

## **75 YEARS AFTER SEELISBERG - REFLECTION**

*BY*

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### ***HOW FAR WE'VE COME—AND HOW FAR WE HAVE YET TO GO!***

It is a tribute to the impact of the Ten Points of Seelisberg that, 75 years after they were approved by the conference delegates in that Swiss town, we are still discussing them, and celebrating their foundational role in modern Jewish-Christian dialogue. And yet the fact that, for many contemporary Christians, the Ten Points are still ground-breaking and unheard-of, is something of an indictment of how seriously Christian communities have (or have not) taken them. While there are many denominations that have expanded considerably upon Seelisberg's teachings, there are still many pockets of the Christian world where the basic truths expressed at Seelisberg would be considered shocking at best—and quasi-heretical at worst.

Perhaps, given the 1900-year history of negative Christian teachings about Jews and Judaism, we should not be surprised that this legacy has not been entirely uprooted in three-quarters of a century. We have certainly made great strides in healing the painful rupture between these two faiths. In many parts of the world, Jews and Christians are good friends and cherished partners, contributing together to building up our communities and improving our world. Jewish-Christian associations are flourishing in many countries, and are models of respectful cooperation and mutual enrichment. At a time of social and political polarization, the ability of two historically estranged faiths to unite in the service of justice and peace is a sign of hope that our divided world badly needs. That united voice is one of the blessed fruits of the efforts of Jules Isaac and those who shared his vision.

Perhaps the place where the impact of the Ten Points is most easily visible is in the world of religious scholarship. Underlying many of the Seelisberg points is the recognition of the Jewishness of Jesus, his family, and the first generations of Christ-followers. What was still fairly revolutionary in 1947 has today become a commonplace of both Christian and Jewish scholarship. Writing back in 1999, Father John Meier (one of the great contemporary scholars of the historical Jesus) said: "One definite gain [from the most recent 'quest for the historical Jesus] that must be incorporated is ... the true and thorough Jewishness of Jesus ... Even if the third quest has no other impact on contemporary

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Christology, the emphatic reaffirmation of the Jewishness of Jesus will make the whole enterprise worthwhile.”<sup>1</sup> The explosion of books, both scholarly and popular, devoted to exploring the place of Jesus within Judaism, and of Judaism within the New Testament, testifies to how integral the Seelisberg insights are to many areas of theology today. The fact that theological thinking that was somewhat “niche” in 1947 is today commonplace reminds us that no discipline is static; the slow, patient work of generations of scholars has contributed to a major evolution in exegesis, Christology and interreligious dialogue.

One of the areas where Seelisberg has made a big difference is in challenging overly literalist or “fundamentalist” readings of Biblical texts. Seventy-five years later, it is no longer enough to quote proof-texts and say: “But the Bible says X”. The points of Seelisberg pointed us to the necessity of *historical, cultural and theological context*. Behind the Ten Points lay the more detailed study that Jules Isaac would publish in 1948 as *Jésus et Israël*, pointing out areas where Christians had often misinterpreted or misrepresented Judaism in an effort to exalt Christianity. Seelisberg was a salutary reminder of the human context that was necessary to properly situate and interpret Scripture—and that demanded accurate knowledge of Second Temple Judaism, instead of the clichés and stereotypes that preachers and devotional writers had often trafficked in. An openness to learning from Jewish scholars was the path to purifying Christianity of false and harmful ideas that ultimately damaged the integrity of Christianity as well. Over those decades, that growing friendship, and those rich, challenging conversations, have enabled Christianity to gain a more authentic and mature self-understanding, informed by the growing guild of Jewish experts in early Christianity. The centuries-old temptation to deprecate Judaism as a foil for a “superior” Christianity is (happily) fading in many circles. The Ten Points of Seelisberg already sketched out the contours of that re-conceptualization of Jesus and the New Testament, and pointed the way to a less defensive, and more open-hearted, approach to Judaism by Christians.

Here in Canada, we often use the image of a snowball to suggest growth and momentum: as even a small snowball rolls down a snow-covered hill in the winter, it grows in size and increasingly picks up speed. Looking back over the 75 years since the Seelisberg Conference, it is hard not to see how those Ten Points have “snowballed” in very real ways. They have provided the nucleus for dozens of “daughter” documents (including Vatican II’s 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate*), and have helped to inspire a thriving network of Jewish-Christian groups and institutions around the world. With each generation, the correctives recommended by Seelisberg seem less radical and more obvious. That

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<sup>1</sup> “The Present State of the ‘Third Quest’ for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain,” *Biblica*, Vol. 80 (1999), 486.

evolution does not attempt to artificially ignore the differences between Jews and Christians, but it has enabled us to articulate those differences more honestly and fairly, in a way that is not antagonistic or combative. It has enabled conversation about difference, but it has first reminded us of the ways in which our faiths overlap.

Sir Isaac Newton famously wrote that, if he had been able to see further than others, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants who preceded him. As we celebrate the progress we have made since 1947, we know that we are the heirs of the courageous and visionary leaders who were part of that momentous gathering in Seelisberg; we stand on their shoulders. May we faithfully fulfil the task that falls to us 75 years later: to continue advancing Seelisberg’s legacy with conviction, creativity, generosity, and hopefulness.

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