



Christians and Jews. A Declaration of the Lutheran Church of Bavaria

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Preamble

The question of the relationship of Christians and Jews points to the center of Christian belief: Faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom we Christians confess as the father of Jesus Christ, ties Christians and Jews together. The theme is not only laid on the church from the outside; in the same measure it puts basic life-questions to the church and theology. Because Jesus of Nazareth belonged to the Jewish people and was rooted in its religious traditions, thereby "through their confession of Jesus Christ Christians are brought into a unique relationship to Jews and their faith, [a relationship] that is distinct from the relationship to other religions."

Through its action of April 23, 1997 - "Christians and Jews: Invitation to a Fresh Start" - the territorial synod of the Lutheran Church of Bavaria embraced this understanding as its own and called for a Year of Emphasis on this theme. At the conclusion of this year, in the month of the sixtieth anniversary of the national pogrom [Kristallnacht], the Lutheran Church of Bavaria releases the following declaration. Its purpose is to provide our territorial church with a basis for discussion to reflect on our relationship to Jews and Judaism and to provide an initiative for further work in this field.

I. The Consensus Reached in the Protestant Church

1. The Common Roots of Judaism and Christianity

Jewish belief and Christian belief live from the same biblical roots. Jews and Christians confess one God, the Creator and Savior. Jews and Christians both think of themselves as the People of God. Jews and Christians declare their faith in their public worship, in which are found many similarities. Jews and Christians are marked in their faith by the interaction of justice and love. Jews and Christians also live in the break in the shared history of God with God's people, the overcoming of which they await.

These elements in common have through centuries been forgotten and denied by Christians and misapplied and misinterpreted. For this reason, too, there came about the frightful persecutions and murders of Jewish persons, in which Christians participated, which were initiated by Christians or tolerated by Christians. In the German Protestant churches we have come during recent decades to an understanding that is important to us: that we must make a new beginning. In recent decades individual persons and agencies in the Lutheran Church of Bavaria have undertaken

vigorous initiatives, whose result the church judicatories seek to express in this declaration.

2. The Importance of the Shoah

The path to a fresh start in the relationships of Christians and Jews has to begin with an understanding of the complicity of Christians in the persecution and destruction of children, women, and men of Jewish origin (the Shoah, the Holocaust). The Shoah represents a deep challenge to Christian teaching and practice. It belongs to the historical development of centuries of an old anti-Jewish tradition, which also presents a total Christian problematic. This tradition helped to prepare the ground for the crimes against the Jews in the twentieth century. The Lutheran Church of Bavaria has a share in this guilt -as Lutheran and as German.

3. Luther and the Jews

It is imperative for the Lutheran Church, which knows itself to be indebted to the work and tradition of Martin Luther, to take seriously also his anti-Jewish utterances, to acknowledge their theological function, and to reflect on their consequences. It has to distance itself from every [expression of] anti-Judaism in Lutheran theology. In this, attention must be given not only to his polemics against the Jews but also to all places where Luther simplistically set the faith of the Jews as "works-righteousness" over against the gospel.

4. The Unrevoked Promise to Israel as People of God

Judaism and Christianity went different ways, and despite common roots they represent two different communities of faith. Nevertheless, Israel remains, according to statements of the New Testament (Rom. 11: 1), God's elect people. Its election is not canceled through the election of the church from the Jews and pagans. The Christian faith holds fast to the unrevoked election of Israel. Its reason for this rests in the faithfulness of God to keep God's promises.

5. The Responsibility of Christians toward the Jews

Recognition of the unrevoked election of the Jewish people and the central importance of Christian/Jewish relations places anti-Judaism in opposition to the deepest essence of the Christian faith. Therefore, it belongs to the most essential tasks of the church to separate from all enmity toward the Jews, to resist it wherever it appears, and to work for a relationship to Jews and to the Jewish religion that is shaped by respect, openness, and readiness for dialogue.

II. Theological Perspectives

1. The People of God

According to the entire biblical evidence, God has fixed the Jewish people in permanent relationship to God. This perspective is confirmed in the New Testament and is especially clearly expressed in Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "The gifts and calling of God are beyond repeal" (11:29). God's faithfulness remains inviolable, regardless of human conduct. Even if the majority of the Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah, God's promise concerning the people Israel whom God has chosen remains in force. According to the testimony of the New Testament, the church sees itself as the community of those who have been called from Jews and pagans to be God's people. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the church so to fix the church's understanding of itself in such a way that [the self-understanding] of the Jewish people is not thereby set aside.

