

## TOPICS IN THIS SERIES

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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](mailto: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](http://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](http://www.jcrelations.net).

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## TALKING POINTS

#5

### TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

#### DIFFICULT TEXTS

Christians are morally obligated to understand the New Testament’s harsh words against Jews and Judaism in their original contexts, without translating those polemics to anti-Semitism.

The documents of the New Testament were written in a time of great controversy. The Jesus movement had begun as one among several forms of Judaism. While departing from some aspects of strict Torah observance as it spread among Gentiles, it continued to assert its identity as a legitimate inheritor of God’s promises to Israel. The main body of the Jewish community, however, strove to distance itself from those who acclaimed a Galilean rabbi as Messiah, Savior and Son of God.

The intensity of the conflict is reflected in many places in the New Testament. Scribes and Pharisees are vehemently denounced, and in the fourth gospel, the collective term “the Jews” designates the enemies of Jesus, even though Jesus and his disciples were, of course, all Jews. The gospel narratives minimize the role of the tyrannical Roman authorities in Jesus’ death, depicting the Jews as fundamentally responsible for the crucifixion. The polemic continues in the book of Acts, and Paul contributes his own harsh words in passionate attacks on those opponents who would impose strict Jewish observance on Gentile converts. Often the New Testament writers selectively appropriated the words of Israel’s prophets to shape their invective.

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“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.

*YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS  
AGAINST YOUR NEIGHBOR.*

EXODUS 20:16

*IF I HAVE ALL FAITH,  
SO AS TO REMOVE MOUNTAINS,  
BUT DO NOT HAVE LOVE,  
I AM NOTHING.*

I CORINTHIANS 13:2

In subsequent history, such texts have often been linked to feelings of hostility and contempt toward Jews, giving apparent biblical warrant to violence against them. Such words – “You are from your father, the devil” (John 8:44), “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:25) – still evoke the memory and threat of such hatred.

To remedy this, Christians must make every effort to interpret the texts with a fuller awareness of their historical contexts. Various Jewish groups in the first century C.E.\*, including the early Christians, were struggling to understand scripture and history as revealing God’s will for Israel and the world. Later Christians, alienated from the synagogue, employed the language of those early, internal debates to condemn Jews and Judaism as a whole. We today cannot properly continue to use these texts in this way.

Christians also need to bear in mind the vast changes that have taken place since New Testament times. Originally a minority movement, Christianity soon became the dominant faith in the Roman Empire, and all too often misused its power to oppress its fellow heirs of the covenant, the Jews. Moreover, Judaism has undergone many creative developments, so that Jewish faith and practice today, which in continuity with biblical Israel, is by no means identical with it.

The reader of the New Testament needs to guard against transferring what is said there about Jews to our actual Jewish neighbors today. The gospel of love must not become a pretense for prejudice or hatred.

\* Common Era, the period otherwise designated A.D.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think that texts such as those referred to above can lead to hostility against Jews today? Has this happened in your experience?
2. Before lessons such as these are read in worship, commentary can be offered to avoid any anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic implications. What do you think of this possibility?
3. Does it help us Christians to ask: “What if my Jewish neighbors heard this text? Does it slander them? What impression would it give them of Christians and Christianity?”