Why have Christians been so brutal?

Series: The Case for Faith

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This morning we continue our series called The Case for Faith , a series based on the popular book by the same name written by award winning author Lee Strobel. In his book Strobel tackles the eight toughest questions facing the Christian faith. And the question today is, "Why have Christians been so brutal down through history?" He deals with it in chapter seven of his book.

Atheist Ken Schei who founded an organization called "Atheists for Jesus" says on his website, "Christianity has, by certain people, been used throughout history as an excuse for some of the most brutal, heartless, and senseless atrocities known to man. The historical examples are not difficult to recall: the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the witch-burnings, the Holocaust.... I did not see much in Christianity that I considered to be worth the having."

The atrocities that have been committed in the name of Jesus Christ have been a lightning rod for those who oppose the Christian faith. Steven Weinberg, Nobel-prize winning physicist said, "With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion." According to him religion hasn't made the world better, it's made the world worse.

In his book Farewell to God our good friend Charles Templeton, the one-time evangelist turned agnostic, takes a more balanced approach but he's still down on Christianity when he writes that, "organized religion has done immeasurable good, but it has seldom been at its best. Too often it has been a negative influence.... Across the centuries and on every continent, Christians-the followers of the Prince of Peace-have been the cause of and involved in strife. The church during the Middle Ages was like a terrorist organization." Is that what Christ followers have brought into this world? Atrocities, crusades, inquisitions, strife, terrorism?

Some people think so.   But there are a lot of people who would argue with that. One of them is pastor and author Dr. D. James Kennedy who wrote a book called Why I Believe in which he says, "Christianity

has been a boon to mankind ... and has had a beneficial effect upon the human race.... Most people today who live in an ostensibly Christian environment with Christian ethics do not realize how much we owe Jesus of Nazareth.... What goodness and mercy there is in this world has come in large measure from him."

So what's the answer? Has Christianity helped or hurt humankind? What do we do with those Christians who have been so brutal down through the ages? To find the answer Lee Strobel visited Dr. John D. Woodbridge. Dr. Woodbridge currently teaches church history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has a master's degree in history from Michigan State University and a doctorate from the University of Toulouse in France. He's written a pile of books, served as senior editor of Christianity Today magazine, and is a member of a number of key historical societies. John Woodbridge is a thinker and has thought a lot about the role of the Christian church down through the centuries.

And when Strobel asked him why the church has been so brutal over the centuries, he immediately called a time out and said, "Wait a minute, before we go any further let's make sure that we first understand who the true church is." There's a big difference between the institutional church that's existed in various forms down through history and the true church, made up of the genuine people of God. Just like there's a difference between people who are cultural Christians and those who are authentic Christians. Some people think they're Christians just because they live in America, but they don't actually have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Sometimes on the news we'll hear something about the conflict in the Middle East and they'll say that Israelis, Palestinians and Christians are all fighting over a portion of the West Bank. When the term "Christian" is used in that context it's used of a group of people who are neither Jewish nor Muslim. It doesn't mean they all have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and are doing what Christ commands.

Jesus himself drew the distinction between true Christians and false Christians in Matthew 7:21-23 when he said, Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Jesus said there'd be counterfeit Christians, those who cast out demons and even do miracles in his name, but don't have a personal relationship with him, don't really know him, and aren't known by him. He calls them "evildoers." And certainly down through the centuries a lot of damage has been done in the name of Jesus Christ by counterfeit Christians, by evildoers.

Early on Adolph Hitler tried to color his movement as being Christian, but he certainly didn't represent the teachings of Jesus Christ. One time theologian Karl Barth was asked to begin a lecture in Germany by saying, "Heil Hitler.' He said, "I can't do it. It's pretty hard to say, 'Heil Hitler' just before you start teaching the Sermon on the Mount."

So the first thing we need to understand to answer the question of why the church has been so brutal down through the centuries is that not everything that's been done in the name of the church has been done by true Christ followers. Often the atrocities have been perpetrated by the institutional church as a political organization, not by the true church made up of genuine believers. That doesn't mean that Christians haven't done some evil things. But when they have they haven't reflected the teachings of Jesus. And so what critics attack is cultural Christianity, not authentic Christianity.

Authentic Christianity caused the church to grow at an amazing speed throughout the Roman Empire despite brutal persecution. The church took off in the first four centuries after Christ because Christians were so loving and caring.

