



LIBERATED  
BY GOD'S  
GRACE



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION



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# LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE

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Anne Burghardt*

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# PREFACE

*Martin Junge*

The year 2017 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. Churches in the Lutheran tradition take 31 October 1517 as the starting point of the Reformation. It was on that date that Martin Luther is said to have nailed his Ninety-five Theses opposing the sale of indulgences and what he perceived to be clerical abuses attached to this practice on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg. Since then, the Reformation has made an impressive journey. Today, Lutheran churches can be found in all four corners of the globe, with a steadily growing number of Lutherans living in the global South. The Lutheran World Federation, a world-wide communion comprising 144 churches, today represents over 70 million Lutherans in seventy-nine countries.

The churches' diverse formative experiences, social and cultural backgrounds make it virtually impossible to talk about "the" Lutheran identity. For some churches, the year 1517 does not necessarily have special significance since they associate different dates with the beginning of the Reformation. For several LWF member churches, for instance, the introduction of Christianity in their local context represents the key date that is being remembered as constitutive of their self-understanding and identity. However, the commemoration of this quincentennial anniversary offers an excellent opportunity for all Lutheran churches to reflect on the ongoing relevance of the questions that triggered the Reformation and to discern its societal impact.

The four booklets included in this collection aim to contribute to such an in-depth review. The discussion is shaped around the overarching theme of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and the Twelfth Assembly, "Liberated by God's Grace," with its three sub-themes that help to elaborate different aspects of the main theme: "Salvation— Not for Sale," "Human Beings—Not for Sale,"

and “Creation—Not for Sale.” The booklets include essays by bishops, pastors, academics, members of the LWF Council, representatives of different LWF networks and ecumenical partners from all LWF regions. The wide range of authors and topics gives the reader a glimpse of the wide variety within the communion and some aspects of the LWF’s programmatic work. The three questions at the end of each essay seek to encourage further reflection and discussion.

It is our hope that these booklets can be used in bilateral discussions between partner churches to trigger a dialogue on the message and role of churches in different contexts. Furthermore, they will hopefully provide significant impulses for our deliberations as we prepare for the Twelfth Assembly that will take place in 2017 at Windhoek, Namibia.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have contributed an essay to this publication and for making these comprehensive and meaningfully diverse. I would like to encourage readers carefully to study these booklets and hope that they will lead to meaningful and worthwhile conversations on their content.



# INTRODUCTION

*Anne Burghardt*

“Liberated by God’s Grace”—the Lutheran World Federation’s main theme for the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation—is closely linked to the doctrine of justification by faith which, in the Lutheran tradition, has also been called “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). The central insight of this doctrine, namely that in Christ God’s grace is given to us as a free and unconditional gift, evokes a response of gratitude, expressing itself in the loving and caring engagement with human beings and the whole of creation. This understanding is as pertinent today as it was in Luther’s times and continues to impact all aspects of theology. The essays in this booklet explore the topicality and influence of this Reformation insight from different perspectives.

In his article “Liberated by God’s Grace—From What, To What?” Gottfried Brakemeier argues that in today’s world the concept of grace/mercy is becoming increasingly suspect. A world without grace would end up being an inhumane world. A theology centered on justification by faith holds on to the concept of grace since, in biblical terms, justification promises God’s unconditional acceptance of human beings. Showing love is the response to God’s abundant love for human beings, not an attempt to “earn” God’s love by “good deeds.” Referring to Luther’s writing “On the Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” Brakemeier shows how Luther’s two sentences, “A Christian is a free lord of all, and subject to none” and “A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone”<sup>1</sup> belong closely together.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of A Christian, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”<sup>2</sup> This is his [Luther’s] first sentence. Anyone who has God as lord cannot serve other lords (cf. Mt 6:24). Serving God frees us from serving humans. All pressures fall away as soon as people entrust themselves in faith to God’s grace. However, this freedom would be thoroughly misunderstood as arbitrariness. So Luther adds: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all and subject to all.”<sup>3</sup> That is his second sentence. The two belong together. Freedom destroys itself if it is not in a position to take on obligations. Above all, however, love is betrayed. It is essentially “serving the neighbor.” Without diakonia, faith also becomes false as there is no “Christian” faith that does not take action in love (Gal 5:6).<sup>4</sup>

The rediscovery of the gospel’s liberating message, which Luther discovered through his profound study of the Holy Scriptures, was at the center of the Reformation. This powerful and liberating message needs to be heard anew at different times and in different contexts. In his essay, Hans-Peter Grosshans, a member of the LWF’s hermeneutics network, points to the diversity of human life and the fact that through the medium of the Holy Scriptures God speaks to individuals’ and communities’ concrete lives.

Hearing God’s Word is therefore not followed by some sort of imperial anti-individuation process but by a song praising the manifold grace of God (1 Pet 4:10), expressed in the diverse and many-hued lives of Christians and churches—in “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).<sup>5</sup>

The fact that the significance of hearing and understanding the Word of God has been highlighted since the beginning of the Reformation gave rise to many new translations of the Bible which, in several cases, noticeably impacted the further development of certain national languages. Comprehending the actual meaning of the text has a lot to do with the hermeneutical key that is being used. Elżbieta Byrtek describes the importance of education in Lutheran churches throughout the centuries, which originated in the desire more widely to engage with the Scriptures and their meaning. True engagement with the Scriptures implies posing questions, listening to different “readings” and voicing one’s concerns and doubts.

Faith that is not afraid of posing questions, seeking answers and staying in dialogue with those who do not share one’s own opinion, is a living faith, one that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Gottfried Brakemeier, in this publication, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Peter Grosshans, in this publication, 56.

will be able to survive in today's multilateral and complex world. A world where "right" answers given by external authorities do not necessarily speak to people but where Christians, liberated by God's grace, have a responsibility to talk about this grace to others and to be ready to engage in difficult dialogues.<sup>6</sup>

The Reformation was a catalyst for the renewed understanding of the church's role in society. Luther valued ordinary work, both in- and outside the home. Thus everyday work acquired a new dignity since he explicitly considered it to be an essential part of serving both God and the neighbor. This perception laid a fruitful basis to the later concepts of active citizenship. In his article about the church's calling in society, Kjell Nordstokke points out that, according to Luther, God has called the church to be a "living word" in the world.

The call to be "a living word" is an exhortation to active citizenship. Luther radically changed the understanding of Christian vocation, shifting the focus from the internal life of the church, to serving in the world—being Christian citizens who love and care for their neighbor.<sup>7</sup>

Using the example of Norway, Nordstokke identifies four areas of action for diakonia: loving one's neighbor; creating inclusive communities; caring for creation; and struggling for justice.

In 2013, the LWF approved the Gender Justice Policy (GJP), a document that helps to raise awareness about questions pertaining to inclusiveness and gender roles in the churches. Using the example of the Murut people of Sabah, Malaysia, Au Sze Ngui describes how the liberating power of the gospel has brought about a change in the perception of gender roles among the Muruts. In her article, she also draws on the theological argumentation and methodology outlined in the GJP. Ngui explains how the Christian understanding of the equality of all human beings before God has empowered Murut women in the church to take on responsibilities that traditionally would have been within the male domain. She refers to the gospel's liberating power when it comes to revisiting certain traditions, which despite the rhetoric that is sometimes being used, do not correspond to the actual message of the gospel.

Liberation from the bondage of sin is the beginning of our striving for justice: we are free; we are forgiven; we are the recipients of God's grace. We are free to

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<sup>6</sup> Elżbieta Byrtek, in this publication, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Kjell Nordstokke, in this publication, 30.

change and to change the world. There are many examples of how Christianity has been an agent of change by supporting the revision of some "traditional" practices.<sup>8</sup>

"Freed by God's Love to Change the World" is the motto of the LWF's Global Young Reformers Network that was formed within the framework of the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. Inspired by this motto, Monica Villarreal picks up the question about faith's liberating power from the perspective of youth. Being liberated, being freed by God always implies the question what we are actually liberated or freed from and to. Villarreal quotes Caroline Huth from Argentina, a member of the steering group of the Global Young Reformers Network, who expresses the idea of an ongoing reformation by explaining how her faith has freed her for creating new space:

As Lutherans we believe that while traditions are not necessary for salvation, they are sometimes good for order, tranquility and common practice. But when they do not serve their purpose, when people are uncomfortable and the church is no longer inviting and God's message does not reach everyone, then we may need to consider reorganizing the pews.<sup>9</sup>

The ecumenical voice in this volume belongs to Tim Harris who, in his article, refers to both the profoundly personal as well as ultimately global character of Martin Luther's discovery of God's grace. This rediscovery

not only addressed his own need for personal assurance from his spiritual angst, it sparked a movement of ongoing reform, the heart of which must always be shaped by and draw us back to a deeper appreciation of the great gospel message of grace and peace.<sup>10</sup>

The rediscovery of the gospel's greatness nonetheless also reminds us of our own limitations in understanding the gospel as our cultural blinkers and blind spots sometimes tend to make the gospel smaller than it is. "The gospel is bigger than any and every culture, and no ethnic grouping, nation or culture can claim any supremacy in their particular expression of the gospel."<sup>11</sup> In the spirit of ongoing reformation, there is thus always the need to "translate" the gospel "into the many and varied expressions of gospel articulation, proclamation and lived realities that are part and

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<sup>8</sup> Au Sze Ngui, in this publication, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Monica Villarreal, in this publication, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Harris, in this publication, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 87

parcel of human life,”<sup>12</sup> keeping thereby in mind our own limitations in understanding it.

In his contextual Bible study on Isaiah 55:1-2, Zephania Kameeta addresses the pressing issues of poverty and hunger in Africa and Namibia in particular and unfolds the liberating message of Isaiah in this context.

The text of this Bible study does not say, Come so that you can be counted or registered or so that research can be done why you are thirsty; but just simply, come and drink. This is what is needed in this hour of need. Those in need want help now before they perish. Now is your hour and your moment. Budgets and money is now not in question, come, eat and drink, so that you can live.<sup>13</sup>

### **THE THREE SUB-THEMES: SALVATION—NOT FOR SALE; HUMAN BEINGS—NOT FOR SALE; CREATION—NOT FOR SALE**

The three subthemes elaborate the various “not for sale” dimensions of the main theme, “Liberated by God’s Grace,” and question practices and theological concepts that stand in the way of the gospel’s liberating message. Attempts to commodify salvation differ widely, ranging from prosperity gospel to attempts to “guarantee” salvation by following certain practices, rituals etc. The salvific aspect of consumerism as well as questions regarding from where and under what conditions “salvation” is expected in the secular context, are also crucial.

The renewed relationship between God and human beings inevitably provides a deeper insight into the creation of human beings in God’s image and the understanding that human beings will be renewed through God’s grace. Human beings cannot therefore be regarded as commodities whose value can be measured in terms of profit only.

Today, in light of the massive exploitation of natural resources, it is vital that we pay attention to God’s creation beyond human beings. We read in Genesis that God considered creation to be “good” and entrusted it into human care. The notion of “dominion” in Genesis 1:26 has often been misused and it has been overlooked that God declares all creation to be “good,” quite apart from its usefulness to humans. The renewed relationship between God and human beings therefore also has implications on how humans relate to the rest of the creation since creation primarily belongs to God and is only entrusted into our hands.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Zephania Kameeta, in this publication, 101.

Diverse reflections on different aspects of the three sub-themes can be found in the respective booklets included in this collection. Hopefully they will help to trigger conversations around the liberating message of the gospel as together we journey towards the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation.

# LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE— FROM WHAT, TO WHAT?

*Gottfried Brakemeier*

## A CONCEPT IN CRISIS

Grace and mercy (German: *Gnade*) have become rare words occurring only in exceptional cases, such as in the “plea for mercy” of those condemned to death. Or we say that the sun is beating down “mercilessly,” drying out the land and ruining the harvest. Above all, wars are “merciless.” They are unrelenting; the enemies’ vengeance fearsome, raging without regard for guilt and innocence, believing it does not need to worry about right and wrong. Destruction, rape and murder are rife. That is repeated in the “law of the street.” Many young delinquents have long forgotten the word “mercy,” if they have ever heard it at all. Even if the victim has already been knocked down, they keep on beating and kicking—“mercilessly.”

It is significant that we only become aware of mercy when it has disappeared. The term only carries weight in the negative meaning of “merciless.” Whoever knows no mercy is thus “merciless,” is regarded as ruthless, unscrupulous and brutal. Otherwise the concept has disappeared from everyday life. Gone are the days when rulers understood their authority as being their divine right and legitimized their rule as being by the “grace of God.” In a democracy all state power emanates from the people. The ballot paper decides on how the government is formed. Parliamentarians are “representatives of the people.” That has nothing to do with God’s grace. Also God has become superfluous. During their installment ceremony, many politicians have even stopped using the phrase “So help me God.” A secular world is uneasy about the term “mercy” and does not know what it is good for.

What is more, the very word is suspect. No one wants to depend on anyone else’s mercy. Anyone needing mercy is a weakling. We want to stand on our

own feet, earn our own living and owe no one anything. People strive to steer clear of grace and mercy. It is ultimately a question of prestige. Children do not want to be a constant burden on their parents and depend on them for their keep. As soon as they can, they move out and take their lives into their own hands. It is a disgrace if that does not work out. The same applies to the relationship with the state. Long-term unemployed people suffer from feeling superfluous and having to live at the expense of the community. Many consider them to be parasites. The jobless do not want to be beggars and live on handouts all their lives. Who could condemn that? It is better to manage without mercy.

After all, mercy makes slaves of us. There are countless examples of this. The generosity of the masters creates a crowd of humble servants who do not dare to object to unreasonable requests. Favorites and lackeys are not free. "He who pays the piper calls the tune," says the proverb. That has always been the way dictators have cemented their power. They have granted privileges and thereby guaranteed loyalty. That is no different even under "democratic" conditions, since voters can often be bought. Politicians can win supporters by making promises to the electorate. Gifts create an obligation, even those given only at Christmas. The concept of "mercy" is unattractive because it sounds hierarchical. It would seem to establish dependencies. There remains a gap between giver and taker, between them ("up there") and us ("down here"), with the former always setting the tone as benefactors and patrons.

