

BEARING FAITHFUL WITNESS

STATEMENT ON UNITED CHURCH – JEWISH RELATIONS TODAY

PREAMBLE

The United Church of Canada is called to be faithful to Jesus Christ in worship, prayer, word and action in the midst of our neighbours and in the world. Accordingly, the 36th General Council, meeting in Camrose, Alberta in 1997, authorized for the whole church a study of the document *“Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today.”*

People of the United Church responded thoughtfully and prayerfully to the study document and to the proposed policy statement. This statement encompasses that response, and seeks to be a faithful expression of our understanding of United Church/Jewish relations.

The 38th General Council, meeting in Wolfville, Nova Scotia in 2003, overwhelmingly and enthusiastically approved this policy statement on the United Church of Canada – Jewish Relations today.

We believe this statement reflects our faith in Christ and is consistent with our historic witness as part of the Body of Christ. We believe that the God whom we know in Jesus Christ is the One who called Sarah and Abraham, gave the Torah to Moses, and put passion for justice into the hearts of the prophets. We believe, above all, in the faithfulness of God.

Holy Scripture teaches that the eternal Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, a Jew. The One who is “our judge and our hope” lives as a Jew, dies as a Jew and is raised as a Jew. In making these affirmations we seek to bear faithful witness to the Jewishness of Jesus.

We believe that the Holy Spirit calls us to bear faithful witness concerning God’s reconciling mission in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has opened the door in a new way to those previously outside the covenant¹. Our understanding of the faithfulness of God would be at risk if we were to say that God had abandoned the covenant with the Jewish people. As Paul says in Romans 9-11, the covenant is irrevocable because God is faithful.

We believe that our faith issues in action. Jesus commands us to love our neighbours, but all too often Christians have treated Jews, our sisters and brothers, as enemies. We believe that our faith calls us to repent when the church has been unfaithful in its witness by not loving Jews as neighbours.

Therefore, as an act of repentance and in faithfulness to the commandment that we should not bear false witness against our neighbours, The United Church of Canada ...

a)... ACKNOWLEDGES:

a history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism² within Christianity as a whole, including the United Church of Canada;

a history of interpretation of New Testament texts which has often failed to appreciate the context within Judaism from which these texts emerged, resulting in deeply-rooted anti-Jewish misinterpretation;

a history of insensitivity with respect to the importance of the Shoah³ for Jews;

1 See glossary reference to “covenant.”

2 See glossary reference to “anti-Judaism” and “antisemitism.”

3 ‘Shoah’, which is a Hebrew term meaning ‘catastrophic destruction’ is often the preferred term over the more-familiar ‘Holocaust’. This is because the word ‘Holocaust’, comes from a Greek term which is used in the Septuagint to signify the Hebrew term for ‘burnt offering’. Many do not consider it helpful or appropriate to refer to the destruction of most of European Jewry as an ‘offering’. The useage of these terms is not yet a completely settled question.

antisemitism and anti-Judaism as affronts to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

b)...REJECTS:

all teaching of a theology of contempt toward Jews and Judaism;
the belief that God has abolished the covenant with the Jewish people;⁴
supersessionism, the belief that Christians have replaced Jews in the love and purpose of God;
proselytism which targets Jews for conversion to Christianity.

c)... AFFIRMS:

the significance of Judaism as at once a religion, a people, and a covenant community;
that Judaism, both historically and currently, cannot be understood from knowledge of the Old Testament alone;
that the gifts and calling of God to the Jewish people are irrevocable;
the uniqueness for Christianity of the relationship with Judaism;
that both Judaism and Christianity, as living faiths, have developed significantly from a common root;
that the love of God is expressed in the giving of both Torah and Gospel;
that the State of Israel has the right to exist in peace and security;⁵
our common calling with Jews and others to align ourselves with God's world-mending work;
the opportunity for growth in Christian self-understanding that exists through closer dialogue with, openness to, and respect for Judaism.

d) ... ENCOURAGES MEMBERS, CONGREGATIONS, PRESBYTERIES, CONFERENCES AND THE GENERAL COUNCIL:

to seek opportunities to meet with Jews and to learn about modern Judaism;
to continue to study the issues raised by the study document, *"Bearing Faithful Witness,"* along with other issues of significance within the Jewish-Christian relationship;
to be vigilant in resisting antisemitism and anti-Judaism in church and society;
to create ongoing worship opportunities within the church for highlighting the importance of the Jewish-Christian relationship, such as at the time of Shoah Remembrance in April, or the high Jewish Holy Days in September/October, or Kristallnacht in November or Brotherhood/Sisterhood Week in February.

4 The biblical covenant with the Jewish people includes the promise of land. Whether that means exclusive occupation and control is disputed.

5 The United Church of Canada strongly affirms the right of the state of Israel to exist in peace and in secure boundaries and the right of Palestinians to a homeland state. United Church of Canada support of specific United Nations resolutions implies support for the boundaries of Israel and the Palestinian state being approximately represented by the pre-1967 borders of Israel and the West Bank and Gaza, subject to mutually agreed negotiations on the transfer of land.

BFW GLOSSARY

Anti-Judaism And Antisemitism

The term antisemitism, derived from Antisemitismus, was coined in imperial Germany during the 1870's by propagandists who did not wish Jews to enjoy equal rights with Christians. The term had a modern scientific ring because it assumed the fashionable racial science of the late nineteenth century; this was advantageous to its proponents. However, because there is no integrity to the word Semitism (or Semite) unless one adopts the pseudo-science that divided Europeans into opposing races, Aryans and Semites, anti-semitism is really a nonsense word; its true political meaning is "I am against the Jews." For this reason, many scholars prefer to spell it without a hyphen. To spell it with a hyphen is to lend respectability to racial ideas that they do not deserve.

