

LOVE IS MORE THAN JUST A WORD

PAGE 1 A Wake-up Call

In addressing the early Christians at Rome, the Apostle Paul admitted himself a “debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians, both to the wise, and to the unwise” (Romans 1:14). He was not speaking of a monetary debt, but a spiritual one, because of having found the true riches in Jesus Christ that he now wanted shared with the world.

Paul, of course, was Jewish, the former Saul of Tarsus who became God’s chief messenger to the Gentiles. Today, as recipients of God’s grace that has come to us Gentiles through Jewish roots and a Jewish Redeemer, it makes both scriptural and humanitarian sense for the Church to now reverse the centuries of Christian blindness in persecution of Jews by taking a stand against a modern evil built on that legacy of the past—antisemitism.

When I first awakened to the need to combat hatred against Jews in the early 1980’s, there were some 100 hate groups operating in the US. That number doubled as the economic recession of the 1990’s offered bigots another excuse to savage and stereotype their favorite scapegoat—the Jews. And once again today, hatred of Jews—especially hatred against Israel—is felt worldwind.

Swastikas are often scrawled on synagogues. Holocaust survivors who attempt to teach young people the cost of silence fifty years ago will soon be gone. White-supremacist groups still attack Jews and other minorities. Jobless people are told that a “Jewish conspiracy” is behind their poverty. Skinhead and other neo-nazi violence continues against Jews and other minorities. And it’s happening in America—even while spreading like a cancer in Europe, the Mideast and Asia.

Generalized hate against Jews is even dispensed from those who should know better—black Americans whose cause for equal rights was championed by many Jews while too many Christians like me were shamefully silent. While numerous people-groups form the target of the haters, the Jew almost always remains the bull’s-eye of that target.

Many people—Christians and non-Christians alike—have see this unequal war and have felt sorrow for Jews being singled out for stereotyping and contempt. However, such sorrow from even the most well-meaning of people can’t bring

healing and hope to Jewish victims—or other victims of hate—unless followed by meaningful deeds of compassion and identification.

I still recall vividly my own wake-up call back in 1984. A news item had caught my eye that provided the inspiration for the development of a “Christian Task Force Against Antisemitism” in the Boston area. The story reported how antisemitic vandals had driven a tractor through the wall of a new synagogue in Manalapan Township, New Jersey.

The haters must have caught their collective breath at what followed—more than a thousand caring Christians and other concerned citizens who joined with their then-Governor Thomas Kean in rushing to the side of synagogue congregants, repairing the damage, and attacking the sin of antisemitism with an outpouring of concern and indignation.

A light went on inside me as I read of this counter-attack against bigotry. I now had my answer as to how to flesh out the compassion that good people feel when they see injustice done to the innocent. I just figured that what those fine people had done once in New Jersey could be repeated again and again all over America in resisting the fires of hate. I was ready to take my stand.

LOVE IS MORE THAN JUST A WORD

PAGE 2 When even the Media was shocked!

Using that New Jersey example, I challenged a group of ministers to stand with me against hate in the Boston area. The plan was simple: each time the media reported a hate incident we went into action issuing our protest to the same media, standing in solidarity with our Jewish friends, helping clean up any damage bigots caused and leaving the unmistakable message that hate would not be tolerated.

Word got around that our group stood for more than well-meaning but hollow rhetoric. “Love” had put on working clothes and rolled up sleeves. It wasn’t long before we had imprinted a threefold message: 1) haters of Jews could expect to be resisted and stopped by all lawful means; 2) fellow Christians everywhere could do more than wring their hands and feel sorry when Jewish neighbors were attacked—they could follow our example of reaching out with practical care; 3) Jewish people could know that they were no longer alone and that there is a world of difference between those who profess Christianity and those who truly know and follow Jesus the Jew, whose command is one of unconditional love.

There was even a fourth message given, this one to a tough media that seemed genuinely impressed at witnessing a Christianity that made love for neighbor a vocation rather than a mere word in the Church’s vocabulary.

