



## What about Christian Jews or Jewish Christians?

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**Church-Jewish relationships depend upon direct relations between the churches and Jewish groups. Messianic Jews, Hebrew Christians or Jews for Jesus have to be accepted in their own right but are not representative of either the Jewish community or the churches. Night of the Broken Glass (Reichskristallnacht)**

## What about Christian Jews

or Jewish Christians?

by Fritz Voll

### Summary

The Jewish community is adamantly opposed to the idea that one can convert to Christianity and still remain a Jew. Jews converting to Christianity are no longer considered part of Jewish life.

Churches are bound by the principle of accepting the self-definition of other religious groups. Those that call themselves Messianic Jews, Hebrew Christians or Jews for Jesus have to be accepted in their own right. However, such groups should not be considered to be representative of the Jewish community nor are they representative of the Christian community. Church-Jewish relationships depend upon direct relations between the Churches and Jewish groups.

Jewish conversions to Christianity have a very long and checkered history. These conversions have seldom guaranteed full acceptance of the converted by the Christian community and not even protected them from antisemitism.

In recent years the churches associated with the World Council of Churches have moved away from mission and conversion in interfaith relations seeking dialogue between equal partners.

Some evangelical or fundamentalist churches still seek to evangelize Jews or they support groups that do so. The purpose of the Jewish-Christian dialogue presented on these pages is mutual

understanding and learning, not conversion.

## **The Jewish community considers converted Jews to be Christians**

For Judaism, the matter of conversion is quite clear: a Jew who joins the Christian church can no longer be a member of the Jewish community. If a Jew comes to accept the divinity of Jesus, or a trinitarian understanding of God, or initiation into the Christian community through Christian baptism, these things are seen as antithetical to Judaism. Converted Jews have argued that even secular or atheistic Jews are still considered members of the Jewish community, why not Jews who differ from other religious Jews only through their faith in Jesus Christ? Such a position may have been possible in the first century CE before the Church was firmly established as a Gentile and anti-Judaic community. After two-thousand years of intense enmity between the two communities and after they have developed separately as distinct religions, they can at best become equal partners, at worst they will remain contradictions of each other. Some Christian theologians have cautiously expressed the hope that converted Jews could one day become a bridge between the two communities. For Jews this is an unacceptable idea. And it is questionable what Christians would gain from conversations with people who clearly would want to represent both communities.

## **The history of Christian mission to Jews**

In past centuries Jews were often forcibly baptized under threat of torture or death. Jewish children were taken away from their parents to be brought up in Christian homes. Jewish congregations were sometimes ordered to listen to Christian preachers in their own synagogues. Debates between Jewish and Christian scholars were arranged to prove the superiority of the Christian faith over that of Judaism.

The (Christian) Great Awakening of the nineteenth century spawned many associations that were concerned with "mission to the Jews". The momentum from that movement extended into the twentieth century and, among other things, influenced the work of the International Missionary Council (IMC). Beginning in 1927, the IMC formed the Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews (IMCCAJ) drawing together diverse associations and societies concerned with this mission work. This Committee was influential in the pre-war years, participating in the gatherings that eventually led to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The Committee recognized that many converts continued to follow Jewish traditions and that many did not feel fully accepted in church congregations, where anti-Judaic teaching and preaching was never questioned. It wondered "what to do with" converted Jews. After much debate, the Committee opposed the establishment of a separate church made up only of converts. It asked the churches to integrate converted Jews into their congregational life. (For the history of the Committee see Allan R. Brockway, [\*For Love of the Jews: A Theological History of the IMCCAJ, 1927-1961\*](#), University of Birmingham, Birmingham, England: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1992).

## **How racists treat converted Jews**

In Europe in the 1930s and "40s, the antisemitic racial policies of the Nazis were applied equally to Jews, to Jewish converts to Christianity, and to the descendants of Jewish converts. All were regarded as being Jews and were persecuted accordingly. The churches were forced to dismiss their pastors who were of Jewish origin. While officially churches did little to help their members who were Jewish converts, or descendants of Jewish converts, individual Christians and congregations tried to assist them to flee from countries under Nazi rule. The Jewish community

considered the converts to be Christian and offered them no assistance during the Holocaust nor afterward. In some eastern European countries converted Jews still face racial discrimination as do Jews themselves.

