

NEWSBRIEF

LUTHER AND THE JEWS

The 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

Resources to consider:

Martin Luther (Wikipedia)
Martin Luther and antisemitism (Wikipedia)
Guidelines for Jewish Christian Relations (ELCA)
Agreement between the Montana Synod of the ELCA and the Montana Association of Jewish Communities



Luther. Reformer. Theologian par excellence. Professor. Pastor. Religious extremist.

Saying Luther was an extremist may be an overstatement. The reason some might consider Luther to be an extremist is due to the caustic antiseptic verbiage he used in the latter years of his life. Luther was not a religious extremist in today's definition. He was passionate about Christ and the Gospel message. His passion significantly colored his language. A surprising group grabbed hold of these writings and used them to support their extreme dealings with the Jews. It is because of this many Lutherans today wish to put distance between themselves and Luther's language against the Jews.

Early in his life Luther, in an essay written in 1523, considered the Jews to be cousins and brothers of our Lord. He even wrote of dealing kindly with them. *"Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are...If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them...by the law of Christian love."* (Martin Luther, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," trans. Walter L. Brandt, in Luther's Works [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962, pp. 200-201, 229).

His earlier writings showed concern that Jews be converted to Christianity both through the message of Christ and loving treatment of them. However by the year 1536 Luther seemed to be changing and turning against the Jews. He wrote that they were doomed to hell. During this time frame Luther's prince, John Frederick, Elector of Saxony issued a mandate against the Jews. Luther refused to intervene on behalf of the Jews because they refused to convert to Christianity.

Luther's anti-Jewish language was picked up by the Nazi's in WW II who used him to justify their brutal violence. ***“On The Jews and Their Lies”*** written in 1543 was reprinted five times in Luther's lifetime. In it he used scathing language against the Jews and even wrote “we are at fault for not slaying them” (cited in Michael, Robert. "Luther, Luther Scholars, and the Jews," *Encounter* 46 (Autumn 1985) No. 4:343–344.) Just about every anti-Jewish book printed in Hitler's Third Reich contains references and quotations from Luther. In fact, ***“On the Jews and Their Lies”*** is said to have been the “blueprint” for a night of terror called “Kristallnacht” (Crystal Night). Jewish synagogues, businesses and stores had their windows shattered and the broken glass littered the streets of Germany and Austria. Many Jews were killed and thousands were imprisoned on that tragic night. It was the beginning of the attempted annihilation of the Jewish race by Hitler's Third Reich.

Today we are taken back and desire to put distance between us and Luther's violent and antisemitic writings. Yet some scholars interpret Luther's position as being more religious in nature than racial. (cf. “Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther,” Roland Bainton, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1978, p. 297)

Indeed as one studies Luther's Christology he comes off not so much racist as jealous for Christ and the Gospel message. His jealousy rose out of the intense struggle he engaged in to free, from papal error, the message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Luther was intense against all who opposed that message—Jews, Muslims and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church at the time. Another point to consider is that Luther seemed to believe that once the Gospel was freed from the chaos and confusion of “works righteousness” and the pope's corrupted teachings the Jewish people would quickly and eagerly embrace this good news. When that did not happen Luther became impatient and harsh.

Teaching on faith alone through grace alone, Luther writes that no matter how much or little we do we all have all of heaven when we

have Christ; but that *“without this God, who died and rose again let every (person) fear and hesitate nor presume to draw near to God or to come to Him, no matter how pious and holy of full of good works (they) might be. For God the Father cannot tolerate anyone who wants to go to Him or approach Him unless he brings His beloved Son Jesus Christ with (them). And so indeed the Son says in John 14:6. Here, then, all saints and their merits are utterly excluded so that nothing is to rate in the presence of God except Christ. That is why Jews, Turks and the pope, who despise the Son of God with His suffering death and resurrection and propose to come to God in a different way, stand condemned.”* (What Luther Says” #546, vol. 1, pp. 187-188)

Luther lived and wrote in turbulent times. Political upheaval, social unrest, fear of the eternal fires of hell and the power of the church to damn; the longing to be free from the authority and restraints of an evil minority who were jealous of their influence and wealth made for violent times. It is amazing and commendable that Luther had the courage to stand up and speak against the abuses of the times. He had the courage to clarify and defend the Gospel message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, based on Scripture alone. It is worth noting that Luther's language was harsh and unkind to any and all who opposed that message.

From our vantage point today we can say that our convictions and passion for living and proclaiming the message of Christ must never lose sight of the heart of that message. The good news of God's love for us in Christ ought to instruct and shape what we teach as well as how we communicate that message. Suggesting the mistreatment or destruction of those who disagree with our message puts us on the same level as the religious extremists of our day. Our proclamation must be done in Christian love, accompanied by listening and caring across religious and ethnic boundaries.

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