

A STATEMENT TO OUR FELLOW CHRISTIANS (final)

1. The Church of Christ is rooted in the life of the People Israel. We Christians look upon Abraham as our spiritual ancestor and father of our faith. For us the relationship is not one of physical descent but the inheritance of a faith like that of Abraham whose life was based on his trust in the promises made to him by God (Gen. 15:1-6). The ministry of Jesus and the life of the early Christian community were thoroughly rooted in the Judaism of their day, particularly in the teachings of the Pharisees. The Christian Church is still sustained by the living faith of the patriarchs and prophets, kings and priests, scribes and rabbis, and the people whom God chose for his own. Christ is the link (Gal. 3:26-29) enabling the Gentiles to be numbered among Abraham's "offspring" and therefore fellow-heirs with the Jews according to God's promise. It is a tragedy of history that Jesus, our bond of unity with the Jews, has all too often become a symbol and source of division and bitterness because of human weakness and pride.
2. Christians can also enrich themselves by a careful study of post-biblical Judaism to the present day. Such enrichment is especially imperative in light of the far-reaching value crisis that now affects the entire Western world. If religion is to play its rightful role in the value reconstruction that is now beginning, its approach will have to be ecumenical. And in the West this means, first of all, the recognition that two religious traditions, not a single Judaeo-Christian tradition, have shaped our culture; and secondly, the genuine and open sharing of insights and differences between Jews and Christians, each realizing that one's understanding of the spiritual nature of the human person remains incomplete without the other.
3. The singular grace of Jesus Christ does not abrogate the covenantal relationship of God with Israel (Rom. 11:1-2). In Christ the Church shares in Israel's election without superseding it. By baptism and faith the Christian, as the Roman liturgy says, passes over to the sonship of Abraham and shares in the dignity of Israel. The survival of the Jewish people, despite the barbaric persecutions and the cruel circumstances under which they were forced to live is a sign of God's continuing fidelity to the people dear to him. For our spiritual legacy and for all that the Jews have done for the whole human race we Christians are grateful to God and to the people whom God has chosen as a special instrument of his kindness.
4. The new ecumenical atmosphere in theological research and the tragic reality of the Holocaust together with the present Middle East conflict urge us to reconsider the relationship of Christians to Jews. We Christians have readily acknowledged that God made a covenant with the Jews in the past, promising his paternal care for his chosen people in return for their fidelity. Unfortunately many Christians have assumed that the validity of Judaism ended with the beginning of Christianity, the rejection of Jesus as Messiah marking the dissolution of the covenant. This assumption conflicts sharply with St. Paul's declaration that God did not annul his promise to the chosen people since God never takes back his gifts or revokes his call (Romans 11, 28-29). The Apostle dismissed as altogether untenable the notion that God had rejected his people. There is thus strong Scriptural support for the position that God's covenant love for the Jewish people remains

firm. The continuity of contemporary Judaism with ancient Israel demonstrates the abiding validity of Jewish worship and life as authentic forms of service to the true God.

5. The fierce persecution of Jews by Christians through the centuries should be seen as a fratricidal strife as well as a vast human tragedy. In many instances Christian preachers and writers disseminated slanderous stories about the Jews. From the apostolic age the Church accepted uncritically the condemnation of the Pharisees as hypocrites even though the Synoptic Gospels picture Jesus as generally agreeing with what many Pharisees in fact stood for. Whole generations of Christians looked with contempt upon this people who were condemned to remain wanderers on the earth on the charge, in fact false, of having killed Christ. Anti-Jewish polemics became a perennial feature of Christendom and reflected gross ignorance of Jewish history and religion. This sin has infected the non-Christian world as well.

6. A major source of friction in contemporary Christian-Jewish relations is Christian hostility and indifference to the State of Israel. In dialogue among Christians on the Middle East question there exists a startling variety of opinions, some of which exacerbate already existing Christian-Jewish misunderstandings. We urge the churches therefore to give their prayerful attention to such central questions as the legitimacy of the Jewish state, the rights of the Palestinians, and the problem of the refugees--Jewish as well as Arab. Only a conscience seeking to be well-informed and free of prejudice can help to bring about peace with justice in the Middle East.

