

# **Lutheran Identity**

## Preface

In 2017, the 500<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the Lutheran Reformation, many churches will ask themselves what exactly it means to be “Lutheran.” What is a Lutheran church or Lutheran theology? What is the “Lutheran DNA”?

The Institute for Ecumenical Research, based in Strasbourg and affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), is taking up these questions because Lutherans are always pressed during ecumenical dialogues to specify the teaching of their church. Ecumenical encounters demand a meticulous study of each side’s tradition. As they regard the teaching of their tradition as a gift to the whole church, Lutheran ecumenists must be able to account for the teaching of their own church in a way that is intelligible to the other churches.

Forty years ago the Institute published a booklet entitled *Lutheran Identity*. In the first part it discussed “Basic Theological Convictions as Essential Components of Lutheran Identity.” This series of theses was originally drawn up by the Institute’s research professors engaged in intensive dialogue with numerous colleagues. The theses were discussed critically over the course of five regional consultations. The present text takes up these original theses and reworks them to suit the contemporary context. They constitute the First Set of Theses of this book.

The Institute for Ecumenical Research has, for more than fifty years now, been in the service of Lutheran ecumenism, first of all through participation in the international dialogues of the LWF. A theological reflection on the experience of these dialogues constitutes the Second Set of Theses in this book. It also collects the fruits of consultations organized by the Institute for more than twenty years now at the Château de Klingenthal near Strasbourg, which events have been attended by ecumenical specialists from a variety of churches and different countries.

The Lutheran churches today must face many challenges that could prevent a living transmission and development of Lutheran identity. The challenges touching most directly on ecumenical research have been dealt with by the contributors from different churches during the annual international Summer seminars organized by the Strasbourg Institute. A first sketch of these challenges was prepared by the Institute’s staff and discussed intensively during a consultation at Klingenthal by theologians from several countries, whose number included two collaborators from the Geneva office of the LWF. These efforts led to a Third Set of Theses, which pay attention to the considerable challenges that the Lutheran churches must face today.

Through these three sets of theses the Strasbourg Institute wishes to be of service to the Lutheran communion and promote its ecumenical engagement. The review of the essential teachings of the Reformers calls to mind what it is to be “Lutheran.” The presentation of the basics of Lutheran ecumenism shows the “catholic” relevance—which is to say, the relevance for the church universal—of Lutheran teaching. This study intends, finally, to show where Lutheran teaching must especially test itself and develop in order to face the great challenges of our day.

Strasbourg, Epiphany 2017

André Birmelé, Theodor Dieter, Jennifer Wasmuth

Co-opted Staff of the Institute: Kenneth Appold, Matthieu Arnold, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, Elisabeth Parmentier.

In addition to the Institute’s Staff, the following persons participated in the final consultation at Château Klingenthal (September 13-16, 2016): Lubomir Batka (Slovakia), Frederic Chavel (France), Luis H. Dreher (Brazil), Bo Kristian Holm (Denmark), Frank O. July (Germany), Jens-Martin Kruse (Italy), Friederike Nüssel (Germany), Matti Repo (Finland), Oliver Schuegraf and Walter Sparn

(Germany), Madeleine Wieger (France) and from the Geneva Staff of the LWF: Miriam Haar and Simone Sinn.

The contributions prepared for this consultation about the Lutheran churches in Brazil, Finland, Slovakia, and Tanzania as well as a paper about the interreligious dialogue will be published on the website of the Institute ([www.strasbourg-institute.org](http://www.strasbourg-institute.org)).

## Three Sets of Theses concerning Lutheran Identity

### Introduction

1. The goal of the Lutheran Reformers was to reform the church on the basis of their rediscovery of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which came to them through intensive study of Holy Scripture. Their reforming impulse was intended for the whole church, but their proposals were positively received only by certain parties within the church at that time. The result was the division of the Western church and the emergence of Lutheran churches characterized by their specific confessional markers. Over the course of the last five hundred years, new Lutheran churches featuring great diversity have come into being throughout the world. Nevertheless, the common features shared by all are the basic Reformation convictions especially expressed in the Lutheran Confessions and the theology of Martin Luther.

2. It was only toward the end of the twentieth century that the Lutheran churches of the world, as gathered together through the Lutheran World Federation, declared full communion among themselves: altar and pulpit fellowship. Such a living communion of churches should continually reflect on the basic convictions that connect them to one another, above all when tensions or even oppositions place the communion itself in danger. The challenges provoked by the contexts in which the churches live and the extremely rapid transformations that characterize contemporary society demand a constant reappropriation of the insights into the gospel of Jesus Christ that have always been of central importance to Lutheran churches. This is why the First Set of Theses presents basic Lutheran convictions. These theses do not pretend to cover everything that Lutherans teach, and certainly not the whole range of Lutheran theology; however, they do bear witness to the guiding principles of Lutheran teaching. They are offered to Lutheran churches that are eager to reappropriate their heritage—with full awareness that the churches have appropriated these convictions in very diverse contexts. This reappropriation is a task that must be taken up again and again. The Third Set of Theses outlines the challenges that the Lutheran churches and their ecumenical research should attend to today. These have to do with the challenges of appropriating the basic convictions of faith, affirming communion between the Lutheran churches, and sorting out their relationship to other Christian churches as well as to other religions. The two Sets of Theses are meant to help the communion of Lutheran churches.

3. In their ecumenical engagements Lutheran churches take seriously the concern of the Reformers to reform the whole church. Such a concern does not amount to a rejection of the other churches and their doctrines; rather, it is realized in dialogue. Ecumenism studies afresh the age-old conflicts that provoked church division. It seeks out new insights and approaches for understanding the old controversies in a new way. It searches out common points that encompass differences and hopes in this way to contribute to the overcoming of the division of the churches. Therefore, the Second Set of Theses discusses the Lutheran churches' search for the unity of the church. If this document speaks of a "Lutheran identity," it is not for the purpose of marking off the boundary lines that separate it from other churches. An identity based solely on establishing distinction from others would be a poor sort of identity anyway. Quite the contrary, Lutheran identity is a means of understanding the basic convictions of the Reformers as a gift to the whole church. It is a matter of placing oneself in and encouraging dialogue, not fearfully preserving divisive differences for their own sake. It rejoices in those things held in common with other churches in their understanding of the Word of God; it is open to a critical appraisal of its own church and teaching by other churches; and it is willing to learn from other churches and to be challenged and encouraged by their practice.

4. "Identity" is a difficult notion since it is used in so many senses to describe so many complex realities. If it is a question of "Lutheran identity," this expression does not encompass only

the basic convictions outlined by the First Set of Theses. It also includes diverse elements such as spirituality, forms of worship, customs and traditions, and so forth. These latter items often count among the “human traditions” that, according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, need not be the same everywhere. These elements nevertheless play an essential role psychologically for Lutheran identity, even if they vary from Lutheran church to Lutheran church. It is therefore fitting to distinguish between the *normative* dimension and *descriptive/empirical* dimension of the notion of identity. Conscious of this complexity, the present text uses the word “identity” with prudence. Its usage is concentrated upon basic convictions that are emphasized in ecumenical dialogue and must prove their worth in the face of many contemporary challenges.

## I. First Set of Theses: Basic Theological Convictions of Lutheran Identity

5. §1. *We confess faith in God, who emptied and humbled himself to become the unique way leading to salvation.*

6. In his Son Jesus Christ, God, the creator of the world, draws near to human beings to save them by giving himself over to them, hidden in weakness, allowing himself to be grasped in the incarnation, in the humanity of Jesus, and in his sufferings and death on the cross. By the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God reveals himself at one and the same time as the Lord victorious over death and over all the powers that reduce human beings to bondage. In the humanity of the Word and in the corporality of the sacraments, God grants faith by the Holy Spirit. This work of salvation, in which God continues to humble himself in the Word and sacraments, will be completed on the day that human beings see God face to face.

*Historical and present context:*

7. In insisting on a God who empties and humbles himself by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Lutheran Reformation opposed certain speculative currents of late medieval theology, the spirituality of many religious dissidents (the “Enthusiasts”), and tendencies even within the Reformation to hold the physical body in contempt and neglect, all of which turn aside from the basic pattern of the biblical message: in the saving encounter between God and humans, the initiative is entirely on God’s side. God comes to humans by the path that God himself has chosen. It is not the human who attains to God through intellectual ascent or mystical contemplation. The point of encounter between God and human is located, thanks to the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, in the finite, material, and corporeal gifts of this world. The Lutheran conception of the Word of God—a word spoken by human beings—and the sacraments—earthly elements as the point of contact with God—have their origin in this affirmation.

8. This belief in God’s stooping to take on human form and thus emptying himself into weakness and suffering stands over against all spiritualizing tendencies in piety and theology, and against all forms of prosperity gospel that are commonly preached today. The earthly, bodily, human sphere is taken seriously as the sphere of divine encounter. It is understood that we only hold and pass on the divine treasure in earthen vessels. This belief opposes any triumphalistic view of the church as such, which would overlook its low estate. It invites a piety that recognizes God’s power to be concealed behind weakness instead of mainly emphasizing the mighty deeds of the Spirit. It is a warning to us against seeing a direct link between the great powers or events of history and politics, on the one hand, and the workings of a merciful God and the presence of Christ on the other. At the same time, faith in the incarnate God calls us, as churches and as individuals, to care for the smallest and “least important” of human beings. It is in this way that we encounter God himself.

9. §2 *The witness to God’s justifying action in Jesus Christ is the essence of the message of salvation—that is, the gospel—as well as being the criterion of the church’s proclamation and the foundation of Christian existence.*

10. God created human beings for fellowship with him. He made them in his image and thereby granted them the dignity of participating in his activity in the world in a manner accountable to him. True humanity exists only where persons affirm this relation to God their creator, live by it, and let it shape their involvement in the human community.

11. All people are guilty of having forsaken this fellowship with God and are unable to restore it by themselves. Without God there is nothing people can do but rely on themselves and base their existence on their own achievement. But in doing so they become altogether sinful, even while remaining creatures of God.

12. God himself makes a new beginning for these lost creatures and by grace alone takes up their cause. In the death of Jesus Christ for us and in his victorious resurrection, God opens up for men and women a genuine humanity in fellowship with himself by forgiving their sins. He leads them by faith to a new life, free from the power of sin, hoping for resurrection and eternal life, trusting in his grace even in judgment. In this way they are set free and called to praise God, to bear witness to Jesus Christ, and to give themselves in service to their fellow human beings.

13. This action of God is the gospel. Here the church has its center that cannot be surrendered and that determines all of the church's proclamation and activity.

*Historical and present context:*

14. Late medieval piety and theology certainly spoke of grace, but not of grace alone. Rather, human beings could prepare themselves to receive the grace of God by performing meritorious good works. In contrast to this, the Lutheran Reformation brought out the biblical message of the human race's justification through Christ alone by faith. The message and doctrine of justification thus became the North Star for Lutheran proclamation and theology.

15. This basic conviction has, however, been subject to continual discussions and varying interpretations throughout the history of Lutheran thought. The issues were, for example, the relationship between justifying faith and good works; whether justification means pronouncing or actually making someone just; the relationship between justification and sanctification; and the relevance of the message of justification in its traditional form for modern people.

16. Theological research and the interconfessional dialogues on justification have allowed for an official declaration by the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran World Federation, namely the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed by both parties in Augsburg, Germany, in 1999. There it is affirmed:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works. (JDDJ §15)

The Catholic church rightly reminds Lutheran theology that the Christian message of salvation is also expressed in the Bible by means of concepts other than those of justification. The vocabulary of justification cannot be the only permitted way of speaking of the core of the biblical witness. A unilateral insistence on the doctrine of justification apart from its broad biblical setting and detached from its Christological and Trinitarian foundations would be theologically inadequate and ecumenically problematic.

