



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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LUTHER AND CONTEMPORARY INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

From the ELCA Consultative Panel
on Lutheran-Jewish Relations



The 500th anniversary of the Reformation provides an opportunity to reflect on Martin Luther's legacy. Does it help or hinder peaceful relations with individuals in other religions?

On first impression, the legacy seems unhelpful. Martin Luther lived in late medieval Christendom (a religiously based and religiously unified society in which only Christians could be citizens). Inter-religious relations were never his central concern. To be sure, he could acknowledge the way God provided good gifts (of parental love, food and shelter, for example) to Muslim children as well as to Christian children. He opposed a crusade against Muslims. Early in his career, he urged Christians to treat Jews with respect. But anti-Judaism surfaced frequently in his lectures, and his harsh treatises of the 1540s called upon rulers to destroy synagogues, burn books, and deny safe passage to Jews. In these respects, his own advice and behavior do not provide a model for Christians today. For this reason his harshly anti-Jewish statements have been repudiated by a variety of Lutheran churches. [The 1994 ELCA statement, "Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community," is at ELCA.org/en/Resources/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations.]

However, Luther's statements against the Jews in the 1540s violated some of his own principles [see Eric Gritsch, cited below]. To choose but one ex-

ample, Luther regarded God to be both hidden and revealed. Even with faith and the aid of Scriptures, even with God's self-disclosure in Jesus the Christ, humans cannot fully understand God or God's actions. According to the book of Romans, one item hidden from view is God's future judgment about the Jews. Paul ends his discussion of this topic with a doxology of praise (Romans 11:33-36), acknowledging the mystery of God. Luther's claim in the 1540s to know God's hidden judgments (about the Jews) therefore not only failed to heed Paul, it also violated his own limits regarding what can be known.

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Far more helpful are the underlying principles of Luther's theology. They open exciting and fruitful possibilities for a more respectful and workable understanding of inter-religious relations. They can equip Christians to engage Jews and others in positive, constructive and honest ways. We propose for consideration four of his signature principles.

1. A very basic principle for Luther is that God adopts people solely out of God's generosity, without any prerequisites. Humans are in no position to control or limit this generosity. Faith, for Luther, is primarily a matter of trust – trusting God's promises. The benefit of faith is not that it makes a person eligible for grace; the value of faith is that it celebrates and receives the benefits of God's generosity. Faith acknowledges what God has done, is already doing, and will do. What too often happens, however, is that "justification by grace through faith" gets understood to mean that a human must first have faith in Jesus, and then God will do the saving. This view ("you must first have faith") then produces a boundary that separates Christians from non-Christians in a way that limits God's generosity. To say that we do not know the limits of God's generosity is also to say that we do not know how far the good effects of God's generosity extend. In other words, with regard both to other Christians and to non-Christians, the mysteries of God's judgment and salvation ultimately remain beyond our knowing.

Luther was clear that no one could know for certain another person's relationship with God. The calling of the Christian is to share the good news of God's grace, not to decide who needs it and who does not. God's generosity is paramount, and the good news of that remarkable generosity is a principle we can claim and proclaim loudly and with joy.

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2. Luther asserted that God is active in the world in such a way as to empower but not to con-

trol. Nothing can exist without God's sustaining power. Creation is on-going. God is active in every realm of life, working in and through nature and other human beings, through social structures and individual actions, to bring good gifts to humans. The gospel enables us to see the consistency between the way God treats the chosen people (Israel and the church) and the way God treats the world as a whole. Every human is gifted by God. No one, in whatever religion, is beyond the pale of God's gifting. (Whether any specific person recognizes and acknowledges God as the source of their gifts is another question.)

God values all creation – across all differences. This principle can be reflected in our behavior and our attitude toward individuals in other religions.

3. A third principle to which Luther clung is a theology of the cross. This was Luther's alternative to scholasticism. The medieval scholastics endeavored to answer questions which the Bible did not. They began with a biblical or doctrinal idea and then used logical inference to fill in the gap.

As the distinction (between what was revealed and what was inferred) faded from view, every part of scholastic teaching seemed equally authorized by revelation. People were tempted to believe they could have the whole truth in one package. Luther objected.

He emphasized the limits of our knowing. God has disclosed enough for us to know God's gracious disposition toward us and to know something of God's character and purpose, but this knowing does not answer our every question or provide us with the whole truth.

