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SPEAKING OF GOD TODAY

Jews and Lutherans in Conversation

AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

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The Church and the Jewish People¹

I. The Church and Israel

The church may use the term Israel theologically only in the sense in which it appears in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments: in the first instance, as an expression of God's sovereign grace toward Abraham and his descendants, the people of the old covenant, to whom God revealed his will and promised his redemption for the blessing of the nations; in the second place, as an expression for the people of the new covenant made up of Jews and gentiles in which, through the redemption in Jesus Christ, the gentiles become fellow heirs of the promises. Here we take up both the New Testament assertions about the true seed of Abraham and the typological interpretations of Old Testament history as applied to the church.

Thus the church testifies that, by the fulfillment of the promises in Jesus the Messiah and by his acceptance by but a part of the Jews, a division has arisen which has placed the "old" Israel outside the "new." This division will be healed when "all Israel" (Rom. 11:26) recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as its Messiah. Only then will the mystery of the faithfulness of God toward his people be resolved. Those who share in the inheritance must recognize a grateful responsibility for the original heirs. It follows, therefore, that the church will pray for the Jews daily, especially in its Sunday worship.

Those who in faith through baptism have put on Christ Jesus are all Christians, without distinction, whether they have their origin in the people of the old covenant or among the gentiles. Terms such as "Hebrew Christian," and the like, introduce unbiblical divisions into the church.

1. Parts I-III of this document were prepared at a Consultation on the Church and the Jews, convened by the Lutheran World Federation's Department of World Mission at Løgumkloster, Denmark, in 1964. Part IV represents subsequent study by a Committee on the Church and the Jews, which completed its work at a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1969. The document was presented to the meeting of the LWF Commission on World Mission in Asmara, Ethiopia; that same year, and to the Fifth Assembly of the LWF in Evian, France, in July, 1970.

The gathering of Jews in the land of the patriarchs may in God's redemptive purposes have special importance. We live much too close to this development, however, to make a specific judgment about its religious significance: God's action in history we are unable to discern.

II. Mission and Dialogue

A. The church is called by its Lord to be his body in the world, and to proclaim the mighty works of God to all men (Acts 2:11). Following the call of its Lord, the church has the responsibility of beseeching all men on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). Because of this responsibility, the church also has the obligation to carry on organized mission activities through which the message of reconciliation is brought to men. As a member of the body of Christ, every Christian also shares in the "sent-ness" of the church. This quality of "being sent" applies in every area of the Christian's relationship to the world, and he will witness with his whole life in testifying to his faith (1 Pet. 3:15), in listening to others, in seeking to understand, and in sharing the burdens of his fellowman.

B. The witness to the Jewish people is inherent in the content of the gospel, and in the commission received from Christ, the head of the church. The mission will most effectively reflect the glory of Christ in his gospel when it is pursued in the normal activity of the Christian congregation, which reflects itself in the Christian witness of the individual members. Where Jewish communities in the world cannot normally be reached by Christian congregations, mission organizations must provide for the proclamation of the gospel to these people.

C. It is a Christian responsibility to seek respectfully to understand both the Jewish people and their faith. Therefore responsible conversations between Christians and Jews are to be desired and welcomed. Such conversations presuppose the existence of common ground on which Christians and Jews may meet, as well as points of difference. The conversations may be carried on through organized institutes, or by individuals and groups. The conversations do not assume an equating of the religions, nor do they require that Christians abstain from making their witness as a natural outgrowth of the discussions. Similarly Christians will listen gladly as Jews explain their insights of faith.

III. The Church and Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is an estrangement of man from his fellowmen. As such it stems from human prejudice and is a denial of the dignity and equality of men. But anti-Semitism is primarily a denial of the image of God in the Jews; it represents a demonic form of rebellion against the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and a rejection of Jesus the Jew, directed upon his people. "Christian" anti-Semitism is spiritual suicide. This phenomenon presents a unique question to the Christian church, especially in light of the long and terrible history of Christian culpability for anti-Semitism. No Christian can exempt himself from involvement in this guilt. As Lutherans, we confess our own peculiar guilt, and we lament with shame the responsibility which our church and her people bear for this sin. We can only ask God's pardon and that of the Jewish people.

There is no ultimate defeat of anti-Semitism short of a return to the living God in the power of his grace and through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ our Lord. At the same time, we must pledge ourselves to work in concert with others at practical measures for overcoming manifestations of this evil within and without the church and for reconciling Christians with Jews.