17. The Lutheran tradition has not, however, forgotten the social dimension of the message of justification. It strives with other churches and religions for a more just world.

18. In doing this, the Lutheran churches desire to preserve the foundational aspect of the Reformers' understanding of justification to amplify the message of the grace of God in a society where human beings are increasingly understood as the creators of themselves. Against all tendencies to reduce the Christian faith to an ethical code, and against all tendencies new and old to fixate the Christian faith on action, the accent should be placed on both the sovereignty of the divine gift of salvation and the response of faith.

19. §3 *Distinguishing between law and gospel safeguards the character of grace in the saving message of the gospel.*

20. The Word of God, which is always already present as the ordering and blessing Word of God in creation, sounds forth as the demanding and judging word (law) and as the forgiving and renewing word (gospel). This distinction preserves the gospel's character of grace over against any legalistic interpretation that would change the righteousness given as a gift in the gospel into a righteousness to be earned by human beings. As creatures of God, all people are accused and convicted as sinners by this demanding and judging function of the law. The afflicted sinner who in penitence flees to Christ receives salvation in him. If only the law were proclaimed, the result would be either pride or despair. If only the gospel were proclaimed, it would necessarily become "cheap grace." Consequently, while law and gospel must be distinguished, they must never be isolated from each other.

*Historical and present context:*

21. Closely linked with the doctrine of justification is the distinction between law and gospel as elucidated by the Lutheran reformers in their confrontation with the church of their time. The notion of the law, however, cannot be limited solely to this distinction. It always includes the good order that God desires and realizes within his creation. Its moral counterpart, as confirmed by the Ten Commandments, is called the natural law.

22. Where the true distinction between law and gospel was blurred, or where the gospel was no longer clear and became veiled by the law, Lutheran theology stressed that they be seen again in their right interrelation. Within this interrelation, the law functions to awaken the consciousness of sin in people and thus lead them to Christ. The law is by no means a purely negative force, as many have thought. God's demands and commandments are to be taken seriously. The fact that people can only fulfill them in part, however, reveals human powerlessness and sinfulness: and so they cannot maintain and justify themselves before God. Only in the gospel, in faith in Jesus Christ, does the sinner receive salvation.

23. This fundamental hermeneutical and pastoral distinction between law and gospel has been interpreted in various ways in Lutheran history. Several points have often led to divergent views, for example overemphasizing either law or gospel (the so-called "Antinomians" in the latter case), an exclusively negative understanding of law, or a positioning of the law against the gospel. The reversal of the order of the terms by some Reformed theologians to "gospel and law" has been rejected by Lutherans in order to preserve the right relationship between law and gospel.

24. There is a tendency frequently observed in present-day theology and proclamation to make a person's or the church's degree of Christianity contingent on specific ethical requirements. Faith seems to be realized only in action and in the public relevance of the gospel. This danger of a new legalism and a justification by works should be critiqued and corrected by a necessary insistence on the true distinction between law and gospel. This distinction denies also the opposing tendency, which makes the actions of believers purely a matter of their own personal discretion, thus opening the door to relativism.

25. §4 *The proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are the necessary means of salvation, means by which Christ through the Holy Spirit creates, preserves, and sends his church into the world.*

26. Where the gospel is proclaimed to people and they are assured of the forgiveness of their sins, and where baptism and the Lord's Supper are distributed in accordance with the New Testament command, there Christ is truly present, grants reconciliation, and gathers his community. The proclaimed Word and the administered sacraments are, therefore, the means necessary for salvation, the means by which Christ creates and preserves his church. In this way the church precedes all individual believers; it is their "mother."

27. This takes place in the worship of the congregation, which is gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, hears the Word, and receives the gifts of grace. United with Christ, it honors God in prayer and praise and intercedes for the world before him. In the worship of everyday life, the congregation confesses the gift of salvation through witness and service in the world.

28. Along with the Word to be proclaimed and the sacraments to be administered, the church's ministry to be conferred through ordination is also divinely instituted. It is Christ himself who acts through this office and its functions. There is freedom in the concrete formation and organization of this office as well as in the shaping of the church's order and forms of worship. This is not a freedom of indifference but a freedom for responsible structuring, subject to the criterion of whether the structures serve the mission and unity of the church.

29. Accordingly, the one church of Jesus Christ is present where the Word of God is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the gospel. Although there are other marks of the church, these two are decisive for the unity of the church.

*Historical and present context:*

30. The reformers pointed to the proclamation of the Word of God and the distribution of the two Scripture-based sacraments as the constitutive basis of the church. They stressed thereby that all human cooperation in these acts is merely in service of God's action and Christ's presence. The many traditions, institutions, and practices that played such an important part in the church of their age was the reason for their correction and reformulation of the basis of salvation. The church is created by God, not by humans, even if humans are indeed active there in service to God. The stress on the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments must not, however, be interpreted too exclusively. God acts through other means, too, such as the confession of faith, confession of sin, ministry, church order, and so on. Lutheran theology has continually insisted on this, even though the exact emphasis has at times varied greatly.

31. The special importance attached to proclamation of God's Word and administration of the sacraments should mean that agreement on these two issues be considered a basic condition for church unity. However, one must add that this conviction has been interpreted in very different ways—even in the history of Lutheranism—and that the debate on the preconditions and expressions of church unity remains lively in ecumenical dialogues. Moreover, Lutheran theology and Lutheran churches are now being asked by other church traditions whether the Lutheran requirement of agreement in proclamation and the administration of the sacraments as the condition and basis of true unity should be supplemented by other elements.

*32. §5 Stressing the priesthood of all baptized believers indicates the equality of all Christians before God and the apostolic obligation of the whole Christian community.*

33. All those reconciled in Christ are God's children, have equal access to God, and may intercede for each other before God. They also participate in the apostolic commission to bear witness to the gospel in word and life.

34. This does not, however, make the office of the church's public ministry superfluous, a mere question of order, or simply a byproduct of the congregation. This office is conferred upon a Christian, after examination by the church's leadership, by the imposition of hands and prayer. The particular office of the ordained ministry of the church cannot be derived from the priesthood of all believers. It stands both within the congregation and under the Word of God over against the congregation. Yet the local church has both the right and the duty to provide for the appointment of ministers and to be responsible with the whole church for the conduct of their ministry.

In the Lutheran tradition, the community gathered for worship is the primary point of reference for the ministry transmitted through ordination. Visitations to local parishes during the Reformation demonstrated, however, the necessity of a ministry of direction and oversight in the church above the level of the parish (*episkope*). In entrusting such supra-regional responsibility to

bishops, for example, the Lutheran tradition maintained the unity of the ministry. These supra-regional ministers have taken different forms according to their time and place. In this way structures developed in which the responsibility for supra-regional direction and oversight was exercised in a personal manner (by bishops or church presidents), in a collegial manner (by cooperation among church leaders or the conference of bishops), and in a synodical manner (by synod gatherings including non-ordained persons). *Episcope* is not always exercised solely by an *episkopos* (that is, bishop) but through the interaction of different persons and institutions in charge of the direction of the church.

*Historical and present context:*

35. Gratian, the eleventh-century master of ecclesiastical law, thought it fitting to distinguish between two types of Christians: laity and clergy. Such a distinction was characteristic of medieval Christianity. In the Reformation, the emphasis on the priesthood of all the baptized broke down this juridical and social distinction as well as the hierarchy of estates, which placed the ecclesiastical estate above all others. For Luther, “we are all consecrated priests through baptism” (LW 44:29). “It is true that all Christians are priests, but not all are pastors. For to be a pastor one must be not only a Christian and a priest but must have an office and a field of work committed to him. This call and command make pastors and preachers” (LW 13:65).<sup>1</sup>

36. By baptism individual believers are priests, for they intercede before God for others in prayer and, in turn, address others in the name of God through their sharing of the gospel of the mercy of God. They also take responsibility for the congregation and for the whole church by interceding for their ministers and by confirming or critiquing the preaching or teaching of the church in communion with other Christians. Despite the insistence on the priesthood of all the baptized believers, Lutheran churches have often become churches of pastors where the responsibility for essential pastoral work have fallen to pastors alone, while the parishioners have had to content themselves with only receiving spiritual services from the pastors. The ministry of the pastor is in the service of the priesthood of all, which it seeks to encourage, just as the priesthood of all the baptized requires the service of the pastor in order to fulfill its own calling and mission. Pastoral ministry and the priesthood of all the baptized are not two competing realities, such that the strengthening of the one entails the weakening of the other. Only in working together can they make any progress in the life of the church. In many of the Lutheran folk churches, many members’ connections to the life of the church has become minimal. In this context, it is important to emphasize that the simple fact of being baptized, and thereby becoming a member of the community, is not as such empowerment to the priesthood in its full sense. It must be completed by spiritual and theological education in the form of catechesis, participation in worship, and reading the Bible, so that all members can fulfill their baptismal vocation.

37. The question of whether the ordained ministry was instituted by Christ or whether it emerges from the universal priesthood of all the baptized has been hotly debated in Lutheran theology for more than 150 years. If it is only something that emerges from the priesthood of all the baptized, the ministry and mandate entrusted to individuals can never be more than a matter of internal order. For some, the affirmation of Augsburg Confession V—*ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*—deals with the ministry entrusted by ordination and consequently with the *rite vocatus* of Augsburg Confession XIV, the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*. Others understand it as encompassing all forms of proclamation of the gospel, including that of the non-ordained. Many of their writings indicate that Luther, Melancthon, and early Lutheranism understood the ordained ministry as instituted by God in the church, all the while underlining the responsibility (or at least

---

<sup>1</sup> *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.).

the co-responsibility) of the congregation for calling ministers. However, it was always clear that the ordained and the non-ordained are on the same level of equality before God. Lutherans have always affirmed that the *ministerium* is for the service of the Word of God within the community, and that minister and parish both stand under the Holy Scripture.

38. §6. *We understand the world as the good creation of God who, by his Word and Spirit, brings about and preserves all that is and leads this same world for his glory.*

39. The creative action of God expresses his paternal love. He creates out of nothing. This provokes continual amazement in human beings, conscious of being created themselves. What do you have that you did not receive? (I Corinthians 4:7) In confessing God their creator, people recognize that they are absolutely unable to merit their own existence or their justification before God. They can only receive their lives and their justification as a gift. God's creation comes about by means of the Word. In speaking and creating by his Word, God not only gives life and being to creatures; he also gives himself to them as Father.

40. The creative act of God through his Word calls forth the response of the human creature: the recognition that the creation is good, thanksgiving, and the delight of enjoying these good gifts of God. But, refusing since time out of mind—"since Adam"—to place our trust in the fatherly love of God, refusing to praise and thank him for the being and the life that he has given us, human beings are curved in on ourselves and in everything we seek our own good, but not what is our neighbor's or God's. The power of sin corrupts the human being's relationship to what God has created. What is good becomes bad. In our desperate search to guarantee our own lives, human beings seize what is good for ourselves to the detriment of others and in this way destroy our own lives as well as the lives of others. The drive of sin toward death thus drives the good creation of God into chaos. Faith in God the creator, however, continues to agree with God's judgment that everything that has been created is very good. The definitive and unparalleled validation of creation, despite sin, appears in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Creator and creature find their unity in Christ. Because God has become human in Jesus Christ, a bodily being, the corporality and materiality of the created are accepted and approved. The incarnation forbids all deprecation and disdain of the corporeal as compared to the spiritual. This validation of creation is confirmed by the institution of the sacraments, where material things (water, bread, wine) become means to communicate salvation. For the Christian faith, the human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

41. Creation is not something long past. It comes about continually and without interruption, for God desires to preserve and maintain the life of his creatures once they have been created. This happens in continuous creation. Creation is not a single point of departure (*initium*) but a constant wellspring (*principium*), the foundation of all that is. God calls creatures into his service, taking them on in cooperation with him despite their sin, to transmit life and preserve creation. Here is one of the greatest challenges that humanity should face.

