



## 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 Co  
unter-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