## From mission to dialogue

The Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews continued to operate after WW II. With the founding of the State of Israel, the emergent WCC was pressured by the churches in the Middle East for political support against actions of the Jewish state. The representatives of the missionary movement pointed out to the World Council the special theological issues that the church has to deal with in relation to Israel. Some even began to say that Jews should not be included in Christian mission: "Are the Jews included in "all the nations"? No. Indeed, in the Old and New Testaments, the expression "all the nations" designates non-Jewish peoples, "gentiles". Israel is distinguished from all the nations by the fact that God has elected it and called it "my people". (Wilhelm Vischer in 1956, quoting the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19, cited in Brockway, [For Love of the Jews](#), p.147 n.3) The missionaries themselves actually paved the way to a new understanding of the Christian-Jewish relationship. In 1961 the IMCCAJ was fully integrated into the World Council of Churches together with the International Missionary Council. The IMCCAJ became the Committee on the Church and the Jewish People. A new approach by the churches to the Christian relationship with the Jewish people found expression in the 1982 [recommendation](#) of the WCC Executive Committee to abandon mission in favour of dialogue.

## Converted Jews: Messianic Jews, Hebrew Christians, Jews for Jesus

Even in the first two centuries, congregations of Jewish Christians (e.g. the Nazarenes, the Ebionites, and so on) faced opposition from both the Jewish community and the Gentile church. They did not participate in the development of Rabbinic Judaism nor in that of the Christian church. Some Jewish-Christian congregations in Syria lasted into the seventh century, but vanished with the rise of Islam. Groups of converted Jews today may share the fate of this early Jewish Christianity: rejection by the Jewish community and uneasy acceptance by Christian churches.

Some evangelical and many fundamentalist churches, not associated with the WCC, are still committed to evangelizing Jews. Instead of being automatically integrated into existing Christian congregations, converted Jews are supported if they want to form their own communities. The theology behind these relatively new movements is dispensationalist and eschatological. (For the idea of dispensations see *The Scofield Reference Bible*, p.5[4] or *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 195.) The eschatological hope is that Israel as a whole will one day be "saved", this being interpreted to mean that Judaism will accept Jesus as Messiah. Dispensationally, it is believed that the "times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) is now coming to an end and that the conversion of Israel is beginning with movements like the "Messianic Jews" (Romans 11:25-26). In Israel such groups face official rejection. Evangelists associated with them are accused of taking advantage of those Jews who have grown up in atheistic environments or have little knowledge of Judaism. Conversely, from Romans 9-11, the Roman Catholic Church and many of the churches associated with the World Council of Churches recognize that God's covenant with Israel as a whole has not been abrogated; Judaism (i.e. all of Israel) is seen as an equal sibling of Christianity. (See H. H. Henrix, [The covenant has never been revoked](#))

## Where do we stand?

Member churches of the World Council of Churches. have benefited from the learnings of the WCC's consultations with representatives of the Jewish community. Many of them approve the statement by the Executive Committee of the WCC entitled [Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue](#). Here evangelism and conversion are abandoned in favour of dialogue and

mutual witness. While dialogue can bring the two communities closer together for cooperation on common goals, it also tends to deepen the knowledge and faith commitments of the participants. With many Jews Christians share the hope for a better world within the rule of God; they want to work together here and now for justice, peace and the preservation of creation. In dialogue Jews and Christians seek a friendly relationship that will help them to learn from each other and correct the distorted images that have arisen during a long history of animosity.

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See also the following discussions of the subject:

[Mission and the Nature of Salvation](#)

[Southern Baptist Statement and New York Bishops Response on "Jewish Evangelism"](#)

[A Protestant Christian Thinks About Evangelism](#)

[Should Christians Attempt to Evangelize Jews?](#)