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Preaching and Teaching After Auschwitz

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(Editor's Note: *This presentation, originally made in 2002 to the Lutheran pastors of the Greater Vancouver Conference of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, is peculiarly relevant to both the preaching and teaching ministries of the Church. While we have become sensitive to sexist and racist language in general, Alan Lai, a pastor of the ELCIC, draws our attention especially to inadvertent and unrecognized anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in lectionaries, hymns, curricula, and theological formulations.*)

In the Fifth Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in 1995, the Church adopted the Statement, *To the Jewish Community in Canada*. In the Statement we acknowledge that "anti-Semitism is an affront to the Gospel" and we Lutherans "carry a special burden in this matter because of the anti-Semitic statements made by Martin Luther and because of the suffering inflicted on Jews during the Holocaust in countries and places where the Lutheran Church is strongly represented." Recently, the publication of *A Sacred Obligation* published by Christian scholars affiliated with Boston College¹ carries the dialogue into a further stage.

I would like first to point out what these endeavours mean to us as preachers and Christian educators; and, secondly, to show why we need to transform significantly the ways we teach, preach, and do Christian education as a result.

First of all, I assume a distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Anti-Judaism refers to the theological attitudes, arguments, and polemics that distort and disparage Judaism in order to support the Christian claim of superiority. It is a consequence of supersessionism — a theological claim that Christians have replaced Jews as God's people because the Jews rejected Jesus. Supersessionism is a form of

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Christian triumphalism where Christianity is regarded as having achieved a special status and is the “fulfillment” of Judaism. In 2001 the Lutheran World Federation issued a document that says, “We use ‘anti-Judaism’ to name specifically theological formulations that denigrate Jews and their faith.”²

In distinction, anti-Semitism is a term coined by Wilhelm Marr in the late nineteenth century that depicts Jews as an inferior ethnic group. Anti-Semitism does not require a theological rationale, although the long legacy of anti-Judaism has certainly created a fertile soil for anti-Semitism. I am mindful that there is no difference between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism from the perspectives of the Jewish victims, and acknowledge that rejection of Judaism can easily “slide over” into anti-Semitism.

This distinction is made for the purpose of probing Christian theological reflection. So often I hear Christians who claim that they are not anti-Semites nevertheless turn around and make anti-Jewish theological claims. Since supersessionism runs deeply into how we understand ourselves as Christians, we may denigrate Jews and Judaism without being consciously aware of it.

Supersessionism finds its roots in the Christian Scriptures. All four canonical Gospel writers give us portrayals of the Pharisees as legalistic and hypocritical opponents of Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel, when one reads the phrase “the Jews” literally, Jews collectively are seen as the enemies of the gospel. Later, Church Fathers such as Augustine, Ignatius, and others picked up the anti-Jewish polemics in the Christian Scriptures to give supersessionism a solid theological ground. It was Melito of Sardis who made it clear that Jewish people had committed the worst crime in history: They had killed God. From the Medieval period onward, Christianity viewed Judaism not only as its inferior, but also as the enemy of the church and a menace to society. This way of theologizing still infects the world’s perceptions of Jews and Judaism today. That is what the Jewish scholar Isaac Jules called “the teaching of contempt.”

During Hitler’s Third Reich many Europeans behaved as bystanders partly due to the power of Hitler’s dictatorship, but also due to the centuries-old Christian teaching of contempt for Judaism. As a result, Hitler did not need to do much to earn the “cooperation” of most Europeans. In fact, Hitler actualized the wishes of Martin

Jews, we note that Luther was infected by the enduring anti-Jewish teachings of the church. As Eva Fleischner says, "... while Christianity cannot be held responsible for the Holocaust, Christian teaching helped prepare the ground for it." Regrettably, many Christians have no knowledge of what Christianity has done to Jews.

What, now, are the implications for those of us who preach and teach?

First, we need to rethink the task of theological education. Like our Statement to the Jewish community in Canada, many Jewish-Christian declarations are chiefly the work of theologians, and the Statements and their implications often have not reached far enough to the laity. In my opinion seminary education has not done enough to enable pastors and educators to take the renewed understanding of Judaism to churches. Jewish-Christian relations is usually offered (if offered at all) as an elective course, and it is often treated as peripheral to the core theological and biblical studies. I believe that that is one of the reasons why Jewish-Christian Statements have minimal effect on church members. The task, as described in *A Sacred Obligation* is not about removing anti-Judaism, but about redefining Christianity. This task cannot be done without redefining how Christians teach Christianity, first in seminaries, then in churches. The implications of these statements extend to how one teaches preaching, children's ministry, confirmation, Bible, and theology. Jewish-Christian relations must not be studied only as a theological and biblical issue, but also as a Christian education mandate. To purge anti-Judaism from our churches, educating all Christians with regard to our renewed understanding of Judaism is not an option. To hold correct beliefs about Judaism is one thing, but to be able to conduct Christian education anew is another.