It appears that mercy is an obstacle to the human striving for freedom. Unfortunately, the church has often understood it that way as well. Movements committed to freeing people from undignified bondage have not always received the necessary support. In this respect, "liberation theology" highlights unusual elements, although they are not entirely new. God is on the side of the oppressed and leads them out of the house of slavery, as God led the people of Israel out of Egypt. God is in solidarity with the poor and sides with them in the struggle for justice. Many view this theology with suspicion and accuse it of being an inadmissible politicization of the gospel. However you react to this charge, the fact is that Latin American liberation theology and its related currents on other continents have starkly outlined the old question about how mercy relates to freedom. How can we talk about God's liberating mercy without disempowering people and plunging them into new dependencies? And how can we represent human autonomy without making it seem that talking about mercy is superfluous?

## **A WORLD WITHOUT MERCY?**

It does not call for much imagination to envisage a world without mercy. This is already reality on a large scale. The horrific news from our imme-



diate neighborhood or from distant countries testifies to this, as does the social inequality in society. No animal can be crueller than the human being. Bestial murders, blind destruction or the distress of millions of refugees in areas of hunger and crisis are illustration enough. The nation responsible for the Holocaust had always been proud of its culture. Civilization is no guarantee for protection from genocide, as is shown by other examples from the past and the present. We only need to remember the history of suffering of the indigenous population in the Americas. Native Americans were brutally decimated and eradicated except for a small remnant. The wrong done to the slaves imported from Africa is just as tragic. The list of crimes committed by the human race is long. It began with Cain and Abel and found a shocking expression in the crucifixion of Jesus. Violence has been the trademark of humanity from time immemorial. “[T]he inclination of the human heart is evil from youth,” says Genesis 8:21. A world without mercy is cold, inhumane and murderous.

Besides the above, there are less spectacular types of brutality, such as economic exploitation. Anyone who falls into the debt trap will find it hard to get out. Banks know no mercy; they are about profit, bonuses and return on investment. Many people have been stripped of their assets due to speculation and false promises. In a thoroughly capitalist system life is commodified. Everything can be bought or sold, including religious goods. Stock prices determine business activity and, again, there is no room for mercy. Social concern, compassion and goodness disappear with it. Greed displaces consideration of the neighbor. Selfishness becomes a virtue. A struggle for jobs begins, often resorting to bullying and similar methods. You have to be “clever” and on the side of the winners. A well-known proverb aptly sums up this spirit: “Everyone for themselves and God for us all.” Social considerations are pushed into the sole responsibility of God. That is convenient and at the same time cruel. Such behavior can occur in many guises and yet they are all equally inhumane.

In addition, people do not see that a world without mercy exposes us to fatal dangers. The decline of compassion does not remain without consequences. It provokes hatred of those who were not able to hold their own in the general competition, those who were excluded or oppressed. The “survival of the fittest” is a principle unsuited to the human community. After all, the losers are still able to take terrible revenge on their opponents. A match is enough to start a huge conflagration. Being indifferent or even hostile toward socially vulnerable milieus, religious and ethnic minorities and other national groups means risking serious social conflicts. It is no surprise when children who have always vegetated on the margins of society and never experienced affection develop a cynical attitude to life and turn to crime.

The precondition for peace is inclusion, not exclusion. But being inclusive presupposes looking favorably at the neighbor. I must grant them a place in society even if they are different and do not match with my ideals. You do not necessarily have to have the same opinions as your partners to extend them the hand of friendship. Mercy is capable of a tolerance that recognizes the right to exist but must not slip into arbitrariness. Crime cannot lay claim to the principle of tolerance. Yet mercy, rightly understood, does not limit people's living space. On the contrary, it protects and extends it. Only those capable of compassion belong to the peacemakers blessed by Jesus (Mt 5:9). Without mercy, humanity is likely to be crushed by its conflicts.

Finally, we must admit that imagining a world without mercy would be a gross delusion. Everything that the concept "mercy" stands for—kindness, acceptance, gratuity, readiness to forgive, etc.—can be suppressed and betrayed. And yet mercy remains part of reality. Human beings are inconceivable without mercy. Anyone who disputes that is blind. In his "Small Catechism," Martin Luther puts this in masterly fashion in his explanation of the first article of the creed:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.<sup>1</sup>

We do not owe ourselves to ourselves. Nor are we the product of a genetic accident or biological manipulation. All of that may have played a role. But it is not enough to explain the mystery of a person. People are not manufactured, they are created and therefore have an inviolable dignity. Their life is a gift, as is every new day. Mercy is present at the beginning of life and thereafter remains a basic need. Every person has to be supported in their own way with their own errors, weaknesses and guilt. They need consideration, forgiveness, love. Who could do without that?

The faculty of reason that characterizes human beings has been perceived to be their distinguishing feature. We differ from other living beings in that we can think, speak, plan and shape the world. For Martin Luther reason is also "in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine."<sup>2</sup> It is a force that shapes culture, he adds. Although reason is not protected from entering the service of evil, it raises us above

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "The Disputation Concerning Man, 1536," in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960). 137.

all other creatures. It would still be wrong to make reason the exclusive criterion of the human. Rationality is linked to irrationality, spirituality, the emotions. And they are unpredictable. It has been proven that decisions are more frequently emotional than rational; human beings are complex and cannot be explained on the basis of simply decoding their genome.

Precisely for that reason, the Christian faith will insist on the fact that mercy is part of our humanity. That was always clear to Martin Luther and he emphasized it often. It is empathy that makes a person a person. We would remain a machine if we could not show compassion, sympathy and love. The apostle Paul said this most clearly. “[...] and if I have not love” all my abilities, however great, are worth nothing (1 Cor 13:1f.). Jesus himself recalled that God prefers mercy to burnt offerings (Mt 9:13f.). Religious ceremony is just as worthless as intellectual brilliance if it bypasses other people and their needs. If we sum all that up in the concept of mercy we find that human nobility basically consists in being merciful. All else is secondary.

## **GOD’S HUMANITY**

Jesus knew he had been sent in the name of a God who is love in person (1 Jn 4:16). This God differs from all gods that legitimize murder and killing, allowing—or even requiring—violence in their name. Gods are not all the same. You have to have a good look and distinguish between the gods. They are recognized by their demands, their commands and their works. Some of them are real tyrants, placing heavy burdens on their worshippers and taking away their reason. They sow hatred and strife, and insist on crusades and holy wars. Religions can be as barbaric as any person. Terrible crimes have been committed in their name, and still are. Frequently religion has blocked progress and development and believers have clung to obsolete behavioral patterns. Religious people are often backward, old-fashioned, suspect. Religion has therefore fallen into discredit among many of our contemporaries. Some dream of abolishing it. It is not only superfluous but downright harmful. Religious fanaticism with its typical disposition for violence has become one of the greatest sources of danger in the global world. Who will curb this religious madness?

At a time when talk about God is losing plausibility, faith has to be accountable for its discourse. Christianity believes in the God whom Jesus called his father and whom his congregation may also address as Our Father. The name stands for a trusting relationship. God could just as well be called mother, as the Bible indicates at some points. Unlike earlier prophets up to John the Baptist, Jesus does not preach an angry God, whose retributive justice will soon descend on the world, but a merciful God, who turns to the lowest, the outcast and the guilty.

In so doing, Jesus caused offence to those who held themselves to be righteous and therefore claimed privileges. The table fellowship Jesus kept with tax-collectors and sinners (Lk 15:1f.), is a scandal in their eyes. It reverses their view of the world, which values only merit and performance. If God is what Jesus proclaims, they will have to change. Yet they are not willing to do so. They react to the patience of the rabbi from Nazareth with the “unworthy” as though it were an act of aggression. Jesus has eyes for the sick and the vulnerable, for those living on the margins, for the poor and despised. They are the ones he tries to bring back into the community of the children of God. His attention and concern are unconditional. Gratitude is the main feature of his actions. That means that Jesus understands himself to be an advocate of a gracious God, who does not reject sinners and gives the lost a chance.

It is well known that the Reformation started with a change in the understanding of God. Martin Luther discovered the merciful God who accepts human beings without regard for merit and worthiness. Justification, biblically speaking, means just this: promise of the right to life without proof of performance, unconditional acceptance, showing love. Martin Luther had been tormented by scruples because of his repeated defeats in the fight against evil in himself; these doubts were suddenly overcome when he discovered that God justifies the sinner “by grace and faith alone.” His frightened question, “How can I get a merciful God?” was thereby answered. It would be wrong to interpret this as a time-bound expression of a bad conscience. It is the human question *par excellence*. Where is there mercy in this world? A merciless God is more of a Moloch than a father. Such a God threatens infernal punishment and spreads fear and terror. No consolation can be had from such a god. Denying God is also no solution. Atheism is just as “dismal” as a cynical religion. With the father of Jesus Christ things are different. This God offers shelter, refuge, protection from meaninglessness.

With these words God wants to entice us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.” God would thereby tenderly urge us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that we may ask him confidently with all assurance, as dear children as their dear Father.<sup>3</sup>

If you ask where this conviction comes from, the reply is easy. It originates in Jesus Christ, in whom God came the closest ever to human beings. “No

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<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. (note 1), 356.

one has ever seen God” (Jn 1:18), but God is revealed in Jesus. The congregation confesses him as the revelation itself. There are signs of God in nature and history, but they are not unequivocal. Anyone speaking of God’s love cannot bypass Jesus of Nazareth. This love is expressed in his words and deeds, and also in his suffering. Jesus dies on the cross as a victim of his enemies. All the evil in the world pours down upon him, but even in this hell, Jesus remains true to his mission. Instead of cursing his tormentors, he prays for their forgiveness (Lk 23:34). He prefers to die himself than to wish the death of others. Jesus consistently refrains from seeking reprisals. For the Christian community, this story allows the behavior of the heavenly father to shine through. God forgoes vengeance on his enemies (Rom 5:10). Instead he forgives their debt. He gives reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18ff.). No peace can grow from revenge.

Jesus witnesses to the God who seeks human salvation, including that of the godless and “unbelieving.” The New Testament speaks of his love of humanity (Titus 3:4). In Jesus Christ God shows solidarity with suffering creatures, in order to wrench them out of their hardship. The God of Jesus Christ is “human,” knowing “compassion” and thereby showing mercy. The latter comes to a head at Easter. Sin, suffering and death do not prevail. The Crucified One is experienced as living, and in possession of the key to death and hell (Rev 1:15). The resurrection of Jesus Christ frees us from the captivity of transience and gives us a future, even in the face of death. The end of all things is not just nothing, meaninglessness, absolute annihilation, but a new beginning (Rev 21:1ff.). The kingdom of God becomes the all-defining reality.

## **THE IMPERATIVE OF THE GOSPEL**

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that the will of God is best expressed in the command to love. God sets the standard with divine action and God’s own being. Again we must point to Jesus Christ, in whom this love appeared (Rom 8:39). “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” says Jesus (Lk 6:36). And when asked about the supreme commandment he replies “[...] ‘you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart [...] [and] your neighbor as yourself’. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:29ff.). They are two commandments in one. Loving God and the neighbor is not the same. Loving the neighbor is not loving God or vice versa. These two cannot be confused. Loving God is shown in the fact that God alone is worshipped. The liturgy belongs to God alone (Mt 4:10). Any human “personality cult” is reprehensible. By contrast, diakonia is for the neighbor. They need assistance, solidarity, attention. The principle is: “Bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). So we need to differentiate. Love has

many faces. And yet there is ultimately only one single command—about love, i.e., the attitude that can only want what is good.

This command is not just one among many, but a criterion for ethics in general. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:40). And Paul will say, “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10). If a precept contradicts the command to love, it must be reworded or abolished. We can observe this in the discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees on observing the Sabbath. But that is only one example among others. At any rate, God wants a humane world. And this is not to be had without a minimum of “love.” Although “love” is an over-used word, it cannot be done without. Indeed, it needs to be protected from abuse. Biblically speaking, love is not primarily a feeling but rather an intention. Whether I love my neighbors or not, ultimately depends on my intentions in their regard. I can also feel the best for my enemies, without actually liking them. We owe salvation to God’s love of the enemy. God’s mercy is addressed to all people without distinction. It calls the sinners back into God’s community.

That happens without pressure and coercion. Love creates no dependences, if it is authentic. It grants freedom. It must almost amaze us that the father in the parable of the prodigal son raises no objections when his son decides to leave his father’s house and demands his share of his inheritance (Lk 15:11f.). His father lets him go. Similarly, Jesus does not bind his disciples to himself. He leaves it up to them to turn away if they do not agree with him (Jn 6:66f). Genuine discipleship is based on a free decision. Mercy without love serves its own purposes and is thus humiliating for the recipient, unlike mercy that comes from love. It wants the neighbors to be its partners, not subordinates. It refrains from patronizing them and telling them what to do. “Legalism” contradicts the command of love. It establishes religious dictatorship and turns mercy into coercion. Love, by contrast, gives greater value to human beings and allows them to take responsibility. To do so, they have to be able to think, and to practice recognizing “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable [...]” (Phil 4:8). Love needs guidance but no regulations; coercion destroys it.

Above all, however, it needs motivation. Love does not spring up by order. That is why the New Testament explains the imperative to act with God’s action. We are to love because we were loved by God. “We love because he first loved us,” says the first letter of John (4:19). Jesus himself puts it similarly in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21f.). The duty mutually to forgive one another arises from God’s forgiveness of debt. That applies to ethics as a whole: each time the command is preceded by the memory of God’s merciful action. Experiencing mercy inspires us to do good. Here is the source on which the imperative draws. “You wicked

slave!” says the lord in the parable, “I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” (Mt 18:32f). Any benefactor must feel foolish if the recipient remains hard-hearted. That is precisely what the Apostle Paul asks: “Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4). The issue is how to draw the right conclusions from this goodness.

