Reflections on the August 2008 'Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today' of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance

31.03.2010 | ICCJ / Theology Committee

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The International Council of Christians and Jews is committed to understanding and cooperation between Christians and Jews based on respect for each other"s identity and integrity. We affirm that in honest dialogue each person remains loyal to his or her own essential faith commitment, recognizing in the other person his or her integrity and otherness [from ICCJ"s *Mission Statement*].

These and other convictions are more fully expressed in the ICCJ"s recent document, A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians, which was issued at our annual meeting in Berlin, Germany in July 2009. It is also known as "The Twelve Points of Berlin."

It is because of our dedication to mutual affirmation and understanding between Jews and Christians that we wish to offer these reflections on a document coincidentally also issued in Berlin, but one year earlier. This is a study document of the theological commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, entitled "The Berlin Declaration on the Uniqueness of Christ and Jewish Evangelism in Europe Today."

We recognize that its authors are grappling with the extremely difficult question confronting Christian theology of how to reconcile mission with dialogue with Jews in the wake of the Shoah and the long prior history of Christian oppression of Jews. While the statement is clearly motivated by a sincere desire for repentance and by an authentic love of Christ to spread the Gospel, in our opinion it suffers from a number of weaknesses.

We offer these comments and questions in order to further the theological discussions that we

believe should occur both among Christians and in Christian-Jewish dialogue.

1. We believe that Christian theologizing about Jews (and vice-versa) needs to engage the other"s perspectives in a serious manner. That does not seem to be a consideration in the "Berlin Declaration."

2. The statement correctly notes that, "Everyone needs what God offers by his grace: forgiveness of sin and a transforming divine presence in those who respond." However, it seems to assume that the Jewish people do not continue to benefit from a grace-filled relationship with God. Perhaps this premise is based on the conviction that Jesus Christ is the only mediator of grace, but ought Christians therefore to conclude that divine grace, the gift of God"s love and presence, is restricted only to baptized Christians? Surely, the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people, which are rightly revered as canonical by Christians, testify to a God who ever-faithful, even when human beings fall short of God"s desires. To empty these scriptures of their significance to the Jewish people by judging them meaningful only in reference to Christ risks falling into the ancient heresy of Marcionism (the view that Jesus revealed a new God of love, displacing the judgmental "God" of the Old Testament). But if, then, God is ever-faithful to the divine commitment to the Jewish people, then God"s grace also continues to bless them. This is true even if, from a Christian point of view, God"s Word Jesus Christ mysteriously mediates this grace-filled relationship in ways unknown to Jews and Christians alike.

3. The statement quite properly affirms "the importance of dialogue in promoting mutual understanding and sympathy." But by holding that "dialogue and evangelism are not mutually exclusive," and by admitting that "most of all" the authors want "to invite Jewish people and all others to consider the claims of Jesus," it is clear that mutual understanding is not the primary goal of dialogue for the authors of the "Berlin Declaration."
   Even though it should be praised for recognizing that "Christians have much to learn from the Jewish people," the statement is, in fact, uninformed by Jewish self-understanding of their own religious experience and tradition. The Jewish religious community understands itself to be in relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Religiously observant Jews employ various traditions of interpretation in following the mitzvoth given in the Torah, evidence of their being embraced by God"s love and blessing. Can Christians simply ignore this Jewish self-understanding in order to "challenge them to consider the message of the Messiah"? How is such behavior not arrogant and disrespectful despite the statement"s claims to the contrary? If their self-understanding is dismissed, should Jews not rightly see dialogue an invitation to apostatize?
   "We are convinced that authentic dialogue never seeks to persuade the other of one’s own truth claims, but rather to change one’s own heart by understanding others on their own terms, to whatever degree possible. In fact, interreligious dialogue in the fullest sense of the term is impossible if any of the parties harbor desires to convert the other. It is also the general experience of both Christians and Jews that interreligious dialogue provides deeper insights into one’s own religious tradition" (*A Time for Recommitment*, The Story of a Transformed Relationship, B,4).

4. The "Berlin Declaration" affirms "the right of Jewish believers in Jesus to practice those traditions that affirm their identity," but seems unable to also affirm the religious identity of non-baptized Jews. Instead, the statement is comfortable in taking away from the Jewish community the right to determine what constitutes authentic Jewish identity by simply asserting that "Jews can believe in Jesus" and still remain Jews. Is defining Jewish identity a right Christians possess?

5. Finally, the statement lacks any hint that salvation in Christ has yet to reach its ultimate fulfillment in the Reign of God. By only using the present tense in such phrases as "the

fulfillment of God"s promises," the statement disregards a key Christian understanding that salvation is both "already" and "not yet." For instance, Christians pray daily to God that "thy Kingdom come." This unfinished dimension of salvation history is crucial for Christian-Jewish relations because it enables Jews and Christians to see each other as contributing to preparing the world for the messianic age in distinctive yet complementary ways. On the other hand, a one-dimensional stress by Christians on what has already been realized excludes Jews from any ongoing mission to witness to God before the nations, even if Jews believe they have that (and other) missions.

We recognize that many of the theological questions posed above relate to contrasting Christian understandings of how to interpret both Testaments of the Christian Bible?a very complex subject. Therefore, the differences between the "Twelve Points of Berlin" and the "Berlin Declaration" about Christian relations with the Jewish people can be addressed only by conversation about biblical interpretation?a conversation to which Jews have much to contribute as well.

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on behalf of the ICCJ, Executive Board