

Was Martin Luther Anti-Semitic? Is the Lutheran Church Anti-Semitic?



Lutheran church life: The preaching of the Gospel, the distribution of the Lord's Supper, and the administration of Baptism to a Jewish convert. (*Bedebug* illustration, 1531)

David Jay Webber

Was Martin Luther Anti-Semitic? Is the Lutheran Church Anti-Semitic?

I. Was Martin Luther Anti-Semitic?

Anti-Semitism, according to the original and more precise meaning of the term, refers to animus against Jews, or hatred of Jews, as a racial or ethnic group. This kind of racial anti-Semitism emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century under the influence of the writings of Charles Darwin, who claimed that humans evolved from lower forms of life and are still evolving. Some Germanic Europeans believed that their race was more highly evolved than other races. They looked down on Jews, Slavs, Africans, and others, as inferior.

These racial anti-Semites wanted Jews as an ethnic group to be isolated from Germanic society. In keeping with Darwin's evolutionary principle of "the survival of the fittest," they furthermore believed that their Germanic race was "fit" for survival and should thrive, but that the Jewish race was not "fit" and should not be allowed to thrive. Others saw Jews as members of a uniquely malevolent race, comprised of people who were conspiring at an international level to dominate Europe and the West in general, economically and politically.

These toxic ideas were able to emerge and take root in Germany in particular, because most of the Protestant churches of that country had at that time lost their influence in the culture. The impotence and increasing irrelevance of these churches was directly connected to their rejection of Biblical theology and their embracing of "liberal" theology.

Martin Luther was a sixteenth-century figure who lived long before the time of Darwin. He was definitely not a racial anti-Semite. Luther believed in the fundamental equality of all human beings, since all human beings share a common descent from Adam, who was created by God. Specifically in regard to Jews and Gentiles, he wrote:

I could go back to the beginning of the world and trace our common ancestry from Adam and Eve, later from Shem, Enoch, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech; for all of these are our ancestors just as well as the Jews'...

And so, according to Luther, Jews and Gentiles

both partake of one birth, one flesh and blood, from the very first, best, and holiest ancestors. Neither one can reproach or upbraid the other about some peculiarity without implicating himself at the same time. (LW 47:148).

As a traditional Christian, Luther believed in the truth of Jesus' words: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6, ESV). He believed that the Christian gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16, ESV). And he believed that Jesus Christ "is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of

sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-43, ESV). Out of concern for their souls and for their spiritual well-being, Luther therefore wished that the Jewish people would embrace Jesus as their Savior. In this way he wanted those who were currently adhering to the rabbinic Jewish religion to become integrated into the Christian church and into Christian society, through conversion to Christianity.

In the earlier years of the Reformation movement, of which Luther was the acknowledged leader, he thought that this might very well happen on a large scale. In his 1523 treatise, “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” Luther observed that

the popes, bishops, sophists, and monks...have hitherto so treated the Jews that anyone who wished to be a good Christian would almost have had to become a Jew. If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian. They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings; they have done little else than deride them and seize their property.

With reference to the earliest mission work done by the apostles of the Lord among the Gentiles, and with an attitude of respect for those aspects of the Jewish religion that do preserve some genuine Biblical principles, Luther went on to write:

I 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 and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs. They will only be frightened further away from it if their Judaism is so utterly rejected that nothing is allowed to remain, and they are treated only with arrogance and scorn. If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles. Since they dealt with us Gentiles in such brotherly fashion, we in our turn ought to treat the Jews in a brotherly manner in order that we might convert some of them. (LW 45:200-01)

Luther was nevertheless a man of his times, who held to many of the medieval assumptions and prejudices that were common in his era, but that are now foreign to us. He did not believe in the principle of religious freedom as we would understand and value that principle. With others of his day, he thought instead that the cohesiveness and stability of a society required there to be one publicly-practiced religion in that society, and that to this end the government should regulate religious matters. Regarding the controversies that were then raging between Christians who adhered to the reform movement of which he was the leader, and Christians who adhered to the authority and teachings of the pope, Luther said in his 1530 commentary on Psalm 82:

