

Christian Repentance in the Light of the Messianic Hope of Jesus's Second Coming

Budapest: October 4, 2004

As this meeting is sponsored by the Daniel group, who are committed to promote a Christian repentance in Hungary for past sins against the Jewish people, I will take it that the words "Christian repentance" in the title refer in particular to a repentance for the sins of Christian history. It seems clear that it is the Christian treatment of the Jews and especially the horror of the Holocaust that has been nagging at the Christian conscience and pushing Christians towards a confession of the sins of the past. The pioneering work in Christian repentance for past sins has come especially from Mother Basilea Schlink, a foundress of the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary in Darmstadt, Germany. Right from their foundation in the aftermath of World War II, Basilea Schlink confessed the sins of the German people and of the German church for the sins against the Jews issuing in the Shoah. But outside Germany, it is only in the last thirty years that Christian churches and denominations have been recognizing the need to confess the sins of the past. Here too it is the Jewish issue that is bringing the Christian world to its knees to confess the sins of the past, first against the Jews and then against other Gentiles (other nations, other churches and other denominations).

We can see this connection clearly in the initiatives of Pope John Paul II in this regard. The Pope first called for a confession by Catholics of the sins of the past in the context of the Church's preparation for the Jubilee year of 2000<sup>1</sup>. The Pope immediately set up two study commissions to examine historical issues requiring a confession of sin: both concerned the Jewish people. One commission studied the Catholic treatment of the Jewish people through the centuries, and the other the Spanish Inquisition<sup>2</sup>.

The second part of the title of this talk is "in the Light of the Messianic Hope of Jesus's Second Coming". These words express the important truth that the hope for a coming King and a coming Kingdom is distinctively Jewish.<sup>3</sup> The Jews are the people chosen to carry the Messianic hope. As Christians have distanced themselves from the Jewish root of their faith in Yeshua of Nazareth, to that extent has the hope for the coming of the Lord Jesus in glory been weakened and obscured. Thus I want to show in this talk how a Christian repentance for the many sins against the Jewish people leads necessarily to a rediscovered and renewed hope for the coming of the Lord in glory and the establishment of his messianic reign.

At the heart of this repentance is a confession of the lie of replacement, namely the belief that God had rejected the Jews because they had not accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. In this view, the Church has replaced Israel as the chosen people, the people of the covenant, the heirs of the promises. It is important to understand the gravity of this sin. It is not simply that a theological mistake has been made, and an error has entered into Christian preaching. The sin is at root one of usurping the role of God as judge. God alone is the judge, in the ultimate sense, which includes deciding who is chosen and who might be rejected. The Lord chose Israel as his first-born son (Ex. 4: 22). It should not surprise us that the Lord's choice is "without repentance" (Rom. 11: 29), because it is a choice of his love. "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands." (Deut. 7: 7 – 9). The sin is that we did not understand this passionate love of God, ever-faithful despite the vagaries of his chosen, and we judged God's elect. Not understanding the love of the Lord for his people, we did not love them either. Indeed, we persuaded ourselves that we were imitating God in showing a contempt for the Jewish people.

All the sins of the Christian people against the Jews have come out of this judgmental animus: seeing the Jews as the murderers of Jesus, guilty as was said of deicide, and thus to be treated as the scum of

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<sup>1</sup> This was in the letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Symposia were organised in Rome by both these commissions, and the papers of both have now been published by the Vatican press.

<sup>3</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "And when one considers the future, God's People of the Old Covenant and the new People of God [not the most felicitous expressions!] tend towards similar goals: expectation of the coming (or the return) of the Messiah." (para. 840).

the earth, only preserved in existence to demonstrate the horrendous consequences of apostasy and unbelief.

In the initiatives of Pope John Paul II for a Catholic repentance, he has singled out the concept of “purification of memories” as the goal. The concept of memory enables us to avoid imputing the sins of ancestors directly to their descendants. At the same time, it recognizes that there is a transmission of attitudes and behaviour-patterns from generation to generation. **It is through memory that the past enters the present and shapes the future.** This is true for personal memories, family memories, tribal memories, ethnic and national memories, as also for ecclesial memories. This concept of memory is treated further in the document of the Pope’s International Theological Commission entitled *Memory and Reconciliation*, issued in March, 2000.

I see several elements as necessary for an authentic Christian repentance for the sins of the past. I will try to illustrate how they form part of the purification of memories.

