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Prepared by the Consultative Panel on Lutheran–Jewish Relations of the office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Your ideas about these topics are very welcome and will be considered by the Panel in its further work. To submit personal reflections or the results of a group discussion, please use the accompanying Response and Evaluation form or simply send a letter to the ELCA office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations at the address below, or send an email to erinfo@elca.org.

Further information on Jewish-Christian relations, including a downloadable form of these “Talking Points,” may be found at www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Christian-Jewish-Relations/Talking-Points.aspx. See also the comprehensive set of resources on the ecumenical web site www.jcrelations.net.

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TALKING POINTS

#3

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

LAW AND GOSPEL

The meaning of “law” for Jews is positive, in a way quite different from what it has usually meant to Lutherans.

What is meant by “Law,” in the sense in which we often speak of the Word of God as including both “Law” and “Gospel”? To Lutherans, “Law” usually means God’s demand that we live completely in accord with God’s will. Since in our bondage to sin we cannot do that, we are condemned by the Law and must be saved by the Gospel. In this view, the Law always accuses us.

We are often surprised, then, to find that Jews embrace the Law more as a gift than as a demand. Thus the Psalmist explains, “O, how I love thy Law [Torah]” (Psalm 119:97), and the rabbis emphasize that Israel received the commandments (*mitzvot*) not to be condemned but “to live by them” (Leviticus 18:5) – “live” and not die. The Israelites do not receive the law in order to earn God’s favor; they were saved from bondage in Egypt before they ever came to Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. So they are already God’s people when God gives them the Torah to know how to live out their divine calling.

Torah embraces the Five Books of Moses, scriptural teaching as a whole, and the rabbis’ interpretation. Beginning with the Ten Commandments, which many Christians also use as a positive guide for living, it is a powerful mentor more than a legalistic taskmaster. Indeed, the Hebrew term “Torah” is better translated as “teaching” or “instruction,” rather than law.

“Talking Points” is a set of eight leaflets issued by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations to set forth propositions for discussion and debate on topics in Christian-Jewish relations. These “Talking Points” are not intended as position papers, but as discussion starters, with the hope of eliciting a broad range of responses to the point as stated in the box above. See back page for information on how to offer feedback.

*OH, HOW I LOVE YOUR LAW!
IT IS MY MEDITATION ALL DAY LONG.
HOW SWEET ARE YOUR WORDS
TO MY TASTE,
SWEETER THAN HONEY TO MY MOUTH!*

PSALM 119:97,103

*SO THE LAW IS HOLY,
AND THE COMMANDMENT IS HOLY
AND JUST AND GOOD.*

ROMANS 7:12

The New Testament describes a vigorous debate between Jesus and the Pharisees, who led a lay renewal movement within Judaism, over some issues of Torah interpretation. Although this conflict has been wrongly interpreted as pitting “Christianity” against “Judaism,” in fact both Jesus and the Pharisees were seeking to discern how God’s will applied to the details of daily life in the Jewish community. Jews know the Pharisees as the precursors of the great tradition of rabbinic Judaism, in which this effort to perceive the meaning of Torah teaching for each new generation was continued, and continues to this day.

The commandment against false witness calls on us to avoid negative caricatures of Jewish life and thought. Christians today are learning to pay attention to the Jewish understanding and experience of Torah in its multiplicity and its graciousness.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Psalm 119 celebrates the Law as God’s gracious guidance in innumerable ways. Does this emphasis inevitably lead to “works righteousness” (the expectation that salvation must be “earned” by obeying the Law)?
2. The Christian sacraments involve commands (“Do this...”), yet are experienced as a profound source of grace. Does this help us understand how, for Jews, *mitzvot* (commandments) can serve not as legalisms but as blessings?
3. Must “Law and Gospel” always be the interpretive principle by which Lutherans approach scripture and preaching? If so, how does the principle relate to the broader sense of Torah in living Judaism?
4. Recent historical study of the Gospels has developed a more positive view of the Pharisees not as hypocritical legalists, but as part of a reform movement stressing (as Jesus did) piety and faithfulness in daily life. How can the strong criticism of “the Pharisees” in the Gospels be read and preached without breaking the commandment against bearing false witness?