*Historical and present context:*

42. In confessing the creative bounty of God, the Lutheran Reformers were insisting on the autonomy of the created world and inviting people to joyful participation in earthly life. While taking the Fall and its consequences for all of creation seriously, they nevertheless did not denigrate the world as being essentially opposed to God, which would require a Christian life turned away from this world. The Reformers were convinced that God has not changed his mind about the goodness of creation (Genesis 1:31). That which God has created is a good gift. It is human beings who use what is good either wisely or abusively.

43. Until modern times, creation was considered to be inherently ordered and something given to humankind. The celebrated Aristotelian affirmation that "art imitates nature" (*ars imitatur naturam*) was commonplace. In exposing the interrelations of nature and its processes, modern science takes a constructive approach, forcing nature to respond to human questions. Not only the

implementation of new technologies but also the natural sciences themselves are constructive in their outlook. These then permit human intervention into “natural” processes in a manner unimaginable even a century ago. “Nature” becomes, so to speak, “culture.” With this new ability, the character of human cooperation in creation is transformed. Human beings have become in a certain sense a second “creator,” even if they remain incapable of creating out of nothing. Therefore it is important to reflect in a fresh way on the meaning, in these new conditions, of the human being in cooperation with God.

44. While interventions of human beings—of humanity—into that which has been created by God are inevitable, and we benefit from them daily, they still all too often have devastating consequences. Humanity is not limited to individual persons but includes states, economies, huge industrial complexes, non-governmental organizations, and so on. These entities pursue their own interests that are often at odds with one another. Their insight into their own contexts and the consequences of their own actions is limited. They are relatively independent of one another, even if they act in a certain reciprocal dependence. Therefore, there is no one single subject who could be considered responsible for all the consequences caused by human actions. The battle against climate change demonstrates the difficulty in getting governments to cooperate in common action in order to define and observe certain climate targets. There is also a great disparity of power and wealth between these numerous different actors. The task of preserving creation is thus always linked to concerns for achieving peace and justice. When the various actors pursue their own interests without regard for others or the environment, faith identifies this as sin. This applies also to actors above the individual level. Thus not only human hearts or personal actions are determined by sin, but also larger dimensions of human life that should be denounced as structural sin.

*44. §7 Christians' secular responsibility is obedient participation in God's creative activity in the world.*

46. In his love God wants to sustain and promote life and preserve it from chaos by means of the secular order and the rule of law. For this activity of his in the world God calls upon all people. This service is realized by using human reason. The foundational law for the common life of human beings is the Golden Rule. It brings together the law of reason and the law of love. Reason is the foundation that permits Christians and non-Christians to be active together in organizing the world and promoting common life.

47. Through faith in the gospel, Christians are freed for and called into service in the world seeking its good and not their own. This service is rendered through deeds of love and justice, working for peace, and suffering on behalf of others. This applies to individual Christians living in a specific context and more particularly to those who exercise public offices in state and society. It also applies to the church. Even if the outcome of this engagement should not be considered a progressive realization of the kingdom of God, these acts are undertaken in the hope that, at the end of time, God will save the fallen creation and bring to perfection what has already begun here below. It is in this hope that the church undertakes its responsibilities of preaching law and gospel, carrying out diaconal works, and advocating for a wholesome human community while opposing inhuman and unjust situations.

48. The church need not legitimize the orders of the world, nor should it attempt to be their guardian. Yet the church must test the orders of the world as well as its own, to discern whether they do contradict God's good law. The church may not resort to coercion for the proclamation of the gospel, just as it is not the task of the state or society to control the proclamation of the gospel.

*Historical and present context:*

49. For Luther, human beings cooperate with God in three domains or “estates” that have been structured and instituted by God: the church, the family, and social life. Depending on the context of his argumentation, Luther either relates the term “estate” to three distinct groups of

persons or to three different tasks; in the latter case one person could belong to all three estates. The place where one lives and works is the place where one is called to practice love of neighbor (I Corinthians 7:20) as father, mother, or child; as master or servant; as judge or civil servant; and so on. Luther designated these daily occupations as “vocations.” He thus enlarged the meaning of vocation, which had been reserved till then (with a few exceptions) to priests, monks, and nuns, to other realms of human activity. Daily life was thus theologically honored in a manner hitherto unknown. Understood as a vocation, work is no longer only a means of making a living; it takes on new meaning. The social responsibility of each person is defined in a new way.

50. Even if societies and economies today are fundamentally different from those that Luther knew, the basic concern of the Reformation notion of “vocation” remains in force. The human workplace is also a place for love of neighbor; it is a place where one is called to worship God. This conception is more meaningful than ever today. It makes a difference if Christians with political or economic responsibility are not corrupt, if they direct their work toward the good of all, if they put themselves at the service of others and strive for peace. This clarifies the contribution that Christians can make toward a responsible use of God’s creation. Acting justly requires the readiness to accept disadvantages, indeed sacrifices—doing what God expects of those who believe that His Son was delivered to death for the sake of salvation. The idea of “vocation” should not be limited to individual lives. It includes collective striving for just and transparent laws and lifestyles, the equitable distribution of wealth, and solidarity with those in need.

51. In developing his understanding of the political order, Luther had to clarify the relationship between temporal power and spiritual power, as well as the apparent contradiction between Romans 13:1–17 and Matthew 5:39. He employed two different distinctions that can seem a little puzzling at first. He first distinguished between two groups of persons—non-believers and believers—that is, those who belong to the worldly kingdom and those who belong to the spiritual kingdom. He then distinguished between the body and soul, which make each person belong to two realms or kingdoms, namely the external political realm and the interior spiritual realm. This latter distinction is the most useful for understanding the political order. Luther resolved the apparent contradiction between the two biblical passages by applying Romans 13 to a person exercising a public office (*persona publica*), an office where one is required to fight against evil, in the public external realm. Matthew 5, by contrast, deals with the private person (*persona privata*) who, just like Christ, should be ready to suffer every injustice because of belonging to the internal spiritual realm. The domain of political power encompasses all human beings, their bodies and lives, their property and reputation. Spiritual power, by contrast, is in charge of the “soul,” that is, the human person in her relation to God (Augsburg Confession XXVIII). Temporal power has no business interfering in the spiritual domain; questions of orthodoxy and heresy belong to bishops and church leaders whose judgment should be carried out entirely without violence (*sine vi sed verbo*). Bishops are not to exercise temporal power to put certain teachings into effect. The Reformers did not always obey their own best insights, unfortunately, especially in their dealings with the Anabaptists.

52. Modernity has often considered the affirmation of Romans 13—that all political authority is willed by God—to stand in contradiction to the foundations of democracy, in which power comes from the people. God and the people as sources of the authority of the state, however, are not realities lying on the same plane of existence. They are not in competition with one another. From a theological perspective, state authority comes from God as much in a monarchy as it does in a democracy. This is an important point, for it charges Christians to obey the political powers not out of fear of punishment but from the conviction of conscience (Romans 13:5), so long as no major objections demand a different attitude (Acts 5:29).

53. Luther’s era distinguished between the lord and his subjects, between those who have power and those who do not. In most modern states, power and authority are diffused among multiple authorities who interact according to precise laws and are reciprocally superordinate and

subordinate to one another. Therefore it is a matter of always seeing which state authority is charged with what task and endowed with the necessary competence for doing so. From this recognition issues obedience to the authorities and, when necessary, opposition and resistance.

54. *§8 Holy Scripture is the norm for the church's proclamation and teaching. The differentiation, but not separation, of gospel and Scripture is important.*

55. The gospel of Jesus Christ is witnessed in the Holy Scripture in a foundational way. For this reason Scripture is the decisive and permanent norm of the church's teaching and proclamation.

56. Nevertheless, simply as a collection of texts, Scripture is not the living gospel of Jesus Christ by which faith and church live. The gospel is the liberating message of salvation, which is disclosed to us by the Holy Spirit through the Scripture. The gospel is the center of Scripture, and all statements and texts of the Bible are to be interpreted in its light. It has to be imparted to people in living proclamation. Through this proclamation, bound to Holy Scripture as its norm, the Holy Spirit creates and bestows faith.

*Historical and present context:*

57. As witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Holy Scripture obtains its true sense in Christians' living encounter with it. Preaching is essential here, for the Word of God is above all a Word proclaimed and heard. In order that a great number of persons could discover the Bible through their own reading, Luther translated the Bible into German and asked the magistrates to establish schools where children, both boys and girls, could learn to read. He also translated the biblical message into songs so that people could sing them together. Artists like Lucas Cranach translated the biblical message into images. For the most basic level of biblical instruction, Luther composed his Small Catechism so that parents could teach and explain the faith to their household. The Word of God comes forth in the encounter where the written word is made a personal address by the Holy Spirit.

58. The Reformers took seriously the question of the authority that could bind consciences. In the conflict between the authorities of Holy Scripture, ecclesial doctrinal decisions, and church law, they were of the opinion that Scripture alone as a witness to the Word of God could be the final authority. Therefore they rejected every claim that contradicted the Bible and regarded as non-obligatory every notion that could not be founded in the Scriptures. They expressed this in the programmatic and polemical formulation *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) and in the understanding of Scripture as the *primum principium* (first principle). The reference to Scripture *alone* has a problematic aspect, however, for Holy Scripture can only be authoritative when it is interpreted and understood. Interpretations of the Bible vary. Faced with multiple interpretations, the appeal to the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture and its self-efficacy reached its limits. It is necessary to add the church back in as the community of interpretation. Within it the different interpretations meet in dialogue and one can struggle to reach a common understanding on the major questions. The church cannot claim an authority *over* the Scriptures. It cannot decide on the understanding of the Scripture. It is rather to listen as the community of hearers searching for a position on the biblical Word valid in concrete situations. The church could state what the community understands in Holy Scripture. It claims a certain authority for the opinion that is the fruit of dialogue between brothers and sisters.

59. Theological debate concerning Holy Scripture is confronted with great difficulties, given the number and plurality of methods of reading and interpreting the Bible. The historical-critical method seeks to discover the original sense of biblical texts, without agreeing, however, on which version of the text should be considered definitive. Theological scholarship is very far from reaching a consensus on the use of exegetical findings in systematic theology: exegesis and systematic theology generally conduct their studies independently of one another. Literary studies

have divergent conceptions, one searching the meaning of the text in itself, the other the intention of the author, still another asking whether the meaning of the text does not finally reside in the reader. In more practical efforts, readers seek out the meaning and significance of the text for the contemporary reader, but whether this meaning corresponds to the original sense of the text often fades into the background. The scriptural principle dear to the Reformers is today at the center of many controversies.

*60. §9 Commitment to the church's confession is a way to safeguard the right proclamation of the gospel and church fellowship.*

61. Faith is inseparably linked with confessing that faith. This is not limited to the spoken act of confessing but also finds expression in written confessions and doctrinal statements that the church formulates and passes on. These are accepted by the Christian community but also place obligations on it, and in this way they serve to preserve the fellowship of the church through space and time.

62. Alongside the creeds of the ancient church, therefore, Lutheran churches have accepted the Lutheran Confessions, in particular the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism.

63. The basic purpose of the church's confessions lies in their historical witness to the truth of the Christian faith, which has its center in the gospel of Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture. The confessions derive their authority from being bound to the gospel and being faithful to Scripture. They are a hermeneutical aid for the right understanding of Scripture and a criterion for distinguishing between true and false proclamation and doctrine.

64. The church's confessions are subordinated to Holy Scripture, so their content and use must be tested again and again by the gospel as witnessed in Scripture. As the church's response to the gospel, the act of confessing is never finished but must be interpreted and expressed afresh in new historical situations and by listening anew to the scriptural witness in continuity with the confessions of our forebears.