1. **Research/Examination.** There needs to be a careful examination of what happened in the past in Christian behaviour and beliefs concerning the Jewish people. Inaccuracies and exaggerations in confessions of sin undermine their credibility, and can only be avoided by a thorough examination of the history in question.
2. **Confession.** There needs to be a clear statement of what was evil in the past behaviour of Christians and what was wrong in our preaching and teaching. The purification of memories requires that lies and distortions be separated from truth. Such statements should be simple. Where something is not clear from history, we should not speak until it is clear. Replacing confessional propaganda with a delineation of what was true and what was false is essential for genuine reconciliation.
3. **Identification.** This stage involves moving from “they” to “we”. It is not a question of blaming our ancestors, but of recognising that we are their children, of saying like Jeremiah, “We and our fathers have sinned.” (Jer. 3: 25). That is to say, through our collective memories, we have received and made our own the prejudices, the animosities and the lies of our fathers. Jesus shows his awareness of this dynamic of inter-generational guilt when he tells his critics: “And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of their prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.” (Matt. 23: 30 – 31).
4. **Lamentation.** It was the people of Israel whom the LORD taught through Torah about holiness and about sin. So it is from the people of Israel that we need to learn how to repent for sin, for all offences against the holiness of God. Here we find among the forms of prayer-expression before the LORD the distinctive prayer of Lamentation.<sup>4</sup> In the biblical laments, the faithful Israelite grieves over the sin of his people and the resulting devastation. This grief comes from the depths of the heart, the same depths soiled by the sins being lamented. An authentic and full purification of our memories and of our consciences requires that the lament is not just an expression of the mind, but comes from the depths of our beings.
5. **Asking for Forgiveness.** The process of reconciliation leads to forgiveness. But above all, forgiveness by God. A letter of John Paul II concerning Europe in 2003 speaks of this in relation to anti-semitism. The Pope calls for “acknowledgment [to] be given to any part which the children of the Church have had in the growth and spread of antisemitism in history; forgiveness must be sought for this from God, and every effort must be made to favour encounters of reconciliation and of friendship with the sons of Israel.” (*Ecclesia in Europa*, para. 56). Whether we ask forgiveness of those we have offended requires a sensitivity to their convictions.

### Repentance and the Future

In Christian thinking, we think of repentance particularly in terms of healing, of rectifying what had gone wrong. We have paid less attention to the role of repentance in relation to the future and

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<sup>4</sup> We find the prayer of lamentation in the Book of Lamentations, in some Psalms (e.g. Psalms 74 and 79), and in passages from the prophets (e.g. Jer. 14: 17 – 22).

particularly in relation to the coming of the LORD. However the Jewish people with their deep messianic expectation have never forgotten this. For example, Rabbi Yohanan said, “Great is penitence [*teshuvah*] for it brings nearer the redemption, as it is written: ‘A redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn away from transgression in Jacob’ (Is. 59: 20).”<sup>5</sup>

As we Christians recover an understanding of the Jewish-rootedness of all faith in Jesus of Nazareth and the centrality of the covenant with Israel into which we are admitted as adopted sons and daughters, so will we recover our Messianic orientation to the fulfilment of the promises to the covenant people. The people of Israel are the people of **memory** and the people of **hope**. These two aspects are inter-connected. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the paragraphs on **anamnesis** (memorial) and on **epiclesis** (invocation of the Holy Spirit) are followed by this statement: “The Holy Spirit’s transforming power in the liturgy hastens the coming of the kingdom and the consummation of the mystery of salvation.” (para. 1107). This statement, which hardly reflects the common Catholic consciousness at Mass, nonetheless comes out of a renewed biblical scholarship re-connecting with the Jewish roots.

A Christian repentance for past sins against the Jewish people will necessarily have huge implications for the preparation of the coming of the LORD. I would like to single out three ways in particular in which I can see this happening:

### **1. Christian Repentance for sins against the Jewish people will lead the Church to the root issue.**

There is a dynamic of sin that leads from one sin to another. Likewise, there is a dynamic of repentance that leads from particular acts of repentance to deeper expressions of sorrow for sin. In the Christian repentance for the theology of replacement and all its consequences, we are dealing with something vast that has so many repercussions for the whole life of the Church. It means in effect a re-reading of the whole Bible, especially the New Testament. Thus this dynamic of repentance will require a lengthy period of painful discovery and adjustment.

