

Was Martin Luther an Anti-Semite?

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, focus will return to the leader of that movement, Martin Luther. What kind of man was he, really? More specifically, what kind of Christian was he?

At a recent conference of R. C. Sproul's Ligonier Ministries, panelists Stephen Nichols and W. Robert Godfrey discussed "whether Martin Luther was guilty of anti-Semitism," and there is good reason to raise this question.

As Nichols rightly points out, in 1523, Luther reached out with kindness and humility to the Jewish people, denouncing how the church had treated them up until then with the hope that many would become Christians. Twenty years later, when that did not happen, and when Luther, now old and sick, had been exposed to some blasphemous, anti-Jesus writings penned by Jews in past generations, he wrote his infamous document "Concerning the Jews and Their Lies."

In this mini-book, he told the German princes how to deal with "this damned, rejected race of Jews."

First, their synagogues should be set on fire ... Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed. ... Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer-books and Talmuds ... Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more ... Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews. ... Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury [charging interest on loans]. ... Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the ax, the hoe, the spade, the distaff and spindle, and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses ... We ought to drive the

rascally lazy bones out of our system. ...Therefore away with them. ...

To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden—the Jews.

Yes, all this came from the pen of Martin Luther. (Brace yourself. There's more to come.)

Of this despicable document, Nichols said that "Luther unleashes his rhetoric against the Jews and is very forceful in his rhetoric." Very forceful? I'd call that a gross understatement.

Nichols continues:

Now we need to say that he was an equal opportunity offender. It wasn't just—that rhetoric was not just reserved—for the Jews, he used the same rhetoric for the Papists, for the Anabaptists, for the nominal Christians, that he used for the Jews. But he was wrong. He spoke harshly, and I think he abused his influence that he had in speaking harshly. And so, we need to say that Luther was wrong in that. But this isn't necessarily anti-Semitism, that's really a 20th-century phenomenon.

Once again, I must take exception to these words, which minimize the horror of what Luther wrote.

Tragically, Adolph Hitler thought that Luther was a genius who figured out how dangerous the Jewish people were. And the date that many historians mark as the beginning of the Holocaust, Nov. 9, 1938, was the day that Hitler put Luther's advice into practice, setting on fire and vandalizing Jewish synagogues, shops, and homes.

In that light, I cannot agree with Nichols in saying, "I think he abused his influence that he had in speaking harshly." That, again, is a gross understatement, regardless of how ugly Luther's rhetoric was towards other groups and regardless of how coarse the rhetoric of the day might have been. For a Christian leader, such writings must be renounced in the strongest possible terms, even with tears and wails.

Robert Godfrey, the other Ligonier panelist, commented:

Just to add one more thing . . . the one little that should be added is Luther, all his life, longed that Jews should be converted and join the church. Hitler never wanted Jews to join the Nazi party. That's the difference between anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish. Luther wasn't opposed to the Jews because of their blood. He was opposed to the Jews because of their religion. And he wanted them to join the Christian church. If you're really anti-Semitic, you're against Jews because of their blood and there's nothing Jews can do about that. There's not change they can make to make a difference. You're absolutely right, Luther's language should not be defended by us because it's violent against the Jews. It was not against an ethnic people, as you said, but against a religion that he reacted so sharply.

Is Godfrey right? Yes and no. On the one hand, the real issue was the Jewish religion (specifically, from Luther's point of view, Jewish unbelief in Jesus) as opposed to being Jewish in and of itself. On the other hand, there was a fine line between the two, as historian Eric W. Gritsch pointed out in his book, *Martin Luther's Antisemitism: Against His Better Judgment*.

He writes,

There is even a hint of racism in Luther when he commented on the unsubstantiated rumor that Jews killed Christian children. This crime "still shines forth from their eyes and

their skin. We are at fault in not slaying them [the Jews].” Such a declaration cannot be limited to a specific historical context. It is timeless and means “death to the Jews,” whether it is uttered by Luther or Adolf Hitler. Moreover, Luther himself was willing to kill “a blaspheming Jew”: “I would slap his face and, if I could, fling him to the ground and, in my anger, pierce him with my sword.”

So wrote Martin Luther. And I find little comfort in the fact that he wrote about others, like the peasants, in similarly dreadful terms: “On the obstinate, hardened, blinded peasants, let no one have mercy, but let everyone, as he is able, hew, stab, slay, lay about him as though among mad dogs, ... so that peace and safety may be maintained ... etc.”

Returning to Luther and the Jews, quotes like this make it difficult to separate his theological Jew-hatred from his ethnic Jew-hatred:

A Jew or a Jewish heart is as hard as stone and iron and cannot be moved by any means. ... in sum, they are the devil’s children damned to hell We cannot even convert the majority of Christians and have to be satisfied with a small number; it is therefore even less possible to convert these children of the devil! Although there are many who derive the crazy notion from the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans that all Jews must be converted, this is not so. St. Paul meant something quite different.

As a non-Catholic, Jewish believer in Jesus, I am indebted to Luther’s positive contributions and recognize the hellacious battle he fought with corrupt traditions. But I appeal to followers and admirers of Luther today: Please do not minimize the horror of what he wrote (against the Jews and others). Please don’t downplay all this as an example of Luther having “feet of clay” (in the words of Nichols).

There is a lot of blood on those clay feet—including Jewish blood.

Let's own it with sadness and grief. To do otherwise is to be less than honest with the memory of Martin Luther. {eoa}