



## **Martin Luther and the Jews. A necessary reminder on the occasion of the Reformation anniversary**

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In 2017 the EKD celebrates the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. On this occasion, we look back over our historical and theological heritage and inquire what essential insights it holds for today. Amidst all the gratitude and joy, we do not close our eyes to the mistakes made by the Reformers and Reformation churches and their involvement in guilt.

### **Troubling perceptions**

1. The Reformation aimed to reform the church by the power of the gospel. This rarely gave rise to a new way of regarding the Jews. The Reformers operated within a tradition of anti-Judaic thought patterns, the roots of which reached back to the early church.
2. It is our responsibility to clarify how we deal with the anti-Judaic statements made during the Reformation period and the history of their impact and reception. We ask to what extent they fostered a generally anti-Judaic attitude in Protestant churches and how this can be overcome today. Engaging with Martin Luther's attitude towards the Jews takes on exemplary significance in this process.
3. Luther linked central insights of his theology with anti-Judaic thought patterns. His recommendations for dealing with Jews in practice were contradictory. First he argued for a friendly, persuasive approach to Jews, and then resorted to invective, demanding that they be deprived of their rights and expelled.
4. In the lead-up to the Reformation anniversary we cannot bypass this history of guilt. The fact that Luther's anti-Judaic recommendations in later life were a source for Nazi anti-Semitism is a further burden weighing on the Protestant churches in Germany.

### **A distressing legacy**

5. Luther's early statements and his late writings from 1538, with their undisguised hatred of Jews, show continuity in his theological judgment. He regarded the Judaism of his time as a religion that had missed its own calling. It was guided by the meritoriousness of works and refused to read the Old Testament as leading up to Jesus Christ. According to Luther, the suffering experienced by the Jews was an expression of God's punishment for their denial of Jesus Christ.
6. Luther's judgment was bound up with the western tradition of hostility towards the Jews. At first he rejected widespread slanderous tales such as the charges of desecrating the Eucharistic host and of ritual murder, stating that they were lies and fabrications. Later he returned to obsolete stereotypes and remained blinded by irrational fears and resentments.
7. Luther believed that Christians could only live alongside Jews on a temporary basis, and in the hope of converting them. In 1523, in a clear critique of the customary Jew-baiting, he expressed the hope that "if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians." <sup>[1]</sup> (*That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*). In 1543 he composed *On the Jews and Their Lies*. For fear that tolerating the Jewish religion could bring down the wrath of God upon the Christian community as well, he ended this treatise by recommending that the temporal authorities

e.g. burn synagogues, destroy Jewish houses, confiscate their Talmuds and prayer books, prohibit them from trading and draft them into forced labor. If that did not help, he advised driving out the Jews "like mad dogs". [2]

8. For centuries, people had recourse to Luther's advice. On the one hand, with reference to his attitude of qualified friendliness in 1523, they argued for tolerating Jews but also for a more intensive mission to the Jews. On the other, they appealed to Luther's late writings in order to justify hatred and persecution of Jews, in particular with the emergence of racist anti-Semitism and at the time of National Socialism. It is not possible to draw simple continuous lines. Nevertheless, in the 19th and 20th century Luther was a source for theological and ecclesial anti-Judaism, as well as for political anti-Semitism.

## **Renewing relationships**

9. After 1945 the churches embarked upon a learning curve about their culpable failure regarding Judaism-hesitantly at first, and this process is not yet complete. The Evangelical Church in Germany redefined its relationship with Judaism in theological terms, rejecting any form of hostility to Jews and calling for encounter with Judaism. Statements to this effect were included in the constitutions of many EKD member churches.
10. According to our present understanding, Luther's view of Judaism and his invective against Jews contradict his faith in the one God who revealed himself in Jesus the Jew. Luther's judgment upon Israel therefore does not correspond to the biblical statements on God's covenant faithfulness to his people and the lasting election of Israel.
11. In theology and church life we face the challenge of rethinking central theological doctrines of the Reformation and of not falling into disparaging anti-Judaic stereotypes. That particularly concerns the distinctions 'law and gospel', 'promise and fulfillment', 'faith and works' and 'old and new covenant'.
12. We acknowledge the need to deal critically with our Reformation heritage when interpreting Scripture, in particular the Old Testament. We recognize that "the Jewish exegesis of the Holy Scriptures of Israel [Tanakh] . contains a perspective which is also not only legitimate but even necessary for the Christian interpretation" (*Church and Israel*, Leuenberg Documents 6, II, 227). We can explore the richness of Scripture more profoundly when we are aware of Jewish biblical interpretation.
13. We recognize the part played by the Reformation tradition in the painful history of 'mismeeting' (from Martin Buber's 'Vergegnung') between Christians and Jews. The far-reaching failure of Protestant churches in Germany with regard to the Jewish people fills us with sorrow and shame. The horror at such historical and theological aberrations and the awareness of our share of guilt in the continued suffering of Jews give rise to a special responsibility to resist and oppose all forms of enmity and inhumanity towards Jews today.
14. "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (Martin Luther). The Reformation anniversary in 2017 is an opportunity to take further steps of repentance and renewal.

**Bremen, 11 November 2015**  
**Dr. Irmgard Schwaetzer**  
**The President of Synod**  
**Evangelical Church in Germany**

## Footnotes

[1] Luther's Works, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and

Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 45:200.  
[2] Ibid., 47:292.