It seems to me that Christianity owes the Jews an apology which is long overdue. Christianity’s relation to Judaism has been tragic for centuries; the Christian record regarding Judaism is written in blood in all the countries of Europe. The record in this country so far has been good; the spirit of the first amendment to our constitution guaranteeing every person freedom to worship as he sees fit has given the Jew the first real haven he has found for long centuries. But today a new spirit of intolerance is being fanned by unthinking elements in this country; the reasons for it are complex but the fact is clear- we have only to read our newspapers to see how racial prejudice is growing. The Negro problem has always been a source of trouble, but now the insidious and ugly menace of Anti-Semitism is appearing more and more among us. The threat of this attitude is quite obvious; no matter how one feels personally toward any of these minority groups, one has to admit that any outbreak of persecution and prejudice toward any of these would undermine the freedom and liberty upon which this country is founded, and cave the way for a Fascist state.

The reasons for Anti-Semitism are many and complex as we view the problem superficially, but underlying them all is a basic religious reason; and this reason is the attitude we have inherited through Christian tradition toward the guilt of the Jews in the Passion week. Christianity has always blamed the Jay for killing Jesus. We may think that this has little to do with our attitude toward the Jew; after all, this is past history. But the tradition of centuries is not easily forgotten, and this attitude is still with us forming the basis for an intolerant attitude. We will find other reasons for our attitude, but this one is still fundamental. When we find trouble with other racial groups, such as the Negro, we are more likely to see the causes of the trouble and be sympathetic, but with the Jew there is an immediate block, and the unpleasantness merely confirms our inherited prejudice. Christianity has preserved the tradition of the Jew’s guilt, and the churches still teach it. How can we help but feel a certain deeply planted suspicion toward these people who killed Jesus?

Today the world complains of Jewish separatism, provincialism, assumptions, pride, distinctiveness, failure in adaptation, commercial ability, selfishness, nationalism, sentimentalism, etc. But did not our ancestors compel the Jew to develop those traits? After centuries of exploitation ought not the Jew to have become painfully exacting? He was forced to work his wits in barter and trade. He was steeped in contempt; naturally he became saturated with it. The unpleasant traits have been conditioned by the Christian attitude throughout the years; and this attitude has as its cause Calvary.

Let us turn to the Gospel account of the trial of Jesus as we read it in Mathew and see what happened. We are told that Pilate examined Jesus and found that the charges against him were not well founded. He wanted to release Jesus and publicly washed his hands in the presence of all the people to show that he would have no part in the business. He says, “I am innocent of the blood of this just person; see ye to it.” “Then answered all the people, and said, his blood be on us, and on our children.” This is my text for this morning “his blood be on us and our children”-
for this verse is the chief source for placing the blame upon the Jews. And for nineteen centuries the Jews have suffered under this curse; the blood of countless Jews have been making atonement for this guilt.

And Christians throughout the centuries have pointed to the suffering of the Jews as just retribution for their heinous crime, and pointed to this text as proof of this punishment. And worse, this text has been used throughout the centuries as license to heap more abuse and misery and torture upon the Jew by the instigation of the Ghetto, in which Jews were forced to live in narrow crowded unsanitary slums while the rest of the city’s populations enjoyed the sunny open spaces; by the Inquisition in which the loyal Jews who refused to abandon their religion were tortured and killed; by the pogrom (a term which comes from a Russian word meaning to destroy utterly without pity). It is strange and horrible to realize that these atrocities were committed in the name of Christianity.

It is strange to think that the religion that Jesus taught must treat a people as the Jew has been treated in the past; it is strange to realize that the religion of love and forgiveness which He taught does not apply to the Jews and they must be made to suffer way beyond the third and fourth generation. Christian men puzzled by this situation have looked back into the evidence of history to try to find the reason behind Calvary, to see whether this statement so unfitting to the Christian spirit is substantiated by the facts of history. The verdict of history is unanimous in absolving the Jew of the guilt of the crucifixion.

