

Covenantal Conversations: Christians in Dialogue with Jews & Judaism

DVD created by the ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, 2010

"Covenantal Conversations: Christians In Dialogue with Jews," DVD- approximately 3 hours, ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, 2009. Available through Select Learning at Select Learning \$49.95 http://www.selectlearning.org/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=65&products_id=557 Foundational book, *Covenantal Conversations*, available through Fortress Press

The majority of ELCA congregations are not likely in close proximity to Jewish communities. However, the DVD *Covenantal Conversations: Christians in Dialogue with Jews and Judaism* is a great resource for everyone – not just those congregations located in multicultural, multi-faith urban areas. Any congregation whose members are interested in the history, theology and traditions of Christianity, especially in light of Christianity's obvious roots in Judaism, will want to access this multi-media resource.

This DVD, and the original book by the same title, assists any small group or congregation in learning more about our own faith tradition; more specifically, about the importance of Judaism as the people who received the Torah at Sinai, and the integral relationship between the two faiths. This program, which includes nine (9) separate 20-minute sessions on a variety of topics, demonstrates clearly the close connection between Judaism and Christianity.

The material covered in these conversations provides some foundations of Christianity, then turns the viewer outward to look closer at the practices, teachings and traditions of God's original covenantal people — Jews and Judaism. One of the intriguing aspects of the dialogues is the personal dimension that is introduced as Dr. Darrell Jodock asks each presenter to provide something about his/her background and early interest in Jewish – Christian relations.

There is much insight to be gained just by watching the interviews. The DVD is a stand-alone resource for congregational use. However, it can be supplemented by the original Fortress publication, which provides a parallel chapter allocation. Each book chapter concludes with a series of questions designed to help facilitate conversation and exchange in an educational setting. [An earlier, basic version of this work entitled "Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations" is available from the ELCA Office of Ecumenical & Inter-Religious Relations. It includes a series of flyers with basic propositions and teaching points]. All three of these items together are excellent resources for use in any congregational adult education setting. Following is an overview of the series of interviews with a synopsis of each section.

JUDAISM THEN AND NOW ~ *Barry Cytron*

Rabbi Cytron is currently a Chaplain and a visiting Assistant Professor at Macalaster College. He served 25 years as a congregational rabbi and, for the past fifteen years, was director of the Jay Phillips Center at the University of St. Thomas, which fosters interfaith education.

Cytron explains that Rabbinic Judaism begins with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 AD, marking the transition from Biblical Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism. With the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish Diaspora was created. Prayer, synagogue, and rabbi replace Temple, sacrifice, and priest. The family Sabbath table replaces the Temple as well. Despite the loss of place, there was a need for carrying on the tradition. The role of the rabbi as teacher is to carry on the tradition.

The rabbi teaches the community and engages others on the rabbinic books, including the Talmud. All the different texts are "having a conversation" with one another, and the contemporary Jew is invited into the conversation to discern what is appropriate for today.

Judaism does not have creeds as Christianity does. The closest may be the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one." Cytron also discusses the differences among Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox Judaism, and what it means to be a "chosen" people.

COVENANTS OLD AND NEW ~ *Peter Pettit*

Peter Pettit, an ELCA pastor from Pennsylvania, came to Muhlenberg College to serve as Director of the Institute for Christian–Jewish Understanding.

Pettit wants to disabuse viewers of the notion that the Old Testament and New Testament are somehow parallel or representative of the ideas of old and new covenants. For Pettit, although there is clearly a difference between Judaism and Christianity, there is also a natural continuity from one to the other. This section is about multiple covenants within two related traditions.

Christianity emerged from Judaism, and it is another expression of Covenant. His line of reasoning is derived from the apostle Paul who gave early expression to this idea. Christianity stands in line with the series of covenants originally established. Christianity is an expression of the living God who is changing and offering alternatives. God keeps doing things anew, creating new covenants, and new ways to relate to his chosen people.

Jewish-Christian relations incorporate all of God's covenantal moments, which could open the door to Jews recognizing Christians as a people who are in covenant with God. Both traditions have covenantal connections with the one and same God.