*Historical and present context:*

65. Theological and ecclesiastical clashes challenged the Reformers to confess their faith in the church of their time and increasingly in opposition to their church. There were varying reasons for the new confessions that emerged. In order to answer for their faith before spiritual and temporal authorities, as aids for church instruction, to preserve church unity, and to create a sense of community in the Reformation camp, they drew up texts that were received as Reformation confessions and accepted officially in the nascent Lutheran churches. There are different views among the Lutheran churches as to the number of binding confessions and the understanding of confessional adherence.

66. The Lutheran churches are in agreement that the confessional writings are, through the authority of the Holy Scriptures, *norma normata* ("normed norms") for the church's teaching and practice. They consider them as an essential bond of unity, linking them with one another and enabling full church fellowship (with a few exceptions). They now face the difficult task of reinterpreting the statements of the confessions in view of new questions, tasks, and a diversity of historical and cultural contexts, and of finding answers to questions that the Confessions did not ask. There is also the question of whether modern confessions can be recognized as Lutheran confessions with respect to their content, as was the case, for example, with the reception of the Batak Churches into the Lutheran World Federation.

*67. §10 Intensive theological effort is required to discern the truth of gospel proclamation for our time and place.*

68. Salvation in Jesus Christ is offered to people in the living proclamation of the gospel. The canon of Holy Scripture, the church's confessions, and the office of ministry are essential

presuppositions and instruments of this proclamation. But they are not identical with the gospel that must be proclaimed in a living way; nor can they, as such, secure and guarantee right proclamation. The sovereignty of the gospel therefore demands an unremitting theological effort in quest of the truth of the message to be proclaimed here and now.

69. This quest is carried out by perceptive and critical listening to the biblical witness and to the church's confessions and tradition. It demands coming to grips with the intellectual challenges of the present and paying attention to the spiritual and theological insights of other churches. It is upheld by confidence in Christ's promise that he will preserve his church in the truth.

*Historical and present context:*

70. The basic approach of the Lutheran Reformation required thorough theological study to clarify the nature of the gospel to be proclaimed. This process was launched in the context of tackling the abuses prevalent in the church of the time. The roots of these abuses were examined, and a renewed understanding of the gospel itself emerged from the thorough biblical, historical and theological studies and reflection. Particular importance was attached to distinguishing between the gospel, the Scriptures, and traditions.

71. These strong theological impulses carried over into the subsequent history of Lutheranism. But fierce Lutheran theological infighting also ensued. A further consequence of this development was a high degree of pluralism in Lutheran theology and a tendency to be very abstract in theological thinking. This has contributed to Lutheran theology's, particularly in its European form, being frequently charged with neglecting practical and spiritual aspects. It seems that attempts are being made by many within Lutheranism today to reach a better two-way flow between theological reflection and church practice.

## II. Second Set of Theses: Lutheran Churches and the Unity of the Church

72. §1 *Unity is an essential mark of the church.*

73. The unity of the church is a gift of the triune God. Christians acknowledge themselves to be indebted to this gift because they believe and confess the church as *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*. The unity of the church is in tension with the multiplicity of the churches as long as the latter live separately from one another. The division of the churches is something to be overcome. This is the mission and task of all the churches and the goal of the ecumenical movement.

74. God the Father sent his Son into the world in order to reconcile the world to himself (II Corinthians 5:19). His call to reconciliation extends to all human beings. So that this word would be proclaimed everywhere, God made the apostles to be ambassadors, imploring on behalf of Christ: "Be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:20). That human beings hear this call and believe it is the work of the Holy Spirit, who at the same time founds the church. The church is the world reconciled to God. With all believers and especially its ministers, the church has the mission of transmitting this invitation to reconciliation so that the world may believe. The church is at the same time the assembly of those reconciled with God and the instrument of this reconciliation. As the church has Jesus Christ as its one foundation (I Corinthians 3:11), its unity precedes every human work. The *unity* of the church corresponds to this *unique* foundation.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

75. The conflicts surrounding the Reformation in the sixteenth century led to the division of the Western church. The divided ecclesial entities that emerged were the Roman Catholic church, the Lutheran and Reformed churches, the Anglican church, the Anabaptist churches, and ultimately still other churches. Seen in the context of their emergence, the Lutheran churches were generally churches of a certain region or nation. Churches of immigrants developed in time on other continents as well. They all made reference to the Lutheran Reformation without always forming a Lutheran church, because at times their common ethnicity was more important than their common confession. Starting in the eighteenth century, missionary activities engendered Lutheran churches all over the world; however, not all these new and old Lutheran churches were in communion with one another, on account of stemming from so many different mission agencies. All these churches preserved their common confessional heritage, but their different cultural and historical origins led to different emphases in practice.

76. The concern for unity, whether within each confessional family or between different confessional families, did not arise until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The founding of the Lutheran World Convention—the organization that preceded the Lutheran World Federation—did not come into being until some years after the eruption of the modern ecumenical movement at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910. The concern to reunite all the Lutheran churches of the world in a coalition, and the effort to integrate all the Lutheran churches into the ecumenical movement, developed in parallel. Common objectives and numerous personal connections kept the two currents tightly bound to one another. So, by way of example, the Swedish Lutheran bishop Nathan Söderblom was at the same time the spiritual father of the Life and Work movement (one of the pillars of the future World Council of Churches) and a pioneer in Lutheran unity. After the Second World War, the birth of the LWF (1947) and the WCC (1948) occurred at practically the same time. The reciprocal influence and stimulation was visible. This complementarity has always been verified by its results and has allowed for many cases of cooperation and coordination.

77. At the foundation of the LWF, a double commitment was expressed: *both* "To cultivate unity of faith and confession among the Lutheran churches of the world", *and* "To foster Lutheran

participation in ecumenical movements.”<sup>2</sup> The LWF assembly in Minneapolis (1957) warned against “complacent acceptance of the status quo.” “We know that the ministry of reconciliation is jeopardized by the lack of manifested unity.”<sup>3</sup> To promote participation and strengthen the responsibility of the Lutheran churches within the global ecumenical movement, the LWF assembly in Helsinki (1963) decided to establish the Lutheran Foundation for Interconfessional Research,<sup>4</sup> whose Institute began its work in Strasbourg in 1965. The LWF assembly in Dar es Salaam (1977) requested “to give high to the continuation and extension of bilateral dialogues with other Christian traditions.”<sup>5</sup> Successive assemblies confirmed this choice. Along the way, the contours of the unity envisaged and the means of reaching it have been further clarified.

*78. §2 What founds the church also founds its unity.*

79. Christ is present and the Holy Spirit awakes faith, offers reconciliation, and founds and gathers the community where the gospel is proclaimed to human beings, where the forgiveness of sins is declared, and where baptism and the Lord’s Supper are celebrated in conformity with the gospel. By the Word and sacraments, the individual receives the salvation of Christ, and these same means of grace establish and maintain the church (cf. Thesis I.4). According to the Lutheran understanding, these same elements are necessary and sufficient for the unity of the church (Augsburg Confession VII). For the service of Word and sacrament, God instituted the ministry in the church (Augsburg Confession V), a ministry that accomplishes its mission under diverse forms in service of the unity of the church.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

80. The creation of the LWF was not inevitable or obvious, given the diversity of the Lutheran churches. These culturally different churches were first gathered into a federation requiring the same confessions of faith (in particular the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism). Thus was born “a free association of Lutheran churches. It shall have no power to legislate for the churches belonging to it or to interfere with their complete autonomy a free association of Lutheran churches. It shall have no power to legislate for the churches belonging to it or to interfere with their complete autonomy.”<sup>6</sup> A first step had nevertheless been made. But it was then necessary to pass from a federation to a global communion of churches. The path was difficult and took more than forty years to reach its goal. The LWF assembly in Budapest (1984) spoke in favor of a Lutheran ecclesial communion. It “finds its visible expression in pulpit and altar fellowship, in common witness and service, in the joint fulfillment of missionary the missionary task, and in openness to ecumenical cooperation, dialog, and community.” The LWF is understood as “an expression and instrument of this communion. It assists it to become more and more a conciliar, mutually committed communion by furthering consultation and exchange among its member churches and other churches of the Lutheran tradition, as well as by furthering mutual

---

<sup>2</sup> Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation (as adopted by the LWF First Assembly, Lund, Sweden, 1947), in : J.H. Schørring / P. Kumari / N.A. Hjelm (eds.), *From Federation to Communion. The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 527.

<sup>3</sup> Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of The Lutheran World Federation, Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A., August 15-25, 1957, Minneapolis, Minnesota : Augsburg Publishing House, 1958, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Helsinki, July 30–August, 11, 1963, Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1965, 394-400.

<sup>5</sup> *In Christ a New Community. The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of The Lutheran World Federation, Dar-es-Salaam. Tanzania, June 13-25, 1977, Geneva : The Lutheran World Federation, 1977, 202.*

<sup>6</sup> LWF Constitution 1947, Article III.1 (loc. cit. [fn. 2], 527).

participation in each other's joys, sufferings, and struggles."<sup>7</sup> It was finally possible to take the decisive step at the LWF assembly in Curitiba (1990), where the constitution was changed to read: "The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship."<sup>8</sup>

81. Global Lutheran communion today corresponds to the understanding of the church as confessed in Augsburg Confession VII. Since 1990 the new task has been to give form to this ecclesial communion by promoting unity within the communion while still respecting the legitimate diversity of the church members. Thus, for example, the Council of the LWF was able to adopt in Lund in 2007 a common understanding of the ministry of the oversight of the church (*episcopate*). The Lutheran communion and its shared self-understanding should constantly take up new challenges along these lines.<sup>9</sup>

*82. §3 The unity of all the churches beyond confessional borders—not only the unity of the Lutheran churches—is to be understood as ecclesial communion.*

83. The unity sought by the churches as communion in the Word and sacraments ought not be limited to one confessional family. What is necessary and sufficient for unity *ad intra* (on the inside) is also valid *ad extra* (on the outside) for efforts toward unity with other ecclesial traditions. Until the recent past, an agreement on preaching the gospel purely and celebrating the sacraments rightly was accepted and recognized only when the confession of faith was formulated in the same terms. Contemporary ecumenical research and dialogues have shown that the *same* understanding of the gospel can be expressed by various traditions using *different* language and thought-forms. When the dialogues show that the *consentire de doctrina Evangelii et administratione sacramentorum* (agreement on the teaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments) is officially recognized by the churches, communion in word and sacrament exists.

84. As a result of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, many churches have, on the basis of a statement of mutual agreement, reciprocally recognized their ministries as being in the service of the proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. This agreement should be studied and redefined in new ways, in new situations, and in the face of new challenges. In order to preserve their ecclesial communion, churches should strive to continue on theological work and to consult together when making decisions regarding common tasks. Ecclesial communion is thus preserved and expressed by common witness and service in the world. To do this, the churches do not need to abandon their juridical autonomy.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

85. At the LWF assembly in Minneapolis (1957) the LWF formulated its conception of unity: "Wherever we hear the Gospel preached in its truth and purity and see the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we may be assured that the one Church of Christ is present. There nothing separates us from our brethren, and both faith and love constrain us to overcome our dividedness."<sup>10</sup> The path toward unity was thus described and officially approved. This approach corresponds to the basic notion formulated in Augsburg Confession VII. All the ecumenical work of the LWF since then has been engaged in the service of this conception of unity as ecclesial communion.

---

<sup>7</sup> In Christ Hope for the World. Official Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Budapest, Hungary. July 22-August 5, 1984, LWF Report 19/20, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1985, 176.

<sup>8</sup> LWF Constitution 1990, Article III (loc. cit. [fn. 2], 530).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion—A Study Document, Geneva: LWF, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly in Minneapolis, op.cit. [fn. 3], 86.