7. The validity of the State of Israel rests on moral and juridical grounds. It was established in response to a resolution of the U. N. General Assembly, after termination of the British Mandate. However, involved in the potentially explosive political conflict in the Middle East is a theological question that demands careful scrutiny. What is the relationship between "the people" and "the land"? What is the relation between the chosen people and the territory comprising the present State of Israel? There is no Christian consensus on these questions. Genesis explicitly affirms a connection between the people and the land (Gen. 15:18), and even within the New Testament certain passages imply such a connection. Therefore, Christians who see Israel as something more than a political state are not wrongly theologizing politics by understanding the existence of the Jewish state in theological terms. They are merely recognizing that modern Israel is the homeland of a people whose political identity is sustained by the faith that God has blessed them with a covenant. There is reason for Christians to rejoice that the Jewish people are no longer required to live in enforced dispersion among the nations, separated from the land of the promise.

8. We have traditionally viewed the Jews as a people having a universal dimension. God wanted them to set up a special society dedicated to the fulfillment of the messianic aspirations for righteousness and freedom. Even when dispersed they became a summons to the human conscience to safeguard and protect the rights of all people. Here in the United States the Jewish contribution to the advancement of human rights remains outstanding. Now the question arises: is the Jewish people so universalistic as to exclude the possibility of their having a state of their own? It does seem to many observers that the localizing of Jewish activities gives a greater opportunity to fulfill their universal vocation than would an unfocused global presence.

9. As a political state, Israel is open to all the temptations of power. The charge is sometimes made that Israel is belligerently expansionistic as a result of its military triumphs in the Six-Day War. Visitors to Israel, however, can easily discover that the overriding concern of the majority of Israelis is peace, not more territory. Israel's anxiety about national defense reflects the age-old human yearning for security, the anxiety of a people whose history has been a saga of frightful persecution, climaxed by the Holocaust of six million men, women and children. Against such a tormented background, is it surprising that the Jewish people should want to defend themselves? It would be quite unrealistic and unjust to expect Israel to become a sort of heavenly society of which more is expected than of other nations. This does not mean that Christians must endorse every policy decision by the Israeli government. Most Jews, both within Israel and without, do not do so. Rather, Christians must refrain from the type of criticism that would use the failure of Israel to live up to the highest moral standards as an excuse to deny its right to exist. Such a view would be a double standard, one not applied to any other nation on earth.

10. As Christians we urge all nations in the world (our own nation, Israel, and the Arab states included) to recognize that there is no way to secure lasting peace based on the balance of military power and the use of fear as a deterrent. Rather, the only road leading to peace is trust in and understanding of neighbors and partners. We urge the Church to attend to its role as agent of reconciliation.

11. At present antisemitism is unfashionable and seems to have gone underground in the United States, though some recent studies show it is on the rise. But even an underground antisemitism surfaces from time to time in various forms and disguises. New Left literature has excoriated the Jews not as Jews but as Zionists. Some Christian publications in the United States and Canada have even resorted to more subtle forms of antisemitism, exploiting the claim that Israel is "judaizing" Jerusalem and its environs and driving Arabs from their homes in the Holy City. Antisemitism, however, is a difficult virus to counteract. It has a pervasiveness that infects our whole civilization and manifests itself in education, housing, job opportunities and social life. Fortunately some Christian churches are working hard to excise from their liturgy and education any anti-semitic references.

12. Those who refuse to learn from history must relive the errors and evils of the past. In times of civil disorders, agitators have arisen and will continue to appear in our society attempting to make Jews the scapegoats for the evils of an era. If problems like inflation and unemployment continue to escalate, if a depression should set in, we can be fairly sure that the radical Right and/or the radical Left will make Jews out to be the culprits.

13. The pressure of our violent times urges us as Christians to live up to our calling as ministers of reconciliation, ready and willing to stifle rumors about the Jews and to build up an atmosphere of brotherly understanding in Christian-Jewish relations. We strongly commend Jewish-Christian dialogue as a favored instrument by which we may explore the richness of Judaism and the Jewish roots of our Christian faith.

14. The pain of the past has taught us that antisemitism is a Pandora's box from which spring out not only atrocities against Jews but also contempt for Christ. Whatever the antisemite inflicts on the Jews he inflicts on Christ who is "bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh." In the words of St. Paul, "They are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh is the Christ" (Rom. 9:4-5).

