

LutherFacts #26

In the midst of increased peasant uprisings, Martin Luther addressed another challenging social issue: the future of Christian-Jewish relations in Europe. In 1514, Luther broke with the practice of suppressing Jews and opposed the burning of Jewish writings. Then nine years later, Luther published an essay stating "That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew" (1523). He reminded his readers that Christianity had its roots in Judaism and that the Savior himself was Jewish at birth. He sought the conversion of Jews: "I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs." During the next decade, however, that call bore few results. Instead, members of the Jewish faith resisted Protestant efforts to convert them. Deeply disappointed, Luther realized his effort was in vain. Between 1538 and 1543, using harsh language, he reversed his earlier views and called for the expulsion of Jews from German society. His goal was to separate the dominant Christian community from contact with Jews. Unlike his later call for the violent suppression of peasants, Luther never called for the killing of Jews. Indeed, his last public words about Jews again called for their conversion. Nevertheless, the story of Luther and Judaism, as well as his response to the peasant uprisings, remain to this day as sad chapters in the life of a man otherwise dedicated to a free and just society.