In his book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*<sup>6</sup>, the American scholar, R. Kendall Soulen, has helpfully identified three forms of replacement or supersessionist thinking. The first two are easy to understand. First, *economic supersessionism*, which means that Israel is no longer God’s chosen people, because this role was completed when Jesus died on the cross<sup>7</sup>; and secondly, *punitive supersessionism*, which means the view that God has rejected Israel because of their sin<sup>8</sup>. But Soulen then points to a third form of replacement or supersessionist thinking that he calls *structural supersessionism*<sup>9</sup>. He finds this in all the ways in which the Christian Church has articulated her foundational narrative in ways that ignore the place of Israel and the Jewish people. For example, every presentation of Christian faith that goes straight from the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3 to the Incarnation and the New Testament is structurally supersessionist. Man sinned, so God sent his Son to die for sinners. Israel has become superfluous to the heart of the story. No mention of Abraham, no mention of Moses, Sinai or the Torah, no mention of the messianic kingdom. Soulen identifies two essential elements in divine revelation that are lost when the story of salvation is misunderstood in this way: the covenant alliance (I shall be your God and you will be my people) at the heart of God’s plan, and the complementary roles of Israel and the nations.

It is only as we repent for and correct this structural supersessionism that we can recover the fullness of the Messianic hope. We must repent for devaluing the centrality of the covenants of God with his people and for eliminating Israel from the nature of the “new

<sup>5</sup> Cited in *The Talmud: Selected Writings* (New York & Mahwah, NJ: The Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 107 – 108.

<sup>6</sup> Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 31 – 33.

covenant” in Jesus (in distorting the prophetic word of Jer. 31: 31, 33). This repentance will enable us to celebrate the new covenant in the “one new man”, that prepares for the messianic banquet when “many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8: 11).

## 2. This repentance will restore a purity to the Messianic hope.

In the first letter of John, we read: “But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3: 2 – 3). I believe that John is saying that the hope in the LORD’s coming is itself purifying. He is not telling us to make a greater effort so that he will come, as some Catholic translations imply.

The “blessed hope” of our LORD’s appearing is purifying because this is our goal. This will be the fulfilment of all the promises. “He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3: 21). Setting our hearts totally on the final goal is what purifies us from excessive attachment to all intermediate goals and lesser goods.

When I say that it is the hope itself that purifies, this needs to be sharply distinguished from all human attempts to produce timetables for the climax of history. Our hope is not in knowing **when** something will happen (Jesus himself says we cannot know the day nor the hour<sup>10</sup>), but in the inner certainty of faith as to **what** will happen (face-to-face vision, resurrection and glorification of the body, everything submitted to the reign of Messiah).

## 3. This Christian repentance will open the possibility for the Church to understand rightly the place of Eretz Israel and of Jerusalem in the last days.

One obvious consequence of replacement theology (supersessionism) with its teaching that the Church has taken the place of Israel is that in the New Testament era there is no further theological significance to the land of Israel or the city of Jerusalem. Eretz Israel becomes the Holy Land, where Christian pilgrims retrace the footsteps of Jesus during his earthly life and ministry. This aspect of the land becomes all memory and no promise. The city of Jerusalem is replaced by the heavenly Jerusalem, understood as an eternal reality outside this world. With the city of Jerusalem, it would seem that the promises have been spiritualized out of existence.

A Christian repentance for these distortions will make possible a recovery of the biblical and Jewish understanding of the place of the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem in God’s purposes. However we should not be surprised if this process of recovery takes some time, as it involves a complete re-reading of the New Testament. Many biblical commentators have argued against a contemporary significance for the land of Israel from the absence of the land from Paul’s list in Romans 9, where he says of the people of Israel: “Theirs [is] the adoption as sons; theirs the glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the worship and the promises.” (Rom. 9: 4)<sup>11</sup>. But while the land is not mentioned explicitly, it is difficult to interpret the “promises” as excluding the land, since the land was included in the original promise to Abraham and repeated in subsequent covenant promises<sup>12</sup>. The reason that Christians have long assumed that the land of Israel no longer formed part of God’s covenant gift is supersessionism. So they believed that God had rejected Israel, and that the promises given to Israel now belonged to the Church. So the land was seen as belonging to the carnal old covenant that was replaced by the spiritual land of heaven in the new covenant order.

<sup>10</sup> “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matt. 24: 36).

<sup>11</sup> I have here modified the translations to better reflect the Greek original: *he hyiothesia kai he doxa kai hai diathekai kai he nomothesia kai he latreia kai hai epangeliai*.

