

On Luther and his lies

As the Reformation's 500th anniversary nears, Christians are contending with Luther's violently anti-Jewish writings.

by [Noam E. Marans](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue



Title page of Martin Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, from 1543.

When Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, he set in motion a revolution which transformed Christianity, Europe, and eventually the world. Jews and Judaism were a relatively minor detail of the Reformation, but Luther's virulent anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism—a term first used in the 19th century—left a legacy

that would be cynically championed by the Nazi cause and religiously heralded by some Christian leaders in the 20th century as genocide was perpetrated against the Jewish people.

There is hope in this sad story because Lutherans and other Christians confronted their anti-Jewish past during the second half of the 20th century. But before celebrating that change of heart, the first 400 years of Luther's legacy must be remembered. The retelling of that story is not simply an academic exercise. It represents a commitment by Jews, Christians, and others to acknowledge that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Even when we study history, we humans sometimes, perhaps even quite often, repeat it. Unfortunately, the Shoah was not the final genocide of human history. And today we see almost every day—including recently in the United States—how the venom of xenophobia, racism, and hatred inevitably leads to violence.

Luther initially believed that kindness toward Jews was the right path, if only for the purpose of enlightening them and opening their eyes to Christianity. As a professor of Old Testament, he believed that Jews could be taught the proper meaning of certain Hebrew Bible verses prophesying Jesus' life, messianic mandate, and New Covenant, thereby leading to their conversion. This period in Luther's early fame is represented by his essay "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" (1523). Both the title and intermittent points of the tract foreshadowed some elements of 20th-century Christian outreach to and reconciliation with Jews. For example, Luther writes, "We gentiles are relatives by marriage and strangers, while they [the Jews] are of the same blood, cousins and brothers of our Lord" (I rely here as elsewhere on Thomas Kaufmann's *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism*).

But this attitude did not last. Frustrated by Jewish steadfastness, and misinformed regarding Jewish practices, Luther in his later years undid his early openness toward the Jewish people and penned anti-Jewish rants. "On the Jews and Their Lies" (1543) is a patently anti-Semitic document. He writes:

And so, dear Christian, beware of the Jews . . . you can see how God's wrath has consigned them to the Devil, who has robbed them not only of a proper understanding of the Scriptures, but also of common human reason, modesty and sense. . . . Thus, when you see a real Jew you may with a good conscience cross yourself, and boldly say, "There goes the

Devil incarnate.”

Worse than that, Luther’s rage and increasing religious and political power were accompanied by a program for protecting Christian society from Jewish influence and contamination by burning or razing synagogues, destroying Jewish homes, confiscating Jewish holy books, banning Jewish religious worship, expropriating Jewish money, and deporting Jews.

Luther’s anti-Judaism might have been forgotten and even understood as a product of his times. After all, Luther preached in a Wittenberg church where anti-Jewish art—the notorious *Judensau* depicting Jews nursing on the teats of swine—had been installed hundreds of years before he was born. But Luther’s prolific output, his mastery of the media revolution unleashed by Gutenberg, and his role as founder of a religious movement that would have many offshoots guaranteed that he would never be forgotten.

Never was that more painfully clear than with the rise of Nazism. Hitler was influenced by those who appropriated and reenergized Luther’s anti-Jewish polemics. Chillingly, in November 1938, just two weeks after *Kristallnacht*, Martin Sasse, bishop of the Evangelical Church of Thuringia, published a pamphlet titled *Martin Luther and the Jews: Away with Them!* Sasse wrote:

On 10 November, Luther’s birthday, the synagogues are burning. . . . At this moment, we must hear the voice of the prophet of the Germans from the sixteenth century, who out of ignorance began as a friend of the Jews but who, guided by his conscience, experience and reality became the greatest anti-Semite of his age, the one who warned his nation against the Jews.

That polemic, with a print run of 100,000 copies, connected the dots between Luther’s aspiration for the burning of synagogues to its fulfillment by the Nazis.

In a similar vein, Julius Streicher, who founded the anti-Semitic paper *Der Stürmer* and was sentenced to death at Nuremberg for crimes against humanity, defended his actions by saying they were inspired by Luther himself. It was Luther, he suggested, not he, who should be on trial.

Jews and Christians have found a way to move beyond Luther’s anti-Judaic diatribe.

But the story does not end there. From the hell of the Shoah came Christian self-reflection on centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and culpability that enabled the persecution of the Jews throughout the ages, culminating with the Holocaust. The Catholic Church's 1965 document *Nostra aetate*, which rejected the charge of deicide against the Jews, is the most widely cited of Christian documents in this new era of Christian-Jewish relations. But it is not the first or only one. Lutheran documents are remarkable in that they confronted the challenging task of rejecting Luther's anti-Jewish teachings while sustaining an appreciation of his religious heroism and legacy.

In 1983, the Lutheran World Federation declared, "The sins of Luther's anti-Jewish remarks, the violence of his attacks on the Jews, must be acknowledged with deep distress." In 1994, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America stated:

In the spirit of . . . truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribe, and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. . . . We particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.

In 1983, 500 years after Luther's birth, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland called Luther's anti-Jewish texts "calamitous." In 2000, the EKD reiterated the point:

Fifty years ago, at its second session in Berlin-Weissensee, the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany . . . declared: "We state clearly that through omission and silence, we too have become guilty before the Merciful God of the outrage perpetrated against the Jews by members of our [German] people." The Synod thereby admitted the church's complicity in the persecution and murder of European Jewry.

And in 2016 the EKD stated: "In the lead-up to the Reformation anniversary we cannot bypass this history of guilt. The fact that Luther's anti-Judaic recommendations in later life were a source for Nazi anti-Semitism is a further burden weighing on the Protestant churches in Germany."

Engaging Luther is not an all or nothing enterprise. The ELCA document “Luther and Contemporary Interreligious Relations,” issued several years ago in anticipation of the Reformation’s 500th anniversary, delineates ways in which Luther’s better ideas can be incorporated into interreligious relations generally and Christian-Jewish relations specifically.

The Christian world has found partners within the Jewish community who have embraced the Christian move toward reconciliation. That positive Jewish response should not be taken for granted or assumed. *Dabru Emet* (1999), the first broad-based Jewish communal response to the post-Shoah Christian reversals, states, “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon,” and “We applaud those Christians who reject this teaching of contempt and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.”

I recently accompanied a group of young American Jews on a visit to Wittenberg. They were part of a seminar sponsored by Germany Close Up, an organization committed to introducing young American Jews to modern Germany, and by the American Jewish Committee. For two days, together with German Christian peers, these Jews studied Luther’s anti-Jewish texts and recent church repudiations of those texts, visited the sites of the Reformation, viewed medieval anti-Jewish art, heard from Jewish and Protestant religious leaders, and weighed the implications.

That Wittenberg experience can serve as a model for Christians and Jews. We have reached a point in the journey when we can feel comfortable speaking candidly about our respective traditions and firmly held beliefs. In consultation with Jewish partners over many years, Lutherans found a way to help Christians and Jews acknowledge and move beyond “Luther’s anti-Judaic diatribe” and its utilization as “a source for Nazi anti-Semitism.” If that is possible, then we need not fear taking on other topics that threaten to drive a wedge between Christians and Jews.

On the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the story of Luther and the Jews in the context of Christian-Jewish relations is a narrative of how bad things were, how much better they are today, and how it may yet be possible to complete the journey of reconciliation.

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