



Here & Now

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An update for Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors and friends

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Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

One of the most interesting studies in Baptist history would be a glance at the relationship of Baptists and the Jewish community. We claim many things in common such as religious liberty, human rights, appreciation of the Old Testament text, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. Our checkered relationship is worth a cursory review and is open for strong historical research and interpretation.

In society there is no small question as to how to define a Jewish person. Some say a Jewish person is a person whose religion is Judaism. Others would say a Jewish person is one who descended from the ancient Hebrews. In Judaism a child is a Jewish person if born of a Jewish mother. In Reform Judaism a child with a Jewish parent is considered Jewish. Some would say a true Jewish person is one who follows Jesus as Lord and others would say a resident of Israel could be considered a Jewish person. Another definition of the Jewish people is that they are an ethnic group made up of the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob.



John A. Broadus

Early Baptists and Jewish People

Historian William R. Estep states that Hans Denck, A Bavarian Anabaptist and evangelist was the first Baptist in modern times to witness specifically to Jewish people in 1526. In the United States Roger Williams sought religious and economic freedom for all. In 1833, Joseph Samuel Frey, a Jewish person converted to Baptist beliefs, traveled through ten southern states and visited 276 Baptist churches, urging Baptists to act with compassion and accountability toward the Jewish people. Over 10,000 Jews served in the Confederate Army and were no doubt exposed to the preaching of Baptist chaplains like John A. Broadus, William Williams and I. T. Tichenor.

Early Southern Baptists and the Jewish Community

The earliest formal action of the Southern Baptist Convention related to the Jewish people was in an 1867 resolution that called for labor and prayer for the conversion of the Jewish people. On April 7, 1921, the Southern Baptist Convention employed Jacob Gartenhaus, to serve as a missionary to the Jewish people. Gartenhaus served from 1921 to 1949, as the director of Southern Baptist work among the Jewish people. Gartenhaus was a Jewish man who became a Christian and he and his wife worked with the Home Mission Board until they resigned in 1949 to begin the International Board of Jewish Missions in Chattanooga, Tennessee. There were ten SBC resolutions on Jewish Evangelism from 1867 to 1921. Two more were passed in 1996 and 2002.



Jacob Gartenhaus

Frank Halbeck succeeded Gartenhaus at the Home Mission Board in 1949 and worked in the Jewish ministry until 1956, when he went to a pastorate in California. William B. Mitchell then became the director of Jewish work among Southern Baptists. Jim Sibley of Dallas, Texas, would probably be the foremost SBC scholar on Jewish—Baptist relations today. Herby Geer is the team leader for FMB Worldwide work among Jewish people.

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Martin Luther

Controversy in Baptist—Jewish relations

As early as Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation there has been conflict over Christian—Jewish relations. In later ministry Luther was so radical as to sanction the burning of synagogues, prohibiting Jewish worship and refraining from contact with Jewish people. This failure to practice charity was a blind spot for Martin Luther and a sore spot for Christians.

Southern Baptists have had a wide point of view on Jewish relations and contacts. In 1984, the Foreign Mission Board of the SBC pled for a “no preferential stance” with Israel because our missionaries served with all Semitic people and sought to share God’s love with all nations of the world. It was a controversial “preferential stance” that led to the resignation of George J.

Sheridan, in 1988, from the Home Mission Board staff, over his saying Jews did not need a personal faith in Jesus Christ in order to be saved.

Historian Leon McBeth attempted to put Baptist —Jewish relations in proper perspective when he said, “We do not regard our efforts to win other people, including Jews, to faith in Christ as anti-Semitic and for sure in our hearts we do not intend it as such.” Seminary professor Luther Copeland put a personal interpretation on the controversy by saying “without harshness or any implication of superiority”, we must present our witness of God’s activity in Christ to our Jewish friends.



Leon McBeth

Florida Baptists and Jewish relations

The first Jewish community came to Florida in 1763 with a small group settling in Pensacola. When Florida became a state in 1845 there were less than 100 Jewish people in the state but today there are 750,000 in the Jewish community in Florida. In 1947, the *Florida Baptist Witness* carried a five month series of articles by Lakeland pastor James S. Day, Jr., who was traveling in Israel. The area around Jerusalem was already a war zone between the British and the Jewish underground and Day was able to come to some amazing conclusions in the chaos of his situation. Over 60 years ago this Florida pastor said for Israel it was either (1) an Arab state (2) a Jewish state (3) a Bi-national state or (4) a partition state. Day attempted to be politically neutral but theologically he did conclude, “To me it seems the Jew is returning “home”... and this is a direct fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.”

Lloyd White served as pastor of Shenandoah Baptist Church in Miami (1944-1965) and was probably the most influential person in Baptist—Jewish relations in the state. He taught at the University of Miami and along with Joseph R. Estes, pastor of First Baptist Church, DeLand, served as a catalyst for Baptist—Jewish dialogue in the state. White and Estes had served with the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and were excellent resource persons in the area of mutual concern and effort in Baptist—Jewish relations. David Hecht is the Christian pastor of FBC, Hollywood, a member of the FBHS Board of Directors, a very informed Jewish history source, and a Jewish believer. Earl Joiner was very interested in Baptist—Jewish relations and presented a paper at Oxford University in 1988, entitled “Baptists and the Holocaust.”

On December 19, 1983, Jacob Gartenhaus, the first SBC missionary to the Jewish population, had a severe stroke and died on January 3, 1984. The last physical effort that Gartenhaus made was to write a note. He could not speak due to his weakness and the severity of the stroke, but he motioned for pen and paper and wrote: “I am a Jew, and a Baptist.”

Honoring those who honor Christ,

Jerry M. Windsor
Secretary-Treasurer
Matthew 6:33