Patrick Glynn, an atheist turned Christian, said, "Part of the reason for Christianity's rapid spread, historians have remarked, was simply that the early Christians were such nice people. The very kindness of the Christians and their service to the poor and downtrodden attracted new adherents. Christians astounded the ancients with their charity."

Christians loved people. All kinds of people. They didn't just take care of their own. They took care of their neighbors and the poor and widows and the hurting and children. They were especially compassionate to children who were often abused by the Romans and the Greeks. Baby girls especially were often abandoned and left to die. But Christians would rescue them and take them in. The lifestyle of the early Christians matched the teachings of Jesus and it turned the world upside down.

And critics didn't know what to do with them. They couldn't get rid of them because they weren't afraid to die and believed so strongly that to live is Christ and to die is gain. In the 2ndcentury Justin Martyr said, "You can kill us, but you can't hurt us." Authentic Christianity is powerful. It can change the world and it did. But what happened? When did authentic Christianity shift to cultural Christianity? When did the church become a political organization?

Well, it started in the 4th century when Constantine, the Emperor of Rome, embraced Christianity in the year 312 and shortly thereafter declared it the official state religion of the Roman Empire. And with that came a mixed blessing. The brutal persecutions finally stopped and Christians were free to worship,

which was a good thing. But the doors of the church were flung wide open to worldliness, which was a very bad thing. Pagan practices began to mix and mingle with the teachings of Christ. And the church quickly transitioned from a community of believers to an organization of the state.

Woodbridge points out that there was a widespread rumor that Constantine promised that if you became a Christian, you'd get a beautiful robe and pieces of gold.   So many people were coming into the church for the wrong reasons and the church started becoming more and more political until it began to use the state to press its own agenda through force and persecution. And down through the years there have been some major blots on Christian history starting with the Crusades around 1000 AD and going all the way up to the Holocaust in the 20th century. Let's look at the four that Ken Schei pointed out in his quote.

First, the Crusades. For two centuries the church tried to drive the Muslims out of the Holy Land. And they did it by force. If you visit Israel today you can walk through the remains of Crusader forts and castles all over Palestine. Pope Urban II launched the first crusade in 1095 AD when he gave a famous sermon and concluded by declaring it's God's will that we rid the Holy Land of infidels.

He challenged Christians all over Western Europe to go to Israel and take it back from the Muslims who had desecrated it. He convinced the people that they were doing something magnificent for Jesus Christ. They didn't go there to share the gospel, they went there to draw the sword. And for the next two hundred years, until the last Crusade in 1291, the Holy Land was stained red with blood

One eyewitness described it this way. "Some of our men ... cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames.... It was necessary to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon where men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies."

Did that please Christ? I don't think so. It was Jesus who said in Matthew 5:43-45, You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

In addition to the violence, Pope Innocent III in 1215 actually promised salvation to all those who went on Crusades. And if they didn't go, but found someone to fight in their place, that person would earn their salvation. That's not what the Bible teaches. The Crusades are a black eye on the body of Christ.

They make a mockery of the teachings of Jesus and show us that everything done in the name of Christ doesn't necessarily reflect what Jesus said. There's no way to reconcile the slaughter of the Crusades with Jesus' words in Matthew 5.

Pope John Paul II understands that which is why a few years ago he called upon the church to acknowledge "the dark side of its history" when he issued this statement, "How can one remain silent about the many forms of violence perpetrated in the name of the faith-wars of religion, tribunals of the Inquisition and other forms of violations of the rights of persons?" Those who are critical of the Crusades find an ally in Jesus. He'd be critical of them as well.

Second, the Inquisition. The Inquisition began in 1163 when Pope Alexander III ordered his bishops to sniff out any evidence of heresy in the church and do something about it. What developed was a campaign of terror, with secret proceedings, lack of due process, and torture to extract information. When heretics were convicted and refused to repent they were turned over to the government and burned at the stake. It was ugly. And lots of it was all tangled up with political motives as well.

There were three waves of inquisitions. The first was in France in the 1100's, when those in northern France used charges of heresy to take over parts of southern France. The second was in Spain in the 1400's, and the third was throughout Western Europe in 1500's. In that Inquisition, Protestants were the targets.

In fact according to Woodbridge, it's very likely that lots of authentic Christians were put to death during these inquisitions. And the truth of the matter is, when it comes to persecution, the church has almost always been on the receiving end. This very morning Christians around the world will die for their faith. In fact, there have been more martyrs in the 20thcentury than all 19 centuries combined. The Inquisition, as horrible as it was, is a rare exception. It's not the norm in the Christian church.