If our knowing were complete, there would be no point in dialogue. Because our knowing is limited, dialogue – inter-religious and otherwise – is valuable.

Moreover, Luther emphasized the experiential and/or relational dimension of our knowing. We know God from within a relationship with God (whether healthy or broken) and not from some neutral stance. Our understanding of God can deepen with experience. A crucial dimension of this experiential knowing is suffering. God is seen more clearly through suffering (including the suffering of Jesus, the suffering of others, and one's own suffering) than through success. Humans are connected to each other through the commonality and universality of human suffering. And the purpose of the promises made by the God most fully revealed in the cross and resurrection is not to insulate humans from suffering but to "be with" them and to call them to "be with" others. A theology of the cross excludes triumphalism; we who know God's promise of gracious, trustworthy love need not have all the answers as we acknowledge the deep mysteries of God. We can live humbly within these limits and still stand in courageous solidarity and loving compassion with ALL who suffer.

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4. Another central principle is Luther's high regard for vocation as a calling from God. The person who benefits from God's generosity is called to serve the neighbor and the community. To serve is to listen attentively. To serve is to care actively about the whole person and about the quality of

relationships in the community as a whole. To serve is to exercise the radical freedom that accompanies grace. It is to be informed by the Scriptures but not enslaved to any detailed codes of conduct, such as those sometimes drawn up by various Christian authors. As Jews and Christians alike recognize, the Scriptures teach that God's goal is shalom (peace/wholeness/justice). We who enjoy God's generosity are called to participate in God's project of fostering this shalom. This principle of

service to the neighbor can undergird all inter-religious cooperation.

When these four key principles are taken together, the basis for inter-religious relations is a humble need to connect with others and to engage in dialogue. Christians simply do not know enough to be able to claim that they have God figured out – or even to have humans figured out, for that matter. In

inter-religious dialogue, just as Christians draw on their own deep and rich tradition for crucial insights to offer others, so they benefit from many of the insights offered by their dialogue partners.

Of particular urgency is dialogue with our Jewish neighbors, because no other religion has as much in common with Christianity as does Judaism. We read the same sacred texts (though ordered differently, the Jewish Bible contains the same books as the Protestant Old Testament), we worship the same God, we celebrate God's steadfast love, and together we are called to foster shalom and to mend the world. While recognizing significant differences, Jews and Christians can find mutually beneficial ways to work together, learn from each other, and support each other in the face of adversity, misunderstanding or hostility. Jews have an ongoing covenantal calling to be a blessing to the world. Christians have a special responsibility to overcome the tragic, centuries-old legacy of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, while at the same time opposing the misrepresentation and mistreatment of any other religious group.

The common experience of individuals who have engaged in inter-religious dialogue is that their understanding and appreciation of their own tradition is enhanced in the process. Sometimes this comes about smoothly; at other times it comes from wrestling with deep and troubling challenges. Dialogue invites everyone to go deeper. The goal is not to discover uniformity. Participants instead begin to sense the permeability of human boundaries, the possibility of shalom, and the underlying commonality of the human condition. They discover a deeper sense of their own vocation.

In this way, Luther's principles undergird an outlook that differs markedly from some of his own conclusions. This outlook enables his followers to come to terms with religious pluralism, 500 years later. It allows us to be faithful even as we embrace and give thanks for new possibilities.

RESOURCES:

Gritsch, Eric. "Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment." Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2012.

Jodock, Darrell, editor. "Covenantal Conversations: Christians in Dialogue with Jews and Judaism." Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.

Schramm, Brooks, and Kirsi Stjerna, editors. "Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People: A Reader." Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

The Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations is a small group of ELCA pastors and professors appointed by the presiding bishop. Its role is to assist the various expressions of the ELCA to increase cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community. It does this by working with the staff of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations to offer advice, develop educational materials and maintain contact with Jewish leaders. The members of the Consultative Panel, as of July 2016, are Darrell Jodock (chair), Ward (Skip) Cornett III, Esther Menn, Peter Pettit, and Margaret (Peg) Schultz-Akerson, Kathryn Lohre, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations staff. This resource was originally published in January 2014 under the title, "Why Follow Luther Past 2017? A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Inter-Religious Relations." Thank you to Michael Chan for his assistance in the preparation of this document.



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