86. Dialogue with the Reformed and Methodist traditions has concluded that *consentire de doctrina evangelii* exists. The churches have therefore been able to reach declarations of ecclesial communion in many different countries throughout the world (in Europe, the United States, Canada, the Middle East). Through dialogue with the Anglican family, ecclesial communion has been declared also in many locations. In this latter case, full visibility is realized differently due to different emphases in the respective churches regarding the common exercise of the ministry of oversight.

87. In dialogue with the Roman Catholic church, important steps have been taken in reaching a common understanding of the Word and the sacraments. Ecclesial communion is not yet achieved, however, since according to the Catholic understanding the college of bishops under the authority of the pope is indispensable for the exercise of ecclesial communion. An analogous difficulty in reaching a common understanding about ecclesial unity characterizes dialogue with the Orthodox churches.

*88. §4 The unity of the church is unity in reconciled diversity.*

89. The ecumenical dialogues have given priority to differences in the confession of faith since those differences, over the course of the centuries, has prevented ecclesial communion. The goal of the dialogues is not, however, to eliminate all differences or to seek a single uniform doctrine across the board. Certain differences can and indeed should remain; what needs to happen is that they lose their dividing character. At the same time, when unity is understood as “unity in reconciled diversity,” this does not mean a simple acceptance of all differences. Differences should neither disappear nor be simply tolerated; they should rather be reconciled. To allow such a reconciliation to happen, it is necessary to distinguish the *content* of the confessions from their *form*. When it is possible to demonstrate that the different forms and expressions of different confessions of faith have the same content or basis, then one can truly speak of a reconciled diversity. To reach such a conclusion, a process comprised of several steps is necessary.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

90. It is with this outlook that the LWF developed its understanding of unity as a “unity in reconciled diversity.” This model of unity was approved at the LWF assembly in Dar es Salaam (1977) as the Lutheran path toward the unity of the church. It was confirmed again at the Budapest assembly (1984). This model suggested an open and non-excluding understanding of the unity of the church. The Lutheran churches understood themselves as being fully the church without claiming to be the entirety of the church. In different ways, other churches are also part of the one church of Jesus Christ. Thus the absolutization of any particular confessional identity was excluded.

91. This path toward unity was thus described at Dar es Salaam: unity as “a way to unity which does not automatically entail the surrender of confessional traditions and confessional identities. This way to unity is a way of living encounter, spiritual experience together, theological dialogue and mutual correction, a way on which the distinctiveness of each partner is not lost sight of but rings out, is transformed and renewed, and in this way becomes visible and palpable to the other partners as a legitimate form of Christian existence and of the one Christian faith. There is no glossing over the differences. Nor are the differences simply preserved and maintained unaltered. On the contrary, they lose their divisive character and are reconciled to each other.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> The Proceedings of the Dar-es-Salam Assembly, op. cit. [fn. 5], 174, affirmed by the Budapest Assembly (Proceedings, op.cit. [fn.7], 218s).

92. §5 *Differentiating consensus corresponds to unity in reconciled diversity.*

93. Ecumenical research studying conflicted doctrines can only succeed if it reaches a common understanding of *consensus* that demonstrates agreement and allows for differences. Ecumenical theology should therefore highlight the places where agreement is indispensable, where differences are legitimate, and how these two can coexist. Such a consensus is often qualified as a “differentiated consensus” but it is more useful to speak of a “differentiating consensus.” It is differentiating because it distinguishes actively between the content of basic truths (where a full agreement is necessary) and the expressions of this content (where differences may remain). These forms of expression include different concepts, different distinctions, and different modes of thought. Such distinctions correspond to the fact that human beings and also the churches live in a certain moment in history and in a specific context. They allow for the recognition of the different questions and experiences of different contexts. Such diversity appears already in the biblical texts, which witness in a diverse manner to the one gospel. When differentiating consensus has been achieved, the remaining differences can be acknowledged as legitimate in their diversity. They can even be understood as enriching. “Unity in reconciled diversity” requires a differentiating consensus.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

94. The concepts of “unity in reconciled diversity” and “differentiating consensus” are the fruit of the ecumenical research at the heart of the LWF. What exactly a differentiating consensus is can be seen thanks to the example of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), signed in 1999 by the Roman Catholic church and the LWF. There it is said that “a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics” (JDDJ §40). It does not say, however, that the Lutheran doctrine of justification is identical to that of Catholics or vice versa. The common affirmations of the JDDJ show rather than the teachings of the two churches express, even in their differences, the same content. Consensus thus does not exclude the differences but includes them as reconciled differences. The reciprocal condemnations of the Reformation era were taken very seriously in this dialogue. The dialogue nevertheless was able to highlight that some condemnations did not accurately capture the official doctrine of the churches of that time. In other cases it showed that the condemnations no longer apply to the present teaching of the churches. That is what the JDDJ set out to do.

95. The Lutheran churches borrowed an analogous method for their dialogue with other churches. In these dialogues differentiating consensus was not limited to the doctrine of salvation but could be extended to the very understanding of the church. They were thus able to reach declarations of ecclesial communion between Lutherans, the Reformed, Anglicans, and Methodists in many regions. It was declared that the historical condemnations between them no longer apply to the present teaching of the church. Thus ecclesial communion had become possible. It was declared and put into effect.

96. §6 *Serious theological dialogue and intensive ecumenical work are required to reach a differentiating consensus.*

97. Theological dialogues are necessary because certain doctrines and practices of the churches are in conflict and have been the reason for divisions between them. The dialogues seek to contribute to the improvement of relations between the churches in giving them a new foundation. To reach this goal, it is first of all necessary to study the reasons for the conflicts. To overcome them, it is essential to understand the different terminologies and habits of thought in order to identify more clearly both the hopes and fears of the partner and former antagonist. One can thus distinguish the contents of conflicting teachings from their different forms of expression, and one can then ask whether these teachings do not in fact express agreement at the level of their content. For this reason one must “translate” the content from one theological language to another. The

question whether in a particular case it is a matter of the content itself or only of the expression of that content will receive different answers in different churches. Only patient and precise dialogue permits the overcoming of the divisive character of these doctrines. Ecumenical documents highlighting consensus in brief outline wish to demonstrate—and not simply affirm without evidence—that two church teachings in effect state the same content despite different forms of expression.

98. In the last fifty years many dialogues have taken place between different Christian world communions. In this way a great library of reports of dialogues have come into being, not all of which are of the same type. Not all dialogues want or try to reach consensus in written statements. Some are only records of verbal discussions; others are valuable theological treatises elaborating how the respective churches approach theological questions and thus can also be used within the churches.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

99. Even if, in the Lutheran tradition, faith is in the first place *trust* and therefore has an existential dimension, it is equally the case that faith includes knowledge of the one in whom it trusts, a knowledge that asks to be put into words. These words take the form of confessions of faith or “symbolical writings” that hold a place of great importance in the Lutheran churches. These texts claim to be theologically accountable as theological interpretations of the Holy Scripture. In summary, this giving of an account as well as the existential dimension together comprise the Lutheran understanding of faith.

100. The LWF was, already at its very foundation, conscious of the need for ecumenical theological research. During the 1950s it promoted regional theological dialogues with Reformed churches, then international dialogue with the Anglican communion. For its part, the Roman Catholic church became involved in ecumenical dialogue after Vatican II. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue began in 1967. The signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) was a decisive step. On this basis it is now working toward reaching a differentiating consensus on the understanding of the church. This question is and remains the decisive question of the last twenty years. The recent statement of the international dialogue, *From Conflict to Communion* (2013), offers an assessment of the fifty years of dialogue, which serves as the point of departure for a common commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. It is what made possible the common Lutheran-Roman Catholic worship service in Lund in October 2016, with Pope Francis participating.

101. Relations between the Lutheran, Reformed, United, Methodist, and Anglican churches should also be accompanied by continual theological dialogue to avoid the legitimate differences becoming divisive once again.

102. In those cases where, at present, ecclesial communion cannot be envisaged for the foreseeable future, concrete steps toward reconciliation are nevertheless possible. One important example is the reconciliation with the Mennonites that took place at the LWF assembly in Stuttgart (2010). Various national dialogues in addition to several years of international dialogue permitted the two churches to write together the statement *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ* (2010).

103. In dialogue with the Orthodox churches, the first task is to overcome misunderstandings in order to reach a better reciprocal understanding. This first step deepens the connections between the two traditions that already exist. Dialogue with Baptists allowed for a certain progress in mutual regard, even though ecclesial communion in the sense indicated above is still not possible. Dialogue with the Pentecostal churches has only just begun.

*104. §7 The mutual recognition of different churches as members of the one church of Jesus Christ is a constitutive element of the fulfillment of the unity given by God.*

105. The goal of many dialogues is reciprocal recognition as members of the *one* church of Jesus Christ. Not only believing individuals are members of the church but also the different ecclesial communions are themselves to be understood as members, for the church is in fact a *communio ecclesiarum* (communion of churches). This mutual recognition requires a consensus in doctrinal questions as has been described above. The first step is the theological consensus obtained by the dialogues. It should provoke a public theological discussion within the churches and should lead to a position statement by the bodies authorized to speak in the name of the churches. This position statement cannot consist of a detailed evaluation of all the complex theological debates carried out by the dialogues. It should rather formulate a brief text (like the Leuenberg Agreement or the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification) that concisely summarizes the conclusions of the dialogues and advocates for mutual recognition.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

106. For the dialogues between churches characterized by the theology of the Reformation (including the Anglican communion and the Methodist churches), the synods as decision-making bodies have declared, in approving brief texts, that agreement in the understanding of the gospel exists and that therefore communion among the participating churches can be declared. Such a declaration is the recognition that the other church is an authentic expression of the one church of Jesus Christ. Now it is a matter of verifying the compatibility of diverse regional declarations so that a worldwide declaration of ecclesial communion can be achieved.

107. The dialogue with the Roman Catholic church is also trying to travel down this path. A full mutual recognition is not possible at present. The question that has not yet been resolved is whether, alongside the doctrinal consensus already established, reaching a common exercise of oversight over the leadership and teaching of the participating churches is required. The Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches have, depending on their self-understanding, different conceptions of the necessary consensus for a mutual recognition and of what guarantees this consensus. One can also express the issue by saying that the question of what “recognition” is has not yet received the same answer on both sides. Recognition is always recognition *as*. *As what*—as the church, but in what sense?—should the Lutheran churches be recognized, and *as what* does the Roman Catholic church want to be recognized? The answers to these questions are different. The fact that the *as* is controversial indicates the difficulty in reaching mutual recognition.

*108. §8 Reception is the ecumenical task laid upon all levels of church life.*

109. The encounters between Christians of different churches and the theological dialogues between them are interdependent and closely connected. The formal act of church authorities declaring ecclesial communion with another church cannot be based solely on the conclusions of the theological dialogues; rather, local ecumenical experiences are crucial for the decisions that the church leadership takes and for future ecumenical dialogues. At the same time, the ecumenical decisions made by the leadership of the churches need be received spiritually at all levels of church life. They should permit a new manner of encounter with one another and a better perception of the teaching and life of the other church, conforming to the findings of the dialogues. One cannot only expect synodical declarations to be approved and received formally by believers. It is also the spiritual experience of groups and parishes that prompts the synods to approve in an authorized manner the texts of the dialogues. Ecumenical reception exceeds mere information or approval of the conclusions of the dialogues. By reception, theological consensus creates a new quality of relationship between traditions that have divided or at least have become alienated in spite of being committed to the same gospel. For the most authentic possible reception, ecumenical education and communication are necessary. If the results of the dialogues and ecumenical encounters are received and become binding in all domains of the church’s life, one should regard this as the work of the Holy Spirit.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

110. The LWF sends all the concluding reports of the dialogues to its member churches. It asks them to study these reports with care and to report back their observations, comments, and critiques. This first basic step is an encouragement to receive the results of the ecumenical dialogues; this is also the task of various sectors of the LWF and theological seminars. The Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg counts among its priorities the promotion of ecumenical reception by the member churches of the LWF as well as by other churches engaged in dialogue. For such a reception, it is indispensable to explain the problems that the dialogues had to resolve and the results that they reached. One must additionally take up criticisms aimed at proposed solutions and attempt to respond to them. The Strasbourg Institute has devoted itself to this task for more than fifty years, through conferences and seminars offered to bishops, church presidents, and pastors as well as to congregations and academic institutions. Numerous publications have been published to this effect. A particularly fruitful element of this work is the involvement of the Strasbourg research staff in the dialogues themselves, which allows the staff to communicate the internal dynamics of the dialogues.