<sup>12</sup> “go to the land I will show you” (Gen. 12: 1). “To your offspring I will give this land.” (Gen. 12: 7). “All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” (Gen. 13: 15).

As a result of this supersessionist hermeneutic, the words of Jesus concerning the destruction of the temple and the devastation of Jerusalem by the Gentiles<sup>13</sup> were interpreted as final and ultimate. In fact, they form part of the prophecy of a new exile that did not invalidate the promises but delayed their ultimate realization. The love of Jesus for Jerusalem is deeply embodied in his words of lamentation: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” (Matt. 23: 37). This love is not about to be withdrawn. It reflects the heart of God, whose mind does not change.

We live in the age when this long exile of the Jewish people from Eretz Israel is coming to an end. We are seeing a fulfilment of the words of Jesus that “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles [nations] until the times of the Gentiles [nations] are fulfilled.” (Luke 21: 24) But in the New Testament, the end of this exile is a harbinger of the end, of the coming of the Lord. So the lament of Jesus in Matthew 23 and in Luke 13 ends with a prophetic declaration: “For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Matt. 23: 39; Luke 13: 35).

The return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is a visible denial of the supersessionist conclusion that the promise of the land has no further relevance subsequent to the first coming of the Lord or at least of his death on the cross. But the Christian world is having great difficulty coming to terms with this changed reality. A book published by the World Council of Churches on *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People* (1988) has this perceptive comment: “Nothing in the church’s tradition has prepared it for dealing with the State of Israel. Indeed, tradition has assumed as a matter of theological principle that a Jewish state was an impossibility: the Jews, we have taught, having rejected their Messiah and so their own inheritance, are condemned to wander the face of the earth in exile, until they turn to Christ or are confronted by him upon his return in glory. It is therefore not surprising that the churches have had difficulty in accounting for this phenomenon, and that no consensus has yet arisen concerning the State of Israel.”<sup>14</sup>

But the difficulty is not only theological. it is spiritual. Until there is a real repentance for the distorted theology, a truly biblical understanding cannot emerge. Likewise, until this repentance takes place, the Churches will not be prepared for the coming of the Lord in glory. This association of repentance with the coming of the Lord is presented in Acts, chapter 3. It is in this passage (vv. 18 – 26) that we are shown most clearly the transition from the messianic hope of Israel expressed above all in the Old Testament prophets, to the New Covenant hope, that confesses that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. The transition is not from the hope that all will be fulfilled in the Messiah to everything has been fulfilled in Jesus. It is from the hope that all will be fulfilled in the Messiah to a two-stage fulfilment, partly in the first coming of Jesus (“God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer” v. 18) and partly in his second coming (“He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” v. 21). The process from the first to the second involves first **repentance** (“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out.” v. 19), and then **refreshing** (“that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” v. 19) leading to the sending of “the Christ”, the Messiah, “even Jesus” (v. 20).

### The Challenge to all the Churches

The title of this talk speaks of “Christian repentance”. I want now to speak of how the call to confess the sins of the past affects the ancient Churches of East and West, who were most implicated in the oppression of the Jewish people, the main Churches of the Protestant Reformation and lastly the free churches. The Presbyterians and the Reformed were among the first to reject replacement theology and to assert a continuing role for the Jewish people in salvation history. Today, it is the Evangelical Christians, many of them in the free churches, who have hailed the return of the Jewish people to the

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 23: 29 – 24: 14.

<sup>14</sup> *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People* (Geneva: W. C. C., 1988), p. 170.

land as a fulfilment of biblical prophecy and have been excited by the appearance of the Messianic Jews.

Because the histories of Christian churches and denominations are different, their repentance for the sins of the past will also be different. But all the Christian traditions need to enter into this Christian repentance, because all have been implicated in the sins of Christian history, though not in the same way. The first responsibility for confessing the sins of the past against the Jewish people lies with the ancient Churches that claim total continuity with the Church of the first millennium. The sins against the Jewish people began within the ancient Church after the separation from the synagogue but before the first inner-Christian schisms. It was in and through these communions that the replacement teaching arose and had repercussions on public behaviour and in church legislation. It has been in the Catholic and the Orthodox communities that violence against the Jews has been first tolerated and to various degrees excused, encouraged or sanctioned.