If it happens that in a parish, a city, or a principality, the papists and the Lutherans (as they are called) are crying out against one another because of certain matters of belief, and preaching against one another, and both parties claim that the Scriptures are on their side, I would not willingly tolerate such a division. My Lutherans ought to be willing to abdicate and be silent if they observed that they were not gladly heard... But if neither party is willing to yield or be silent, or if neither can do so

because of official position, then let the rulers take a hand. Let them hear the case and command that party to keep silence which does not agree with the Scriptures. ... It is not a good thing that contradictory preaching should go out among the people of the same parish. For from this arise divisions, disorders, hatreds, and envyings which extend to temporal affairs also. (LW 13:62-63)

Most people in Luther's day believed that people who were guilty of sedition should be punished by the civil authorities. Luther agreed, but he also expanded the definition of "sedition" to cover many of the non-violent yet socially disruptive practices that the Anabaptists of his time were advocating. In the same commentary he wrote that

some heretics are seditious and teach openly that no rulers are to be tolerated; that no Christian may occupy a position of rulership; that no one ought to have property of his own but should run away from wife and child and leave house and home; or that all property shall be held in common. These teachers are immediately, and without doubt, to be punished by the rulers, as men who are resisting temporal law and government (Rom. 13:1, 2). They are not heretics only but rebels, who are attacking the rulers and their government...

For Luther and for most others in his time, the enforcement of blasphemy laws was also seen as a proper duty of the civil government. Luther simply assumed that secular rulers have the duty "to advance God's Word and its preachers." So,

If some were to teach doctrines contradicting an article of faith clearly grounded in Scripture and believed throughout the world by all Christendom, such as the articles we teach children in the Creed – for example, if anyone were to teach that Christ is not God, but a mere man and like other prophets, as the Turks and the Anabaptists hold – such teachers should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers. For they are not mere heretics but open blasphemers; and rulers are in duty bound to punish blasphemers as they punish those who curse, swear, revile, abuse, defame, and slander. ... In like manner, the rulers should also punish – or certainly not tolerate – those who teach that Christ did not die for our sins, but that everyone shall make his own satisfaction for them. For that, too, is blasphemy against the Gospel and against the article we pray in the Creed: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" and "in Jesus Christ, dead and risen." Those should be treated in the same way who teach that the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting are nothing, that there is no hell, and like things, as did the Sadducees and the Epicureans, of whom many are now arising among the great wiseacres.

By this procedure no one is compelled to believe, for he can still believe what he will; but he is forbidden to teach and to blaspheme. For by so doing he would take from God and the Christians their doctrine and word, and he would do them this injury under their own protection and by means of the things all have in common. Let him go to some place where there are no Christians. (LW 13:61-62)

Turkish Muslims, Anabaptists, and others who might dissent from the public religious orthodoxy, would have found little comfort in the concession that they may believe as they wish as long as they do not tell others what they believe (or what they do not believe).

Modern Confessional Lutherans do not share Luther's medieval perspective in regard to these matters, but have a clearer and more consistently Biblical understanding of the proper and distinct roles of the state and of the church. Carroll Herman Little writes:

We Lutherans should honor the State as an institution of God for the regulation of the outward affairs of men, that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives here upon earth. God has given us this institution "for the punishment of evil doers and for the praise of them that do well" [1 Peter 2:14]. And for the execution of this purpose God has bestowed upon it the sword. The State has authority from God to employ force where this is necessary for the accomplishment of its ends.

The Church also is a Divine institution, but its realm is quite different from that of the State. It is limited to spiritual affairs. It touches matters which the State cannot reach – religion, conscience, the thoughts and intents of the heart. God has entrusted it with the means of grace and has laid upon it the obligation to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. The Church's work is, in a word, evangelization. The Church has no sword but the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. She employs no force, but uses only the persuasive power of the Word. Church and State observing their appropriate spheres should dwell together in harmony. (Little, 88-89)

And Francis Pieper writes that

If we desire to retain the Christian doctrine, namely, the doctrine that we are justified and saved by God's grace through faith without the deeds of the Law, we must, for one thing, hold to the divinely ordained means of grace; and, secondly, we must be content with these means and refrain from employing the powers of the State to build the Church. (Pieper, III:182)

According to the old medieval way of thinking, it is easy to see how the presence of a synagogue in an otherwise Christian community would be perceived as even more socially disruptive than conflicting Christian congregations with conflicting Christian theologies in a community. And according to the old medieval way of thinking, it is easy to see how the Jewish teachings that Jesus was not the Son of God, was not born of a virgin, did not by his death atone for the sins of humanity, and did not rise from the grave, were perceived as blasphemous teachings.