This is not the place to go into all of the investigations and proofs presented; the results of the investigations are the significant points to consider. The Jews are absolved from guilt in the first place because of the method of execution. If Jesus had been tried and condemned by the Jews, he would never have been crucified. Like Stephen, he would have been stoned, for this was the method of execution the Jews used when they convicted anyone of a crime against their religion. Jesus was crucified and this was strictly a Roman method of execution, one which they reserved for slaves and the worst criminals. The charge which Jesus was found guilty of was in no sense a crime against the Jews or their religion over which they might have jurisdiction. The charge was purely one of insurrection; Jesus was accused of being a revolutionary, one who would set himself up as the King of the Jews and violate the authority of the Roman governors. It was the practice to put a sign on the cross when a person was crucified explaining the charge, which served as a warning for those who saw it (in much the same way in which patriots in conquered countries during recent years who have been caught and executed are publicly displayed with a sign to show their crime). And the sign which Pilate put on Jesus’ cross clearly states that he was killed as the King of the Jews. He was not the first or the last to be executed in this manner for the same charge. The times were turbulent and the forces of occupation were nervous; they did not hesitate to put out of the way any who might disrupt the order of the government. Certainly the triumphal entry that Jesus had just made into Jerusalem would be sufficient to arouse the suspicions of the authorities. The action of Pilate washing his hands seems very strange when we read other accounts of his character in other sources. He was a hard-boiled ruler who did not hesitate to use the strong arm in government. It is perfectly consistent with his character and his position as we understand them for him to condemn Jesus without hesitation. And from the Roman point of view the crucifixion was perfectly legal and justified. A Roman official whose
duty was to preserve law and order in the conquered country of Palestine would quite naturally condemn anyone to death who threatened that law and order.

This does not mean that all of the Jews were completely innocent. Certainly Caiaphas and others among the high priests and Pharisees had no great love for this man who had disrupted their authority in religious matters, who had attacked their institutions, violated the order in the temple and called the religious leaders a bunch of thieves and hypocrites. They were probably in agreement with the verdict. But the fact remains that the Romans and not the Jews conducted the trial, reached the verdict and performed the execution. We certainly cannot blame all of the Jews indiscriminately and their children to this day.

This verse, then, is without doubt a later addition which resulted from the later controversy between Christian and Jew which was characteristic of the situation after the Jews revolted against the imperial Roman empire. At the time this gospel was written there was a strong conflict between the Jewish and Gentile elements in the Church and this feeling is reflected in this verse. But even if we are to ignore the evidence of history and accept every statement we find as literally true, we will find that we still cannot accept the spirit behind this verse, “His blood be upon us and upon our children”. According to the Ten Commandments God punishes evil only to the third and fourth generation. And Ezekiel tells us that old proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” shall have no longer an occasion for use. The blood of our Lord cannot be a curse as the blood of Abel was. If the Jews placed themselves under the blood of Jesus, their sins must have been covered and forgiven. From either point of view, then, we must conclude that we cannot hold the Jew responsible for what happened at Calvary and certainly not blame them today for what their ancestors were thought to be guilty of centuries ago.

From this time on our Christian literature has been full of attacks upon the Jews. Our modern politicians could learn much about the art of vituperation when they want to smear a rival candidate by reading some of the early Church writers in their attacks upon the Jews. And secular literature took up the torch of the fire of persecution. Shakespeare in his Merchant of Venice has put down a pattern for our attitude toward the Jew in his characterization of Shylock. Many pattern their attitude after such a picture as this. As the Jews were blamed completely, we find that Pilate became completely exonerated in Christian thought for his part in the Passion. Tacitus the Roman historian tells us that Jesus was crucified by Pilate, but Justin of the early church changed this ‘by’ to ‘under’ and this form was advertised in the Apostles’ Creed. When a group of people hates another group the invention of atrocities comes easily. And so throughout the Middle Ages the Jews were accused of all sorts of horrible practices. To this day the peasants in certain sections of Europe believe that the Jews when making their unleavened bread mix in the blood of Christians. The Jews were consistently robbed of civil rights and property. In 1492 they were driven from Spain and forced to leave all their wealth; some of these proceeds were what financed the voyage of Columbus - and all in the name of religion

