

Guidance needed: Ill-informed about Judaism

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It's hard not to feel a little sorry for Charlie Ward. Most of us get our theological lessons in private from sympathetic family, friends or teachers. He got his in public from some angry religious leaders and newspaper columnists. Ward, who plays basketball for the New York Knicks, was quoted in the *New York Times Magazine* uttering anti-Jewish comments. The Jews have "blood on their hands" for killing Christ, he told reporter Eric Konigsberg. Ward also contended that "Jews are stubborn" for not accepting Christ, and that Christians are "persecuted by Jews every day."

Ward was promptly rebuked by the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Congress. The commissioner of the National Basketball Association reprimanded him for his "uninformed and ill-founded statements." Editorial writers issued their own formulaic attacks on bigotry, hatred and divisiveness. Ward, widely known as a devout Christian and as one of the solid citizens of the NBA, quickly issued an apology.

The rebukes were certainly warranted. Ward repeated some of the oldest and most menacing forms of Christian anti-Semitism, and his comments should not go unchallenged.

So why feel even a bit sorry for him? Because it's clear if one reads Konigsberg's article that Ward was attempting, in a confused way, to engage in a Christian-Jewish dialogue. In the course of researching an article on the Knicks, Konigsberg attended several of the Bible-study sessions that Ward and a few other players hold while on the road. In some of those meetings, the players peppered Konigsberg with questions about Judaism. One gathers from their questions that this was a rare encounter with a Jew. Not surprisingly, Ward eventually felt compelled to offer Konigsberg his version of a Christian witness.

In Konigsberg's own telling of the story, there's a certain poignancy in Ward's situation. For example, the group used a study guide that one of the players had picked up at a Christian bookstore. Their Bible group was a typical American do-it-yourself effort, with no assistance from a pastor or a more mature Christian.

Konigsberg also stresses how much the Knick players "hunger for guidance and connection." His article reveals the NBA to be a cold and isolated world in which the players, many of them barely out of their teens, have little reason to be loyal to one another or to their coaches. While they are in some ways pampered by their employers, they are also treated with mercenary disregard. As Konigsberg suggests, players like Ward, who take the time for Bible study, are at least reaching out to other people and seeking some larger perspective on their lives.

Ward's understanding of Judaism is indeed uninformed and ill-founded—as is too often the case for many Christians. He is unaware of the church's lethal tradition of anti-Semitism, and he doesn't recognize that God's covenant with Israel remains intact. What's saddest of all about the case, however, is that this earnest Christian lacked, and perhaps still lacks, connection to a Christian community that could give him a fuller understanding of his own faith.