Anyone who refuses to do that suffers considerable losses. Naturally you can argue that you owe something to God. Who or what is “God”? A modern trend wants religion without God. Apparently the concept is no longer appropriate. People want to believe but to do so differently than in the past. Indeed, we will have to be sure that mercy is not catapulted out of the world at the same time as God. Who, or what, do people want to believe in, if God disappears from life? There is a great danger that, in this case, one has to accept the meaninglessness of the world, likewise the general lack of love and the tragedy of a finite life. God is the decisive force that makes it possible to resist the negativity of life and the power of evil. The experience of preservation in difficult situations, even at the risk of death, becomes impossible under the conditions of the modern eclipse of God, wherefore combating God’s reality must be seen as a major “risk factor” for successful life.

In addition, denying God’s grace runs the risk of losing the sense of wonder, a feeling for the extraordinary. It therefore normally sees no grounds for gratitude. Everything threatens to go under in platitudes and, at the same time, to run automatically according to well-known laws. Who is responsible for the wonders of creation? You do not need to give thanks to “evolution.” The very idea is absurd. Becoming dulled toward God’s mercy leads to blindness toward dimensions without which life would be insipid. So remembering it can set a huge liberation process in motion. It opens our eyes to the justification of a prayer such as the Lord’s Prayer. You have to be clear about what you are doing when you press the “delete” button on God’s mercy.

## **FREEDOM**

The Reformation understood itself as a freedom movement. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” writes the Apostle Paul (Gal 5:1). That lent dynamic to the movement. It dared to rise up against foreign domination and appeal to the gospel as the sole standard. Accordingly, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther defied the Pope, emperor and the concentrated power

of the church. He had already developed the theme in detail in “On the Freedom of a Christian, 1520.” “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”<sup>4</sup> This is his first sentence. Anyone who has God as lord cannot serve other lords (cf. Mt 6:24). Serving God frees us from serving humans. All pressures fall away as soon as people entrust themselves in faith to God’s grace. However, this freedom would be thoroughly misunderstood as arbitrariness. So Luther adds: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all and subject to all.”<sup>5</sup> That is his second sentence. The two belong together. Freedom destroys itself if it is not in a position to take on obligations. Above all, however, love is betrayed. It is essentially “serving the neighbor.” Without diakonia, faith also becomes false as there is no “Christian” faith that does not take action in love (Gal 5:6). That is the litmus test of faith.

It is worth reflecting at length on the two sentences of the Reformer. Martin Luther aroused the anger of the papal church because he denied its role as mediator in the salvation process. Faith alone suffices for justification. The church is witness to the gospel and thereby fulfills an essential task. But salvation comes exclusively from Jesus Christ. Humans do not need to work for their salvation anymore or strive to perform meritorious works. Instead, they are invited to accept it in confidence. Luther was able to appeal to Paul, who had stated “[...] no one will be justified by the works of the law” (Gal 2:16). Luther had personally experienced what that meant. It took a load off his mind when he realized that his sin did not disqualify him from the kingdom of God. He could again go through life with his head held high. God’s mercy had freed him from the pressure to perform acts of religious merit. That pressure was not only strong in the medieval church. It is also present today, not least in non-Christian religions. Anyone who does not bow to the regulations is regarded as a “non-believer” and is treated with hostility.

Even under altered conditions, the message of justification has no less relevance. Each person needs the experience of being accepted. It is a condition for mental health and finding identity. An undesired child has a hard time in life. Without the protection and care of mother and father the child cannot grow up. Later, too, recognition is vital—by a small group if not by the public at large. Everyone strives for praise, applause and approval. People must have the feeling of being someone, having some significance, having a place. But what happens if society rejects its own members including its own parents? I myself can belong to this society if I

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of A Christian, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



start to hate myself and develop an inferiority complex. Then I imagine that I am not worth much, I am a failure, I bear a stigma. That is a dangerous development that may end in suicide or outbreaks of violence.

God’s mercy puts it differently. When everyone teases and humiliates you, driving you crazy, you remain God’s beloved creature. You are no less important than anyone else. Do not envy the success of others. Justification means emancipation from social judgment. “Who will bring any charges against God’s elect? It is God who justifies” (Rom 8:33), says the Apostle Paul. A person is always more than the sum of their actions or non-actions. What others think of me continues to be important. The image they spread cannot be indifferent to me. No one is immune to denigration and aggression, and defamation of character is rightly a crime. And yet, human judgments have lost their absolute validity. They have become “relative.” The key thing is what the gospel says about me. Then I will manage better, with all my deficiencies. I will learn to accept myself with my errors and weaknesses without apologizing for them. The promise of justification has extraordinary psychological effects. It teaches us to recognize sin without plunging into despair.

Of course, justification resists pride. It thwarts the illusion of being able to manage everything and calls for a realistic image of what it means to be human. The Apostle Paul chastises the pride of the Corinthians with cutting words. He wants to know, “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor 4:7) The message of justification pricks the bubble of arrogance. It brings people down to earth with a bump and teaches them modesty. God’s mercy is a stumbling block for the proud, the strong, the righteous, for those who think they do not need to be grateful for anything. Yet without God’s mercy they would also be nothing. It is advisable not to deceive yourself. Society as a whole sets limits on God’s mercy. Yet if the last judgment on a person is God’s responsibility, all human judgment is subject to reservation. Society is thereby deprived of the final right of decision about its members. Human beings are God’s property and as such enjoy God’s protection. No one is an exception. All are invited to accept God’s mercy in faith. Nevertheless the gift precedes human response. In a further sense, the message of justification is thus part of the grounds for human rights. Divine law focuses on respect for human dignity and the integrity of the human person.

This makes it clear that God’s mercy towards human beings is not situated in a vacuum. It places individuals in fellowship with others. Hence the second clause of Luther’s treatise on freedom has to follow the first one. There is no contradiction. We can learn that from Jesus Christ. The one who was free and felt exclusively responsible to his Father in heaven

“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7). He was not forced to do this, it was voluntary. In his own words, he “came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). That is why: “Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mk 10:44). Only the one who can serve is really free. “Freedom from” must correspond to “freedom to.” Only then will it receive the seal of quality. Mere independence can be just as despotic as pure arbitrariness. It needs to be bound to what is good.

It is thus a tragic misunderstanding when people think that a Protestant does not need to do good works. While Catholics have to score well, Protestants can fold their hands in their laps. This is a popular misunderstanding one still comes across now and then. Anyone arguing like that has not read the confession the Lutherans published in Augsburg in 1530 that has retained its validity to this day. The Sixth Article reads, “Likewise, they teach that this faith is bound to yield good fruits and that it ought to do good works commanded by God [...]”<sup>6</sup> However, the Lutheran tradition distinguishes between works of love and works of the law. The latter are not just for the sake of the neighbor but to fulfill the law. However, that means performing an action that we can count as merit, which contradicts the spirit of love not concerned for its own glory but for the welfare of the neighbor. Jesus himself demonstrated time and again that it is the practice of love that counts, not formally fulfilling the commandments. Love does not boast of its good works; it does them without thinking of its own advantage.

Because love is service, Christians can subordinate themselves. They know that every community needs rules and depends on its members respecting them. For that reason there are ordinances, offices and authorities. The New Testament recognizes the state as a good institution of God and calls for obedience towards it (Rom 13:1f., 1 Pet 2:17). Every church is committed to its national constitution. Social peace is not possible without a basic social consensus. The church itself needs administrative and leadership structures. A Christian is not an anarchist. However, the required obedience is restricted by the higher principle that: “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). So a Christian can go into opposition. That will always be the case if the laws are not just. Liberation theology has correctly recognized that sin can take the form of unjust social structures, an insight that cannot be abandoned again. It is part of the church’s task to name and denounce abuse. That happened for instance in 1977 at the Lutheran World Federation’s Sixth Assembly in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The delegates declared that the system of apartheid was incompatible with the Lutheran confession; those who still clung to it

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<sup>6</sup> “The Augsburg Confession—Latin Text—Article VI: Obedience,” in *op. cit.* (note 1), 41.

placed themselves outside the community; racism was sin. But there are also other, less dramatic cases of structural criticism. Wherever necessary, the church will press for a change in prevailing laws. For love “does not rejoice in wrongdoings” (1 Cor 13:6). Christians can call for resistance on grounds of conscience. In any case, ministering to suffering people also includes a readiness to take political action.

Martin Luther himself is an impressive example of this. He was by no means an “unpolitical” person. The ills of his age provoked his displeasure and gave occasion for critical positions. The Reformer appealed to those responsible for his age and called for measures to improve social conditions in his “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520.”<sup>7</sup> But he spoke up resolutely on other occasions, as well. There is no such thing as a nonpolitical church. As long as Christians live in this world they are part of society, i.e., the polis, and co-responsible for its weal and woe. Certainly, church and state have their respective tasks. While the state is to look after law and peace, the church is entrusted with working for God’s will and God’s law. Precisely for that reason, the church cannot be indifferent to whether and how the state observes its mandate. It has to raise its admonishing voice and protest if injustice and violence become endemic ills. If ethical questions are up for discussion the church must not be silent. Conversely, the state should be interested in the church properly sowing faith, love and hope, and ensure that they are disseminated among the citizens. It has to guarantee the appropriate infrastructure.

The distinction between church and state means an unmistakable rejection of the idea of theocracy. Jesus himself clearly spoke out on this. We should neither give the emperor what is God’s nor vice versa (Mk 12:17). Worldly power has its own law, although it is never released from its responsibility before God. Consequently, Lutheran theology does not want a theocracy but a state based on the rule of law. Theocracy is by its nature authoritarian and basically anti-freedom. It allows only one faith and forbids legitimate diversity. Instead we must expect that society can agree on a legal system that guarantees its members a maximum of freedom, peace and prosperity. Such consensus is also possible with non-Christians. Justice is a generally human postulate and is binding in religious and secular ages. The state based on the rule of law is not a Christian invention and yet it is a project the church must promote.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 115ff.

Naturally, the church of Jesus Christ must beware of being co-opted by party politics. It would lose its freedom and be incapable of critical distance. While individual Christians cannot avoid making their political choice and voting for a party, the church as an institution is prohibited from doing this. It has to commit all parties equally to promoting the common good and thus to press for them to be publicly accountable for their respective programs. The church should resist the temptation to want to control the state. But it has the duty to remind the state bodies of their responsibilities. That is part of its “political diakonia” and proof of the freedom given them by God.

## QUESTIONS

*In the global world of the twenty-first century, tolerance is becoming a central condition for peace. Is it right to claim that the gospel ultimately liberates us from intolerance? How far may Christian tolerance go without becoming arbitrariness?*

*The church should not interfere in political matters. That is a frequent demand. It is grounded in the fact that people say the church has to care for people's salvation and the state for their welfare. Can salvation and welfare be separated so neatly?*

*Why must we actually talk of God's mercy? Is a humane world not possible without God? Many say that we should abolish religion in order to create peace in the world. What needs to be said in this regard?*

# THE CHURCH AND THE PUBLIC SPACE. A LUTHERAN INTERPRETATION

*Kjell Nordstokke*

## **THE REFORMATION AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF BEING CHURCH**

The core message of the Lutheran Reformation is that justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. This position builds on Luther's reading of the Bible and his interpretation of the ministry of Jesus. It has often been presented as the five so-called *solae* or guiding principles of Lutheran theology: by Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*); by faith alone (*sola fide*); by grace alone (*sola gratia*); through Christ alone (*solo Christo*); and glory to God alone (*solī Deo gloria*).

At first sight these principles make no reference to the church. This may give us the impression that ecclesiology (the theology of the church) was not an important issue for Luther and his followers. This was clearly not the case; the Reformation started as a reaction against the late medieval model of the church and its concentration on economic and political power. According to Luther's view, the consequence of this way of being church was a silencing of the proclamation of the gospel. The church was therefore in great need of being reformed. It is the proclamation of the gospel that forms the church's being and sending into the world, and not the other way round. The church exists and has its mandate by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone and to God's glory alone.

The state of the fifteenth-century church was such that many longed for reform. The Pope had become a political leader with his own army; bishops were local rulers and in control of enormous economic resources. The problem, however, was not only how the church exercised its political power. Rather, the Reformers criticized the way in which the Pope and the

bishops used religious power in order to legitimize their position as worldly rulers. For instance, they would excommunicate political adversaries and in some cases impose an interdict on a country. This meant that a whole people were denied access to the sacraments and to a Christian funeral. The struggle for political power thus severely impacted ordinary people and their religious life. They feared for their salvation if they could not attend mass and use the sacraments as prescribed by the church authorities. In a similar manner, people adopted practices that the church had established with the purpose of increasing the church's income, such as for instance the selling of indulgences. Having observed how poor people, driven by fear, wasted their money on buying indulgences in order to escape the torments of purgatory, Luther wrote his Ninety-five Theses "on the power and efficacy of indulgences" in 1517. As we know, this was the start of the Reformation. On the one hand its point of departure was a reaction against the church that abused its power to exploit the poor; on the other, it questioned a church that instead of proclaiming the gospel offered believers confidence in a piece of paper that could be bought. Salvation is not an article that can be commodified; salvation is not for sale.

Luther did not only criticize such practices. Motivated by his theological conviction, he radically questioned this model of being church and challenged the political leaders of his time to take back the power that he believed the church to have wrongly usurped. The church's mandate is not to exercise power as a political ruler, he claimed. The "power of the sword," in Luther's words, belongs to those who God has rightly installed as kings and other worldly rulers. All citizens, also the church, should acknowledge their authority in obedience. The church has a different mandate: God has called it to exercise the "power of the word," the public proclamation of gospel in word and deed.

## **THE WORD AS A POWERFUL PUBLIC WORD**

This discernment between the power of the sword and power of the Word has led to the formulation of the teaching of the two kingdoms in Lutheran theology and to an intense discussion on how to interpret this teaching in times that politically and socially are very different from the context in which Luther lived.

First, it is important to note that the issue here is discerning, not separating. Luther emphasized that both kingdoms (Luther would rather say governments) are subject to God's will and judgment. All rulers are therefore responsible to God and, as good Christians, they should consider their task as a divine vocation and diligently use Word and sacrament to

strengthen them in their duty as governors. This made sense in times when all citizens belonged to the church. Kings and other rulers were expected to be good Christians who regularly attended church and therefore were exposed to the “power of the Word.”