The term anti-Judaism should contain a hyphen because Judaism is a religion that really exists. However, the term is vague and should not be used without careful definition. It can mean intellectual dissent from Jewish precepts (in the same sense as 'anti-Christian' or 'anti-Christianity'). Or it can have a pejorative connotation, implying not merely an attack on Jewish ideas, but on the Jews themselves for other than racial reasons. In the latter case, it approximates antisemitism. Ultimately, the line between the two terms is blurred because anti-Jewish animosity existed in Western Culture long before modern times, and it is clear that ancient and mediaeval religious cultural anti-Judaism became the foundation of modern antisemitism. Yet there is a historical distinction. Anti-Jewish elements are present in the Christian Scriptures, but it would be false to claim that the scriptures are antisemitic.

Israel

A Jewish view of the term Israel states that it contains within it three ideas — people, land and state. When it refers to the people of Israel, the term traces the Jewish people back to the ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Noah and Adam and Eve. It is believed that the people of Israel received two identity-forming calls: the first being the promise of descendants and the second being the covenant at Sinai. (It is also believed by some that the people of Israel are specially chosen to be a light, a bearer of justice and righteousness to the world.) When the term Israel means land it is believed that there was a promise of land given by God to Abraham and through him to the whole Jewish people. The people have often been active in the acquiring and settlement of this land and while the promise is seen to be eternal, the boundaries have varied throughout history.

When the term means the State of Israel, it refers to the political form of the Jewish civilization in the land.

These three definitions of the term Israel and the tight inter-connection amongst them are often difficult for Christians to understand. The connections between spirituality and bodies, and between religion and geography have no easy parallels in Christianity which understands itself as a universal religion. Yet, these ideas are core and central to Jewish identity.

(This glossary item is taken substantially from the book, "A Dictionary of the Jewish- Christian Dialogue" edited by Leon Kienicki and Geoffrey Wigoder, Paulist Press, 1995.)

Antisemitism And The State Of Israel

Because of the powerful bond on many levels between the state of Israel and the larger Jewish world, and because of the sensitivities engendered by the Holocaust, severe criticism of the Jewish state is often regarded by pro-Israel Jews and Christians as a mask for antisemitism. Those who make this claim are not always wrong. For one thing, anti-Zionist language has served to disguise antisemitism since the publication of the PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION at the end of the 19th century. For another thing, real antisemitism does exist in the Middle East and its presence has coloured and distorted the geopolitical issues faced by Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims and Christians. For still another thing, old Christian beliefs that define the Jews as witnesses to God's wrath (the mark of Cain) and thus condemned to perpetual homelessness have not entirely disappeared, especially from the conservative churches. Israel, seen through certain theological eyes, has no right to exist. Since attacks on the Jewish state can arise readily from antisemitic motives, some persons have argued that Christians at least, because of their highly compromised

past, should refrain from criticizing Israel at all. But this position is untenable, although Christians must take special pains not to forget this past and its ideological legacy. As a modern nation-state, Israel, like all nation-states, is subject to the moral ambiguities of power which, by definition, is never innocent and never can be innocent. Even if Israel is conceived in religious and theological terms, as, for example, a land promised by God to the Jewish people, this fact remains true. Indeed, the faith component makes criticism even more necessary because of the dangers of self-righteousness inherent in any religious nationalism. The problem is to distinguish legitimate criticism from illegitimate assaults driven by a concealed prejudice. Certain signs indicate the difference. Criticisms of Israel that dwell on its Jewish identity rather than the exigencies of power as the cause of its real or imagined misdeeds are highly suspect. Any attempt to demonize Israel as intrinsically evil and thus a nation unlike other nations (although all nations are guilty of evil deeds) betrays its true nature. Certainly equations of Israel with Nazi Germany or the Star of David with the swastika suggest a sinister agenda, although Jews as well as Germans are not immune to immoral political temptations. Legitimate criticism, on the other hand, concerns itself with specific policies and actions on the part of Israeli leaders and governments, as well as the enduring problems and tensions of Israeli society. Legitimate criticism is always able to distinguish between a regime and a people, between what is transient and what is enduring in the history of a particular country.

Covenant

Literally, a covenant is a pact or bargain between two parties. In the Old Testament, 'covenant' refers primarily to the bond between God and the people of Israel initiated by God and grounded in God's grace and steadfast love. God promises life, land, prosperity and attentiveness. The people promise to be God's "own possession among all peoples" and to obey the divine instruction, Torah (Ex. 19:5); later this is understood to include being "a light to the nations" (Isa. 49:6; cf. Isa.2:2-4). The covenant is made with Moses at Sinai (Ex. 19 ff.), reaffirming the bond made with Abraham (Gen. 15, 17) and reaffirmed again later with David (2 Sam.7) and Solomon (1 Kgs. 9) and in the restoration from exile (Isaiah 40-55). In the Old Testament, God also makes a covenant with Noah. In Jewish thinking, this covenant applies to all humanity, requiring only that people respect life and live by a codifiable rule of law that has integrity (Gen. 9:8-17).

In the New Testament, 'covenant' is used to refer to God's new and renewed bonding with all humanity through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is seen as fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah about a new covenant written in the heart (Jer. 31:31-340; hence the use of the word, 'testament' (i.e., covenant), both "old" and "new" in the Christian Bible. [For an excellent treatment of 'covenant' in the Old Testament, see Jon D. Levenson, SINAI AND ZION (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), particularly the first section on "Sinai". The great Christian Old Testament scholar, Walther Eichrodt, thought that 'covenant' was the most important unifying and organizing concept for grasping the Old Testament's presentation of God and God's action with humanity. This understanding thoroughly informs his THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT (trans. J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961 (vol.1) and 1967 (vol.2))).