Luther also noticed some specific tensions that were developing between Christians and Jews in his time. Certain statements in the Talmud and in other works of rabbinic literature that were commonly understood by Christians as blaspheming Christ, were now being repeated and amplified in the sermons that some of the rabbis were preaching, and in pamphlets that some of the rabbis were publishing. And in a few places, Jewish influence seemed to be causing Christians to question or deny their faith, and even to convert to Judaism. As a medieval man, Luther did not think that Christian princes and magistrates should tolerate such things.

Luther also believed that Jews were engaging in other behaviors harmful to society, such as the practicing of usury – that is, the charging of interest on loans. Banking and money-lending are a normal part of a modern economy, but medieval Christians believed that the

taking of interest on loans was a violation of God's Word. Luther was also disappointed and frustrated that most Jews were still not interested in becoming Christians, even after the true character of the Christian gospel had been clarified by the Reformation. And at a personal level, Luther was becoming ever more irritable due to the effects of his advancing age and increasingly poor health. For all of these reasons, an embittered and irascible Luther felt the need, in 1543, to write his notorious polemical treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies."

Most of this treatise consisted of Biblical refutations of various rabbinic teachings and interpretations of Scripture. In this treatise Luther also commented on the evidence of divine judgment against the Jews, because of their rejection of their Messiah, that he perceived in history and in their current condition. He wrote that

we Christians see...what terrible wrath of God these people have incurred and still incur without ceasing, what a fire is gleaming and glowing there, and what they achieve who curse and detest Christ and his Christians.

Luther considered these divine chastisements also to be sobering lessons for Christians, and as warnings from God to them against neglecting the gospel or falling away from the faith:

O dear Christians, let us take this horrible example to heart, as St. Paul says in Romans 11, and fear God lest we also finally fall victim to such wrath, and even worse! Rather, as we said also earlier, let us honor his divine word and not neglect the time of grace, as Muhammad and the pope have already neglected it, becoming not much better than the Jews.

And in this treatise, Luther called upon Lutheran rulers to take certain actions against the Jewish residents of their territories and cities. He wrote:

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. If we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing, and blasphemy. ... With prayer and the fear of God we must practice a sharp mercy to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames. We dare not avenge ourselves. (LW 47:267-68)

To these ends Luther advised the civil authorities to close and burn down synagogues, to confiscate and destroy Jewish prayer books and religious writings, and to prohibit rabbis from preaching and teaching "on pain of loss of life and limb": not only because of the possible harmful effects of such preaching on Christians but also and chiefly because the rabbis were, by virtue of their authority as teachers, "holding the poor Jews captive," and were infusing them with "poison, cursing, and blasphemy." Other punitive measures against the Jews were also suggested, such as the confiscation of wealth that had been obtained through usury so that it could be given to Jews who convert (LW 47:268-74). The worst punishment that Luther suggested was that the Jews might "be expelled from the country and be told to return to their land and their possessions in Jerusalem" (LW 47:276).