Clearly, this doctrine must be applied differently today when in most places the church represents a mere section of society, perhaps only a minority, who are members of or go to a church. In addition, only very few political leaders today would consider their position as having been ordered by God; their mandate and power are regulated according to secular procedures with regard to selecting and performing leadership. How does this challenge the church to contribute to fostering responsible government and a social and political order that corresponds to God’s will for creation and for human life?

A second point to be noted when interpreting the doctrine of the two kingdoms relates to another huge difference: the scandalous political and economic power that the church had accumulated at the time. The fact that such abuse of power may have been instrumental in the formulation of this doctrine may have contributed to an interpretation that warned against any mixing of church and politics. This was the position held by many church leaders during the time of Nazism. They claimed that the secular government should act according to its own legislation and should be recognized as the social order established by God and that therefore it needed to be obeyed. In a similar manner, a fair number of people rejected the idea that churches should involve themselves in the struggle against apartheid, maintaining that this was a political question, beyond the mandate of the church. Some would argue that dealing with these kinds of political issues could cause divisions within the church, as if that were a more serious sin than the kind of division apartheid had caused in the South African society.

It is quite clear that the doctrine of the two kingdoms does not foresee a withdrawal from the world. Rather, it urges the church to discern the basis for its public mandate. Today, the church no longer accumulates political and economic power—at least not in most parts of the world. The issue is therefore not so much to warn the church about the risks of striving for “the power of the sword,” but rather of withdrawing from the world and limiting its concern to spiritual matters.

Luther did not interpret the “power of the Word” as a withdrawal from the world. On the contrary, he clearly understood it as a public word. According to him, the pulpit was a public arena from which to address the whole community, not only the inner circle of believers. In addition, his words were spread all over Europe thanks to the newly developed methods of printing. We can observe that Luther’s concern when preaching and writing

was not limited to spiritual matters, but very often related to politics and the economy. He advocated for the establishment of schools for all children, for services for the poor and helpless and severely questioned the practice of usury declaring it unethical. When reading these texts today, his ability to interpret the signs of the time impresses us, especially his courage to address public issues, even if we have to admit that some of his writings were most unfortunate, i.e., his statements about the Jews and his call to stop the rebellious farmers.

The third point requiring our attention is the fact that Luther had confidence in the power of the word. This follows his theological interpretation of the gospel as a living word (*vox viva evangelii*) and the church as a reality created by the word (*creatura verbi*). God created by words, “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps 33:9). In a similar manner, the gospel has the power to create what it names. Such power does not depend on political position or the use of arms in order to be effective. Nevertheless, the power of the word is strongly resisted by the “powers and authorities,” an expression that not only refers to the worldly rulers, but even more to the power of evil, which according to the Apostle Christ was triumphed over “by the cross” (Col 2:15).

Luther believed God to have called the church to be “a living word” in the world. The proclamation of the Word on the one hand envisages faith in God’s care and mercy in our daily life, and confidence in God’s lordship and providence in whatever happens to us, as individuals and society. On the other, it calls us to be stewards of the gifts with which God has endowed us, as responsible citizens caring about the well-being of others.

In the following, we shall take a closer look at the ways of being “a living word” in the world. The first perspective will be the individual, how each Christian is called to serve God and the neighbor. This has often been presented as the Lutheran ethics of vocation and is today very much interpreted as a vocation to active citizenship. The next perspective relates to the church as a collective body—especially as a local community—to assume roles in the public arena. We shall present diakonia as one basic task within this mandate of being a public church, with advocacy as a specific focus area of this mandate. Finally, we shall reflect on the role of the church being a sanctuary in today’s post-modern world as a new and challenging role, with roots that go back to the first centuries of Christian life and public service.

## **THE VOCATION TO BE ACTIVE CITIZENS**

The call to be “a living word” is an exhortation to active citizenship. Luther radically changed the understanding of Christian vocation, shifting the



focus from the internal life of the church, to serving in the world—being Christian citizens who love and care for their neighbor. Luther sharply questioned the religious orders of his time and the idealizing of the vocation of monks and nuns who had distanced themselves from normal life and instead lived a secluded life in a monastery, devoted to religious practices. From his own experience, Luther knew that such understanding of vocation would often be self-centered. But, even more important, it would ignore the call to serve the neighbor.

Luther understood Christian vocation from the perspective of being in Christ, and the two basic directions this organic relation brings with it. First, in relation to God, in Christ we are saved from the power of sin and death. By God's grace we are liberated and set free, also from the law and the fear that God will reject us and exclude us from God's love and care. This is one dimension of being in Christ: the adoption to childhood in our relation to God, enjoying with Christ free access to our heavenly Father. There is, however, another dimension of being in Christ: as Christ was sent into the world, so we are sent for the sake of our neighbor. This is the main message in one of Luther's most important writings "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520," with its famous statement: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>1</sup>

The simultaneous relation to God and to our neighbor is fundamental in this understanding, as it is in Jesus' teaching on the greatest commandment of loving God and one's neighbor. Crucial to Luther's understanding is that out of our own strength we are not able to love God nor our neighbor as our vocation claims, but in Christ and empowered by God's Spirit this is not only possible but is what in fact it means to be a Christian. Luther sums up his reflections on the freedom of a Christian as follows:

We conclude therefore that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love [...].<sup>2</sup>

Luther expressed this view on being a citizen according to the way in which society was conceptualized at his time. It implied that every citizen should be faithful to their social role, as farmer, tailor or merchant, without any ambition of changing the way in which society was structured. If Luther would

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

have spoken about active citizenship it would have been within the confines of respecting what he would have considered to be the natural order of society and there finding opportunities for serving one's neighbor. Furthermore, he would hardly see any role for women outside the home. Nevertheless, what is new and radical is his positive evaluation of ordinary work—both in- and outside the home. Honest and faithful work is true service, more than observing religious practices. Sowing and harvesting the fields, building houses for people to live in, producing clothes and preparing food for hungry people—from the perspective of the Christian vocation all such activities are dignified and considered ways of serving God and of serving the neighbor.

This remains an important reminder to us today. Our life as Christians is not limited to what we do on Sundays and to how we relate to spiritual matters. Much more, it relates to how we live our lives throughout the week, and not least the way in which we perform our daily tasks, as caring family members, honest professionals in our work and responsible members of the wider community. At a time when work is conceived as a way of earning as much as possible the Lutheran ethics of vocation can orient us so that we see work in accordance with the perspective of serving God and our neighbor, and of promoting justice and well-being. In times when our lifestyles threaten the ecological balance this challenge gains a new dimension. Indeed, the concept of Christian vocation continues to be relevant and deserves to be lifted up as a core component of the Lutheran heritage, and it can help us to develop our understanding of active citizenship.

### **THE “LIVING WORD” AS DIACONAL ACTION**

For Luther the “living word” referred in the first place to the preached word, and mainly from the pulpit. This does not, however, imply that he limited the understanding of “word” to what is orally expressed and can be registered by human ears. As a biblical scholar, Luther was well acquainted with the biblical concepts of “word” (Hebrew: *dabar*; and Greek: *logos*) that both express a living reality. Most notably this is articulated in the message of the incarnated Word, as reads 1 John 1:1: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.” In a unique way, Jesus not only announced the gospel; he himself incarnated the gospel. His ministry as the word of life encompassed both teaching and care for people in need. It would make no sense to separate between his words and deeds; they are an integral part of his mission.

The concept of Christian vocation referred to above can be interpreted as mission, following the example of Jesus. To be in Christ means to be sent

as he was sent, and to serve in word and deed as Jesus did: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also” (Jn 12:26). The Greek verb used for “serve” in this verse, is “*diakonein*.” Here it refers to the service of the disciples; on another occasion, Jesus uses it in order to explain the distinct meaning of his mission: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

When the New Testament was translated into Latin, the Greek word *diakonia* was rendered as *ministerium* and, later, as ministry in English. This indicates that diakonia basically means to be sent, to receive a mission, a task, or a vocation. The one who sends determines the content of the mission; which is expressed in the saying of Jesus: “Jesus said to them again, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ ” (Jn 20:21). In other words, as disciples of Jesus Christ the diakonia of the church is to follow the example he gave in words and deeds.

Against this background, the concept of diakonia is widely used in churches today. In its *Plan for Diakonia* the Church of Norway defines diakonia as

the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice.<sup>3</sup>

This definition clearly states that diakonia is more than a possible consequence of the gospel, as an optional activity when considered necessary because of external challenges. Diakonia is an integral part of the gospel. It is imperative to make God’s living and liberating word visible in action and, as such, an integral part of what the church as the body of Christ is called to be and to do in God’s name. Not by our own understanding or effort, as Luther states in the “Small Catechism”; “[...] but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth [...]”.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that Luther was not familiar with this way of understanding the concept of diakonia. He knew deacons who according to Roman Catholic tradition would later be ordained as priests, and mainly had liturgical tasks. Luther saw no reason for maintaining this tradition and soon the title of deacon disappeared in the churches of the Reformation. On one occasion, Luther wrote that the congregations very much needed real deacons that could care for the sick and the poor, but this never became a priority at

<sup>3</sup> [www.gammel.kirken.no/?event=dolink&famID=247](http://www.gammel.kirken.no/?event=dolink&famID=247)

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 355.

his time. The pure proclamation of the gospel and a right administration of the sacraments remained the most urgent tasks.

This urgency made Luther appeal to the public authorities in matters of social care. They should establish services, for instance community chests, with the purpose of helping the poor, or providing homes for orphans. Luther considered it most efficient to impose these tasks on the worldly authorities, having in mind that all citizens then belonged to the church, and could therefore be expected to perform such services as good Christians. Without any doubt, this practice has strongly influenced the understanding of responsible political leadership in the countries that adopted the Reformation, and led to the development of public welfare services in these countries.

Nonetheless, it has also resulted in decreasing diaconal consciousness and practice in many churches. One may ask if the focus on Word and sacraments has engendered the development of a kind of pastor-centrism within Lutheranism, which has portrayed the congregation as passive receivers of Word and sacrament, rather than a living community endowed with gifts and ministries. Luther did not subscribe to the kind of ecclesiology that reduced the laity to objects of church services. On the contrary, his teaching on the "priesthood of all believers" claimed that all baptized were empowered to be "priests" in the sense of having access to God and being included in God's mission to the world. In that sense, it gives meaning to interpret "the priesthood of all believers" as the diakonia of all baptized.

In today's social and religious contexts, the model of "outsourcing" the diaconal mandate to public authorities is no longer viable, neither from a theological nor sociopolitical point of view. In a secularized society, the church cannot count on political leaders when it comes to the task of realizing its diaconal ministry. The church must organize its diaconal work—locally at the congregational level or by established organizations or specialized ministries that can operate nationally and internationally.

As the caring ministry of the church, diakonia may have many areas of action. The above mentioned plan of Church of Norway indicates four areas: loving one's neighbor; creating inclusive communities; caring for creation; and struggling for justice. They indicate the importance of lifting up these issues on the church's agenda in the form of initiatives rooted in the life of the congregation, such as visiting the sick and receiving people in challenging life situations, but also, whenever possible, establishing services for instance within the areas of health care or social welfare. In some instances, such services are organized in partnership with public offices or with other agents within civil society. This affirms that diaconal action envisages general well-being and the promotion of human dignity, justice and peace.

Diaconal action is both faith- and rights-based. It holds together our distinct identity as a caring and inclusive communion and our shared voca-

tion to promote human dignity, justice and peace in the world. As we have seen, diakonia links to a theological interpretation of the gospel and of being church while affirming the vision of a public church and assuming the vocation to contribute to the well-being of society. This reflects the vision of embarking on a pilgrimage of justice and peace that the World Council of Churches formulated at its 2013 Assembly in Busan. Moreover, it is in line with the LWF booklet *Diakonia in Context* that points at transformation, reconciliation and empowerment as the basic directions of diaconal action.

Many churches, including those belonging to the Lutheran communion, are in the process of renewing their reflection on what it means to be church today and on how to understand and practice “the power of word.” At Luther’s time, the concept of vocation mainly referred to individual Christians and their service in the world. Today, we recognize the necessity of addressing the congregation as a whole and its communitarian call to serve and to be a visible “living word” in the world. Without any doubt, this is in line with the vision of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, of reformation as the continued self-questioning and renewal of the church.

## ADVOCACY

The publication of the Ninety-five Theses in 1517 can be interpreted from the perspective of advocacy. As a pastor in Wittenberg, Luther had observed how people wasted their money on indulgences. His theses represent a vehement critique of the abuse of religious power that exploited ordinary people and manipulated their faith. At the same time, it sought to defend the dignity of the believer and their right to hear the Word of God freely.

There is a clear link from this historical moment of the Reformation to situations in today’s world that challenge the churches to speak out against similar abuses of power, be they religious or political. Advocacy, the public voice of church in defense of victims of injustice, is an integral element of the church’s mission for the healing of world, as reported in the LWF document *Mission in Context*:

Mission as advocacy for justice denotes the church’s praxis in the public arena as affirmation and reaffirmation of the dignity of human life, both as individual and as community, as well as a widened sense of justice, encompassing the economic, social and ecological spheres.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> At <http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Mission-in-Context-EN-low.pdf>

Advocacy is different from lobbying that seeks to influence governments or other leaders for the benefit for one's own organization or interest. Advocacy is concerned with the situation of others, in the first place marginalized groups in church and society: those who are unable to defend their own interests, or for different reasons are silenced in society. This does not mean that advocacy is speaking for others, ignoring the voice of those it seeks to defend. On the contrary, advocacy presupposes listening and solidarity. A good example is the voice that many churches have given to people affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. From the day that the church gave space to people living with HIV and AIDS, to their stories and struggle for justice, its advocacy role grew in importance.

Advocacy can be seen as an expression of the prophetic ministry of the church. This ministry is largely modeled by the Old Testament prophets who criticized the religious and political leaders of their time, especially for the way in which they ignored their duty to protect the rights of the poor. Jesus' ministry also manifests his prophetic role—above all in the way in which he defended the dignity of marginalized people of his time, liberating them from bonds of stigmatization and shame, and including them in the new society that his disciples represented. The narrative of the healing of the man born blind in John 9 illustrates this dimension of Jesus' diaconal ministry.

