



# Response to the Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

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## Response to the Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

**By David J. Levy**

In July of 1995 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada adopted a critically important statement addressed to the Jewish community of Canada. The significance of that statement, and the extent to which it is appreciated by the Jewish community of Canada, cannot be overstated. The document is a milestone in Canadian Christian-Jewish relations.

The question has now become:  
Where do Jews and Lutheran Christians go from here? I'll



suggest three possible directions.

## **Dealing with our heroes**

Rabbinic literature spans a period of more than two thousand years. One theme to be found in that literature is reflection upon the real lives of biblical personalities. If you were to take the quest for the historical Jesus and place it into a different academic milieu, you'd have an intellectual pursuit comparable to that rabbinic theme - the quest for the historical biblical heroes. One aspect of that quest strikes me as particularly relevant.

In chapter 30 of the Book of Genesis, Leah is busy giving birth to child after child. Rachel, meanwhile, remains barren. Rachel approaches Jacob and asks, "Give me children or else I die!"

The Torah records Jacob's reaction: "And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, "Am I in G-d's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the



womb?"

The rabbis of the Midrash (Bereshet Rabba 71:7) chastise Jacob for his reaction. They say: "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Jacob: Is that a way to answer a woman in distress? By your life, your children will one day stand in supplication before Rachel's son Joseph and he will likewise answer them, "Am I in the place of G-d?"

In chapter 16 of Genesis, the barren Sarai gives her handmaid Hagar to Avram. Hagar becomes pregnant. Sarai torments Hagar. Nachmanides states again that "our matriarch did transgress by this affliction . . ."

Even the heralded Moses is recorded, not by Rabbinic literature, nor by medieval literature, but by the Torah itself, in chapter 20 of Numbers, as having sinned as he smites the rock of Meribah instead of talking to it. For that sin, Moses is not permitted to enter the land of Israel.

The conclusion is obvious. According to Rabbinic thought,



perfection is a goal we strive for. Yet, the biblical heroes portrayed in the Torah - the real people whose biographies are believed to have been written by the Holy One, the Creator G-d, and recorded in the Torah - that same Creator G-d and author details the weaknesses of even His greatest leaders.

Why? What value could there possibly be to recording the transgressions of spiritual heroes?

Of course, the point is to inform us that His creation Adam, that which we call the human, is imperfect. To date, there has not been a perfect Adam. From Adam to Moses, from Sarai to Miriam, all biblical heroes have their shortcomings.

There are predictable consequences that flow out of an acceptance of that view of humanity. If spiritual heroes are imperfect, how much more so the average individual?

Thus, imperfection is normal and ought to be coped with as the unchangeable



reality of human existence. That's the human challenge, the human struggle.

With that background, we can address the first of the three avenues for future Lutheran-Jewish Dialogue.

## **Revisiting Luther**

From an early age, all 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Christians were indoctrinated with Jew hatred. Everybody hated the Jews; there simply was no option. Nor were there any exceptions. There were no other intellectual options.

Reuchlin did not preserve Jewish texts because he loved Jews he preserved the texts because he believed in free scholarly access to the sources of Christian kabbalah. Erasmus had no love of Jews, and attributed France's superiority to the fact that France alone was "not infected with heretics, with Bohemian schismatics, with Jews, with half-Jewish Marranos." [Marrano:



Christianized Jew of  
medieval Spain.]

In that case, an  
agenda item for  
Lutheran-Jewish  
relations would be a  
revisiting of the  
implications of that  
which is referred to  
as "the early  
writings versus the  
later writings."

Often, reflecting on  
the contrast  
between Luther's  
earlier and later  
writings, young  
Luther is portrayed  
as a Jew-lover who,  
in his later life,  
becomes a Jew-  
hater. Is that  
portrayal  
defensible? Suffice  
it to say that even  
the attempt to  
defend it is  
potentially offensive.

Was there a  
pragmatic  
component to early  
Luther's toleration  
of the Jews? In his  
1523 That Christ  
Was Born a Jew,  
Luther states that  
early missionary  
attempts had failed  
"not so much  
[because of] the  
Jews" obstinacy and  
wickedness, as  
rather [through] the  
absurd and asinine  
ignorance and the  
wicked and  
shameless life of  
the popes, priests,  
monks and  
scholars."



Did early Luther respectfully tolerate a Jewish presence in the hopes of proving through the conversion of the Jews that his anti-Catholic teachings were in fact truth? Did Luther see the Jews, not as Jews, but as potential ammunition in his anti-Catholic arsenal? Perhaps yes. Regardless, he certainly did not love the obstinate and wicked Jews.

Even setting aside historical inaccuracy, I can think of no factor that should motivate one to attempt a defense of Luther. Luther was an Adam, a human, created and imperfect. As such, Luther was as capable of hate as Jacob was of impatience and Moses of anger. Luther's weaknesses ought to be highlighted no differently than Moses', Jacob's, or Abraham's.

Human spirituality advances by learning from the mistakes of its leaders no less than by learning from their divinely granted blessings. To attempt apologetics handicaps the



cause of human spirituality.

Everybody hated the Jews. Let us stop describing Luther as a disenchanted idealist and instead discuss the consequences of hatred.

## **Issues involving the Holocaust**

My second point is inspired by reference to the Holocaust in the ELCIC document. I would suggest, as have others, that the Holocaust is the most important Christian occurrence since the Reformation.

Franklin Littell has said: "The murder of six million Jews by baptized Christians, from whom membership in good standing was not (and has not yet been) withdrawn, raises the most insistent question about the credibility of Christianity."

Harry Cargas says the same differently: "The Holocaust is, in my judgment, the greatest tragedy for Christians since the crucifixion. In the first instance, Jesus died; in the latter,



Christianity may be said to have died. In the case of Christ, the Christian believes in a resurrection. Will there be, can there be, a resurrection for Christianity?"