LAW AND GOSPEL ~ *Esther Menn*

Esther Menn, who has Jewish roots in her family tree, holds the Marilyn and Ralph Klein Chair of Old Testament Studies at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

She asserts that law and gospel, and Old Testament Law and New Testament Gospel do not represent dichotomies. Christianity and Judaism are intertwined faith traditions, and learning about Judaism enhances our understanding of Christianity. Law is about God's expectations and our failure to live up to them; we are freed by justification not to have to be preoccupied with our fate. "Law" is a translation of "Torah," which means a set of teachings and not only a set of requirements. God's teaching was revealed at Mt. Sinai.

People of Torah have already been set free. Rescue and redemption have already happened. God's election is God's good news. Election might be understood as similar to justification. Steadfast love is about God; God acts in steadfast love – in *hesed* – toward his people. We do not "live up to" his expectations. Our treatment of others, the poor, and the marginalized is inadequate. But God is abounding in steadfast love. Torah is his written steadfast love. Torah is a delight, a joy. By the sacraments we know God's grace. But, there is a commandment portion, too. The sacrament is also a commandment: "do this in remembrance of me." It is also a gift. These debates are internal to Christianity and Judaism. Legalism, for example, can be part of Christianity. Putting that label on Judaism is inaccurate.

PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT ~ *Ralph Klein*

Ralph Klein is the Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor, Emeritus, of Old Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He studied at Harvard with numerous Jewish colleagues and lived for many years in a St. Louis Jewish neighborhood.

Klein explains that there are multiple fulfillment scenarios in the Hebrew Bible as enunciated by the prophets. The death of the messiah is not one of them. The gift of the messiah, the crucified one, vindicates Christians and brings us into the community of the faithful. Christians need to avoid imposing our understanding of Jesus as Messiah on different prophecies in the Old Testament. The New

Testament has adopted many traditions that are found in the Old Testament. There are messianic passages in the Old Testament, but few messianic promises.

An alternative approach for Jews and Christians is to wait together for the revealing of God's future. It is important for Jews and Christians to talk to one another about understandings of these texts. People of good will reading a similar text may come to a similar understanding about it. Patience and appreciation of what the other says about various prophetic texts are necessary.

DIFFICULT TEXTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ~ *Franklin Sherman*

Franklin Sherman, a Pennsylvania native, grew up in the midst of an anti-Semitism against which he reacted in youthful idealism, and came to realize was not consonant with the Christian faith. Later, he discovered the works of the great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, and came to appreciate through Heschel and others how much Christians have to learn from Jews in our understanding of God and the world, prayer, and ethical responsibility.

Former Professor of Christian Ethics and Dean of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Sherman was the founding director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg College. He discusses here the "teaching of contempt" towards Jews and Judaism that has a long history in Christianity, and particularly after Constantine's conversion led Christians to use their position to afflict the Jews. The charge of being "Christ killers" has been carried down through the ages, but the crucifixion was actually carried out by the Romans, with the support of certain Jews associated with the Roman power structure, not the generality of the people. Far less could Jews of subsequent generations be held responsible for Jesus' death.

Some texts from the New Testament reflect an early tendency to demonize the Jews. In accordance with the "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community" (1994), we must learn to interpret such texts in such a way as avoid any further teaching of contempt, and instead, live out our faith "with love and respect for the Jewish people."

JEWISH CONCERN FOR THE LAND OF ISRAEL ~ *Karla Suomala and John Stendahl*

Karla Suomala, Associate Professor Religion at Luther College, became interested in this topic initially from a course at the University of Michigan on Jewish civilization and history. She subsequently studied at the University of Haifa and completed her PhD at the Hebrew Union Seminary in Cincinnati.

Suomala poses a question about the significance of the land in Jewish understanding. North Americans need to understand the question in historic context. From our shortsighted view, looking only at the last 50 – 60 years, we tend to claim that this conflict over land has always been around. Well, yes and no. The story starts in the biblical text with Abraham receiving the land; it is a contract between God and the people of Israel. The fall of the Temple and the creation of the Diaspora put added value on the land. From a biblical perspective, the land is important, but the Jews are no longer in the land.