*111. §9 The unity of the church must become visible, for in this way it corresponds to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.*

112. The visible unity of the churches is the declared goal of ecumenical efforts. What makes for unity amidst diversity must be seen and acknowledged. For the church, this is given by the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. Common worship unites in a visible manner all believers from their various contexts. It creates, establishes, and maintains communion among them.

113. Common worship requires an agreement in the understanding of the ecclesial ministry. This applies most particularly to the ordained ministry that presides over this worship. It is ecumenically necessary to reach a common understanding of the ministry and of the appropriate structures and forms for its exercise. One of the more delicate tasks of ecumenical dialogue is to seek such an agreement, by highlighting what is held in common, on the institution and exercise of this ministry, so that ecclesial communion may become visible.

114. Since the issue is the visibility of shared life, questions of organization, structure, and ecclesiastical rules become in themselves ecumenical issues. These institutional elements are put in the service of the communication of the word of God for preaching and the celebration of the sacraments. An agreement on these points is not of the same order as consensus on the understanding of the preaching of the gospel or of the sacraments. These elements nevertheless have a great importance for the life of the churches.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

115. The modification of the constitution of the LWF made by the Curitiba assembly (1990) shows that the LWF is a communion based on the common celebration of the Word and sacraments. It includes a mutual recognition of ministries.

116. The common celebration of worship is—together with the Confessional writings—the anchor that unites the Lutheran churches of the whole world. From it emerges the understanding of the church and its unity held by Lutheran churches today.

117. That modification of the constitution was and is decisive for the visibility of the communion. The Lutheran communion was able, in this way, to grow in its “ecclesial density.” Alongside the communion already mentioned in Word and sacrament, this “ecclesial density” progresses in the holistic mission and diakonia that connect the member churches of the LWF in a

partnership of solidarity.<sup>12</sup> Other foundational texts received by the member churches contribute to this process of a growing visible unity.<sup>13</sup>

*118. §10 The unity of the church and its experienced catholicity are mutually conditioning factors.*

119. The search for visible unity demands a growing awareness of catholicity. “Catholicity” signifies on the one hand the universal dimension of the church encompassing all believers and at the same time the plenitude of the truths of the faith including the means of salvation (John 16:13). The churches only can correspond to it partially, in connection with their own context. Ecumenism, as the exchange of gifts and encouragement between the churches, has a particular importance. Catholicity is realized in this exchange of gifts. Catholicity is a unity that compels and a unity in a legitimate diversity. Catholicity is being church together beyond all confessional, ethnic, linguistic, and national barriers (cf. Galatians 3:28). Only the awareness of catholicity and its realization in the churches gives ecumenical efforts their true sense. One important dimension of catholicity appears where a declaration of communion between the churches has come about. This communion should be strengthened and deepened. Authentic catholicity does not rest content with a peaceable coexistence of ecclesial groups and communities. Peaceable coexistence and the preservation of the status quo represent a real danger, also in view of the ever-hastening fracture of Christianity into many new church groups. The historic churches and the Christian world communions should take on this challenge.

*Application to the communion of the Lutheran World Federation:*

120. The question of the success of the ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation in 2017—in particular between Lutherans and Roman Catholics—is an ecumenical challenge *par excellence*. In a sense, ecumenism itself is put to the test here. In the conditions of the sixteenth century, a movement of renewal within the church provoked the selfsame church’s division. Would a commemoration of the beginning of this division only confirm the division? Or would a common commemoration be a crucial step toward overcoming it? These questions are decisive for the ecumenical future. That the ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation took place at a worship service in Lund together with the pope, gave it exceptional catholicity—not only the catholicity of the Roman Catholic church but the catholicity of the whole gathered assembly. By his presence the pope took as his own the intentions of the Reformation. For their part, the Lutherans indicated that it is important to them not to remember and enact the Reformation and its basic intentions apart from Roman Catholics today or indeed in opposition to them. That this common commemoration took place during a worship service, the very moment where the church again and again comes into the presence of God afresh, is an act of such great importance for the ecumenical movement that it cannot be overstated.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, Geneva: LWF, 2006, and: *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, Geneva: LWF, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the text on the common understanding of *episcopate*: *Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church*, Geneva: LWF, 2007).

### III. Third Set of Theses: Ecumenical Challenges Today

*121. §1 The church exists only in particular contexts.*

122. Their path through history and expansion throughout the world challenges the question of the identity of all churches as the communion of believers. New contexts are always calling for new forms of expression of the being of the church. In the process of inculturation, the Lutheran churches endeavor to remain faithful to the apostolic gospel as expressed by the Reformers.

*Commentary:*

123. The Christian faith and the Christian churches always live in particular contexts encompassing cultural, political, social, economic, and religious realities. The reference to context is essential for the transmission of the Word of God. The communication of this Word, which establishes faith and the church, comes in a certain language that makes sense only with reference to contextual realities. The interaction between the communication of the biblical message and various contexts is obvious.

124. This inculturation is part of the same essence of the faith in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It shows that the church extends to all times and all places. God creates and maintains his church in the most diverse places and cultures. The continuity of the churches is inseparable from their openness to difference. The message of the gospel precedes these contexts, certainly. But the mode of its proclamation and the aspects of church life that result from it are directly tied to the context and thus dependent on it. The contexts challenge the preaching and action of the church and demand that they respond to their specific problems. But it also can happen that these concerns should be modified in the light of the gospel so that it can be better understood which the real issues of the day are.

125. This conscious involvement into various contexts has allowed the Lutheran churches to make significant witnesses to the gospel in the life of local communities, in schools, culture, and universities, as well as in diakonia and service. Since the Lutheran churches live in assorted contexts, one cannot absolutize or generalize from any particular situation. The experiences of the Lutheran churches (and alongside them all the other churches), linked to their contexts, often in a critical manner, vary from one region to another, from one country to another, from one continent to another. Certain Lutheran churches have challenged their context and so initiated great cultural developments, while others have not resisted the temptation to adapt themselves to contexts hostile to the gospel.

*126. §2 The relationship between the context and the message of the gospel should become the subject of critical study in order to remain faithful to the gospel.*

127. The necessary distinction between, on the one hand, the message of the gospel that is valid for all times and places, and, on the other hand, the context where the gospel is preached and lived, represents a constant challenge for all churches. This challenge includes seeking a healthy balance between the message and the context so that it is possible to regard contextual differences as legitimate differences. This task is more urgent than ever in a globalized world where the contexts have multiplied while drawing nearer to one another and indeed being superimposed on one another.

*Commentary:*

128. The differences are justified and gain their true sense when they serve the continuity of the presence of the Word of God. All the churches are in agreement on this point. However, they do not identify the boundary line between legitimate and illegitimate differences in the same way, also with regard to what structures of the church best correspond to the message of the gospel. To

assess and justify the differences, the Lutheran churches refer to Augsburg Confession VII. There it is said that it is not necessary for Christians everywhere to have the same human traditions, rites, spiritual practices, and so on. It is necessary and sufficient to agree on the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. When this agreement exists, diversity is not merely something to tolerate; it is something to receive as a gift of God expressing the richness of the one church of Jesus Christ.

129. The elements that characterize the context of a church are ambivalent. They can be compatible with the message of the gospel; but they can also contradict or distort it. A contextual fact can be an aid for witness to the gospel; the very same fact can, however, become an obstacle if it is absolutized and considered an autonomous end in itself. For example, consider the case of the nation. National identity or ethnic belonging can, in many cases, be a great help in ecclesial development. Many examples from the history of the church attest to this. They range from the emergence of new churches in the Global South to migrant churches that are forming even now in Europe, North America, Asia, and elsewhere. But if, by contrast, the nation is absolutized, the consequence is an extreme nationalism that the churches must oppose.

130. Certain contexts can be threatening to the church: for example, where there is persecution or no respect on the part of the state for human rights. Also the mere fact that Christians often live in minority churches can become a threat to them if they withdraw from an open encounter with and witness to the world and only focus on preserving their own identity. Other contexts prove to be dangerous in more diffuse ways: atheism, indifference to religious matters, general forgetfulness of God. Simply by what is commonly regarded as plausible in a certain culture, such contexts can also become directly, openly opposed to the Word of God. Churches may live in the societies whose economies are ruled by unjust structures, in societies whose way of life exploits and destroys nature, or in societies where certain groups of people are marginalized. In these contexts, the Word of God demands change in these situations and the churches cannot wash their hands of such tasks.

131. It is often difficult to grasp correctly the relationship between the Christian message and the various contexts to which it has come, because certain contextual realities appear to be self-evident and so closely connected to the understanding of certain truths of faith that they seem to belong to the confession of faith itself. This applies to certain modes of thought that have served to support the formulation of truths of the faith. They end up seeming as if they are unsurpassable. This has given rise to delicate debates with the Lutheran communion. Some parties refuse to ask hard questions of certain convictions of the sixteenth century (for example, the relationship of the church to political authorities, or the patriarchal structure of society). The debate is even more difficult in the face of certain contemporary challenges (for example, the issue of homosexuality). What for some persons should be attributed only to certain contexts, for others is a matter of belief or unbelief. The interconfessional dialogues and controversies within the same confessional family attest to this fact.

132. In this period of globalization, the churches live at the same time in a single world and in multiple worlds. The result is tension between particularity (contexts) and universality. These tensions represent a great challenge for the unity of Christian world communions as well as for the claim to the universality of both the Christian teaching and moral and juridical convictions (such as human rights and their universal scope). The contexts are certainly particular and varying in perspective. It is fitting therefore to search out new ways of analyzing appropriately and effectively how despite these unavoidable contextual structures it can be meaningful to discuss claims to universality. For example, the notion of human rights was certainly born in particular contexts but it does not need to be limited to those same contexts. Succeeding in communicating the claim to universality represents a great challenge for both theoretical work and praxis in the churches.

*133. §3 The communion within the LWF demands common, foundational theological work.*

134. A theological challenge is raised by the diversity of context in which the Lutheran churches find themselves. The preservation and deepening of their communion demands continual common theological engagement for the right understanding of the gospel in our time.

*Commentary:*

135. As a communion of churches, the LWF recognizes different ways of doing theology. Theology should, on the one hand, clarify the way in which the gospel can be proclaimed in diverse contexts. On the other hand, the different theologies participate in these contexts. The specific task of the communion is to create dialogue between these different theologies. These dialogues need time. They permit each partner to discern the dead wood, so to speak, in their theology; they enable them to discover the errors that they had not been able to see before. In order to preserve and deepen the communion, constant dialogue among theologies is called for.

136. This present set of theses turns now to taking up the essential theological challenges for reciprocal relations between Lutheran churches, with other churches, and also with other religions. They deal first of all with the understanding of Holy Scripture and the doctrine of justification—two crucial dimensions of the Lutheran Reformation. Then ethical issues that weigh upon the heart of the Lutheran communion and their relationship to other churches will be taken up, as well as the challenge of new forms of Christian communities that have come about, posing new questions to ecumenism and ecumenical theology. The necessity of clarifying the relationship of the Lutheran churches to other religions is an additional challenge. It will finally be necessary to deal with the theological understanding that the Lutheran churches have of communion in relationship to other churches so that its development into the future can be assured. All these domains call for and demand new responses on the part of the churches and ecumenical scholarship. The fact that this set of theses chooses consciously to concentrate on these challenges does not signify, however, an absence of awareness of the other challenges facing the church in a globalized world. The churches take these up under the rubric of “justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.” The notion of justice as expressed in the last number of years has had seen extensive application (climate justice, gender justice, and so on).