One day the challenge came to extend the vision to one of the worst hot-beds of antisemitism, bigotry and color/culture clashes—Southern California. Of course, my wife is a native Californian and most of my years in the ministry have been spent there, in effect making me a Californian. We knew that the great weather made the Golden State not only a melting pot for the nation but also a mecca for hate organizations, propaganda mills and skin-head militancy. It was said in jest that the American continent tipped toward the west, and so everything loose fell into California. But if we were soon to find ourselves in a chief haunt of the haters, we were also to find that here were far more Christians ready and willing to stand by their Jewish and other neighbors. They merely needed to be taught how. That’s when I looked in the mirror and heard that old bit of wisdom: “If not you, who? If not now, when?” It was time to get started with More Than Talk.

LOVE IS MORE THAN JUST A WORD

PAGE 3 “For you it’s a mitzvah”!

It didn’t take long to get started. A couple of months after my arrival in Southern California, the media reported a Jewish temple desecrated in the city of Fullerton. The picture accompanying the story is what broke my heart—a rabbi with obvious pain etched on his face as he viewed the fire damage to the temple. Haim Asa, a Bulgarian Jew, had survived the Holocaust. Now this senior rabbi of Temple Beth Tikvah (in Hebrew “House of Hope”) was again faced with antisemitism—in conservative Orange County California.

I called the rabbi and told him, “If only you and the Jewish community answer the haters, you lose. They’ll be back. Let me—and some other Christian leaders I’ll call—stand with you. Let us answer those who hate you.”

A news conference was called and our group of Christian leaders said, “When they attacked this temple, they also attacked each of us and our churches.” We then prepared to follow up our rhetoric with meaningful action.

I suggested to Haim Asa that we Christians clean up the mess as the surest sign we were in this together. The best day for the Christians to don overalls and wield paint brushes was Saturday—the Jewish Shabbat. When I told Haim that we didn’t want to desecrate his Sabbath, he grinned, “Go to it—for us it would be a desecration—for you it’s a mitzvah.”

The media recorded it all—the press conference—the clean-up committee of nearly 100 Christians—and the Christian offering taken to help pay for a better security system for the temple. The Jewish community was stunned and grateful. Christians were now not merely verbalizing love for neighbor, but vocationalizing it. And somewhere haters were watching it all and realizing that genuine Christians would no longer look the other way.

Thus was launched the first Christian Task Force Against Antisemitism in Southern California, eager and ready to put into practice the words of George Washington which he spoke at the famous Touro Synagogue: “To bigotry no sanction—to persecution no assistance.” We just took that saying one step further—from “no assistance” to “active resistance.”

LOVE IS MORE THAN JUST A WORD

PAGE 4 The crosses of hate vs the Cross of Christ

Later, our task force was challenged to again rush to the side of the persecuted—this time in the city of Garden Grove. A black American had returned from work to find crosses burned on his front lawn. This attack had followed others—a broken window, hate graffiti etched on his driveway, and even his puppy stolen. Meanness was meant to make this articulate engineer cower. It didn't work.

Michael had already experienced prejudice as a lad in the South. He was not about to be run over by bigotry in the West. The burning crosses made the front pages, and I felt the man's pain when he said to reporters, "I feel like a sitting duck!"

I called some of our task force members together and we rushed to Michael's side. I had told him some of us wanted to stand with him, but he had no idea of the numbers. Michael was the happiest, "frightened" man I've ever seen as around 50 Christians representing various churches and denominations drove up and parked in front of his home. "I knew you said you'd stand with me," he told me, "but I didn't know there would be this many!" Then a smile began spreading across the big man's face as the crowd shouted, "We love you!" Even tough newspaper and television reporters were moved by the love and friendship being poured all over Mr. Coffey.

The following Saturday, around thirty five of us gathered at his home. That day we not only covered over the marks of hate, but we painted Michael's house inside and out and made his damaged lawn look like a park. His neighbors came to help, people stopped by with food and drinks, and the atmosphere was charged with the love of God fleshed out by an aggressive love for our neighbor.

The hit on a North Hollywood orthodox Jewish school was nastier. Avram was both rabbi of the synagogue and principal of the school. Born in Europe ten years after the war, Avram would never meet three-fourths of his extended family. They perished in the fires of the Holocaust. One who was murdered, 17 year old Yoash, especially tore at his heart.