Luther was not trying to stir up mobs to attack Jews or destroy their property, but was calling upon the governing authorities to act. He wrote that the common people should be on their guard against the Jews and avoid them so far as possible. They should not curse them or harm their persons, however. For the Jews have cursed and harmed themselves more than enough by cursing the Man Jesus of Nazareth, Mary's son, which they unfortunately have been doing for over fourteen hundred years. Let the government deal with them in this respect, as I have suggested. (LW 47:274)

Luther hoped that the "sharp mercy" he was proposing would drive at least some of the Jews to repentance, and would prompt them to avoid damnation through putting their faith in Christ as Savior. And so he closed the treatise with this prayer:

"May Christ, our dear Lord, convert them mercifully and preserve us steadfastly and immovably in the knowledge of him, which is eternal life. Amen." (LW 47:306)

Today we are horrified by Luther's suggestions, and are troubled by the anger that we see reflected in those suggestions. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Christians are admonished to put away "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk" (3:8, ESV). In this treatise Luther does not even seem to be trying to do this. It is also difficult for us to imagine how Luther could seriously have thought that Jews would have responded to such treatment by converting to the faith of those who would have been treating them in this way. He was, to say the least, greatly misguided in his perceptions and recommendations.

It is a good thing that most Lutheran rulers ignored his advice. Many other religious leaders were also dismayed by these suggestions. No decent person today believes that law-abiding religious minorities should be treated in this way in a society. No Lutheran today should agree with what Luther said in this treatise.

The way in which Luther wrote about Judaism was not substantially different from the way in which others had written about it. The way in which Luther wrote about Judaism was not substantially different from the way in which he wrote about aberrant versions of Christianity that he considered to be false and spiritually harmful. But we might have expected better of Luther. We might have expected a man who otherwise demonstrated such a deep understanding of God's grace in Christ, to have risen above the limitations of his day. We might have expected a man whose heart had been set free by the gospel, to have risen above his own personal limitations, and to have approached these things with greater patience and gentleness, and with deeper insight regarding the difference between the coercive power of civil authority and the persuasive power of the Word of God. In other areas of life and faith Luther was able to rise above his limitations and the limitations of his time. But not here. Here his cultural blinders remained. And we are deeply disappointed by this.

Still, we would also recognize that when Luther was later claimed by the Nazis, and by the Nazis' deluded followers in the apostate Protestant churches of Germany, as their forerunner, this was a completely inaccurate and invalid claim. In a 1939 article on "Martin Luther and the Jews," American Lutheran Pastor Elias Newman, who was himself a Jewish convert, responded to a propagandistic pamphlet that had been authored the previous year

by a pro-Nazi German Protestant bishop. This bishop had used selective quotations from Luther's 1543 treatise, and from other writings of the Reformer, in the interest of promoting the Nazi anti-Semitic agenda. Newman wrote that in this pamphlet,

What is presented to the reader is a garbled conglomeration in which Luther is muzzled and suppressed. Words are torn out of their context, and every sentence, phrase, or word expressing pity or concern for the Jewish people and their salvation is deleted and deliberately omitted, making the sense and purpose of Luther's writings quite different to the one intended by the reformer... The pamphlet in question is a gross misrepresentation and perversion of truth as well as a betrayal of Luther. The great reformer is portrayed as the greatest anti-Semite of his time which he definitely was not.

Faithful Lutheran pastors in Germany at the time, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse, also rejected these claims of the Nazis and their followers.

Newman did admit that in his 1543 treatise, "Luther gives an awful picture of the Jews, highly exaggerated; and his use of violent and intemperate language is profuse." Newman regretted this. We, too, regret this. Yet Newman also made some interesting historical observations:

The Jews themselves were to blame to a great extent for Luther's antagonism to them. They attacked Luther's teaching when they discovered that Luther was not a possible candidate for Judaism; and that he stood for an evangelical and vigorous Christianity, more dangerous from the rabbinic standpoint in its appeals to the Jewish soul, than Romanism. The Jews tried to get Luther's followers to become adherents of the Jewish religion. Some actually joined the synagogue and others formed Judaistic sects.

But even so, and contrary to all Nazi claims, Newman emphasized that

Luther was no anti-Semite. His violent language was always directed against the Jewish religion, which he considered false, and never against the Jewish race. Luther lived in an age when it was customary to indulge in such intemperate modes of giving vent to one's feelings; of this fact due consideration is necessary in any just appraisal of Luther. The righteous indignation of the great Reformer was aroused to its highest pitch by the blasphemous pamphlets which the Jews of his time were circulating against our Lord; and we can be sure that just as the Jews today have changed to a more respectful attitude to Christ, it is certain, that if Luther were now living, his antithesis to Judaism would reveal a corresponding change. (Newman, 488-89)

Luther, who believed in the spiritual superiority of the Christian faith, had opposed the rabbinic Jewish religion, and wanted the Jews to convert to Christianity. In contrast, the Nazis, who believed in the racial superiority of the German nation, oppressed the Jewish people as a racial group, and prohibited Jewish conversions to Christianity. The Nazis treated ethnic Jews who had previously converted in the same manner as they treated all

other ethnic Jews, and did not spare them when they eventually implemented the “final solution” of trying to kill all the ethnic Jews in Europe.