As followers of Jesus the church is called to have a prophetic voice. This is how many heard the churches when they declared apartheid to be a heresy. However, not all churches raised their voice against apartheid. Within the Lutheran family of churches, some considered apartheid to be a political issue, which according to their interpretation of the two kingdoms belonged to the authority of secular powers. After apartheid had been dismantled, a number of churches admitted that they had failed to take sides in this conflict, or that they had wrongly supported the racist government. This leads one to reflect on why it is easier to confess sins committed in the past than to respond to the social and political challenges of the present. One reason is that churches, as well as their members, are constantly tempted to remain within their comfort zones and to stick to interpretations of the gospel that leave us in peace.

From this perspective advocacy also plays a role in keeping the church alert and able to read the signs of the times. Advocacy is frequently related to resisting the power of the mighty and their ideologies. In certain cases it may be a task also to address the church establishment in order to question how we are being “conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2) when dealing with burning issues of our time. Is it fair to say that the church has sometimes imitated structures of domination and exclusion? Has the church adopted a lifestyle of religious consumerism and ethical indifference instead of being profoundly provoked by the signs of growing poverty and injustice in the world?

Conformism is not in line with the Lutheran heritage. On the contrary, it subscribes to the principle of *reformatio continua*, or the need of constant reformation in the life and mission of the church.

## SANCTUARY

Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" continues to be one of the most frequently sung hymns in the churches of the Reformation—not only by Lutherans. Based on Psalm 46 it expresses confidence in God's care and protection against all forms of evil. God provides sanctuary, a safe haven.

Throughout history, the church has interpreted this biblical message as an imperative to act likewise and to offer sanctuary to people in need. Asylum was given to refugees and also to helpless and homeless persons. The first hospitals were established within this tradition of practicing Christian hospitality. The Reformation was followed by decades of religious conflict that forced many to leave their homes. Among the Protestant refugees, many found asylum in Wittenberg, Strasbourg and Geneva. In many ways this has impacted the commitment of Christians, even today, for instance in supporting humanitarian assistance for refugees and in advocating for religious freedom.

The call to offer sanctuary may take different forms. Two recent examples from Norway illustrate this:

The first relates to the situation in 1993 when hundreds of asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia had their application for permanent residency rejected and were told to leave Norway. Many then sought refuge in church buildings, and because the government acknowledged this space as sacred, the asylum seekers were not arrested by the police. Some stayed there for months, even years, and many had their cases reconsidered and were in fact granted asylum by the government. Others voluntarily returned to their country of origin. It is interesting to note that the secular government respected the sanctuary, although the same authorities criticized the church for promoting civil disobedience and for undermining legal procedures. It should also be mentioned that many ordinary people were mobilized in an effort to assist the asylum seekers in the churches by providing food, clothes and not least friendship.

The other is related to the terrorist attack in July 2011 when seventy-seven persons were killed in Oslo and on the island Utøya. In the days that followed, many churches, especially the Cathedral in Oslo, were filled with people. Some brought flowers, others lit a candle, and there were those who simply sat down in silence. Not many of them were active Christians, some were Muslims, and some said they had never been inside a church

before. Clearly they were searching for a sanctuary, a holy space, where they could express their grief, anger and their terrified awareness of being vulnerable. Secular and post-modern society does not offer a similar space, and even secular persons sensed the importance of it.

Offering sanctuary does not mean absolute safety from the forces of evil. All 600 that had sought refuge in St Peter Lutheran Church in Monrovia, Liberia, on the night of 29 July 1990, were killed by rebels. Perhaps they had sung "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" as they were gathering in the church that evening, just as Luther and his friend had as they were entering the city of Worms on 16 April 1521 where the Diet had been summoned.

Sanctuary does not mean invulnerability, but care and solidarity; it does not promise unconditional happiness, but eternal blessing. "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. (Selah)" (Ps 46:7), and, as Luther sings, "For God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom's ours forever!"<sup>6</sup>

## **PUBLIC CHURCH**

As we have seen, Lutheranism firmly situates the church in the public space. It is there where the Word is announced and practiced as a living and a visible word. This is in accordance with how Jesus refers to his public ministry: "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (Jn 18:20). Similarly healings were performed openly, in the context of everyday life.

There are different ways of arguing for the public church and, consequently, different models of being a public church. One may be described as church-centered; it promotes Christian knowledge and values with the aim of Christianizing public space. As a strategy, it may also aim at recruiting new members to the church.

Another model may be presented as the universal; its point of departure is society and people's general welfare. The concept of civil society has added new facets to understanding this model, as it opens space to different actors, also churches, with the task of contributing to what is right, good and true for all citizens. In addition, this space offers a new opportunity for ecumenical and interfaith cooperation in an effort to construct a just and peaceful society.

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<sup>6</sup> See Luther's choral *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, verse 4.



There are strong traits within Lutheranism that point in direction of the second model. The teaching of the ethics of vocation as call to active citizenship points in that direction. The same applies to the understanding of diakonia as service in the public space, as well as the task of advocacy and of providing sanctuary. It is all about loving one's neighbor.

Consequently, Lutheranism emphasizes the theology of creation, as a result of which we may regard the public space as an arena of God's continued action in a way that calls all humans to participate in God's mission of promoting human dignity, justice and peace. Equally, it is strongly influenced by the theology of salvation, of Christ incarnated in the middle of ordinary human life; and last, but not least, it is nurtured by the theology of sanctification that announced that God's Spirit equips and empowers all baptized to love one's neighbor.

All three underpin the view that public vocation of the church envisages: transformation, reconciliation and empowerment, in a way that promotes human dignity and contributes to the construction of a just, participatory and sustainable society. At the same time, some will interpret the acts of this vocation as signs of God's love and gracious care and thank God for them and, eventually, when moved by God's Spirit, seek ways of growing in faith, hope and love.

## QUESTIONS

*How is active citizenship understood and practiced where you live? What are the challenges? In what way could the Lutheran ethics of vocation be activated in order to strengthen the concept of active citizenship? How could this topic become more integrated in teaching and preaching?*

*What kind of diaconal work is your church and local congregation involved in? How does this work express the theme of the Reformation Anniversary, "Liberated by God's Grace"? Do you agree with the statement that diakonia is an integral dimension of the church, its being and its mission?*

*Is the concept advocacy known and used in your context? Give examples of how your church/congregation is involved in advocacy, and discuss how this ministry can be strengthened. The LWF commemoration of the Reformation states that salvation, human beings and creation are not for sale. How can these statements motivate us to be more conscious of our role as public churches?*



# THE LIBERATING WORD OF GOD. REFLECTIONS ON THE LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

*Hans-Peter Grosshans*

God speaks to people and addresses them. This does not, however, go without saying. We ourselves do not speak just to anybody. Whenever we speak to others, we begin and maintain a relationship with them, and when we communicate with others, we always express our own selves in addition to any information being conveyed. Communicating ourselves, moreover, also entails revealing ourselves and we are therefore often cautious as to whom we address and what we communicate to them. We might wish to reveal ourselves only to a small extent and by no means entirely and do not wish to reveal ourselves to just anybody, nor to allow everyone to peer into our souls, minds, our lives. When God communicates with people, God expresses, reveals and thus shares Godself with them. It is indeed marvelous that we speak to one another and reveal ourselves to each other in conversation, offering a mutual glimpse into our souls, minds and lives. It is a great thing that God also reveals Godself to us when speaking to us, communicating with us, and allowing us to be in communion with God. So God is bound to God's Word; God is committed to it. Once God says something, God holds fast to it. God is precisely the one who comes close to human beings and reveals Godself to people in God's Word that is addressed to them.

It is particularly notable that God's words are first and foremost a promise. It appertains to God's divinity that God keeps promises. We therefore read that the "word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8; 1 Pet 1:25). Thus, God is not only revealed through God's words but also committed to these words, saying: "I promise this to you!" This is why God's Word is

emphasized in the Christian faith. God's Word forever establishes a reliable and everlasting promise to God's beloved creatures to be their God.

In all this it remains certain that God's Word comes from God. God is the true and original source of all the words through which God is committed to us. God is the source of everything that God has revealed to us, of all we know and can expect of God.

God did not only communicate, reveal and commit Godself in words, but also in creation, the history of Israel and the life and works of Jesus Christ. We no longer have direct access to any of these events, but can only encounter them indirectly as mediated by the written word. This is not, however, a matter of chance. It is not that these events represent God's actual communication with people and that the texts just happen to complement God's eventful presence here, so that we might also be able to dispense with them. It is all the more significant then that God's works are recorded and witnessed in words and texts with regard to the creation and the history of Israel as well as God's presence in Jesus Christ. God chose to be revealed in words and texts. It is through these words and texts that God communicates and is revealed.

Texts are therefore the central medium for our relationship with God. This makes Christianity a scriptural religion. The events that reveal God are witnessed in the texts of Holy Scripture (creation, the history of Israel, Jesus Christ, the church) and hence the revelation of God as it is articulated in those events.

The interest of Protestant Christians is of course focused on "God's Word." Faith centers on the living communication between each Christian and the community of Christians with the Triune God. This living communication between God and people is also served by Holy Scripture, which can also be treated like a normal book or a historical religious text. But, what matters for Christians is to read, interpret and understand Holy Scripture in such a way that it unfolds its potential to be the Word of God, speaking to us. Implied by God's words, through which God speaks and promises Godself to people, is their expression in Holy Scripture. God wishes to reveal Godself in God's words preserved in Scripture, and wants people to remind God of God's promise.

As we focus on Holy Scripture in the following, we will need to bear in mind the close connection between Holy Scripture and God's Word, involving God's living and salvific communication with people.

## **BY SCRIPTURE ALONE (sola scriptura)**

### **THE ORIGINAL AREA OF INTEREST**

The Holy Scripture was emphasized particularly strongly by Protestant theologians of the Reformation for various reasons, even though the center

of interest of Protestant Christians lay more in the “Word of God” than in Holy Scripture. This principle of “by Scripture alone,” as expressed through the Latin phrase *sola scriptura*, was established in the sixteenth-century Reformation.

In his 1520 writing *Assertio omnium articulorum Martini Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum* (“Assertion of all of Martin Luther’s Articles Condemned by Leo X’s Most Recent Bull”), Luther summarized his various thoughts on this principle in theology and the church:

The primary principles of Christians should thus not be anything other than the divine words; the words of men should however be conclusions derived thereof, which must then be traced back to and held up to them.<sup>1</sup>

These divine words are to be found only in Holy Scripture. In his response to the papal bull condemning him, Luther insisted that one read and study the Bible as had been the case in the early church, when one could not refer to any interpretations of theological and church authorities, or as Luther put it, had not yet read either Augustine or Thomas. Luther indeed asked:

Why do Augustine and the Holy Fathers, in their disputations and teachings, refer back to Holy Scripture as the primary principles of truth, and use their light and power to enlighten and strengthen their own darkness and weakness? Through this example they indeed teach that the divine words are more certain and clear than those of all men, even their own words, so that the words of men need be corrected, proven, completed and strengthened by Scripture and not these by the words of men. [...] How godlessly perverse are we indeed that we should wish not to learn Holy Scripture learnt through itself and its own spirit but instead through the words of men, in contrast to all the Fathers?<sup>2</sup>

By emphasizing Holy Scripture, Martin Luther was not leveling criticism along the lines that Holy Scripture had not been used and interpreted in previous centuries. Luther himself had worked intensively with biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. novissimam damnatorum. 1520,” in *WA* 7, 98 (91–151). The Latin text reads: “Sint ergo Christianorum prima principia non nisi verba divina, omnium autem hominum verba conclusiones hinc eductae et rursus illuc reducendae et probandae.” Latin or German texts of Luther are translated by the author there where no English translation is available. Luther has written four works to defend the propositions condemned in the papal bull in 1520. One of these works is translated into English, see Martin Luther, “Defense and Explanation of all the Articles, 1521,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 7–99.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “Assertio omnium articulorum,” *ibid.*, 98.

texts in his exegetic lectures from the beginning of his teaching activity. Luther, moreover, shared this intensive occupation with Holy Scripture with many theologians of the centuries before him, just as he shared his appreciation of Holy Scripture with the church as a whole. The point of Luther's response to the papal bull lay more in his not wishing to base his reading and interpretation of Holy Scripture on the history of its reception within the church. Luther set Holy Scripture and its contemporary reading and interpretation against the church doctrine and practice based on this centuries-long reception history. Luther, by contrast, taught more of a "consequent exegesis"<sup>3</sup>—to use a term coined by Eberhard Jüngel.

The fact that Martin Luther and other Reformation theologians wished and were able to interpret Holy Scripture not only in a manner that built on previous interpretation and reception history within the church, but also in opposition to them, came as the result of very specific problems and areas of conflict. In the process, a methodology was established for dealing with controversial topics in the doctrine and practice of the church.

This can be illustrated with the following well-known example: In the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, Luther's views are denounced as erroneous that "the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, is not the vicar of Christ over all the churches of the entire world, instituted by Christ Himself in blessed Peter."<sup>4</sup> How is one to decide on the claim of the Bishop of Rome to lead the church and the reasons behind it? The claim of the Bishop of Rome to lead all of Christendom can be founded on purely historical terms: it developed that way historically—at least within the territory of the former Western Roman Empire. Yet, the condemnation of Luther's doctrine on this topic makes it clear that the Roman Catholic theologians and the Pope did not seek such a historical explanation, but instead a theological one founded on the claim of the Bishop of Rome to universal authority having been established by Christ. According to Luther, however, this justification of the universal headship of the Bishop of Rome is not evidenced in any direct reading of Holy Scripture. In light of the historical developments it is therefore clear that Roman Catholic theologians sought to legitimize the Bishop of Rome's claim to authority through the interpretation of biblical texts. Retrospectively, we can also add that the Bishop of Rome's claim to

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<sup>3</sup> With his programmatic term consequent exegesis, Eberhard Jüngel characterized both the theology of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann; cf. Eberhard Jüngel, "Die Freiheit der Theologie," in *Entsprechungen: Gott-Wahrheit-Mensch*, Theologische Erörterungen II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 32002), 11–36, here 19.

