some Christian organizations that provide charity, like feeding the hungry. Some such organizations make it a point not to feed anyone unless and until the hungry person first attends a sermon or listens to a Christian "witnessing" to them. "Witnessing" is essentially the word mainstream Christianity uses to describe our theological sales pitch. So we would have food, but let people starve if they don't agree to first sit still and listen to our infomercial. Reminds me of those time-share presentations where you get a voucher for a vacation deal, but you have to sit through the entire presentation first. I can't imagine Jesus approving such tactics.

The second story is found at Mark 9:38-41. In the second story, the Disciples tell Jesus they made a man stop performing miracles. The Disciples told Jesus they did this because the man was not part of Jesus' clique, and Jesus hadn't authorized anyone but the Disciples to perform miracles. Allow me to take some literary license here, as I create some Christian midrash. I can't imagine why someone would feel obliged to stop performing miracles at the insistence of the Disciples. The Disciples, after all, were not part of the political or religious establishment at the time.

So why would anyone, especially their religious competition, obey them? Here's my Christian midrash: I think the Disciples either physically assaulted the man, or at the very least, threatened to. What I find puzzling here is the Disciples presumably thought Jesus wanted them to stop the man from performing miracles, in order to protect Jesus' turf. Why else would they report the story to Jesus at all, and so proudly?

Rather than the high-five they were undoubtedly expecting, the Disciples got a scolding. Jesus told them that whoever isn't against them, is for them, and they should leave other people alone. Now here is (for us Christians) God in the flesh, telling the Disciples to leave the competition alone; don't bother them. Yet many Christians, in our zeal to "win souls," view sharing our faith as some type of competition that we are obligated to win, and win at all costs. We focus more on swelling our ranks than following the teachings of Jesus, who told us the world will know we're his Disciples because we love people. All people. Love for all humanity is supposed to be our most distinguishing feature.

Jesus told us to love everyone—even our enemies. He never told us to force ourselves on others, or to gently badger them into submission, or to withhold food from the hungry unless they listened to our message. We Christians came up with these schemes all on our own. That's what salesmen do—they come up with schemes to increase sales. Their primary concern isn't to do good, it's to make their quota.

The third story is found at Luke 9:51-56. In the third story, the Disciples display homicidal tendencies. Jesus and the Disciples are soundly rejected by an entire village. The Disciples tell Jesus they should kill all the village residents by burning them alive. Jesus, of course, did no such thing. He told the Disciples he came to save lives, not to take them. This is an amazing story. Jesus' handpicked inner circle got so angry at those they couldn't convert that they wanted to kill them. We know that unfortunately, subsequent generations of Christians did just that. We killed people whose only crime was rejecting our religious views. Clearly, this is not something Jesus would sanction.

What do these ancient stories teach us about how Christians should view our duty to fight anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry today? These stories remind us that while Jesus taught religious tolerance, we, his followers, have a history of intolerance and extremism that goes back to the earliest days of our faith. Even after two mass shootings at synagogues on American soil, the Church is still sheepish in dismantling anti-Semitism. If innocent people being shot doesn't move the Church to bold action, then what will? We don't like to be reminded of these stories, but clearly, we need to be. Pastors all over America should be preaching about how Jesus had to rein in his own Disciples. We should hold these stories up as spiritual mirrors for Christians. That's what the stories are there for—to teach us about ourselves. But rather than learn from these stories and speak out boldly against bigotry, most of us offer only press releases and sound bites condemning bigotry. Then we go back to business as usual. Back to ignoring that Martin Luther (despite his fame for exposing corruption in the Catholic Church) was such a rabid anti-Semite that his book, "On the Jews and Their Lies" would make even a Nazi blush. Back to calling the last meal Jesus had with the Disciples, "the Last Supper," and deliberately refusing to call it what it really was—a Passover seder. Back to projecting Jesus as a White European, though he was a dark-skinned Middle Eastern man of color. Back to being unconcerned that Sunday is still the most racially segregated day of the week in America. Back to not teaching our congregations about the Jewish holidays that Jesus actually celebrated, among them, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, and Sukkot. Back to not teaching our congregations about the existence of the Oral Torah. Back to ignoring the reality that most Biblical characters were in fact Jewish. Back to being intentionally deaf, dumb, and blind to the bigotry all around us. Back to putting salesmanship over discipleship. Back to pretending we care more about loving people than about controlling them.

*Patrick Dankwa John is president of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers. He is DSL's first Black and first Christian president. He's originally from Guyana, South America—a place of kaleidoscopic racial and religious diversity. He's a general practitioner with a focus on family law. He can be reached at [attypatjohn@gmail.com](mailto:attypatjohn@gmail.com). This article was originally published in Times of Israel and is republished with permission.*