*137. §4 New situations require the Lutheran churches to reaffirm in new ways their understanding of Holy Scripture.*

138. The victim of rapid change, the contemporary world is centered upon present and future realities above all. Reference to history is relegated to a secondary level. This observation applies also to the use that Christians make of Holy Scripture and the transmission of its message in the history of the churches. The theology of the Lutheran churches should take up this challenge and propose new approaches and forms of praxis for engaging with Holy Scripture so that it remains or becomes again the living source and north star for all of Christian life.

*Commentary:*

139. The Christian faith is oriented toward the biblical message, which bears witness to God who revealed himself in the history of the people of Israel and became incarnate in Jesus Christ, as the Scriptures report. The apostles are witnesses to Christ, and the church’s confessions of faith attest to and transmit biblical convictions. The Christian faith is, in its very essence, connected to this revelation of God in history. In worship and in reading, hearing, and meditating on the Bible, Jesus Christ himself is present. The past and the present meet and mix, and believers are turned toward the future. Jesus of Nazareth who came to us is the Lord who will come again.

140. The historical event of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the constitutive foundation of the Christian faith, finds itself in sharp tension with the accelerating changes of our time, changes in the realms of science, technology, the economy, society, and politics. The history,

experiences, and wisdom of generations past no longer have hardly any importance. All that counts is the present. Human beings want to shape their futures sovereignly and independently of the weight of the past. Whatever contributes to progress is kept; whatever stands in the way is simply swept aside. This assessment applies also to the use Christians make of the Bible. Interest in the Bible—this old book—is limited, despite the contrary statements of some. Many Christians know only a few words or passages of the Bible. They derive from it only those notions that conform to their current tasks.

141. In the face of rapid social change that makes every choice more difficult, a growing number of Christians turn again to the Bible without, however, distinguishing between its various time periods, contexts, and genres. Mixing up past and present, each verse, word, or even letter of the Bible is understood as a direct Word of God immediately transposable into present circumstances. In so doing Christians forget that it is the Holy Spirit who makes the written text the living Word of God (cf. Thesis I.8).

142. It is essential for the Lutheran churches that Christians preserve and rediscover a living and daily engagement with the whole of Holy Scripture. For personal reading of the Bible, it is useful to remember Luther's triad: prayer (asking the Holy Spirit to grant true understanding of the text), meditation (attending to the whole of the text to allow it to say what it wants to say), and struggle (the Bible confronting the reader, whose life may be in contradiction to the text). In Latin this is called *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*. Lutheran piety is in the first place a biblical piety. For us it is a matter of undertaking this practice afresh.

143. In critical dialogue with modern approaches to the notion of truth, Lutheran theology must take up certain challenges: the differentiated historical study of the biblical writings and their contexts; reflecting and speaking the biblical message in a thoughtful manner; always being ready to offer reason for the hope within (I Peter 3:15). The Bible only opens up when we consider the particularity of its witness of faith and the otherness of its understanding of reality; when we allow the biblical texts to interpret us until we come to identify with a message that is, in the first place, foreign to us. This does not mean, however, that the biblical understanding of reality, unlike that of the modern era, is simply passé and without interest. Rather it is to be seen as an alternative approach to reality, for both approaches—biblical and modern—do not simply exclude each other. The Bible wants to and can grant access to the deep dimension of reality where God encounters us. We should be ready to learn and to interpret this reality with the help of the Bible. It is fitting, nevertheless, to distinguish the biblical understanding of the reality from cultural particularities of ages past that can no longer claim authority over us today, even if they constituted the context of the witness of faith in the biblical epoch. It is not easy to distinguish between the biblical message and its specific understanding of reality and what belongs to the time-limited contexts. One must always remember that the incarnation of God at a moment in history and in a certain culture does not mean that those contextual realities are forever and for always an integral part of the gospel. In other times and other places, the gospel takes new forms.

*144. §5 The message of justification should be reaffirmed in a new way.*

145. The doctrine of justification is for the Lutheran churches the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. The churches should take up the challenge of putting the message of justification back at the center of their lives and to speak it again in a fresh way.

*Commentary:*

146. What Luther, following Paul, understood as "justification" can also be expressed in a language other than the juridical. One can make use of biblical ideas and images such as the Johannine language of "the new birth" or Jesus' parables. These words say, in their own fashion, that in communion with Christ the believer is justified before God (*coram Deo*) and saved. In a joyful exchange Christ takes upon himself the unrighteousness of the believers and confers upon

them instead the fullness of his love toward God and other people. The gift of salvation and their recognition by God are thus offered to the human beings.

147. If one asks people to describe the realities from which they want to be set free, they will mention above all their fears (of failure or of other threats), loneliness, being alienated from oneself, directionlessness, the feeling of being controlled by life and having no agency of one's own, fear of being counted a "loser," failure to thrive in life, dependence, powerlessness in the face of failed relationships with family, spouse, or friends, unemployment, exploitation, or migration.

148. Our societies are, moreover, marked by an obsession with productivity, not only in the realm of economics but also in cultural life. People are thought to be what they make of themselves; they are their own creators, not in the physical sense but in the existential sense. Humans find themselves in their work. What they do precedes who they are. Some of them master such pressures and do in fact find themselves; often, however, to the detriment of others. Other people, by contrast, "fail" and resign themselves to their fears. In either understanding of life, there is no place for grace. Grace is besides the point for many people, even a humiliation or dishonor. If they make mistakes or become guilty, they forgive themselves and grant themselves grace. God is no longer the author of forgiveness or grace. They do it themselves.

149. In the experiences of these people, such phenomena as forgiveness or grace have nothing directly to do with God. Theological reflection perceives nevertheless a connection to religion. "Justification by works" is widespread, even if it doesn't have a religious component in most cases anymore. It is now expressed in secularized form. It is therefore fitting to understand carefully these human experiences and to reflect in a new way on the impact of the liberating grace of God. Grace creates the space in which people can look and accept their experiences, because they are no longer alone with them in this space. The gospel can open such people up to a new experience of their experiences: that in standing before God people can rediscover the saving power of the gospel. They are no longer condemned to a lifetime of mandatory self-realization. God offers them a new identity. Now their actions are the consequence of their new being.

150. Many people, even within the Lutheran churches, participate in these current realities in their contexts. The experience of Luther and his contemporaries, for which the message of justification was the saving power, is foreign to them. This applies not only to Western societies. In many countries in Africa and Asia, the religious and cultural contexts make it difficult to see the need for salvation and grace in the same way the Lutheran Reformers saw it. Basic dialogue and theological reflection are necessary so that justification by grace alone through faith can be reaffirmed in all contexts in such a manner that people can once again gain access to this message.

151. This challenge is connected to the fact that, for many citizens of the so-called "developed" countries, the horizon of life is limited to the time between birth and death. The idea of eternal life, beginning already on this earth, but extending beyond death and definitively accomplished only then, was obvious in the Middle Ages and at the time of the Reformation. It is not necessarily denied our in our time; however, it hardly has the same meaning for understanding all of life. According to Luther, reason and philosophy are occupied with "life between the times." Theology, by contrast, has for its object "the whole of life," the person created by God whose goal is God and eternal life. These coordinates essential to understanding Luther's theology are hardly perceptible anymore.

152. One must reflect in a new way on the final word, the judgment of God. Christian life cannot be thought of apart from this final word of God. His judgment has double function. (a) It places human life in the light of the ultimate love of God and it discloses the truth of every life, including the violation of this loving God who wishes that all people would live forever in and with him. (b) Despite these wounds, God's love wants to open people to the definitive victory of grace and make way for the saving power that crosses the boundaries of death in the resurrection of the God-Human, Jesus Christ. The churches have the great mission of announcing this message of

justification, also in its eschatological perspective, in order to reinforce responsibility for this life and hope for a true life, an eternal life.

*153. §6 New Christian communities challenge the self-understanding of the Lutheran churches.*

154. In the last several decades, new churches and communities have appeared all around the world. They spark lively interest and display lightning-fast changes. This development challenges both the everyday life and the self-understanding of the established churches.

*Commentary:*

155. There are many groups labeled as “Pentecostal” that nevertheless have no connection to the historic Pentecostal churches formed in the early twentieth century. They exist also as Charismatic movements within the historic churches of various traditions. Many new Nondenominational churches have arisen within the broad fold of Evangelicalism, which are not the same as the historic Free Churches.

156. The growth of these Nondenominational congregations is tied to general tendencies in society at large. Institutions no longer have the same unifying power as before, and many contemporary people have developed an outright aversion to them. To this can be added a general loss of tradition and the absence of historical consciousness. Nondenominational churches participate in this development. Many believe they can disregard church history and have immediate access to the Holy Scripture and apostolic times. Historical mediations of the gospel—such as denominations—are considered superfluous.

157. Many believers concerned to live out their faith conscientiously already live in a Nondenominational fashion. They understand the traditional confessional ties to be leftovers from the past. Their growing number is linked to the growing interest in “revival Christianity.” The old controversial theological questions no longer have any meaning for them. Their own biographical experiences and the space for encounter are the new determinants for church belonging. The choice of belonging to a community flows from individual experience. People craft their own faith and their own belonging as autonomous subjects. They ultimately join the group that corresponds best to their own opinions. The decisive fact is lived spirituality, including emotion. To opt for a Nondenominational church is normal and self-evident for these people.

158. Another kind of church is characterized by its ethnicity. Large migratory movements in the last centuries have given birth to Lutheran churches still bearing the mark of their countries of origin; for example, in the United States there are still churches with a German or Nordic character. This process continues up to the present. Common ethnic origin in the adopted foreign country connect people, but these ethnic communities create problems both for the integration of migrants into the new society and for the unity of the churches.

159. The megachurches are yet another type. Their success is in part connected to their style of worship, which appeals with a certain kind of music offered in select locations (movie theaters or concert halls), along with techniques borrowed from the Entertainment industry that correspond to cultural markers and preferences more than traditional-style worship does. That the needs of potential participants in worship—often following market studies—become the principal point of reference is ambivalent. On the one hand, this setup corresponds to the necessity identified by St. Paul to be a “Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks”. It is a healthy invitation to the Lutheran churches to take care lest their style of worship deters certain persons (especially youth) from access to Lutheran worship. On the other hand, this approach is problematic, for it has the tendency to conform to market paradigms, and market demand determines what is on offer. The aspirations of potential worship participants would therefore decide the content of the message, which is contrary to the gospel.

160. These developments are some of the challenges that Lutheran churches must face. They are challenged in the daily life of their congregations. They should strive to understand in

fresh ways the significance of the living Lutheran tradition for a contemporary life of faith and a healthy devotion to Holy Scripture. To preserve and cultivate Lutheran identity is and will be plausible only if the churches are able to communicate convincingly their distinctive Lutheran gifts. These developments challenge also theological research. Many new communities feel no need to look beyond their local situation. To understand themselves as part of worldwide communion of churches and to nurture ecumenical relationships is not their major preoccupation. From a theological point of view, one can label this as a deficit of catholicity. The vision of foundational unity that is so important for the Lutheran churches (cf. the Second Set of Theses) fades into the background or disappears altogether. One must therefore find new paths to enter into communication with these groups and open the ecumenical dialogue that is necessary from a Lutheran point of view.