<sup>4</sup> Condemning the Errors of Martin Luther—*Exsurge Domine*. Bull of Pope Leo X issued June 15, 1520, at [www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo10/H10exdom.htm](http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo10/H10exdom.htm)

universal primacy was historically only possible by ignoring all of the Eastern churches that had emerged outside of the Western Roman Empire.

Luther's return to direct access to the Holy Scripture had a purifying effect that continues today: the Holy Scriptures could not and still cannot be used to justify anything and everything that has developed and established itself in the doctrine and practice of the church over the centuries—just as the view that the church departed too far from the gospel was founded on the Reformation's return to the Holy Scriptures: too much of what was supposedly "good" could lead to the churches being disloyal to Jesus Christ, their head.

With no substantive biblical justification, the question arises as to why such church doctrine and practice should continue to be maintained; or whether an alternative could be imagined that is better suited to Holy Scripture. The next question is whether one should not simply seek the most pragmatic solution to the problem within the current context which can be reconciled with the principles of God's Word.

Enough problems arise within the context of the churches for which there are no solutions in Holy Scripture. Solutions, then, need to be found that are conceived with God's Word in mind. These are, nevertheless, merely human solutions involving church doctrine and practice within a particular time and limited context.

Our example illustrates that the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* is a church process used to address specific matters and problems that arise in church doctrine and practice. With its exclusive *sola*, it seeks solutions to problems that are chiefly or solely based on tradition and the interpretation and reception history of Holy Scripture and thus not on Scripture itself.

Martin Luther himself grappled with the standard objections, which were and continue to be raised, to this exclusive role of Holy Scripture to address issues and problems in church doctrine and practice.

## **OBJECTIONS TO SOLA SCRIPTURA**

A number of objections have been sustained and questions posed regarding the Protestant scriptural principle during Martin Luther's lifetime. Three of these will be discussed here.

First, wherefrom does the Holy Scripture derive its authority and who can vouch for its truth if not the church, which formed the biblical texts into a canon, thereby authenticating the authority of Holy Scripture itself? How can Holy Scripture be set in opposition to church tradition when it is itself part of that tradition?

Luther raised the postulate of *autopisty* or the self-authentication of Holy Scripture, which stipulates that Holy Scripture has no other guarantors

of its own authority than itself. The Second Epistle to Timothy attempts to support this with its explanation of the text's inspiration (2 Tim 3:16). In Luther's view, Holy Scripture does not derive its authority from such an internal claim, but by dint of its content, which can be summarized in Jesus Christ. The truth claims connected with Jesus Christ thus represent the authority that vouches for Holy Scripture. Nothing and nobody else can authorize Holy Scripture and its main areas of content. "The Gospel is not believed because the church confirms it, but because one senses that it is God's Word."<sup>5</sup> Holy Scripture is not authoritative and reliable for the faithful, because the church, as a community of people with knowledge of the truth, compiled and united the biblical texts into a Holy Scripture. Luther believed the relationship between Holy Scripture and the church to be precisely the other way around. It was not the church that granted authority to Holy Scripture, but Holy Scripture which lent authority to the church. The church derives its authority from Holy Scripture because it is the place and institution in which the truth of Holy Scripture is heard and able to unfold.

Second, are there not so many unclear areas in Holy Scripture that there can never be a reasonable interpretation of biblical texts without the binding interpretative decisions of the church?

Luther assumed that the self-authentication of Holy Scripture corresponded to the principle that Holy Scripture interprets itself. In his response to the papal bull, he wrote that Holy Scripture is "in and of itself most certain, most comprehensible, most manifest, its own interpreter."<sup>6</sup> Luther posited that the interpretation of biblical texts was not difficult as

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, "De potestate leges ferendi in ecclesia, 1530," in *WA* 30/II, 687 (677-690); in the original Latin: "Non enim ideo creditur, quia Ecclesia approbat, Sed quia verbum Dei esse sentitur."

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, "Assertio omnium articulorum, 1520," in *WA* 7, 97 (91-151). This view follows on Luther's understanding that each book is to be interpreted in light of the author's spirit. "Scripture is its own light. It is good when Scripture interprets itself" (Martin Luther, "Predigt am Jakobstage. 25. Juli 1522," in *WA* 10/III, 238 [235-241]). Luther supported this principle in opposition to all views that ascribe the authority of correct interpretation to individual people and church officials, whether on the basis of the charisma of office or extraordinary talent. Luther also emphasized the significance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture. The spirit, in which people are able to interpret Holy Scripture, thus does not have a different origin than Scripture itself. This is also the reason why Luther was suspicious of any allegorical, figurative interpretation of biblical texts, and instead emphasized that they were to be interpreted in a literal sense.



Holy Scripture was so clear within itself and always had a straightforward meaning,<sup>7</sup> which emerged from its primary subject, Jesus Christ.

Third, if Holy Scripture is easy to understand, would not everyone have to be easily persuaded of its veracity?

Luther was of course aware that many understood the biblical texts poorly, superficially, or just plain wrongly, and that many people would not even come to acknowledge the truth of the biblical texts. Luther therefore distinguished between the external and internal clarity of Scripture. One had to distinguish the external clarity of Holy Scripture, which was plain to see—especially for those who could read the original biblical languages—from the clarity “in the heart,” which emerges when people hear, understand and recognize what God claims and promises in these texts. Martin Luther did this in his 1525 “On the Bondage of the Will” with the words:

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it. [...] For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it. If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous.<sup>8</sup>

Here Luther spoke out against the viewpoint of Erasmus of Rotterdam, a prominent scholar of the time, that Scripture contained obscure and unclear passages that required interpretation by church authorities or in accordance with the church’s interpretative tradition. Luther proposed, on the contrary, a distinction between the internal clarity (or obscurity) of the message of the biblical texts, anchored in the understanding of the human heart, in contrast with external clarity (or obscurity) in terms of the intellectual understanding of the symbols and meanings within the texts. If one reads biblical texts with an open mind, it follows that human reason will not find anything obscure or ambiguous although the message of the text can remain obscure and unclear to the heart of an individual person.

For Luther, Holy Scripture had a central position when it came to recognizing God, but also for the life, doctrine and practice of the church. He

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Martin Luther, “Ad librum eximii Magistri Nostri Magistri Ambrosii Catharini, defensoris Silvestri Prieratis acerrimi, responsio, 1521,” in *WA* 7, 711, 5f. (698-778).

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will, 1525”, in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 28.

presented theoretical arguments for this and practiced it in the development of his doctrine using biblical texts. Luther's theology was founded on taking the biblical message seriously in a radical and unconditional manner, inasmuch as they had as their content Christ and the gospel founded in him. For Luther, these messages of Holy Scripture had an unconditional validity and supplanted the empirical experience of people, their intellectual and philosophical convictions and their traditions.

### THE PROTESTANT SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE

In order to understand the principle of *sola scriptura* we need to go beyond Luther to look into its further development in post-Reformation Protestant theology as well. In post-Reformation "early Protestant orthodoxy," Holy Scripture would become the principle behind theology and thus also the decision-making processes of the church with regard to doctrine and practice, in the Aristotelian sense of the first principle—the primary source of the knowledge of anything. Holy Scripture is then seen as the foundational underpinning of theological and ecclesiastical knowledge. Holy Scripture thereby became the sole principle and criterion in Protestant theology, which is ultimately concerned with spiritual salvation and people's liberation from sin and death.

Johann Friedrich König (1619–1664), for example, phrased it in his standard textbook of his era: "That which Holy Scripture teaches is the sole source of knowledge, from which all theology ultimately needs to be derived, and to which all returns or is resolved in the end."<sup>9</sup> This citation clarifies a number of things. Holy Scripture is indeed a source in a number of respects. First, Holy Scripture is the source of understanding. In connection with Holy Scripture and God's Word, however, this never refers to the expansion of knowledge alone. If one is not to live on bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut 8:3; Mt 4:4), this implies an understanding of God's Word that is termed life in a biblical sense, i.e., an existence from and for God. Holy Scripture is thus a source both of understanding and life. Holy Scripture is indeed the source of life for the church, if we are to understand the Christian church and the community of believers who exist from God and for God, and who therefore indeed live—in the biblical sense. Those who would obscure or even hinder this source of understanding would thus also misunderstand the church's

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<sup>9</sup> Johann Friedrich König, *Theologia positiva acroamatica*, Rostock 1664, ed. and transl. Andreas Stegmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), § 46 (author's own translation).

source of life and would cause it to dry up; and those who would go as far as to bring alien waters into it, would bring about its very ruination.

We need to specify further what is meant by source here. The connotation of an effervescent source could lead to the naïve idea that the Bible already contains passages on church doctrine and practice. Theology would then only have to take these passages from the source, place them in order and systematically evaluate their dogmatic, ethical and practical use for the church. We can see that the theologians of post-Reformation early Protestant orthodoxy were well aware of this problem, as reflected in the König's quote, when he speaks of Christian doctrine, once derived from Holy Scripture, needing to be retraced to it in the end. Holy Scripture as a source of understanding thus acts to serve Holy Scripture as a source of life.

With regard to Holy Scripture the image of a source has yet a further dimension that first came into focus in later centuries. Holy Scripture is indeed also a source for historical awareness. As Gerhard Ebeling put it,

in the historical sense, the source challenges us not merely to receive what it provides us with but to wring information out of it regarding its own origins. [...] In the historical treatment of sources suspicion, to a certain degree, looms large that the source is deceptive, or at least possibly silent, with regard to what one wishes to obtain from it historically. One makes use of a source [...] because one seeks information with regard to the historical reality behind the text and from which the text derives.<sup>10</sup>

Holy Scripture can thus be used today as a source of understanding and life with regard to theology and the church only when one engages with historical-critical knowledge. This in no way casts doubt on the truth and authority of Holy Scripture. On the contrary, the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible verifies the truth and authority of Holy Scripture. One can place much greater trust in what the historical-critical method is able to interpret as truth from the Bible as an original source, as it stands up to the methodologically required suspicion of historical knowledge instead of running away from it.

Holy Scripture is a principle of theology and hence of all church doctrine and practice as well as a source and origin in at least a threefold sense: it is a source of knowledge (with regard to church doctrine and practice), source of life and a historical source. Similarly, the church and theologians need to distinguish among the Bible, Holy Scripture and God's Word. Each indicates a different use of the same textual body and a different expectation of the

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<sup>10</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 39 (author's own translation).

texts. As the Bible, the texts are a religious book and a historical source. As Holy Scripture, in the usage of the church, the Bible is the source and principle of understanding of its doctrine and practice. As God's Word, the biblical texts are the means through which God expresses Godself to people and hence communicates life and salvation (as a source of life). Only God's Word can grant life and salvation in that it, as the law, confronts people with God's requirements for a true and perfect life, and in that it, as the gospel, invites all the burdened and downtrodden to find relief in Jesus Christ, while consoling all people with the reliable promise that they, as God's children, will have a firm place at the table of their father in heaven.

The 1577 "Formula of Concord" thus not only had Holy Scripture as its source, but also declared it to be the norm for all church doctrine, i.e., the standard for all doctrine of Christian truth and for every life in the truth of the Christian faith. The Formula of Concord states:

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and preachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone [...].<sup>11</sup>

It is then explained that other writings of ancient or modern teachers should not be regarded as equal to Holy Scripture but need to be placed in a subsidiary role. This applied of course to the Reformers themselves. These other writings were instead to be viewed as "witnesses." The "Formula of Concord" expressly accentuates that the Protestant churches were to recognize the creeds of the early church (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed), as the authentic and authoritative expressions of Christian faith, alongside the "Augsburg Confession" together with its "Apology," the "Smalcald Articles," and Luther's Small and Large Catechisms. It does however also emphasize that these creedal texts "are not judges, as is Holy Scriptures, but only witnesses and expressions of faith,"<sup>12</sup> and "show how Holy Scripture has at various times been understood and interpreted in the church of God by those who lived at the time."<sup>13</sup> The "Formula of Concord" thus did not grant precedence, and certainly no normative significance, to the creedal texts recognized by the Protestant churches when it came to explaining the Christian faith for the time. As was variously reiterated in the text, "Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding

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<sup>11</sup> "Formula of Concord," in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 486.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good or evil, correct or incorrect.”<sup>14</sup>

In the interpretation of these texts from the “Formula of Concord,” questions have frequently arisen and been the matter of lively discussion, including the matter of the canon of Holy Scripture (i.e., the question of what we exactly mean by Holy Scripture), and the question of the principles of interpretation. In the reading and interpretation of the individual scriptural texts within the Protestant churches, emphasis has been placed in particular on what “was Christum treibet” (what promotes Christ). From the early years of the Reformation, Protestant interpretation was indeed characterized by skepticism with regard to a chiefly ecclesiastic interpretation of biblical texts such as allegorical interpretations. The Reformers, by contrast, placed emphasis on the literal sense of biblical texts. Protestant theology in fact played a significant role in bringing about the development of a modern hermeneutics oriented toward the material form of the text. All of this contributed toward formulating the Protestant scriptural principle.

One moment of truth for this principle undoubtedly lay in the controversy over authority in the church and in theology. With one sole source and norm for church doctrine and practice and Christian life, all other possible “authorities” are relativized that could be considered for the formation of church life and the life of the faithful. However, the central and most important significance of the principle lay in providing a voice and asserting validity for the liberating, salvific and life-giving Word of God to a lost world. If it were to be reduced to its principal and normative status for church doctrine and practice, however, it would become false and sterile. It was thus of greatest importance to prevent this from happening so that the texts of Holy Scripture could be interpreted in accordance with their literal sense and applied to the lives of believers.

## INTERPRETATION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

The Reformation returned authority to the Holy Scripture with regard to the life of the church and the lives of each and every believer. Martin Luther had a well reflected and nuanced understanding of Holy Scripture, its role within the church, as well as the rules and methods of its interpretation. From this starting point, Lutheran theology repeatedly treated the issues and methods involving the interpretation and understanding of biblical

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 487.

texts. What are the main points that emerge in Protestant scriptural interpretation and Protestant-Lutheran hermeneutics?