Following the war, surviving members of the family were forced to live under communism. Their chance to escape came during the 1956 Hungarian uprising. During this bold attempt at freedom, a single cry from one-year old Avram would

have cost the family their lives. He never cried—and the family made it to the West.

Avram's memories of murdered loved ones never went away. Then in 1992, he had a terrifying flashback to just what hate can do. That's when this rabbi came to his Hollywood school only to find it had been broken into. Swastikas and slogans condemning Jews were splashed on the walls.

Avram thought of his 200 Jewish students who stood staring at the signs of devilish hate. He also thought about the million and one half Jewish children who were murdered by Hitler. And his heart sank.

Then someone from the school told him that a man—a Christian—had called to offer help. What should they do? Avram had two choices: to remain silent and let bigots enjoy Jewish fear, or let us Gentiles condemn that hate and demonstrate friendship, unconditional love and solidarity. The rabbi welcomed our help.

Some 50 Christians representing 20 churches arrived at the synagogue after Sunday church. Again love was put in working clothes. The scenes of our fixing that school and supporting those kids made news across the world—even in Israel, thanks to the media from most TV stations in Southern California filming the action. Later, we took a collection to replace the stolen equipment.

It was as simple as one, two, three, four. One) The media got the message that there was a Christian answer to hate. Two) Our Jewish friends got the message that they will not stand alone again. Three) Haters got the message that they had bitten off more than they could chew. Four) Other churches around the country got the message—by example—of what Christians can and should do if antisemitism or other hate comes to town.

LOVE IS MORE THAN JUST A WORD

PAGE 5 Now it's your turn

The above examples are basic—yet they demonstrate the best solution to smothering the fires of antisemitism and all hate. But this is where you must do more than merely hear my accounts of confronting walls of hatred and building bridges of love. You, too, must act.

What would you do if a Jewish cemetery in your community was desecrated with swastikas and other Jew-hating graffiti sprayed on the grave stones of Jewish dead? What would you do if haters deliberately marred a Jewish synagogue in your neighborhood? What would you do if a Jewish store owner in your community had the words “Kill the Jews” scrawled across his establishment? What would you do if a Jewish neighbor or black or Latino or Asian neighbor had crosses burned on his or her front yard and the words “Jews not wanted” or anti-black or other hate slurs made conspicuous? Or what would you do as an African American, Latino or Asian American if your white neighbor suffers persecution and hate from bigots? After all, bigotry, racism and hatred is not limited to a single color or culture.

A true Christian can never have the spirit of Cain by sluffing off attacks against his Jewish neighbors (or anyone targeted by haters) with a smug “Am I my brother’s keeper?” response to God. Nor can a true Christian merely offer a “prayer without care” when meaningful action is obviously called for.

Our own response to God in the face of ugly and growing antisemitism, bigotry and hate is to accept the command left us in 1 John 3:18, “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.” That kind of care can best come from groups of Christians representing their local churches—rather than an individual trying to be the Lone Ranger but being dismissed as rather ineffective. However, like me, you may have to enter the battle as a lone ranger. You’ll have God on your side.

I dare not close this without offering you the few requirements necessary to launching a Care Corps in you church and neighborhood. It’s as easy as A-B-C, and while this plan for Christian action speaks specifically to the evil of antisemitism, it also works with any related hate crimes.

A. RECOGNITION OF THE NEED

With hate incidents against Jews and others increasing and hate organizations even teaching the Holocaust never took place, the need for the Christian Church to stand is NOW.

B. REPENTANCE FOR THE DEED

We have already covered the centuries-long legacy of hate left the Jews, often in the name of Jesus and perpetrated by the entire spectrum of Christianity. Today's Church cannot undo the past, but we can repent for our own failure to build a bridge of unconditional love to Jewish people and all our neighbors by determining not to allow today's bigotry to go unchallenged.

C. RESPONSE TO THE CREED

We know all of the scriptures well—the Good Samaritan. Loving our neighbors as ourselves, faith without works being dead, etc. Now God gives us the opportunity to live what we believe by saying to our Jewish neighbors and others, “We’re determined that you’ll never, never stand alone again.” And once we say it, we back it up with action by standing with them. Only then is love—God’s love—more than talk!