Many leaders among the Nazis knew that their ideology was incompatible with any kind of genuine Christianity. This is why they tried to revive the pre-Christian paganism of their remote Germanic and Nordic ancestors, in order to give Germans an alternate religion that was not freighted with a Jewish origin, with a creation account that set forth the unity of the human race, with the teachings of Jesus on love for the neighbor, or with the apostles’ teaching that Jewish and Gentile believers are one in Christ.

Luther’s beliefs and values had nothing in common with the racism of the Nazis. Recalling the title of his 1523 treatise, Luther knew “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew.” He also knew that the original Christians were all Jewish, and that the first controversy of the early church – settled by a council in Jerusalem – was over the question of whether Gentiles could become Christians without also converting to Judaism! (Acts 15:1-35).

We can see Luther at his best in his “Letter to Bernhard, a Converted Jew,” penned in 1523. This letter accompanied Luther’s gift to Bernhard of a copy of his 1523 treatise, which he hoped would be of encouragement to Bernhard in his faith:

Now since the golden light of the Gospel rises and shines, the hope is at hand that many of the Jews will be honestly and sincerely converted and drawn in earnestness to Christ, like you and some others have been, who are the remnant of the seed of Abraham, which is supposed to be saved through grace. For the one who has begun it will also lead it to completion and not allow his word to return to him empty. It therefore seemed good to me to send this little book to you for the strengthening and reinforcement of your faith in Christ, whom you recently learned to know from the Gospel and into whom you now finally also are baptized in the Spirit and are born from God. I also would wish that through your example and your work, Christ might also be made known among other Jews, who were predestined, are called, and shall come to their king David, in order that he might lead and save them... Conduct yourself well in the Lord and pray for me. (CCAN, 62)

A racial anti-Semite would not ask an ethnic Jew of any religion to pray for him. Clearly, Luther was not a racial anti-Semite. And he never became one. In the last sermon that Luther ever preached, three days before his death in 1546, Luther said this with respect to the Jewish people:

We should offer to them...the opportunity of conversion to the Messiah and permit them to be baptized. ... We will willingly accept them as brothers whenever they become converted, depart from their usury, and earnestly accept Christ. (quoted in Newman, 490)

We must indeed also take into account the fact that Luther lived at a time in history when religious controversies in general were usually characterized by harsh, hyperbolic rhetoric on all sides. As has already been noted, Luther himself was just as hard on his opponents in other Christian churches as he was on the rabbis. For example, one of the last

treatises he ever wrote, in 1545, bore the title: “Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil.” In the first words of this treatise he described the then-current pope, Paul III, as “The Most Hellish Father” (LW 41: 262). The treatise was filled with scatological invective and personal insults, directed at the pope. In keeping with its title, Luther also

repeatedly emphasized the pope’s origin and relationship with the devil. This topos is used more than 145 times, for example when the pope is referred to as devil’s property, devil’s apostle and the devil’s desperate child, devil’s larva, devil’s breeding ground of evil, devil’s spook, from their synagogue of Satan and the devil’s church, devil’s work and idolatry. (Wriedt, 52)

There is no doubt that Luther was directing these strong verbal attacks against the teachings and practices of the pope and of the Roman Church, and not against the pope’s Italian ethnicity. So too in his anti-Jewish writings, Luther’s strong verbal attacks were directed against the teachings and practices of the rabbis and of the rabbinic Jewish religion, and not against anyone’s Jewish ethnicity.