First, the Reformers emphasized the literal sense of biblical texts, with human reason taking on a major role in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. The importance of reason in interpretation was developed further in *Clavis scripturae sacrae* (Key to Holy Scripture), written in 1567 by Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575), a second-generation Croatian Lutheran. Flacius agreed with Luther's view that those who read a biblical text can reach a plausible and biblically appropriate understanding if they follow generally accepted rules—rules involving the reading and interpretation of texts, which emerge from insights gained through the use of reason in the reading of texts, and of Holy Scripture in particular. Clearly one reaches the limits of reason when dealing with biblical texts. While reason can grasp the linguistic meaning of the texts and gain insight into their content, it has no access to their inner clarity and cannot persuade the heart to trust and follow the gospel and the message of the Old and New Testaments. This, the actual objective and ultimate purpose of biblical texts, to awaken and maintain people's trust in God, can only be brought about by God. God awakens trust by speaking to people through biblical texts.

One must, however, first understand intellectually what it says in the texts. When the Ethiopian court official read the words of Isaiah on his way home from Jerusalem, Phillip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30). One cannot truly trust the message of a biblical text if one does not really understand it. This applies to an incorrect understanding of a biblical text as well, as it would then no longer be intellectually clear what God wishes us to trust in and follow. From a Protestant point of view, one must therefore, unquestionably, read and interpret biblical texts in full accordance with the (reasoned) rules of the art of reading and interpretation. Flacius pursued this course in his hermeneutics in *Clavis scripturae sacrae*. While he was fully convinced of the divine status of Holy Scripture, he still took into account the views of the other sciences of his time (and humanistic philosophy and its rules of interpretation in particular). At the 1546 Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church attacked the Protestant principle of the self-interpretation of Holy Scripture, supporting instead the doctrine that Scripture was hermeneutically incomplete and needed to be supplemented by tradition. The Protestant side then had to respond by showing that Scripture was indeed sufficient unto itself and could be understood on its own. To this end, the hermeneutical method and the tools required for the interpretation of biblical texts need to be clarified, under the assumption of the completeness and comprehensibility of Holy Scripture. Flacius's expansive work did precisely that. In his response to Roman Catholic critics, Flacius emphasized that the reason why Holy

Scripture (or parts of it) could not be understood was not because it was incomprehensible but in fact due to flaws in the interpreters' linguistic education along with their questionable interpretive methods. Taking the coherence of Holy Scripture for granted, Flacius underscored its normative autonomy by presenting all the elements involved in exegesis. With the help of philology, exegesis, rhetoric, logic and other scholarly knowledge, any biblical text can be rendered comprehensible within the Bible as a coherent whole. In addition to the coherence of Holy Scripture as a whole, Flacius also emphasized, in particular, the comprehensive perspective, i.e., the scope of all of the texts of Holy Scripture. This scope represents the goal pursued by the Bible as a whole and the golden thread that runs through all of its texts. This scope is not however clear from the beginning but is itself the result of interpretation of Holy Scripture as a whole.

Second, new foundational insights into the interpretation of Holy Scripture would follow in the course of the centuries following the Reformation. During the era of Europe's religious wars in the seventeenth century, the conviction that there was no single correct interpretation of biblical texts gained traction in Europe. A methodically developed interpretation of Holy Scripture thus did not need only one but often several plausible interpretations of biblical texts, whereas the different Christian churches had previously presumed that there was only one absolute meaning of Holy Scripture and its laws, with people resorting to armed conflict as a means of defending their own positions. The development of a methodical interpretation of Holy Scripture also paved the way for scholarly disputes over the appropriate and correct understanding of biblical texts. Confessional fighting on the battlefield could then, most sensibly, be replaced by scholarly discussions.

Third, according to Protestant understanding, the interpretation of biblical texts can only truly achieve its goal if people hear God speaking to them through these texts and are touched existentially by them. Protestant theology has consequently been confronted with the question of what exactly touches and connects with human beings in this way. Within the Lutheran churches, for example, Pietism was of the view that the interpretation of biblical texts should not only meet the academic standards of scholars and educated people but also contribute to deepening the piety of those who simply read the Bible or heard a sermon. In this context, human emotions, feelings and passions were of importance and had to be taken into account if one was to understand the spiritual stirring of the emotions of the authors of the biblical texts, and if the readers of biblical texts and hearers of sermons were truly to be existentially moved. The contexts and the lives of readers and listeners thus gained in importance in Pietistic scriptural interpretation. Fully understanding biblical texts means that

readers and listeners need to be moved in their feelings, emotions and passions, i.e., in their concrete existence.

Fourth, for Protestant Christendom in general, Holy Scripture is one of the means through which God communicates with people in this world, and is indeed the main medium for this communication. This is not a matter of mere chance for Lutheran theology, which was and remains convinced that God purposefully seeks to express Godself through Holy Scripture, committing Godself to this particular medium. This then leads to the view that it is futile or even misleading to look for any other avenues through which God might communicate with us. This referred to church traditions that were not covered by Holy Scripture as well as the free action of God's spirit in the faithful, as God speaks directly into people's hearts. By focusing on Holy Scripture as God's chief medium, the Bible increasingly became the object of historical interest in Lutheran theology. But how exactly does God express Godself and God's will in these texts? And what do we discover about God when we experience how God expresses Godself in our understanding and our communication?

Time and again this entails tensions with regard to the interpretation of biblical texts. The historical-critical method was and remains the main challenge when it comes to the reading of and listening to the Bible in church. At times, the differences would appear to be quite radical between historical-critical exegesis and the Reformation interpretation of the Bible. The conviction thus gained traction that the texts of the Old and New Testaments were not the timeless Word of God but reflected historical events instead. The individual authors of the biblical texts always wrote from their own particular perspectives, just as the interpreters of the biblical texts interpreted the texts from their own particular perspectives as well. Their interpretations do not only take the biblical texts into account, but their own personal and historical situation. All of these insights into the process of scriptural interpretation make it increasingly clear that the God witnessed in the Bible did not only express Godself through a text (the Bible) but also through history, at a particular time and place, as needs to be taken into account when interpreting, so that God's message can be understood for our own time. This is the starting point for the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. The method falls short, however, if it is only used to distinguish historical elements from the virtually timeless message and meaning of the texts. In the past, precisely those elements of the biblical message were often identified as timeless that were currently in vogue and generally accepted at that particular time and within that particular context. The Protestant relationship between history and scriptural interpretation has many more facets than does such a simple model.

Biblical texts are, first, to be recognized as historical texts written at a particular point in history and in a particular place in the world. One



therefore needs to understand the historical conditions from which the texts emerged. Second, the text is placed before interpreters who are part of a particular interpretive tradition and who therefore already have an idea of how a particular biblical text is to be understood. Third, interpreters are located in a particular time and geographical place, which also influence what they are able to conceive of and what interests them about the text in particular.

Interpretation is thus influenced by the circumstances of the context in which interpreters live. One must therefore ascertain what people in each context experience as the truth. Scriptural interpretation from a Protestant point of view is always more than just a methodical reading and explication of a biblical text, but is also ultimately about the individual interpreters as a whole and their discovery of the possibilities provided by God for their own existence and lives in truth.

Fifth, the interpretation of biblical texts can succeed once interpreters are not only able to ascertain what the text actually seeks to express, but also when the text reveals the human condition in all its variety to readers and interpreters and raises the question of whether the life varieties expressed therein could be their own. The Lutheran New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) considered<sup>15</sup> that we can only reach a true interpretation and understanding of biblical texts when we have listened to the questions the texts ask of us, and when we discover what it is that the texts demand of us. Only then can the texts open up new possibilities to us for our individual and collective lives by calling us away from ourselves and opening our eyes to the presence of God in our lives. In Bultmann's opinion, the entire interpretative process is a critical one: we are to analyze and interpret biblical texts critically in order critically to examine ourselves and our individual and collective lives. The main area of interest for modern Lutheran hermeneutics is the interpretation of biblical texts not with the goal of confirming our own selves and ideas but critically to listen to God's Word in respect to our own lives in our particular contexts and situations.

Sixth, it is part of the overall interpretation process that believers from different situations and contexts share with one another the insights that they receive from their individual and collective listening to God's Word. The resultant diversity of understanding of Holy Scripture bears witness to the lively and concrete nature of God's communication with God's people. The Triune God is not like an imperialistic ruler who, from a fitting distance, would uniformly send God's messages to people all around the world, and would expect that they all live their lives in the same homogenous way.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in *ZThK* 47 (1950), 47–69.

Human life is diverse and God speaks through the medium of Holy Scripture to the particular concrete lives of individual people and communities. Hearing God's Word is therefore not followed by some sort of imperial anti-individuation process but by a song praising the manifold grace of God (1 Pet 4:10), expressed in the diverse and many-hued lives of Christians and churches—in “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

## QUESTIONS

*What expectations do you have when you read or hear a biblical text? Do you expect the biblical passage to tell you something meaningful for your personal life and your understanding of the world?*

*What role should the texts of Holy Scripture play in the formation and decision making of the church and its governing bodies today? What is the relationship between Holy Scripture to other contextual and scientific insights?*

*What is crucial in the interpretation of a biblical text, in sermons or Bible studies? Should the interpretation of biblical texts be adapted to contemporary understandings? How should we deal with different interpretations of the same biblical text in evangelical churches?*

# IMPLEMENTING GENDER JUSTICE: AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Au Sze Ngui*

## **TESTIMONY OF THE IMPACT OF GOD'S LIBERATING GRACE**

In Jesus Christ, we are “liberated by grace.” As we read in Romans 5:1-2, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

The Murut people of Sabah, Malaysia, used to be animists. When the gospel of Jesus Christ came to them, they were liberated from their beliefs. They had been subject to fears and omens that manifested themselves in daily life: if someone wanted to take a boat journey—the Murut mainly live on the banks of one of the large rivers in the interior of Sabah—they would have to wait for a sign. If a snake was seen on the river then it was a bad sign, meaning that the journey would be fraught with danger and the boat might capsize or they might meet with some sort of disaster. If they saw a series of birds flying in a certain direction, this would be a good omen and the journey would be a smooth and safe one. They were subject to fears of spirits and so never went out after dark as this could cause them to encounter some evil spirit who would harm or curse them in some way. They feared encountering anything out of the ordinary in their everyday lives for the extraordinary, be it an animal, insect or object, would not bode well for the person who encountered it.

After the Murut heard the gospel, they were set free from the fear that was manifested in their former beliefs and their lives were changed. This freedom not only liberated them from the bondage of fear but also from their traditional views and practices. The roles of Murut men, women and children had been strictly divided: the men were hunter gatherers, hunting,

fishing and gathering fruits or vegetables to provide for their families. The women stayed home, looking after the children and their homes as well as doing the cooking, farming, growing vegetables and foraging in the surrounding jungle for basic supplements. Children were not given very much responsibility though they had to help with household chores and some of the simple farming activities. As they grew up they were taught certain hunting or cooking skills depending on their gender.

After the Muruts had encountered the Christian message of God's liberating grace the traditional roles of men and women and children changed. Although the Murut men still hunt and fish for their families and the women are still mostly in charge of the household duties, the women started to express their opinions, even if the men still had the greater voice in the decision-making process. Even though women are still the cooks and the homemakers, through the church they began to contribute to the social life in non-traditional and varied ways. The women started to become active in many areas in the church. They started to participate in the worship ministry by leading the singing in the church; they started to teach children at Sunday school, taking thus also key teaching roles.

The greatest change in gender roles took place at the level of the church leadership. Women are now elected as church leaders and their key role within the church is acknowledged. Even Murut men acknowledge that within the church the women are a force to be "reckoned with" and within Murut society the voice of women is being heard. For example, in a small church called Mansaso in the Tenom region in Sabah, Malaysia, a Murut woman chairs the church council. Traditional gender roles that confined women and men to limited spheres of action were transformed by the inclusive and liberating message of the gospel.

## **THE LWF GENDER JUSTICE POLICY (GJP) AND ITS RELEVANCE IN SPECIFIC ASIAN CONTEXTS**

One of the core values of the LWF is inclusiveness. Since the Second LWF Assembly in 1952, women have been included in the LWF leadership structures as council members and with each assembly decisions were made to ensure inclusiveness. Today, the LWF has a policy of requiring the participation of forty percent women and men respectively and twenty percent youth in councils, symposiums and assemblies. Moreover,

simply fulfilling quotas is not sufficient [...]. In order to be faithful to previous assembly commitments and achieve the goal of full inclusivity, there is an urgent

need to be transformed as churches and as a global communion by the power that women and youth bring.<sup>1</sup>

Along the way, admitting that violence exists within churches and that measures need to be taken to combat such violence especially against women constitutes a confession of sin. The communion realized that injustice cannot be tolerated and needs to be addressed. Therefore, in 1997, at the Ninth LWF Assembly in Hong Kong,

the commitment to gender equality was identified as one of the communion's core tasks: to speak on gender and power from a theological and biblically based faith perspective as a justice and relational issue and to address gender and power as issues of leadership.<sup>2</sup>

The GJP approved by the LWF Council in June 2013, outlines a set of principles and provides the basis for the communion to achieve gender justice. It implies the protection and promotion of the dignity of women and men who, being created in the image of God, are co-responsible stewards of creation. The goal of the gender justice policy is to strive towards actualizing the liberation brought by God's grace. The aim is to eliminate gender-based institutional, cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression, i.e., power systems that sustain discrimination. In order to achieve this goal, the GJP "seeks to provide political intentions and tools that contribute to fostering gender justice in order to achieve inclusive and sustainable communities and churches."<sup>3</sup>

According to the LWF's understanding, the theological foundation of the GJP is embedded in the biblical-theological notion of being justified by faith through grace: "to be justified is to be freed from that which binds us (cf. Rom 5)."<sup>4</sup> As Christians we believe that God created us (Gen 1:27); we are all sinners (Rom 3:23); Christ died once for all (2 Cor 5:14-15); we are all justified by faith (Rom 5:1-2). Therefore we are all equal in Christ Jesus and strive toward gender justice for all, precisely because of this common basis. Thus, gender justice is "a matter of faith"<sup>5</sup> for us in the LWF communion.

