



Time to Turn' - The Evangelical Churches A.B. and H.B. in Austria and the Jews

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Declaration of the General Synod. Vienna, Nov. 4, 1998

Time to Turn

The Evangelical [Protestant] Churches in Austria and the Jews

On November 4th, 1998, the General Synod of the Evangelical Church A.B. and H.B. [Augsburg and Helvetian Confessions] in Austria resolved to issue the following declaration. The reference in section I. of the present declaration to the preliminary comments of both the General Synod 1965 and the Evangelical Churches of the Helvetian Confession 1996, make clear that this resolution has a long and in different ways also difficult history.

Not least, the initiatives of the

*Coordination
Committee for the
2nd European
Ecumenical
Assembly 1997 in
Graz have at last
given impetus to
introduce the fruits
of years of efforts
within the
Evangelical
Churches of Austria
towards a new
relationship of these
churches to
Judaism's history
since biblical times
– also since the
Reformation into our
own days, again
and again
determined by
explicit enmity
against Jews – and
to Jewish fellow
citizens in our midst.
It is clear that the
result in the present
declaration is still
only the beginning
of a learning
process, which must
be checked for its
effectiveness by a
practice following
from it.*

*It is important that
this text not only
establishes the
impossibility of a
Christian-based
enmity against
Jews, as for
instance already in
1965, but that
renewed relations to
the Jewish people
now also obliges the
Christian churches
to enter into a
relationship of
learning and
dialogue with it.*

*Much is to be done
in this regard within
the evangelical
churches in Austria.
The following text
mentions such tasks
in detail. Ulrich
Trinks*

[Translator's note: The term *Evangelische Kirche* as proper noun has to be translated "Evangelical Church" though it actually means the "Protestant Church", or the two churches of the Reformation united as in Austria. It does not indicate North American evangelical Christianity. "Protestant" has been applied in translation of *evangelische* whenever it is used to modify other nouns.]

Declaration of the General Synod of the Evangelical Church A.B. and H.B. in Austria

[Augsburg and Helvetian Confessions]

I.

November 9th of this year will see the 60th anniversary of the 1938 pogrom against Jews. This event prompts us Protestant Christians and churches in Austria to again grapple with this century's dreadful history of the deliberate attempt to annihilate the Europe's Jews. The part played by Christians and

churches and their shared responsibility for the suffering and misery of Jews can no longer be denied. The word of the General Synod of 1965 and the "Declaration of Principle of the Evangelical Church H.B." of 1996 are to be remembered.

II.

We realize with shame that our churches showed themselves inured by the fate of the Jews and countless other victims of persecution. This is all the more incomprehensible because Protestant Christians in their own history, especially in the Counter-Reformation, were themselves discriminated against and persecuted. The churches did not protest against visible injustice; they were silent and looked away; they did not "throw themselves into the spokes of the wheel" (Bonhoeffer).

Therefore, not only individual Christians but also our churches share in the guilt of the Holocaust/Shoah.

We remember with

grief all victims of persecution who were divested of their civil rights and their human dignity, abandoned to an unrelenting pursuit and murdered in concentration camps.

III.

The General Synod asks the Jewish congregations [Israelitische Kultusgemeinden] and the Jews in Austria to receive the following assurance:

- The Evangelical Churches know themselves obliged to always keep alive the memory of the Jewish people's history of suffering and of the Shoah.
- The Evangelical Churches know themselves obliged to check the teaching, sermon, instruction, liturgy and practice of the church for any antisemitism and to also,

through its
media, stand
up against
prejudices.

- The Evangelical Churches know themselves obliged to fight every social and personal anti semitism.
- The Evangelical Churches want, in their relations to Jews and Jewish congregations, to walk a common way into a new future.

Therefore, we make an effort to reconsider and shape the relationship of Protestant Christians and Jews accordingly.

IV.

The evolution of antisemitism into the Shoah represents for us as Protestant churches and Protestant Christians a challenge that reaches down into the roots of our faith. The God of Christians is no other than the God of Israel who called Abraham to faith and chose the

enslaved Israelites to be his people. We profess to the permanent election of Israel as God's people. "God did not terminate this covenant" (Martin Buber). It exists to the end of time.

We read God's word in John's Gospel: "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). God himself is the salvation which he gave to his people and which he expands over everyone in the Jew Jesus, whom we confess as the Christ. God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim. 2:4).

The quarrels in the New Testament about the meaning of Jesus and the gospel must not be misused in anti-Jewish ways. The fact that they were argued among Jews was suppressed by the gentile Christian community. The church felt itself chosen alone to be the people of God and claimed the rejection of Israel. Since then anti-Jewish excesses run all the way through the entire church history.

In this regard we as Protestant Christians are burdened by the late writings of Luther and their demand for expulsion and persecution of the Jews. We reject the contents of these writings.

The biological and political racism of the 19th and 20th centuries was able to make use of Christian anti-Judaism for its religious-ideological confirmation. Against this there was hardly any resistance in our churches. Rather, Protestant Christians and pastors also involved themselves in antisemitic propaganda. If the churches looked after persecuted Jews, it looked mainly after those who were baptized.

This, our burdened past, demands an about-turn which comprises the church's interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, its theology, teaching and practice.

V.

When we Christians read the Bible of both testaments as a unified whole, we

have to listen carefully to the Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, of our Old Testament, knowing well that for Jews the New Testament is not Holy Scripture.

Differences in the understanding of Scripture can be tolerated in mutual respect. "The Biblical symbols of hope are an impulse for the common effort around the formation of a world of justice and peace."
(Ecumenical Assembly Erfurt 1996).

It is to be considered that the New Testament – which proclaims Jesus Christ as the redeemer of the world – was written mainly by Jews.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was, according to origin, education and his faith in God, a Jew and has to be understood as a Jew.

According to the resolution of the Ecumenical Assembly in Erfurt 1996, the Christian proclamation must learn "to recognize Judaism as a living and diverse entity

that existed already before Christianity and simultaneously with it. That forbids every triumphalist arrogance."

The "Declaration for the Meeting between Lutheran Christians and Jews" of 1990 calls for the realization that God himself sends his people. This *missio dei* teaches one to understand ones own possibilities and tasks. "God authorizes the mutual witnessing of faith in confidence of the free workings of God's spirit, because he decides about the effect of the faith-witness and about the eternal salvation of all people. He frees one from the compulsion to have to do everything oneself. Because of this realization Christians are obliged to witness and serve in respect for the conviction and the faith of their Jewish dialogue partners."

Because the covenant of God with his people Israel exists in nothing but grace to the end of time, mission among Jews is theologically not justifiable and to be rejected as a

church program.
The dialog of
Christians with
Judaism, in which
they are rooted, is
to be fundamentally
distinguished from a
dialog of Christians
with other religions.

VI.

50 years ago the
State of Israel was
founded. We wish it
justice and peace.
We hope and pray
that this state finds
a secure peace with
its neighbors – in
particular with the
Palestinian people –
in mutual respect of
the right of
residence, so that
Jews, Christians
and Muslims can
live together
peacefully.

We consciously join
the
recommendation of
the Ecumenical
Council of the
Churches in Austria
to observe the 17th
of January, the day
before the
beginning of the
Week of Prayer for
Christian Unity, as a
day of solidarity with
Judaism and
thereby include the
Jewish people in
intercession.

Vienna, on October
28, 1998