This all seems a long time ago because our American democracy is such a far cry from this kind of tyranny. But we do not have to look far to see the same thing happening in the world today. We are still teaching the guilt of the Jews in many of our Sunday Schools perpetuating the
tradition. We are inventing all sorts of stories, finding all kinds of reasons, to justify this ancient prejudice. And the subjugated and weak countries of the world, the countries made up of different races and religions who want to look to our country as a protector begin to wonder about our feeling of brotherhood; and the totalitarian interests became encouraged at the situation, and rub their hands.

The problem of Anti-Semitism is not merely a matter of individual concern. The attitude of intolerance is opposed to the ideals of our democracy, the ideals that Americans are dying to preserve today. And it is opposed to the Christian religion whose ideals are behind the tradition of our democracy. It violates the supreme commandment of Christianity that we love each other as Jesus loved us, the commandment to mutual respect and understanding which we are beginning to realize must be obeyed if we are to survive at all. This specter of increased prejudice against the Jew must be destroyed. It is time that the Christian church make amends for the injustices done the Jew instead of heaping upon him more abuse. That is why we have been thinking this morning on the ultimate reason for this prejudice, the reason which has been directly operative in history and is still at work indirectly among us. This religious ground for the prejudice is without foundation, as we have seen, and should be repudiated and destroyed.

The superficial reasons for prejudice, all of the many accusations about the Jews’ character, need not be discussed, because if we can get rid of the initial prejudice caused by this religious reason, we will be able to see the causes behind the habits we do not like and do something about them. There is always hope for understanding between peoples if the initial prejudice is cleared away, but if it is not, no amount of discussion will solve the situation. It is much easier for the Northerner, for example, to think out the Negro problem, because he does not have the inbred prejudice against him, and can see the difficulties on each side and the means of solution. It is much harder for the Southerner trained to fear the Negro menace and to believe that the only solution is to keep him in line, to view dispassionately the difficulties involved.

The first step, then, in combating racial feeling and antagonism in Anti-Semitism is to remove the initial prejudice so that one can view the situation intelligently instead of emotionally. But this is not all. Many of us make the mistake of thinking that all we need do is to decide that the people we dislike aren’t so bad after all; we go to church and then feel that if we develop a feeling of love and try to help the oppressed minority, everything will be all right. And so we give the Negro, for example, better housing and expect that will solve everything. We invite him North to work in our factories, build nice houses for him, and then wonder why he still seems a menace in the community; why he still runs wild Saturday nights and won’t fit in with our accepted ways of conduct. We forget completely that years of training are needed, that he cannot fit into a new environment and change to a different way of living over night. And so we begin to think that maybe the Southerner is right after all, when all that is needed is a little intelligence to remove the final difficulties. And similarly when we see a Jew from East side New York out of his environment, instead of thinking that the poor fellow doesn’t know any better, and try to teach him, we say, That’s a Jew for you. Adults who behave badly are like children who are misbehaved, except they haven’t quite the charm. And the only thing to do in either case is train them, not hate them. Parents lay down rules and laws to train their children to proper conduct (that is, if they are old-fashioned enough to believe that a child should not always freely express
himself) and the community lays down rules and laws to control the conduct of its population in general. It would be silly for a community to develop a prejudice against people who have a habit of entering homes and stealing things; it is much more sensible to make laws against it. If, then, there is a valid reason to feel resentment toward a particular group for some particular reason, the sensible thing is to remedy the abuse instead of developing hate.

It is time that the Christian Church begin to deal with the problems of racial prejudice in a Christian and intelligent manner. Let us rid our minds of unfounded, inherited prejudice, and seek to help build a world in which people may live at peace with each other, in mutual love and understanding according to the kingdom of God which Jesus taught us. Unless we do this, unless we live what we believe, and follow the teaching of Jesus to love all men, the hope for a better world will remain only a hope; we will not enter the kingdom unless we follow the teachings of our Lord and King.