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Was Martin Luther anti-Semitic?  
October 28, 2018 Reformation Sunday

Nazis used Luther's writings against the Jews to justify their anti-Semitism and nationalism. Martin Luther has been accused of being anti-Semitic. Lutherans for many years tried to hide Luther anti-Jewish literature, but we couldn't keep his negative attitude toward the Jews secret. The Christian world knows about Luther anti-Jewish teaching. As we are celebrating the Reformation of Martin Luther, the question that I'm going to answer in this sermon is whether Martin Luther was anti-Semitic. Martin Sasse, the pro-Nazi Lutheran bishop advised Lutherans the following: "The German people must hear the words of this man [Martin Luther], the greatest anti-Semite of his time, the warner of his people against the Jews."<sup>1</sup> During the time November 9 to November 10, 1938, in an incident known as "Kristallnacht," Nazis in Germany set fire to Jewish synagogues and schools and killed many Jews. *Kristallnacht* took place on Luther's birthday.

Martin Luther wrote influential book against the Jews titled "On the Jews and Their Lies." Nazis used this particular book to justify the Holocaust. In his book, Luther advises Christians to carry out sixth remedial actions. These are as follows:

First, Luther told Christians to "set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn."

Second, he recommended that "their houses also be razed and destroyed."

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 265.

Third, he advised that “all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.”

Fourth, he declared that “rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.”

Fifth, he urged that “safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.”

Sixth, he wrote that “usury should be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping.”

This teaching is disturbing. How can Luther’s attitude toward the Jews be justified?

First, we need to look at the broader context of Luther. In his first initial writing, Luther advocated for better treatment of the Jews. In his 1523 essay *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Luther condemned the cruel act against the Jews and urged Christians to treat them kindly. He hoped that the Jews would convert to Christianity if they received better treatment.

Second, one of the most significant issues that disturbed Luther was exploitation of the people by major banking houses of Europe. The banking system involved in a shameful level of usury: the exploitative level of interest rate. German Jews controlled that industry. Martin Luther was against the Jews who were taking advantage of the poor Christians.

Third, the hostile and negative rhetoric that Luther employed in his book, *the Jews and their lies*, are used all over his writings to attack the Papacy, Anabaptist, and nominal Christians. Luther was wrong in using harsh and abusive language. However, we cannot say that this is anti-

Semitism. Anti-Semitism is a 20-century phenomenon. Luther was following the approach of the New Testament that describes the Jews as the betrayal of Christ and the gospel, and as failure to recognize Jesus as the coming Messiah. It was not an ethnic motivation that led Luther to this, but it was theological motivation.

Throughout his life, Luther wanted the Jews to convert and join the church, but Hitler never wanted them to join the church or Nazi party. That is the difference between anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish. Luther was not opposed to the Jews because of their race and blood, but he was opposed to the Jews because of their religion as he was opposed to the Muslims because of Islam. If you are anti-Semitic, you are against the Jews because of their blood and race, and the Jews cannot do anything to change their blood or race. Luther attacked and offended the Jews with a purpose to convert them to Christianity. But the Nazi exploited Martin Luther's writings during the Third Reich.

It is dangerous to assume that some Christian writers were not sinners. Luther as a human being was a sinful man. He thought, said, and did sinful things, so are we. It is ridiculous that people dismiss Luther, Augustine, Calvin or Aquinas because they found issues in their lives, but they do not disqualify themselves for things they say and do. God never used a sinless person to guide or write stuff for us. As Martin Luther said, all of us are sinners, and all of us are in need of God's grace. All of us are sinners, and because of Jesus Christ, we are also righteous.