Often today we think that the typical Christian lives in the United States of America and is free from danger. But the truth is, according to journalist David Neff, "The typical Christian lives in a developing country, speaks a non-European language, and exists under the constant threat of persecution-of murder, imprisonment, torture, or rape." The church is almost always on the receiving end of persecution.

Third, the Salem Witch Trials. The Salem witch trials that occurred at the end of the 1600's in Salem, Massachusetts are frequently cited as an example of Christian hysteria. In all nineteen people were hanged and one person pressed to death for refusing to testify.

But when you examine the historical data it's hard to tell exactly what was going in Salem. There were many factors involved. People scheming to get land from other people, issues of hysteria, and claims of astral appearances, where somebody supposedly did something when they were in another place. The story line is very complicated and not as simple as blaming the churches, although they certainly had a part in it.

But it was an authentic Christian by the name of Increase Mather who finally put a stop to it. He spoke out strongly against what was happening and that was the beginning of the end. It took a Christ follower to finally silence the madness of Salem.

Finally, what about the Holocaust? One of the ugliest blots on Christian history has been anti-Semitism. Which is so ironic, because Jesus himself was Jewish, all of the apostles were Jewish, and Jewish authors wrote the entire New Testament with the exception of Luke and Acts.

In 1998, the Roman Catholic Church did a very courageous thing. It apologized for "errors and failures" in not aiding the Jews who were slaughtered during the Nazi Holocaust. About a year later, Cardinal John O'Connor of New York expressed "abject sorrow" for anti-Semitism in churches throughout the years and said, "We most sincerely want to start a new era."

The church has dropped the ball in its treatment of God's chosen people down through the centuries. And Strobel asked Woodbridge how that started in the first place. He suggested that it might have started because the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah. And some Christians hold them responsible for Christ's crucifixion. But it's been fueled by other things too. Throughout the Middle Ages there were all kinds of rumors about the Jews that they had poisoned wells during the Black Death of 1348, desecrated Christian sacred sites, tampered with the Scriptures. And all that added fuel to the fire of anger and resentment.

Fortunately, today there's been a great shift in the attitude of Christians toward Jewish people. In fact, some of Israel's greatest friends are evangelical Christians. There's an organization right across the Walt Whitman Bridge in South Jersey called Friends of Israel. The president of Friends of Israel is a man by the name of Bill Sutter. Bill Sutter is a dear friend of mine. He was my youth pastor for about ten years growing up and marked my life deeply. Today he's known by the Jewish community throughout the world as a great friend of Israel. He loves the Jewish people.

He takes seriously God's words to Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, in Genesis 12:3 , I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. Through you all peoples on earth will be blessed. So attitudes towards the Jews have been changing.

Has the church been perfect? No. Has all that's been done by the church down through the years been done by authentic Christians? No. Even authentic Christians have made some big mistakes. So what's the bottom line? Is the world worse off or better off because of Jesus Christ? Better off, by far. The vast sweep of Christian history has made a huge impact on the world.

Woodbridge ends his interview with Strobel by painting a beautiful picture of Christ's church down through the ages. He says, "I see Christianity's influence as a resplendent mural with many scenes, each depicted in bright, brilliant, and beautiful colors. Without Christianity there would be an awful lot of grays and only a few scattered and disconnected lines here and there giving any sense of meaning. But Christianity adds so much meaning, hope and beauty and richness to the picture. The very center scene would portray the story of Jesus and his redemption for our sins. It would be summarized by John 3:16, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.   Brush strokes in the painting would depict scenes revealing vast humanitarian impulses that have been inspired by Christ's life and teaching -- helping the poor, the disadvantaged, the disenfranchised. All the missionary work, all the hospitals, all the homeless shelters, all the rehabilitation programs, all of the orphanages, all of the relief organizations, all the selfless feeding of the hungry and clothing of the poor and encouraging of the sick. There would be other scenes giving shading and nuance and depth to the painting of Christians giving their minds to God, and their literary, musical, architectural, scientific, and artistic contributions. If taken away, the world would be much more dull and shallow. Think of all the great educational institutions that Christians built, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, which were conceived and constructed to advance the gospel. Finally, there's the power of the Holy Spirit that colors everything good. Can you imagine a world without the Holy Spirit? It's bad enough with his restraining power at work, without him it would be a horror show. When I think of Christian history that's what comes to my mind. That's what Jesus Christ envisioned." And that's what I want us to be a part of. I want Valley View to add our own colors to God's great canvass. Can we do that?