Also in those earlier times, the sharp rhetoric often used by Jewish controversialists was very similar to the sharp rhetoric often used by Christian controversialists. For example, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon, the orthodox Jewish Gaon of Vilna until his death in 1797, thought that the Hasidic Jews of his day were dangerous heretics. Their new concept of mystical, experiential prayer, and their new concept of religious leadership – with a charismatic *zaddik* seen as something like a bridge or channel to God – represented major departures from traditional Judaism. Rabbi Elijah issued bans and excommunications, and ordered the burning of Hasidic books. Historian Paul Johnson writes that

He regarded *hasidism* as an outrage. Its claims to ecstasy, miracles and visions were, he said, all lies and delusions. The idea of the *zaddik* was idolatry, worship of human beings. Most of all, its theory of prayer was a substitute for, an affront to, scholarship... when asked his opinion about what should be done to the *hasidim*, he replied: persecute them. (Johnson, 298)

With reference to the killing of the prophets of Ba’al at the hands of the Prophet Elijah in the Old Testament, Rabbi Elijah also went so far as to say: “had I the power, I would punish these infidels as the worshippers of Ba’al were punished of old” (quoted in Humes and in Isaacs).

We can all wish that the theologians of the past – both Christian and Jewish – would have been more careful in following the counsel of King Solomon: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1, ESV).

II. Is the Lutheran Church Anti-Semitic?

The Confessional Lutheran Church is definitely not anti-Semitic. The Confessional Lutheran Church is also not bound to Martin Luther’s opinions and beliefs regarding social cohesiveness, regarding the involvement of the civil authorities in religious matters, or regarding any number of other topics.

The appellation “Lutheran” as a part of the name of the Lutheran Church is an accident of history. The term “Lutheran” started out as a pejorative slur, used against Luther’s supporters by Romanists who opposed Luther’s calls for reform in the church. The term was then accepted as an informal “nickname” by those who embraced these reforms, while the more formal or official name of the church that had emerged from the Reformation movement was the “Evangelical Church” – which means “Church of the Gospel.” But when Calvinists also began referring to themselves as the Evangelical Church, most Lutherans then distinguished themselves by using the term “Evangelical-Lutheran Church,” which before long was often shortened to “Lutheran Church.”

Some Lutherans, however, distinguished themselves from the Calvinists by using the name “Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession” – referring to the chief confession of faith of the Lutheran Reformation, which Luther did not even write. This was probably the wiser choice, since that terminology clearly tied the church to its Biblical doctrine, and not to the personality of the man who had led the church in embracing this Biblical doctrine.

Referring specifically to the Augsburg Confession rather than to Luther also avoids the misperception that all of Luther’s opinions and writings have a creedal status in the Lutheran Church. Lutherans know that this is not so, even though they do honor Luther as a gifted and generally-reliable teacher of Biblical truth. Three of Luther’s writings are included among the official Confessions of the Lutheran Church: the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Smalcald Articles. But only these three writings of Luther have that status, and none of them includes any harsh polemics against the rabbis or the Jewish religion.

Luther is not seen as the only great reformer and theologian worthy of honored memory. Christ promised to preserve his church until the end of time. Throughout the history of the church he has been faithful to that promise, and he remains faithful to that promise. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Lutherans accordingly observe that,

in order to keep the Gospel among men, he visibly pits the witness of the saints against the rule of the devil; in our weakness he displays his strength. The dangers, labors, and sermons of the apostle Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, and other teachers of the church are holy works, true sacrifices acceptable to God, battles by which Christ restrained the devil and drove him away from the believers. (IV:189-90, BC)

In the fourth century Athanasius correctly defended the Biblical teaching on the incarnation and the divinity of Christ, in opposition to the errors of the Arians. In the fifth century Augustine correctly defended the Biblical teaching on the sinfulness of human nature and salvation by God’s grace alone, in opposition to the errors of the Pelagians. In the sixteenth century Luther correctly defended the Biblical teaching on the supreme authority of Holy Scripture and God’s justification of penitent sinners through faith in Jesus, in opposition to the errors of the Papists. Luther also correctly defended the Biblical teaching on the regenerating power of Holy Baptism and the forgiving power of Christ’s true body and blood in the Lord’s Supper, in opposition to the errors of the Anabaptists and Zwinglians.

Yet Lutherans are very much aware of the fact that Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, and others were also capable of error. Under the infallible authority of Holy Scripture, Christians in each generation should “test everything” and “hold fast what is good,” but should “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, ESV). With respect to Luther in particular, Lutherans are very much aware of the fact that he sometimes did err, especially when he veered off from his Biblical expositions and engaged in social and political commentary. The saddest example of this can be seen in the horrible suggestions that he made in his 1543 treatise. These suggestions do not “pass the test.”

Since the time of the Lutheran Reformation there have been many sincere Jewish converts to Lutheranism. Some of these converts rose to positions of prominence. We have already heard from Elias Newman, a long-time missionary to the Jewish people and a prolific writer. He was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family and became a Christian in 1903 at the age of 15. He worked originally with the Presbyterians but “got turned off by their modernism and became a Lutheran” (Frantsen). For many years he was the director of the *Zion Society for Israel*, a Lutheran mission organization based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The list of prominent Jewish Lutherans in the history of the Lutheran Church would also include theologians Carl Paul Caspari and Friedrich Adolf Philippi, composer and musician Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, missionary and translator Henry Einspruch, pastor and synodical president Hermann Herlitz, pastor and *Voice of the Martyrs* founder Richard Wurmbbrand, and religious scholar and organizer Maria Krehbiel-Darmstädter (who died at Auschwitz in 1943). These and other converts certainly had no inkling that ethnic Jews were not welcome in the Lutheran Church. These Jewish believers embraced Christ. They embraced his church. And his church embraced them.

Ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus are welcome in the Lutheran Church. All people from all nations who believe in Jesus are welcome! The Lutheran Church does not “belong” to Luther, or to those who are its members today. The Lutheran Church, which confesses and proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ, belongs to Jesus Christ: the Son of God, the Seed of Abraham, the Heir of David, and the Redeemer of the world.

Lutherans in our time do look for opportunities to invite their Jewish friends to consider the claims of Jesus of Nazareth, and to put their faith in him as the Messiah. But they repudiate any and all methods or techniques that are rooted in coercion or intimidation. The approach of the apostle Paul (known originally as Saul of Tarsus) is the only proper approach. Paul, in bringing the message of Christ to his countrymen, “reasoned with the Jews,” “persuading them about the kingdom of God” (Acts 18:19; 19:8, ESV). Regarding the Jewish residents of Thessalonica in particular, we are told in the Book of Acts that Paul

reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded... (17:2-4, ESV).

Luther should have stayed with this respectful approach. Lutherans today do stay with this respectful approach. We pray that as we speak with our Jewish friends, and with all others, about the salvation from sin and death that God offers in his Son Jesus Christ, he

will help us always to remember the exhortation of the apostle Peter (known originally as Simon Bar-Jonah):

...in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect... (1 Peter 3:15, ESV)

David Jay Webber
June 14, 2024

Cited Sources:

BC: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

CCAN: *The Church Comes from All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission*, edited by Volker Stolle (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003).

ESV: *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles (a division of Good News Publishers).

Frantsen: Kearney Frantsen, "The Zion Society for Israel, 1878-1990 (Including Good News for Israel, 1975-1990)," <http://lcje.net/papers/1990/Frantsen.pdf>

Humes: Immy Humes, "Hasidism in Europe," www.pbs.org/alifeapart/intro_7.html

Isaacs: Mark D. Isaacs, "Hasidic Judaism and Lutheran Pietism," <https://web.archive.org/web/20121005025309/http://www.elcm.org/theology/hasidicrelattoPietisticLutheran.html>

Johnson: Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987).

Little: C. H. Little, *Disputed Doctrines* (Burlington, Iowa: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1933).

LW: *Luther's Works* (American Edition) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-).

Newman: Elias Newman, "Martin Luther and the Jews," *Lutheran Herald* XXIII:21 (May 23, 1939).

Pieper: Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-57).

Wriedt: Markus Wriedt, "Invectives as a Stylistic Device in Martin Luther's Reformation Rhetoric," *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 10:1 (April 2023).