*161. §7 Whether and under what circumstances ethical differences can become church-dividing should be studied with care.*

162. Ethical questions are at the center of many controversies worldwide. These themes represent particular challenges for the churches. In recent years these issues have in effect weighed on the communion within the various churches and on relationships between churches. Some confrontations have, in certain cases, led to the rupture of church communion and even the impossibility of worshiping together. The fractures do not always follow along the same lines as the traditional borders between Christian families. They are often transconfessional in their reach. Common ethical convictions also cause new coalitions to develop across confessional frontiers.

*Commentary:*

163. The different churches respond in different or even contradictory ways to certain ethical questions, and most particularly to those concerning the beginning and end of life, sexual orientation, gender questions, and those of the environment—domains that some consider to be anthropological questions. If, as a result, church communion and common worship are revoked or ruptured, one can only justify it theologically if one can show how certain ethical convictions and practices reach to the very core of what makes the church the church and do it long-term harm. According to Augsburg Confession VII, the true preaching of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments in accordance with the gospel constitute the being of the church. One must therefore demonstrate that certain ethical attitudes deform or even render impossible the authentic proclamation of the gospel. Such a judgment depends on many factors that are not always doctrinal. Thus there is the following problem: (a) Given that the decision to break church communion must be theologically argued, a theological debate regarding these ethical issues may be and must be possible. If no arguments were offered, there would be no need for dispute. But (b) since the judgment is influenced by many non-doctrinal factors, it is not always possible to solve such conflicts by means of theological discussions.

164. The debate over these ethical issues and their possible divisive character is conditioned by the fact that the churches are marked by different theological cultures (their milieu, their mentality), different points of departure, different methods, different approaches to biblical texts, and different goals. The arguments carry weight within one culture but not always in the other. Thus, those who argue out of their own particular theological culture cannot often understand and are not at all convinced by the arguments of theologians that make sense in another culture, and vice versa. Resulting in endless debates and reciprocal accusations, the others are labeled as “conservatives,” “reactionaries,” or “fundamentalists” on the one side and as “liberals,” “revisionists,” or “unfaithful to biblical truth” on the other.

165. Ecumenical dialogue has highlighted the function of different systems of thought in the doctrines of different churches. An analogous dialogue that would take up different church cultures is proving to be necessary. Some churches know only one theological culture; others live within a

plurality of theological cultures. These dialogues are necessary in order to preserve church communion, even if these dialogues are not, by themselves, the solution and do not always reach their goal. They are to be completed by personal encounters and sharing the experiences of people thinking and living in different cultures. This dialogue is to be done with the commitment to give an account before God and others. It includes the effort to translate the conceptions of the one into the thought structures of the other. This encounter should have as its precondition that each dialogue partner considers the other as wanting to express authentically the evangelical message, and that the differences are understood as different expressions of Christian love. The controversy is not yet resolved in this way, but the starting attitude will be different if the Christian love is the point of reference for the dialogue, even if this love is itself perceived differently by each. Faith is not neutral toward the works of believers; faith wants to be active in love toward neighbor, and not everything is compatible with love. Thus controversies should not be avoided. In order for dialogue to be able to bear fruit, it is good to revive the ancient virtues of prudence (*prudentia*, which pays attention to the details of each case) and equity (*aequitas*, which formulates rules for new situations in the spirit of the general rule).

166. §8 *The relation to other religions calls at the same time for tolerance and for the affirmation of the truth of the gospel.*

167. The churches today live in multireligious societies. The question of the manner of encounter with representatives and believers of other religions as well as of their organizations is posed in the practical as well as theological domains with an urgency unknown till now.

*Commentary:*

168. According to the country it takes place in, this problematic challenges the Lutheran churches in very different ways. The situations are not the same and depend on the majority-minority balances of the churches and of non-Christian religions, on the politics of the states that do or do not guarantee religious liberty, the proper functioning of the judicial authorities in the country, and so forth. The analysis in what follows therefore cannot apply in the same measure to every church.

169. The desire to reach peaceable coexistence is the main and determining factor for the encounter of Christians with members of other religions. Believers of other religions are to be respected because they themselves are created in the image of God. Christians work for religious liberty (active and passive, public and private) regardless of whether it applies to themselves or to members of other religions. The equality of all citizens before the law is extraordinary progress in the history of the human race and is a translation into the legal realm of the conviction that all people are made in the image of God. Christians will ask therefore that all citizens respect the same laws and that states do not reserve a juridical space determined by the precepts of one particular religion applying only to its adherents. In many countries the state institutions permit the free exercise of worship (the human right to religious liberty). They do not accept, however, and with good reason, exceptions for religious reasons that exempt certain citizens from respect for the law that regulates their relations with other citizens. In certain situations, the adherents of a religion should be able to accept—even if it causes them a certain amount of suffering or inconvenience—that certain precepts of their religion are not going to be translated into the law of the state. The human right to religious liberty has its limits, since certain practices within religions jeopardize the human rights of all.

170. Theological dialogue with the representatives of other religions has the primary goal of overcoming prejudices. It wishes to contribute to a better understanding of the other religion and its members. Such a dialogue is in fundamental distinction from the dialogue between members of the Christian family. Among Christians, the starting point is shared faith in the triune God, reference to Holy Scripture as a witness given to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and, in most cases,

reference to the creeds of the early church. Such a common point of departure simply does not exist in the case of interreligious dialogue.

171. In view of the fact that billions of people belong to non-Christian religions, Lutheran theology should, like all Christian theologies, maintain the tension between the *solus Christus* (Acts 4:12) and God's will for the salvation of all people (I Timothy 2:4). According to II Corinthians 5:19, God has reconciled the world (*kosmos*: that is, sinful humanity) to himself in Jesus Christ. This work of salvation intended for all must not be separated from the apostolic word of reconciliation that addresses every person with the plea, "Be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:20). What will happen to those who do not accept this word or who never have the chance to hear this call to reconciliation—thus the question of knowing whether they will be included in this act of reconciliation in the life to come—is ultimately a matter of God's will. The Lutheran churches by no means hold the same opinions as to the truth claims of other religions or the salvation of their members.

172. Those who call for toleration of other religions should distinguish between the people who belong to these religions and their religious convictions. Those who consider all religions to be equally valid have no need to be tolerant. Toleration only emerges in denying the truth claim or ability to salvation of another religion even while honoring the members of those religions because they are created in the image of God. One can respect the faithful of those religions who act in a morally responsible manner and practice their religion with conviction without sharing their convictions. To affirm the universal claim to truth of one's own religion is not a sign of intolerance as long as there is no attempt to impose it on others by force or coercion. The claim to truth is by definition universal. Thus Christian faith includes mission in the sense of offering the witness of one's own faith and inviting others into one's faith community. Toleration as a moral demand does not annul truth claims. It should nevertheless include respect for others' dignity and granting to them the same rights one has oneself. Toleration becomes impossible, however, when people are intolerant vis-à-vis those who think and believe differently. Daily life offers many opportunities for cooperation with people of different religions. These opportunities should be seized, above all when they have to do with helping people in distress.

173. Dialogue helps to foster mutual understanding and trust in countries where the coexistence of Christians with members of other religions is peaceable. In participating actively in interreligious encounters, the churches contribute to the common life of peace in wider society. This happens also in the participation of Christians in the prayers of other religions and in the participation of members of other religions in Christian prayers. It is necessary to distinguish between several situations: (a) the prayer of members of one religion takes place while members of another religion are present; (b) believers of many different religions pray, each individually, at the same time or successively in the same place; and (c) interreligious prayer by members of several different religions. This last case courts the danger of syncretism. In multireligious societies, there are many occasions for common prayer (cases (a) and (b)), for example at the beginning of a new school year or on a public holiday. It occurs most often in the case of catastrophes that affect members of all religions. Religious pedagogy has developed diverse models for interreligious learning processes.

174. §9 *The emergence of a worldwide Lutheran communion confers upon each church member a new identity.*

175. The emergence of a worldwide Lutheran communion is the challenge for the Lutheran churches to have a living exchange with churches that share the same confession of faith and no longer to understand themselves only as churches co-defined by their own history and culture. Such a communion includes reciprocal questions and promptings from Lutheran churches living in different contexts. It also includes, if necessary, mutual assistance.

*Commentary:*

176. The Lutheran World Federation, which at its foundation in 1947 gathered together the majority of Lutheran churches in the world, became in 1990 after a forty-year discernment process a living and mutually accountable communion of churches. The churches declared themselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship and worked to share their spiritual and material resources in the service of the mission of God in the world. On this new path, the Lutheran communion gained “ecclesial density” (Thesis II.9).

177. This worldwide communion of Lutheran churches is a context that helps each church member better to grasp its own context thanks to contact with other Lutheran churches. It permits them to discern better the times when they should be perhaps less adapted to their context or to realize that they have already ceded too much to their particular context. Communion allows them to put better questions to the cultural, political, ethical, and social realities of each church. A worldwide communion of churches living in different contexts also implies difficulties, such as those indicated in the discussion of ethical issues (Thesis III.7). In these situations, reference only to the difference of contexts is not always sufficient to relativize the particular context of each church. Communion asks each church to give a theological account of its own choices. It is essential for the communion of Lutheran churches to strive in theological work, not only within each church but in a common manner in the name of the communion as such. They must always be asking together how the gospel is to be understood in new contexts and, conversely, how the contexts can be understood in light of the gospel; and, when necessary, how to understand the Lutheran confession of faith today and develop it further. To clarify this for the whole communion is indispensable for the communion of Lutheran churches.

178. The *oikumene* as the wider context for the Lutheran churches does not exclude regional ecumenical communion, such as relations with the Catholic and Orthodox churches, with the world communions of the Reformed or Methodists, with the Anglican communion, with the world Mennonite community, and so forth. The World Council of Churches and the Global Christian Forum are also a part of this larger context. These call on Lutheran churches to adapt themselves to the progress made in dialogue between Lutherans and other churches, to live out the new ecumenical agreements, and to develop them further.

*179. §10 Communion in worship undergirds and maintains the unity of the Lutheran churches.*

180. Communion in worship expresses ecclesial communion. It is the ecumenical challenge on the path toward authentic and visible unity among the churches. Communion in worship expresses and preserves the unity of the Lutheran churches. It also connects them to many other churches.

*Commentary:*

181. The Lutheran tradition understands worship, in conformity to the New Testament witness, as the center of church life. The continual listening to the teaching of the apostles, baptism, the sharing of the bread, prayer and praise, as well as the sharing of goods and solidarity express the *koinonia* of the earliest church (Acts 2:41–44). The Reformation of the sixteenth century reaffirmed this. Jesus Christ’s gift of himself (*promissio*, promise) and the believing reception of him by the faithful (*fides*, faith) in prayer and praise are at the center of the Lutheran understanding of worship. During worship, and especially in the celebration of the sacraments, the God who became human allows himself to be experienced in a specific manner. These dimensions, underlined by the Reformation, ground the understanding of the church and its unity in today’s Lutheran churches.

182. Understood in this way, worship connects all Christians across all their contexts; it establishes, creates, and maintains communion, even if the concrete forms of worship can vary from place to place. The common celebration of worship—alongside the Lutheran Confessions, which are the authoritative reference point for the life and teaching of the Lutheran churches (cf. Thesis I.9)—

is the anchor that maintains the Lutheran communion at the world level. According to the Lutheran understanding, this communion is open and should be extended to all Christian communions across the world.

183. Every worship service of a community assembled around altar and pulpit in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is celebrated in communion with the whole church, which is the body of Christ. This communion, this presence of the universal church in the local church, is made visible during worship by the use of Holy Scripture (readings, psalms, the Lord's Prayer, and other biblical elements in the liturgy), in the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as by the creeds. Common worship gives birth to church communion and expresses it. The unity of the body of Christ precedes each particular church, and its believers are incorporated into it by their baptism. This foundational reality is contradicted when particular churches cannot share in worship together. Everyone should take up the challenge of rediscovering unity or, as soon as it is threatened, putting it into action in order to preserve—sacrificially, if need be—our unity.