John Stendahl, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Newtons, Newton, MA was influenced in Jewish-Christian relations by his father the late Krister Stendahl, the Harvard Divinity School scholar, and by his own experience. John lived in Sweden while his family was in the U.S., thus giving him his own Diaspora experience of living in different cultures. Later, he was in college with Jewish students during the 6-Day War in 1967.

Recognizing the needs and interests of both the Palestinians and the Jews, he is looking for a third narrative. The problem is having two different narratives about the land, each of which carries a measure of truth. Neither side is willing to acknowledge the other's narrative, thus demonstrating the need for a third narrative that would overlap these differences. This invites an imagination that seeks to re-conceptualize the religious understanding of the land. Christians, for example, have an understanding that we are never too much at home in the world, that to some extent we are living in exile no matter

where we are located. It becomes much more complicated question for a minority people who aspire to one day return—"next year in Jerusalem"—Zionism—the living out of theological conviction.

TIKKUN OLAM ~ *Karla Suomala*

Suomola is also featured in this segment, which is a strong demonstration of the interchangeable nature of some Jewish and Christian concepts. *Tikkun Olam* means "to repair the world, to make it a better place." It represents a push for social action and social justice. Medieval spirituality suggests that every part of the world contains brokenness and shards or slivers of the world. The challenge of *Tikkun Olam* is to restore the full light that has been broken, to collect the shards and slivers and bring them into wholeness.

The world is not yet perfected, and bringing things back together represents the challenge of restoring the fullness of light and perfection. She uses the term "co-workers with God," similar to the Christian idea of vocation and human creativity, in the process of bringing the world together. Christianity tends to focus more on the afterlife, while *Tikkun Olam* calls for investment in the world today.

CHRISTIANS AND JEWS IN THE CONTEXT OF WORLD RELIGIONS ~ *Darrell Jodock*

Jodock, the Drell and Adeline Bernhardson Distinguished Professor at Guatavus Adolphus College, grew up on a North Dakota farm and first met Jews while in graduate school. He poses the question, "Are we in a better place than we used to be in terms of interfaith and Jewish-Christian relations?" Christianity and Judaism are finally recognizing and demonstrating a special relationship, because of their historic connection. It is important today for these two traditions to walk together and to share both experiences and criticisms. In this regard, it is not unlike a marriage.

This is about a covenant, God and the people of Israel, and about a new or different covenant with Christians. Rabbi Cytron, who conducts the interview, notes that Paul seems to throw up his hands and say, "we just can't figure this out, so let's go with God who is faithful to his covenants." Paul also did not see himself as leaving the original community and covenant, and he explores how to expand this understanding of covenant so that it becomes expansive and more inclusive.

The Rabbi says we need each other and we need scholarship that looks at the whole picture and the idea of bringing wholeness to the world. We are called to be transformers of the world; we need interfaith colleagues to foster an amicable relationship.

THE ARAB-ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT ~ *Peter Pettit*

Pettit studied in Israel, and at the Hartman Institute, which emphasizes traditional Judaism in the context of contemporary society, including contending with religious pluralism. Pettit advocates a third voice in the Middle East conflict, especially when things are really contentious. Can we avoid becoming 'a megaphone for one side or the other of the conflict?' There are actually more than two voices, but the problem easily becomes polarized.

Language is critical in the discussion of this conflict. It traps people in images that limit their ability to talk further. For example, the expression "Palestinian terrorism," is problematic. Not all Palestinians, of course, are terrorists. But, rhetorical flourishes make it seem that all Palestinians are terrorists. Another example is "colonialism," which may not apply to this situation. The British Mandate for the Palestinian territory was the last gasp of British colonialism. Jews were opposed to this kind of colonialism. Yet, the concept is used often, as if Israel is equivalent to the historic colonial powers.

Any discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs to be attentive to the use of language and must not assume that concepts and images are interchangeable. Pettit gives attention to a variety of terms and expressions, and cautions viewers to look for nuance and new ways of using language.