Toward this end, we urge the Lutheran World Federation and its member churches:

1. To examine their publications for possible anti-Semitic references, and to remove and oppose false generalizations about Jews. Especially reprehensible are the notions that Jews, rather than all mankind, are responsible for the death of Jesus the Christ, and that God has for this reason rejected his covenant people. Such examination and reformation must also be directed to pastoral practice and preaching references. This is our simple duty under the commandment common to Jews and Christians: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

2. To oppose and work to prevent all national and international manifestations of anti-Semitism, and in all our work acknowledge our great debt of gratitude to those Jewish people who have been instruments of the Holy Spirit in giving us the Old and New Testaments and in bringing into the world Jesus Christ our Lord.

3. To call upon our congregations and people to know and to love their Jewish neighbors as themselves; to fight against discrimination or persecution of Jews in their communities; to develop mutual understand-

ing; and to make common cause with the Jewish people in matters of spiritual and social concern, especially in fostering human rights.

IV. On the Theology of the Church's Relation to Judaism

1. We as Christians can only speak of the Jewish people if we say that we are all human beings standing under God's judgment and in need of his forgiveness. We are all men and women before we are Jews and Christians. What we say here in a special way about the Jews must be understood in the light of this assertion.

The relationship between Jews and Christians has been confused through the centuries by two wrong assumptions. The first assumption falsifies the Christian understanding by seeing the Jews of all times as identical with that Jewish group which in the first century rejected Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah. The second falsifies the Jewish understanding by seeing all Christians as in principle involved in the hate and persecution which were inflicted on the Jews by the official church and by nations claiming a Christian tradition. While this Committee claims no competence to remove the existing negative opinions held by Jews, it must contribute to the task of eliminating all those barriers raised by past and present Christian misunderstanding which stand in the way of our conversation with the Jews and our understanding of their faith.

We shall have to engage in an ongoing encounter with Jews and Judaism which takes seriously both Jewish and Christian history. In deepening the Jewish-Christian relationship we expect to find ways of understanding each other which have been lost due to historical circumstances. Theological education—and the teaching of church history in particular—will have to undergo considerable revision if this is to be done. Teachers and pastors must be given information and materials so that in their interpreting of biblical texts they will be sensitive to the false assumptions Christians have made.

The distinction between law and gospel which in Lutheran tradition becomes a key for interpreting the whole scriptural revelation is connected with this hermeneutical problem. This specific emphasis places a particular burden on Jewish-Lutheran relations. But for this reason it lends increased urgency to theological encounter. As Lutherans we believe, on the basis of Paul's witness, that it is God's action in Christ which justifies the sinner. Thus we cannot speak about the law and about righteousness as though it were obedience which lays the foundation for

relationship to God. The theological issue here touches both Jewish-Christian dialogue and Christian use of the Old Testament. Our understanding can be traced to Luther and his reception through Augustine of certain Pauline motifs. It is possible, however, that our whole outlook has been shaped and our relationship to the Jewish people has been vitiated by a strongly negative understanding of the law and its function. This, it seems to us, might well be a matter for consideration by the Lutheran World Federation Commission on Theology in cooperation with a possible future Committee on the Church and the Jews.

2. As we try to grasp the theological meaning of the problem we face, we recognize two aspects of the Christian understanding of God's self-disclosure, both of which lead us to the limits of human perception and speech. The first is the fact that with the coming of Jesus into the world a development began which is incomprehensible in its dimensions. It can only be described as an act of God's love for all men. In the moment when, according to Christian faith, God acted to bring his revelation to its fulfillment, among those who had first received his revelation many did not find themselves able to respond in faith to what God was now doing in Jesus of Nazareth. In spite of this rejection, however, God's saving grace found a way into the world and no human guilt or rejection could negate it. The faith and the universal proclamation that God became man, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, is an offense to human wisdom and particularly to the religious view of God's glory. It is as if God had of necessity to meet rejection and to suffer the consequences of his love in order to bring life and salvation to mankind.

The second aspect is closely related to the first. Because Jesus took upon himself his cross and became obedient unto death, God raised him from the dead. His death and resurrection constitute a special Christian hope for the whole world. This implies the crucial paradox that for the Christian faith there is a divine future for mankind since Jesus the Nazarene was rejected. Thus we are here directed toward the mystery of God's inscrutable ways with men.

