



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

04.11.1998 | Evangelical [Protestant] Church in Austria

**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 cong  
regations, 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