2. The Jew Jesus as the Christ of the Church

Jesus was not only outwardly a member of the Jewish people. From a Christian point of view his message is also an elaboration and development of the affirmation of God shown in Israel's holy

writings, our "Old Testament" (2 Cor. 1:20). His efforts were directed primarily toward the gathering and renewal of Israel as God's people. The faith of Christians, of those who confessed the Jew Jesus as the Christ, has its roots in the expectations of the Messiah -of the Old Testament and of Judaism. The confession of Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins and is brought to life for the sake of our justification (Rom. 4:25), separates Christians and Jews. Of course, a return to the Jewish foundations of the Christian confession cannot reverse the separation of the ways, but it can bring the relationship of Christians and Jews to a new way.

3. The Meaning of the Old Testament in the Church

From the beginning the Old Testament has been holy scriptures to the church. The New Testament was never conceived as an alternative to the Old Testament. It is understood to be an interpretation of the Old Testament's understanding of God and humankind in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. In this the New Testament values the Old Testament not alone as witness to the law, but above all as a witness to the promise. In spite of the different exegesis of the Old Testament by Christians and Jews, the church thus learns to know the father of Jesus Christ as the God of the Old Testament.

III. Topics for Further Work

In the course of work with the theme "Christians and Jews" it has become evident that the following topical areas require further effort in the Bavarian territorial church as a Lutheran church:

1. Luther and Lutheranism

Both sayings of Martin Luther and specific expressions of Lutheran theology have had anti-Jewish consequences. Beyond taking the necessary distance from the content, the sources, motive, and historical effects need to be researched, thought through, and analyzed for the sake of a future Lutheran theology with respect to the Christian/Jewish dialogue. In contrast to the familiar practice, every denigrating contrast of Jewry (also Jewish groups, for example, the "Pharisees") or substantive content of Jewish religion (for example, the "Law") to the Christian gospel must be given up and a viewpoint of careful distinctions set in. The Lutheran Church must take on itself the task of fighting intolerance within the church as well as in the general society.

2. The Lutheran Church of Bavaria during the "Third Reich"

The Lutheran Church of Bavaria, together with other churches, knows itself to be co-responsible for anti-Jewish thoughts and actions that made possible or at least tolerated the crimes of the "Third Reich" against children, women, and men of Jewish origin. Although there were in the Lutheran Church of Bavaria some individuals who recognized the issue (for example, Wilhelm von Pechmann, Karl Steinbauer, Friedrich Seggel, Wilhelm Geyer), the church as a whole did not take seriously the so-called Jewish Question as a theological issue. The concrete involvements, neglect, and silence about the murder of the Jews are to be investigated thoroughly.

3. Christian Witness

The mandate to witness to all people the message of salvation in Jesus Christ belongs to the essential nature of the church. In this the church cannot fail to take seriously the witness and self-understanding of Judaism. Today, Christians have the task to think through anew how they are to understand their witness that Jesus Christ is the savior of all [persons] in respect to the Jews - how they designate it and what form they should give it.

4. The Promise of the Land and the State of Israel

The biblical tradition of the Promised Land is a sustaining element in the Jewish tradition. The belief that God has chosen the Jewish people stands in close connection with the faith that God promised the land to the Jewish people. The land of Israel has religious meaning for Jewry, different from that for Christians, for whom the salvation promises of God are not tied to a specific land. There are among the Jews varying concepts in respect to the understanding of "the Land" and its boundaries. Christians support the effort of the Jewish people to achieve a secure existence in their own state. At the same time, they are concerned for a peaceful solution in the Near East, which also includes the rights of the Palestinians, including especially the Christians among them, and which guarantees peace, justice, and security to all the people living there. Our Christian brothers and sisters there urge us to dedicate more attention to the theme of "justice." Therefore, we must think through more vigorously how justice is to be achieved in the region, without neglecting solidarity with the Jewish people.

5. Public Worship and Instruction

Christian teaching and practice share with Judaism the basic elements of biblical belief and of the carrying out of public worship. In spite of that, Christians have in both worship and Christian education all too often used aspects of the Jewish religion as a negative foil, in order to present the Christian self-understanding all the more positively. It is our task to discover what is common and what is indeed one's own, to test what separates as to its authenticity, and to take care that distorted and defamatory talk about the Jews and Judaism in public worship and teaching is not repeated.

Blessing

May God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, bless our efforts to attain a better relationship between Christians and Jews.

Translated by Prof. emer. Dr. Franklin H. Littell, Temple University Philadelphia, PA)

Translator's Note: From 1992 through 1995, representatives of the Lutheran Church of Bavaria met in Nürnberg to work through the theme, "Christians and Jews." In conclusion, on November 24, 1998, the bishop and other judicatories of the territorial ("Land") church issued the statement translated below. The translation was made from the document as printed in Freiburger Rundbrief, vol. 6, no. 3 (1999), pp. 191-197.