The historic Reformation Churches understood themselves to be reforming the historic Church Catholic in the light of the Scriptures, not trying to recreate a New Testament church by jumping over the intervening centuries. This element of identification with the ancient Churches was particularly expressed in their acceptance of the church creeds of the first four centuries, and by the retention, especially among the Anglicans and the Lutherans of many structural and liturgical elements. This element of identification has implications for any identification with the sins of the pre-Reformation Church against the Jewish people. It is a matter for historical research how much continuity there was between the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages and the Churches of the Reformation. But it is evident that there was not any immediate change in understanding of the Jews, and the story of Martin Luther illustrates this continuity. When we say “We and our fathers have sinned”, we have to identify “our fathers”. Many historic Protestants would confess Ambrose and Chrysostom as their fathers, maybe far fewer the Crusaders and Innocent III, and probably hardly any King Ferdinand, Queen Isabella and the Grand Inquisitors of Spain. Here we cannot tell people with whom they must identify. The process of identification is a work of the Holy Spirit. We should simply encourage the process of identification with ancestors and forerunners as part of our contribution to dissolving the enmities of the past.

For free-church Christians, the situation with regard to a “Christian repentance” is a little different. They are much less likely to identify with the sins of the historic Churches. But I would encourage free church Christians to seek the light of the Holy Spirit with regard to their “fathers” and “grandfathers”. Free Church Christians still however have a need to confess and express their sorrow for all their people’s sins against the Jewish people. This obviously includes the extent to which they embraced the replacement theology first developed within the ancient Churches. But there is a particular consequence of replacement thinking that has strongly influenced free church Christianity. Replacement thinking introduced a virus of judgmental rejectionism into the Christian world. So just as the ancient Church had rejected the Jews because they had rejected Jesus, so at the Reformation those protesting against the real corruption in the Catholic Church used the same replacement arguments: God has rejected you, because of your infidelity and has made us the real People of God in your place. This process of judgmental rejectionism was then used later by Christians who broke away from the Reformation churches, saying they were dead and apostate. So while this judgmentalism against other churches and other Christians has affected the whole of the Protestant world, it would appear to remain stronger among those who have adopted it most recently, namely much of the Evangelical-Pentecostal-charismatic revivalist world.

It would seem that this challenge to repent of replacement theology hits each Christian tradition at its point of greatest pride. It hits the Catholic and Orthodox traditions at the point of their pride in their traditions, in the Fathers of the Church, in preserving the faith through twenty centuries. It challenges the view of the first centuries as a “golden age of the Church” in which a wrong turning was unthinkable. I am not saying that it was in no way a “golden age” – some Christians will think it was and others that it wasn’t – I am speaking about a particular wrong turning and the difficulties in acknowledging it.

For the churches of the Reformation, the challenge hits their pride in being authentic interpreters of the Bible. For the replacement theology was a distortion of the Word of God. For the Evangelical Christians, the challenge hits their pride in being the true biblical Christians, perhaps in being the true “remnant”, over and against the apostate and the inauthentic.

The One Hope

Finally, I want to relate these different dimensions of the “Christian repentance” to the messianic hope of the Lord’s coming. There is only one God, one Lord, one Kingdom. As it is written in the letter to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4: 4 – 6). Our “Christian repentance” for the sins of the past, especially in relation to the Jewish people, will become deeper and more authentic as it includes a repentance for obscuring and distorting the “one hope”. The mutual rejection of synagogue and church produced the judgmental rejectionism of replacement teaching. In the same way, this judgmentalism with its self-righteousness has been perpetuated in Christian divisions with all their bitterness. Faith in the one kingdom and in the coming king has to be unifying, because we cannot exclude from the kingdom those whom the Lord has invited to his messianic banquet.

I can put this challenge in another way. When we make our churches into total systems that operate without reference to other elements in the body of Christ, we are in effect denying our common destiny in the one hope. When we do this, we are making the differences between churches bigger than the one hope. Thus all forms of Christian exclusivism act as obstacles to the coming of the kingdom. By this, I do not mean that it is wrong to have different convictions about the Lord and his work. What is wrong is to absolutize these differences so that they become bigger than faith in Jesus Christ. Then they prevent the acknowledgment of our brothers and sisters in Messiah, and block a fuller fellowship and collaboration. The blessed hope of the Lord’s coming in glory thus takes all Christians to the deepest level of repentance for the sins of all our history, which focus on the “original sin” of the rejection of the Jews and issue in forms of judgmentalism that deny the universal call to the coming kingdom of the Jewish Messiah.