If the Holocaust is that important a Christian occurrence, and if, as there appears to be, there is a unique connection between the writings of Martin Luther and the writings of Adolf Hitler, and, as others have argued, between the policies suggested in Luther's later writings and the policies adopted by the Third Reich, and in light of the fact that in 1933 the Nazis reprinted Luther's diatribe, *On The Jews and Their Lies*, then perhaps the Lutheran community bears a special obligation to see that the Holocaust appears on the Christian agenda.

What is meant by appearing on the Christian agenda? To begin with, I mean commemoration of the Holocaust in the Christian community.

To illustrate the problem, please



realize that, five years ago, I brought this topic up to the Kitchener Council of Churches. They responded by suggesting that the Holocaust was not a Christian issue. Perhaps out of a Lutheran-Jewish dialogue would grow a more general understanding of how it is that the Holocaust is, indeed, a Christian problem.

Second, courses on the Holocaust ought to be obligatory for every seminary student. The theological issues that the Holocaust prompts are the ticket to a future of world peace and intercommunal understanding. As well, you cannot approach an understanding of contemporary Judaism without an understanding of the Holocaust. To this very day, congregants regularly bring issues to my attention that grow directly out of the Holocaust experience.

Third, might be to bring up for responsible dialogue the current debate over responsibility.



Daniel Goldhagen's  
book, Hitler's  
Willing  
Executioners:  
Ordinary Germans  
and the Holocaust,  
has returned to  
centre stage the  
topic of  
responsibility.

We can anticipate  
some popular  
discussion of the  
issue on the op-ed  
pages of our local  
rags. Such has  
occurred in the  
Kitchener-Waterloo  
Record, with pieces  
submitted by James  
Skidmore of Wilfrid  
Laurier University  
and the valuable  
response from Peter  
Mikelic, a pastor  
with the Lutheran  
church.

However, there is a  
world of difference  
between discussion  
on the op-ed pages  
and dialogue. The  
issue is a painful  
one, but one which  
needs discussion.  
Were there innocent  
bystanders?

## **Dealing with stalemates**

The third path for  
further  
consideration would  
be that referred to in  
the final paragraph  
of the ELCIC  
document. What  
does it mean to live  
your "faith in Jesus  
Christ in love and



full respect for the Jewish people"?

Again, to illustrate the question, allow me to continue reflecting upon the early attitudes of Luther.

When we counsel a young couple purportedly in love and considering marriage, we assure them that love means accepting a person as they are, accepting the fact that they might well change over time, but that neither spouse will ever be able to control or direct that change. You don't marry with the hope that you'll be able to change a person. By definition, love means you accept them as they are.

Can Luther be described as loving the Jews if his motive for maintaining relations was the changing of the Jews, that is, their conversion?

To the Jew, the ideas of "witness intended to inspire conversion" and "love of the Jews" are mutually exclusive ideas. You do not love me if you want me to convert. If you love me, the conversion



issue is irrelevant.

To hear Luther described as a friend of the Jews, and in the same breath to hear of his desire to convert the Jews, is thus an absurd comment.

The Jewish perspective is that anybody who wants to convert the Jews does not love the Jews.

Of course, there is a standard Christian response.

Christianity has something it wishes to share, and the desire to share is testimony to the love. There is no need to review the entire debate; it's been going on for centuries. In short, the debate ends in a stalemate. You're not going to change my mind and I'm not going to change yours.

So what do we do and where do we go? How do we deal with stalemates?

I found helpful to the "stalemate dilemma" the wording of the final sentence of the ELCIC statement: "We pray that greater understanding and cooperation may continually grow between Lutheran



Christians and the Jewish community in Canada."

Christian-Jewish relations via dialogue seem to oscillate between two poles, the syncretistic pole (the "that which we have in common") and the irreconcilable differences pole (the "that which we do not share"). The polar preference, so to speak, in my experience has been dependent upon the participants in the event.

As it turns out, the first, the syncretistic pole, is easily accepted. It is naturally optimistic, full of hope, and bodes well for the future - all the while sweeping the difficult issues under the carpet.

Yet, some balance must be maintained. Part of that balance involves, first, a recognition of the irreconcilable differences, and second, a strategy of acceptance of those differences. I've heard it referred to as a "theology of the other."

That being the case, how can we as Christians and Jews



deal with the reality  
of the classic  
Christian definition  
of love as "witness  
with the intent of  
inspiring  
conversion" and the  
classic Jewish  
rejection of that  
definition? How do  
you deal with  
stalemates?

Certainly we need  
go no further than  
our differing  
perspective on  
Jesus. How do we  
cope with that? How  
do we help our  
congregants cope  
with that? Thus,  
while cooperation  
focuses upon that  
which we have in  
common (the  
syncretistic pole),  
the prayer for  
greater  
understanding  
directly addresses  
the pole of  
irreconcilable  
differences.

There are,  
apparently, two  
schools of thought  
as to how to  
approach the issue  
of irreconcilable  
differences. The first  
suggests that  
stalemates be  
acknowledged,  
placed on the back  
burner and  
restricted to that  
location. The  
stalemate is not  
allowed to  
precipitate anger,  
nor frustration, nor  
resentment. The



stalemate is  
relegated to a  
cerebral  
compartment. The  
Israeli scholar  
Shemaryahu  
Talmon, Augustin  
Cardinal Bea and  
others belong to this  
school of thought.

The second  
includes most  
others involved in  
Christian-Jewish  
dialogue. The back-  
burner approach  
just won't do.

It's going to take a  
while to undo  
nineteen centuries  
of negative  
baggage, but we'll  
never succeed if we  
don't get started.  
And the ELCIC  
statement was quite  
a jump start.

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