Secondly, supersessionism spreads through the hymns. It is embedded in the ways we worship. It is no secret that many hymns do not fit our theology. The Advent hymn, "O come, O come, Emmanuel" is a good example. Consider the line, "O come, O come Emmanuel / And ransom captive Israel / That mourns in lonely exile here / Until the Son of God appear." The lyric is clearly supersessionistic in essence. If we want to stand by our Church's Statement to Jews we cannot sing this hymn any more without seriously re-writing the lyrics. For example, "O come, O come

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Emmanuel / And bless the place your people dwell / Protect and keep us day and night / And bring the blessing of your light.”⁴

The next time you choose hymns for worship, don’t just pick them because of their beautiful tunes or because their titles fit the subject or occasion; check their messages to see whether the theology is what you believe.

Third, preachers should be careful in using the lectionary. The lectionary is a deliberative result of choosing biblical texts for worship purposes. The Revised Common Lectionary, which the Lutheran Church is using, contains numerous anti-Jewish texts. It is of utmost importance how preachers treat those texts. For example, take this verse in the Fourth Gospel, read every Second Sunday after Easter: “... the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews.” Imagine the image of Jewish people this verse imparts to congregations year after year. Also imagine the effect if the preachers do not intervene by saying, “The disciples were all Jews!” Whenever we read an anti-Jewish text, whether it is caricaturing Pharisee or Jewish customs, we must be conscious that those texts show nothing but the internal disagreements among Jews in first century Palestine. But we who are not Jews must handle with extreme care quarrels in other people’s houses. In addition, we stand when the Gospel is read; the gesture is potentially supersessionistic. We preachers must also be cautious not to approach the texts of a given Sunday or Festival as if the Old Testament (more on this below) is nothing but a foundation for interpreting the Gospel text.

Fourth, we need to re-learn how to talk about our faith without supersessionism. Although an indispensable Christian conviction, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith was, in past centuries, used also to condemn Judaism as a works-righteous religion. Today we still have the habit of measuring the practices of the Jewish faith with our terms of reference. As a pivotal doctrine — especially in Lutheranism — we need to be conscious of how we have used it. In addition, calling the first part of the Christian Bible the “Old” Testament can wrongly suggest that these texts are obsolete, and that the observant Jew who honours only these sacred texts is therefore inadequate. Recently, a “New” Testament scholar told me that some of his seminary students think they are finally studying the “real stuff” and that the “Old” Testament which they had previously studied was just preparation. Against such unholy thoughts we insist that the

relationship of God with the Jewish people is one of grace as expressed in their Scriptures; to stand by our Statement to Jews, we reject the idea that God's covenant with the Jewish people has been superseded and Lutherans alone own the correct interpretation of grace.

Fifth, we need to re-educate Sunday School teachers. A prerequisite to that task is to make sure that the curriculum we are using does not convey supersessionism. Since there is no way to talk about Christianity without making reference to Judaism, it is a great challenge for Christian educators to determine the what and the how of teaching Christianity. Removing supersessionism is like removing a bad thread in a piece of fabric. After the removal the fabric will not stay the same. If supersessionism is removed, the story of Christian origins, liturgical practices, children's religious books as well as Christian theology of Jesus, church, salvation, etc., have to be revised. Think about this caption underneath a picture in a Sunday School curriculum: "Jesus was a good Christian boy who went to church every Sunday." In this short sentence, everything about Jesus is wrong! To be diligent in what we want to pass on is important. That is why I say the task of Christian education cannot be "passing on the faith" without purging the anti-Jewish virus.

Even if we have good curricula, teacher training is urgent. Our churches depend totally upon faithful volunteers to teach Sunday School. It is a good practice. Yet many of our teachers picked up a "virus-infected" Christianity when they were children. It is not enough to teach that Jesus was born a Jew. Some Christians who make that affirmation also insist that Jesus' teaching was exclusively Christian. To ensure that our teachers do not pass on the "virus" it is crucial to re-educate them. To do this, I highly recommend a day's refresher course for all teachers. If possible, organize a series of study using Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?* (see endnote #4), written primarily for beginners.

Notes

¹ A statement published in 2002 by the Christian Scholars Group affiliated with Boston College.

² Lutheran World Federation. *Anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism Today* (Dobogoko, Hungary, September 9-13, 2001).

³ Eva Fleischner, *Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945* Published by Scholars Commons © Lauffer, 2004

(Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1975) 23.

- * Taken from Mary C. Boys. *Has God Only One Blessing: Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (Mahwah: A Stimulus Book, 2000) 270.