The result of four years' study, this statement is the responsibility of the signatories, who were convened and assisted by the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches of Christ in collaboration with the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. We cordially invite your response. Study papers supporting the views herein expressed are available on request.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. In what sense are Christians "God's chosen people"? Is this an exclusive claim, or is the Jewish people part of God's continuing work in history (Romans 9:4)? If "chosen," what are Christians "chosen" for?
2. In what sense are the Jews a covenant people? Are Christians possessors of a second covenant or a shared covenant or a renewed covenant?
3. Is an ecumenical movement without the Jewish component dependable and valid? What is the role of Christian-Jewish dialogue in the future of the church? What are the agreed areas of Jewish-Christian cooperation?
4. What is the meaning of the Holocaust to believing Christians? What is the responsibility of Christendom in relation to the Holocaust?
5. Is not antisemitism a betrayal of the faith?
6. To what extent must Jews and Christians read the Jewish scriptures (which we call "Old Testament") differently?
 - a) Does the acceptance of Jesus Christ mean reading the OT differently?
 - b) In what sense are certain events in Jewish history--like the Exodus and Sinai--also formative for the Christian faith?
7. How can Christianity benefit from post-biblical Judaism?
8. To what extent have Christians taught and are still teaching that which creates religious antisemitism and lays the foundations for the political antisemitism whose horrors we have seen in recent decades?
9. Can there be a conversionist mission to the Jews in the light of Paul's statements (Romans 9)?
10. Does the land of Israel have a special meaning for Christians?
11. Compare the concept of the Messiah in Christianity and Judaism.
 - A. What does it mean to say Jesus Christ is "the Messiah" (a Jewish word)?
 - B. Do we share in the Jewish anticipation of the Messianic era?
 - C. What are the implications for Christians that the Messianic era has not come?
 - D. Is there a Messianic people or two peoples?

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CHURCHES

We call upon Christians to recognize and to respond to God's love for the Jewish people. We affirm this love to be expressed by his presence with them in history to this day and by his choice of them as bearers of the Christ, His Son. We perceive this love to require concrete responses in the life and work of the Christian churches. Among such responses we recommend the following:

1. Sensitivity and balance in use of New Testament texts. There are numerous NT texts which might be interpreted as reflecting negatively on Jews and Judaism. In reading and interpreting such texts we must constantly remember that Jesus was a Jew. His dress, his manner of speaking, his mode of living, his teaching, his relationship to his culture and forebears were thoroughly Jewish. Therefore, conflict and controversies must be seen as taking place within a framework which he not only shared with fellow-Jews, but which he and God affirmed.

Caution in this respect is particularly advisable when treating the Pharisees. Conflicts with the Pharisees were internal Jewish struggles. The diatribes reflect serious family quarrels which took place between Jesus and his fellows in the nascent church. They underline God's choice to reveal himself through a Jewish context, rather than indicating any rejection of Jews or Pharisees generally. Jesus, in fact, agreed with Pharisaic perspectives on many points, as did Paul and other early church leaders.

2. Preaching which portrays or refers to Jews, Judaism, and the OT in a positive light.

Christian preaching employs negative as well as positive examples, images, and experiential analogies. We try to teach what not to do as well as what to do. Some examples of what not to do lie ready at hand in the words or actions of Jews in the NT. Preachers must guard against any tendency to portray Jews or Jewish groups as negative models. The truth and beauty of Christianity should not be enhanced by setting up the falseness or ugliness of Jews or Judaism as a "straw-man" or polar opposite. Likewise the OT witness should not be portrayed as less authoritative, less normative, or superseded. It is central to the tradition which our Lord accepted as his own and which he reaffirmed as He interpreted it in his life, work, and thought. The Judgment and the redeeming love of God should be presented as existing from the beginning to the end of both Testaments.

3. Receptivity to the way in which God's love continues to be revealed in Jewish self-expression.

The varieties of Jewish religious and social experiences are a preliminary vehicle for the reaffirmation of God's mysterious loving purpose in our world today. Fulfillment of commandments and ordinances, liturgy, festivals, family life, communal experience, the State of Israel, and many other aspects of Jewish experience inspire, influence, edify and challenge us. Christians must confront and respond with warmth and openness to the ways in which God is speaking and acting in and through Jewish life today.

As a corollary, we must prepare to speak and act forthrightly against all efforts to distort or to negate the status or value of Jewish life and experience. Jews are pilgrims with us, recipients of God's gracious love, sojourners on the way of salvation.