

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

One fact that Christians and Jews don't want to accept

By Douglas Kindschi,

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Christians and Jews share much of the same Scripture, believe in the one God who created the universe, accept the Ten Commandments and other moral principles, honor and quote the prophets, find comfort and inspiration in the Psalms, love to tell the stories of Abraham, Moses and David, and affirm the duty to love God and love the neighbor. Yet, when it comes to fully accepting the fact that Jesus was a Jew — “let’s just not emphasize that.”

Christians see Jesus through the lens of the creeds, the resurrection and as the promised messiah. His Jewishness is easily forgotten. For Jews, Jesus is seen



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as representing the centuries of Christian anti-Jewish teaching and persecution. Yes, he might have been Jewish but “he’s clearly not one of us.”

The first followers of Jesus were Jews, including all of his disciples. The Apostle Paul affirmed his Hebrew identity as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, followed the law and was proud of his heritage as a Pharisee. (Philippians 3:5)

Yet, early in the movement, tensions grew between believers in Jesus and the Jewish community. Soon, it became primarily a gentile religion. Of course, the writings of Paul and passages in the Gospels did not help the matter with what can be seen as a very anti-Jewish attitude.

The history of the church and its connection to political power, especially following Constantine, is a very disturbing account. One of our previous interfaith confer-

ence speakers, James Carroll, has documented this in his book, “Constantine’s Sword.”

Fortunately, we have the opportunity to hear a dynamic speaker and internationally respected Jewish scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, next week. As a professor of New Testament and Jewish studies, she has led the effort to see Jesus in his Jewish context. In her book, “The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus,” she writes: “For far too long, Jesus has been the wedge that drives Christians and Jews apart. ... Conversations across religions need not, and should not, end with all the participants proclaiming an ultimate unity of belief. Such an exercise only waters down both traditions into a bland universalism that, in an attempt to be inoffensive, winds up offending everyone.”

Levine believes Christians will

develop a deeper appreciation for their own faith when they see Jesus and his belief and practice in the context of his Jewishness.

She says: “Today, Jesus’ words are too familiar, too domesticated, too stripped of their initial edginess and urgency. Only when heard through first-century Jewish ears can their original edginess and urgency be recovered. Consequently, to understand the man from Nazareth, it is necessary to understand Judaism. ... If we get Judaism wrong, we’ll wind up perpetuating anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic teachings, and thus the mission of the church — to spread a gospel of love rather than a gospel of hate — will be undermined.”

THE TIME IS HERE

Levine is convinced the time is here for Jews and Christians to understand their “intertwined histories ... and to explore how

the gains in interfaith relations made over the past several decades can be nurtured and expanded.”

Levine will speak on these themes Tuesday at Calvin College in Grand Rapids. Her talk at 1 p.m. is on the Parables of Jesus. It will be followed by breakout sessions, as well as a panel discussion that includes scholars from Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The evening lecture at 7 p.m. is on Jesus in his Jewish Context.

She also will offer a Wednesday morning workshop for Christian pastors, educators and students.

Registration is free at our website, interfaithunderstanding.org, or by calling 616-331-5702.

You are welcome to attend portions of the conference if you cannot be there for the whole time.

Join us for new insights and learning on this important topic. — Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu