

Continued

## No. 9114

## PROGRESS REPORT ON RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

RECEIVED by the General Assembly

*The 1989 General Assembly (Indianapolis) had before it a Resolution "Concerning the Position of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) on Jewish-Christian Relations" (No. 8946). In adopting this Resolution, the General Assembly called upon the Commission on Theology to prepare a fuller statement that would assist the church in dealing with this critical matter. The following text is a progress report on that assignment. A final report will come from the Commission on Theology to the 1993 General Assembly (St. Louis). This statement is offered to the church for study and response. It attempts to identify theological issues that need careful and prayerful reflection throughout our congregations, regions, and general units.*

**Preface: The Enormity of the Problem**

Why is it imperative that Christians in the late twentieth century take up the responsibility to rethink their understanding of the relation between the church and the Jewish people? Why is it urgent that Christians learn new ways of talking about and acting toward the Jewish people? Answers to these questions will set the report from the Commission on Theology in context and enable Disciples to grasp the significance of the task which the General Assembly assigned to the Commission in 1989.

Since the first century, Jews and Christians have shared a common history. Jews know this history very well, Christians hardly at all. Although Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew among Jews, whose birth was proclaimed by Simeon as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32), within a century his followers had begun to distance themselves from the people of Israel and to define themselves as the "new Israel." As the "new Israel," they claimed to have displaced the Jewish people (the "old Israel") in the covenant with God. This language of an "old" and a "new" Israel is not in the New Testament and has no biblical warrant. The church talked of the people Israel as a people that should not and would not exist save for the willful "blindness" and "obstinacy" by which Jews avoid disappearing. An unremitting parody of evil was projected upon the people Israel. They have been viewed as everything old, carnal, ethnocentric, and disobedient that the new, spiritual, universal, obedient Gentile church displaces, and Christians as everything good that Jews can never be.

Beginning in the fourth century, the church passed laws defining relations between Christians and Jews, and ensuring that the situation of Jews in the society and economy mirrored the image of them in Christian rhetoric. Each of Hitler's laws found its precedent in a law passed by councils of the church. For example, the requirement that all Jews wear the Star of David found its antecedent in a law passed by an ecumenical council of the church in 1215 requiring all Jews to wear distinctive dress. Jews were barred from any significant role in the society, economy, government, and military, forced into making a living by selling old clothes and lending money (illegal for Christians). Church and later state laws forced Jews to live in ghettos. Regularly, Jews were offered a choice of baptism or forced expulsion from the country. All Jews were expelled from England in 1290, France in 1394, Spain in 1492, Portugal in 1497, Brazil in 1654 (when the first Jews came to America). Beginning in the 11th century, we witness the outbreaks of incidents of mob violence and mass murder committed against Jews. These grew in magnitude, becoming ever more destructive, with Hitler's so-called "final solution" the most recent and deadly. One scholar estimates that of all the people who might be alive today as Jews, only about 20% are living; another says that about half the Jews born into the world in the last 800 years have been killed.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Second Vatican Council issued its statement on relations between the church and the Jewish people in the 1960s, the Holy Spirit has been leading the churches to a new understanding of themselves in relation to the Jewish people. We thank God for this new spirit of repentance and self-criticism among Christians. Because of the history of Christian mistreatment of Jews, because anti-Jewish acts continue and again seem to be on the increase, because the church can only understand its own central affirmations properly if it understands Judaism and the Jewish people in the purpose of God, we offer the following theological remarks.

<sup>1</sup> See respectively Arthur Gilbert, *The Vatican Council and the Jews* (New York: World Publications, 1968), p. 51 and Irvin J. Borowsky, "Forward," in *Jews and Christians*, ed., J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 9.

**Preliminary Statement of Theological Foundations  
of Jewish/Christian Relations**

1. At the heart of the faith of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the confession that God has acted and revealed God's self in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of the world. We confess that the God who was present in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to God is none other than the God of Israel, maker of heaven and earth, and known through the law and the prophets.
2. While this confession has often been used as a pretext for Christians to contend that God has rejected Israel, canceled God's covenant with Israel, and replaced Israel with the church, it is our belief that these past emphases and their practical, historical consequences of encouraging persecution of Jews by Christians, represent a profound misunderstanding of God and Jesus Christ, Israel and the church. We confess and repent of the church's long and deep collusion in the spread of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions through its "teaching of contempt" for Jews and Judaism. We disclaim such teaching and the acts and attitudes which it reflects and reinforces.
3. God's presence in Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world is rooted in God's call and election of Israel. Thus, to affirm that presence is to join with Judaism in affirming God's election of Israel and God's purpose to bring blessing to all the families of the earth through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). We confess that both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world and that the relation of the church and the Jewish people to each other is grounded on God's gracious election of each.
4. It is indispensable to an adequate and truthful understanding of God's action in Jesus Christ that it be seen in continuity with God's unsearchable and particular election and covenant with Israel. God is faithful to that covenant in the historical life of Israel, whether or not Israel is itself faithful, just as God is faithful to the church in spite of its sin and rebellion. The God who calls Israel and acts in Israel's life is the God who creates all things and has acted in Jesus Christ.
5. The distinctive work of God in Jesus Christ, which often has been seen by Christians as a sign of God's **rejection** of the Jews, is rather a sign of the continuing **affirmation** of God's election of Israel and the Jewish people. We confess that the covenant established by God's grace with the Jewish people has not been abrogated but remains valid, precisely because "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29).
6. The Jewishness of Jesus ties Christians to Jews both historically and theologically. Jesus was shaped by and lived in the midst of Jewish traditions and culture, and understood his life and ministry to be, at the least, for and with the Jews. A "non-Jewish Jesus," or even an indifferently Jewish Jesus, is one of the most unhistorical and corrupting myths which later church theology and practice have perpetrated. The Jewishness of Jesus deepens the tragedy of Christian mistreatment of the Jewish people. In this regard, the church has historically blamed the Jewish people for the crime of "deicide" in the crucifixion of Jesus. This we now declare to be a theological and historical error. Although the historical details surrounding Jesus' death are not fully clear, it is evident that Jesus died as a result of the Roman imperial system and with the collusion of some of his fellow Jews. At the same time, we must understand that the crucifying actions of Jesus' contemporaries are representative of humanity as such, and are not peculiarly Jewish or Roman. Certainly history has witnessed the same crucifying actions of Jesus' contemporaries are representative of humanity as such, and are not peculiarly Jewish or Roman. Certainly history has witnessed the same crucifying actions by Christians toward Jews. The primary point of the Christian understanding of Jesus' crucifixion is the acknowledgment of God's unsearchably loving presence and action in Jesus' death and thereby God's final redemptive presence in any human situation.
7. Still, in the heart of the Christian confession is a profound sense that what God has done in Jesus Christ is a **new** event, unintelligible apart from Israel's story, but not merely a repetition of that story. Christians affirm that this new event is the Good News of God's taking up the cause both of Israel and of all humanity, and fulfilling Israel's and humanity's call to love and do justice before God and neighbor. This God in Jesus Christ has radically declared an unfathomable grace and love for Israel and for all humanity, grace and love moving God's creative work and hope toward which all creation moves. This new event in Jesus of Nazareth does not cancel or reject Israel, even if most Jews then and now were either indifferent to Jesus or rejected the affirmations of lordship and divinity about Jesus.
8. Jews and Christians share a history, a body of scripture, a communal and ethical tradition, and a treasury of prayers, although each has its own distinctive literature—the New Testament for Christians, the Talmud and midrash for Jews. And for both, history under God continues, requiring a continuing reclaiming of the truth and power of God's revelation in every generation. Thus, the unending task of interpretation requires Christians to be attentive to God's continuing work of redemption among Jews as well as Christians.

9. Christians must acknowledge that the language of invective, condemnation, and rejection against Jews, vexing and difficult as it is to understand, is present in the New Testament and throughout most traditions of the church. This language has all too often gone hand in hand with actions undertaken by Christians against Jews. The church has repeatedly forgotten that the grace and love of God evident in Jesus Christ is *for* Israel and all Jews and is not a blessing dependent for its ultimate efficacy on how righteous or faithful or "Christian" one might be. God does not bestow God's grace and love on the church because the church is righteous and faithful. Both Jews and Christians have standing before God because and only because of the grace of the God who ever justifies the *unrighteous*.

10. Although we do not want to say Judaism is for Jews and the church for Gentiles, we must acknowledge that the continued existence of Jewish people who do not confess the lordship of Jesus Christ and who see their Jewishness as incompatible with this confession is, as Paul the apostle declares, a mystery and witness to the church: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways" (Romans 11:33)! The church must receive this mystery and witness as essential to its own identity and destiny.

11. While we want to propose more vigorous study and conversation between Christians and Jews, it is necessary to declare now, in the light of what we have affirmed above, that:

- a. The Christian faith is not against Jewish people or Judaism as such;
- b. Anti-Jewish teaching and practices by Christians must be stopped and eradicated;
- c. However much Christians may want to point to what God has done in Jesus Christ for Israel and all humanity, they cannot appropriately say that God's election of and covenant with Israel have been canceled;
- d. Christians today have an urgent responsibility to converse and cooperate with, and to affirm Jewish people as the special kindred of Christians before God;
- e. In acknowledging God's covenant with Israel, Christians today must take seriously the meaning of land to Jewish people and the relation of land to the contemporary state of Israel.

#### **Practical/Pastoral Dimensions of Jewish/Christian Relations**

There are also pastoral and practical considerations in the relations of Jews and Christians, and there are practical steps that need to be taken at this time.

1. The Bible has on occasion been read as a story of Israel's failure and of God's turning to the church and away from the synagogue. Such a reading is wrong. Central biblical texts speak against it.
2. Study of Jewish history and thought should not stop with the first century. All Christians need to have some introduction of the great rabbinical heritage, to Jewish history and religion up to the present time, and to the story of Christian persecution of the Jews. Such an introduction provides the groundwork for better relations with Jews today. It enables Christians to express genuine sorrow for past actions and to be attentive to the danger of repeating those actions.
3. Study of the Holocaust and regular participation in acts of remembrance enable Christians to hold before the world and before themselves the culminating horror and tragedy of the persecution of the Jews.
4. Common witness, worship, and service are always appropriate. Interfaith occasions, Bible study by clergy and rabbis, and sessions on Jewish/Christian relations all help to promote understanding and genuine conversation.

#### **A Call for Further Study**

Both because of what is essential to Christian faith and to the church's proper self-understanding and because of the indefensibly cruel treatment of Jewish people by Christians, it is important for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada to pray, study, and engage in conversations with its Jewish neighbors. This dialogue will enable Christians and Jews to understand their own continuities and discontinuities with each other and ancient Israel. For its well-being the church must recover its rootage in Israel, repent of its grievous sins against Jewish people in the past and present, and acknowledge its own dependence on the unmerited grace of the God who creates all things, called Israel into covenant, and acted in Jesus Christ for the redemption of the whole world.

This study and conversation should be:

- a. undertaken in earnest by all manifestations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ);
- b. given oversight, coordination, and focus by the Council on Christian Unity;

c. further stimulated, nurtured, and perpetuated by a study guide and other resources prepared by the Commission on Theology, and hopefully published by the Christian Board of Publication, that would elaborate a wide range of theological issues and historical knowledge about relations between Christians and Jews, and provide practical guidance for the church's conduct in relation to Jewish people.

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Report No. 9114 is to be RECEIVED. No action is required. (Debate  
time 24 minutes)

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