Mystery and paradox—the point where human logic leads no further—stand at the center of all Christian thought. That is the case with Christology, but it is equally true of eschatology, and it applies to ecclesiology as well. God has not only prepared a future for all mankind, but has bound this future to the cross and resurrection of the man Jesus of Nazareth. It is our conviction that the central position of the cross

and resurrection of Jesus has fundamental consequences for the understanding of the church. This was perceived and expressed in a unique way by Luther. He did not accept identification of the elect people of God with a specific ecclesiological tradition. This view has led to the fatal alternatives of medieval church-centered theology, in which the Jewish people were treated from a position of superiority. Luther opposed any kind of a "theology of glory," i.e., any attempt to see and proclaim God and his deeds and works (including the church) primarily in terms of might, of lordship, of victory and triumph. The theological paradox which confronted Luther in his historical situation, however, proved to be too much for him. This one can see from his later writings against the Jews. In these polemic tracts a theology of glory does break in. Luther's anxiety about the church's existence became so strong that he found himself no longer able to let the future rest in God's hands but, in anticipation of what he read to be God's future judgment, called upon the secular arm to effect that judgment in the present. In doing so he overstepped the bounds of what it lies in human authority to do, to say nothing of love. The consequences of this are still with us. The lessons which the church has had to learn in the midst of the holocausts of our century compel us to find a new, more profound, more sober, and at the same time more Christian attitude.

Because of the deep and tragic involvement of men of Christian tradition in the persecution of the Jewish people, the cruel and dangerous anti-Jewish attacks in some of the writings of the old Luther, and the continuing threats in our time to the existence of the Jews as a community, we assert our Christian responsibility for their right to exist as Jews.

3. Jews, on their side, insist that there can be mutual respect and dialogue only if the "legitimacy" of Judaism is recognized by Christians. We believe that this includes not only ethnic and political but also religious factors. What does it mean for us to acknowledge its "legitimacy"? Remembering past Christian criticism of Judaism, Jews demand of Christians recognition of Judaism as a "living" religion. Can such recognition be given? Does it mean that we see two separate but necessary ministries within the one economy of salvation? Is it possible to acknowledge that the survival of Judaism is an act of God without also saying that this survival is a definitive event of salvation history? Does affirmation of the survival or acknowledgment of the legitimacy of Judaism cancel the responsibility of the Christian to bear witness to the Jew at the right time and in the proper way?

In the light of these questions we offer the following affirmations:

We as Lutherans affirm our solidarity with the Jewish people. This solidarity is legitimized in God's election and calling into being in Abraham's seed a people of promise, of faith, and of obedience peculiar unto him, a people whose unity will one day become manifest when "all Israel" will be saved. The Lutheran churches, therefore, may not so appropriate the term "people of God" and "Israel" to the church in such a way as to deny that they applied in the first instance to the Jewish people. They may not assert that continuity of the church with the covenant people of Abraham in such a way as to question the fact that present-day Judaism has its own continuity with Old Testament Israel.

Thus our solidarity with the Jewish people is to be affirmed not only despite the crucifixion of Jesus, but also because of it. Through his death Jesus has brought about reconciliation with God, has broken down the barriers between men, and has established a ministry of reconciliation which encompasses all men, both Jews and gentiles.

Thus our solidarity with the Jewish people is grounded in God's unmerited grace, his forgiveness of sin and his justification of the disobedient. Whenever we Christians, therefore, speak about "rejection" and "faith," "disobedience" and "obedience," in such a way that "rejection" and "disobedience" are made to be attributes of Jews while "faith" and "obedience" are made to be attributes of Christians, we are not only guilty of the most despicable spiritual pride, but we foster a pernicious slander, denying the very ground of our own existence: grace, forgiveness, and justification.

After all that has happened, the existence of the Jewish people in the world today cannot therefore be seen in the first instance as a problem to be encountered, much less as an embarrassment to be faced by the churches, but as a profound cause for wonder and hope. Despite all the inhuman actions of men and the frightful ambiguities of history, God remains faithful to his promise. We have here tangible evidence that God's grace is yet at work countering the demonic powers of destruction and guaranteeing a future for mankind which will bring the full unity of God's people.

In understanding ourselves as people of the new covenant which God has made in Jesus the Christ, we Christians see the Jewish people as a reminder of our origin, as a partner in dialogue to understand our common history, and as a living admonition that we too are a pilgrim people, a people enroute toward a goal that can only be grasped in hope. The

church, therefore, may never so understand the Word which has been entrusted to it, the Baptism which it must administer, and the Holy Supper which it has been commanded to celebrate as possessions which give Christians superiority over the Jews. The church can only administer in humility the mysteries which God has committed to it—preaching the crucified and risen Christ, baptizing into his death, showing forth his death till he come.

The word which our churches, in bearing witness to Jesus the Christ, must share with Jews as with other men is a joyful message of imperishable hope. This message shows forth a time when God's purpose with his covenant in Abraham and with his covenant in Jesus the Christ will be fulfilled. Then God overcomes all blindness, faithlessness, and disobedience and will be all in all.