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<sup>1</sup> At [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS\\_Gender\\_Justice.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11.

The methodology proposed in the GJP for implementing gender justice is: see—judge—act. This means to observe and read each reality and context and to use biblical, theological and universally agreed upon human rights concepts to discern this reality and the main issues arising from this particular context. After reading and discerning the reality, one needs to agree on actions that should be taken in this specific context.<sup>6</sup>

When applying the methodology proposed in the GJP, a first step requires that we “see” the reality in the Murut community and “judge” this reality in light of the principles of inclusiveness and justice as part of the teaching of the gospel.

The changes in the Murut community illustrate clearly how the message of the gospel liberated them from fears that were part of their former beliefs. Muruts began to see one another in a different light—in the light of God’s grace—understanding that all are sinners, justified by their faith and redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, all are equal in God’s eyes. There is no greater sinner or better saint since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Christ died once for all. Therefore, every sinner, whether man or woman, liberated from the penalty of their sins has a new birth and is a new person.

[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26–28).

Thus within our own families, communities, across cultures, nations, race as well as gender, we are one in Christ Jesus as children of God. Thus, if we are all children of God, liberated by God’s grace, justified by faith, we are to be God’s light and salt in this world.

Although we are children of God, we are still living in this fallen world and daily deal with consequences of sin in our lives. The Murut community is still undergoing change. While women are now given more space to speak out and take part in decisions regarding the family, the community and the church, they are still expected to fulfill certain expectations and live in accordance with the traditional understanding of a “woman’s role.” For example, during the visit of a group from an urban church group, a number of Murut men were rather shocked to see how youth of both sexes of the visiting church group helped with washing the dishes. Pointing at one of the youngsters, a man asked, “Isn’t this women’s or girls’ work, why is he washing dishes?” One of the members of the visiting group, a teacher

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 14.

by profession, replied that everyone is responsible for helping with the household chores, regardless of gender, especially when both women and men have responsibilities outside their homes.

The situation described above is a reality in many parts of the LWF communion. Within Murut culture and society, there is still inequality. Within the Murut Christian community, there is still institutional, cultural and interpersonal discrimination. How can churches and Christian communities eliminate discrimination and inequality?

First, we need to see each other in the light of God's grace, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8). God's grace is what saves me, a woman. God's grace is what saves him, a man. God's grace saves not works, not gender, not class, not institutions, not culture. When I am saved by God's grace and you are saved by God's grace, we are all at the same level and this must bring everyone, regardless of culture, race or tribe under the umbrella of God's grace. When you look down at another person, you look down at Christ. Having been saved from our sins by Christ, can we do anything that would hurt the Lord Jesus Christ?

Second, allow me to return to the example of the visiting church group cited above. When the urban church group interacted with the Murut village community, they realized that there was an inequality in how labor was divided. During the Sunday service, the worship leader asked the song leader to come and lead the singing. Since the person was not present in the church someone else had to take over. Later during the service, the women of the congregation presented a song. With them was a woman who carried a small baby. She turned out to be the song leader whom the worship leader had been calling for earlier. Some of the visitors recognized this lady as one of the cooks who had prepared breakfast for them that morning. They realized that she had been so overburdened with different tasks that day since she had had to help with the visitors while, at the same time, taking care of her small child, that she had not been able to make it to the church on time. This example shows that in the Murut community, as in many member churches of the LWF communion, labor is not distributed equally.

Being liberated by God's grace calls for redressing this disparity and we should consider how together we can walk along on the road to holiness and Christlikeness. One way to do this is through discussing and considering what is proposed in the GJP: the liberating grace of God is a blessing for all—male and female.

Third, in the fight against discrimination and for inclusiveness, we must not consider this battle to be distant from each individual within the communion. Gender justice is justice for all, not just for women. Reformation is

reformation for all and not just for some. The dissemination of the GJP will encourage discussion among men and women in the member churches of our communion and encourage our member churches to consider reformation in the area of gender in light of the upcoming 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Liberating grace means looking at oneself, one's family, church, community and nation in a new light—the light of Jesus Christ. Liberating grace opens the door to reforming and renewing all relationships. The first renewed relationship is between human beings and God.

Through our justification by faith in Christ Jesus, we are granted the privilege of becoming God's children. God no longer holds us in debt for our sins. Romans 5:6-8 describes this transformed relationship:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

This means that God's grace liberates us and our faith justifies us to have a relationship with God and the Holy Spirit dwells within us. We are changed for we now have God within us. Renewed relationships start between God and human beings and they need to permeate all relationships. The relationship of marriage must express this liberation by God's grace. There must be an equal division of responsibility and labor: husbands and wives share in the work that it takes to build a marriage, to build a home, to teach and nurture children, to look after parents and elders of the family without sacrificing completely their own spiritual lives as children of God. It is thus important that relationships are renewed within the institution of the family; there must not be favoritism. Our faith is grounded in justice and fairness and must therefore also permeate our family relationships. It is crucial that family relationships are brought under the liberating grace of God since the family, however it is understood and defined in different contexts, is the most basic social unit in the world. Justification by faith should thus become visible at the level of the family through the implementation of gender justice. Gender justice liberates members of a family to look for better ways to care for one another by assuming different tasks and roles that might not always correspond to "traditional" gender roles. It also implies that daughters are given the same educational opportunities as sons. This is still not self-evident in some parts of the LWF communion.

The cultural traditions of many nations are part of the communion of the LWF. These traditions and cultural mores, which sadly have not been renewed by God's grace, color the various member churches. Seventy-seven percent of the member churches ordain women. Yet, there are still twenty-



three percent that do not.<sup>7</sup> This is an example of exclusiveness within our communion. The GJP calls on the member churches to study this policy together and to consider the importance of letting God’s liberating grace permeate all areas of the church so that renewal and reformation might take place within “all of us” and that we, the communion of the LWF, may carry Christ visibly, and be the light and salt of this world, showing forth the Lord Jesus Christ and witness to the liberating grace of God.

In each of our societies we need to continue to preach about constantly renewing relationships because God has granted us grace and renewed our relationship with Godself. As God is inclusive, so we must also be inclusive; as God is just, so we must be just. We need to look at society as Christians and not as Kenyans, Germans, Chinese, Australians or Brazilians. We need to see ourselves as liberated to be the followers of Christ who carry God’s grace into all parts of the world and all relationships. Heading towards the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, we, as Lutherans within the LWF communion, need to reflect upon and evaluate our own church and society in light of liberating grace. If there is still discrimination, inequality and exclusivity then we fall short.

Sometimes, it takes a catalyst from outside the community to effect change and it is the hope of the LWF that the GJP will be this catalyst, enhancing the “communion’s journey towards inclusiveness.”<sup>8</sup> When we are liberated by God’s grace, doors are opened for change and reformation. If there is no grace, there can be no change for we will all be as we have always been. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-18).

Just as the inclusion of male and female youth as dishwashers was an eye-opening event at a local level, so too it is hoped that the GJP will be the eye-opener for the LWF communion. I envisage the Murut community coming together, both men and women and youth, to study the GJP after it has been translated into the language they comprehend, and consider how gender inequality might be redressed within their community. Just as the liberating grace of God granted the Muruts liberation from fear and omens, it is my hope that the GJP will be God’s liberating grace for the reformation of non-inclusive social, institutional, cultural norms. Discriminatory social norms limit and stifle a community’s creativity as well as the contribution it might make toward Christ’s body at large and the LWF communion.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1.

## **THE REFORMATION AND CONTINUING THE REFORMATION OF INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS**

“Gender justice refers then to both, women and men, together organizing life based on partnership and justice.”<sup>9</sup> The Reformation did not happen outside but within the church. Martin Luther called for reform in order to correct what was wrong within the church. Today, we call for reformation within the LWF communion and for gender justice to prevail. We call for an end to discrimination and the inclusion of all. All this happens under the liberating grace of God which grants us renewal and reform.

As we live in the eschatological tension between the now and the not yet, it is understood that on the road of holiness we still have to deal with sin and its effects in the world. Liberation from the bondage of sin is the beginning of our striving for justice: we are free; we are forgiven; we are the recipients of God's grace. We are free to change and change the world. There are many examples of how Christianity has been an agent of change by supporting the revision of some “traditional” practices. For instance, when the Christian missionaries went to China in the late 1800s, they came face to face with the horrible practice of foot binding. Between the ages of four and nine, young girls' feet were bound with bandages, the toes curled under and the arch forced to collapse against the heel. As a result, the girls had tiny feet so that once grown up they could only walk with great difficulty with a swaying gait and mincing steps. The missionaries called for a stop to this practice and later Chinese Christian women added their voices for a ban to foot binding which was finally officially banned in the early 1900s. Such submissive practices continue to exist also today. The LWF Office for Women in Church and Society has been supporting projects in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia that raise awareness of female genital mutilation (FGM) and try to put an end to this practice. Efforts to change a communion are most effective when they come from within the communion. For example, William Wilberforce (1759-1833) championed the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire. His Christian belief was the main driving force behind his fight against the slave trade. The slavers in the British Empire were themselves also nominally Christians, as were the members of the British parliament who sanctioned the slave trade. Wilberforce finally succeeded to convince parliament of the inhumane character of the slave trade and succeeded in his fight against it.

There is always a need for people within communions prophetically to speak out against unjust practices. Within our LWF communion of churches, we also need people who out of their faith and out of the understanding

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

that they are liberated by God's grace, speak out against exclusiveness within their contexts.

My colleague is a Murut. She is an evangelist, trained to lead a church congregation and to teach the Word of God. She is very competent and her family supports her wish to serve God in the church ministry. Due to ill health she cannot work on the farm in her hometown. She therefore felt sent by God to the city and to this ministry. If God's liberating grace had not reformed and changed her people, the Muruts, she might not have been able to serve God as a leader in God's church, accepted and acknowledged by both male and female members of the congregation. However, her extended family still considers it to be most important that she be "a good wife" and although happy about her having a son who will carry on the family line, her in-laws are unhappy that her health does not allow her to have another child. She and her husband have found a way of sharing responsibilities at home and work without overburdening one of them. In this case, whereas the reform of "traditional roles in the family" has already taken place within the immediate family, the extended one still has a way to go.

The member churches of the LWF are to

- Recognize the policy
- Engage in a participatory self-assessment of the assets for and challenges to the churches as they strive toward achieving gender justice.
- Analyze the participation of women and men in the life of the church...at decision-making levels, access to theological education...to address possible inequalities in these areas.
- Encourage women and men...[to move] beyond the traditional culturally assigned tasks in the life of the church and society...
- Encourage church leadership to discuss and reflect on the interpretation of sacred texts that cast a different light on the meaning of the text...new interpretations when referring to women and men's roles and responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

All these steps are important in order for reformation to take place. There will always be sin in our lives. There will always be the division between God and us, but is it not wonderful that we have been shown a better way; that sin does not have power over us anymore because of God's grace, because of our being justified by faith? Let us then make the effort and consider how God's liberating grace might free us to carry out gender justice and inclusiveness in each and every member church of the LWF.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

## QUESTIONS

*How are women and men overburdened in church and society in your context? Provide examples.*

*How far does God's liberating grace extend in church and society in your context and does your church see justice as part of God's liberating grace?*

*How can gender injustice and exclusiveness be overcome in your context? Provide practical examples from your context that you can implement.*

# EDUCATION AND THE REFORMATION

*Elżbieta Byrtek*

The Reformation changed the world by beginning a new chapter in the history of Christianity and significantly impacting various areas of life such as education, the economy, politics and culture. It made use of such new fields of knowledge as geography and astronomy, combining them with philosophy, classical languages (Latin and Greek) and new inventions, such as the printing press. It played a crucial role in education, changed social life and greatly influenced the way in which children were brought up.

## **BEING AN EDUCATED AND MATURE BELIEVER**

Martin Luther believed that the Scriptures should be accessible and understandable for everyone. This meant that everyone should be able to read and write, which was one of the goals of public education. During the Reformation, many monasteries that provided education at the time were closed down because parents preferred their children to go to work and earn money. In light of this situation, Luther repeatedly insisted on the necessity and importance of education, stressing it in his sermons and writings (e.g., “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools, 1524”<sup>1</sup> and “Sermon on Keeping Children in School, 1530”).<sup>2</sup> Luther not only emphasized the value of both

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools, 1524,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1952), 347–78.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School, 1530,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 213–58.

skills, reading and writing, but also underlined the fact that, in a changing world, the parents' knowledge and experience were not enough to help their children to understand the world around them. Luther added that the ability to make their own choices and maturity were also important and that knowledge was required in order to be able to express oneself. Education was no longer an issue for the church alone but became a public challenge. Martin Luther also openly declared that the access to education should not be determined by gender. Already in his "Treatise to the Christian Nobility," he specifically pleaded that "every town had a girls' school as well, where the girls would be taught the gospel for an hour every day either in German or in Latin."<sup>3</sup> He underlined that schools should not only be a place for teaching, singing, praying, reading and memorizing (as it was in the Middle Ages) but as "Christian schools" they should concentrate on explaining (lat. *explicatio*).

Philipp Melancthon, Martin Luther's close associate and author of many seminal religious books, Bible commentaries, philosophical writings and someone who played an important role in the compilation of the *Confessio Augustana*, the basic Lutheran confessional writing, also contributed to the translation of the Bible. Furthermore, he was a great scholar and educator, founding schools, organizing school life and reforming colleges and universities, e.g., the universities in Wittenberg, Tübingen, Leipzig and Copenhagen. He initiated many changes, not only in the field of education, and encouraged others to carry the reforms further. He intensively worked on founding new schools and prepared a draft of the list of activities for the Humanist Gymnasium in Nuremberg (a secondary school with an emphasis on Greek and Latin), a model for the next fifty schools. He underlined that every child should be educated at the elementary level, regardless of their origin and stressed the fact that since all people are equal before God, education should be available to everyone. At the time, such claims were revolutionary. Already in late medieval times, the humanists had advocated for more education, but never for the general education of all. With its focus on empowering people to be mature Christians and citizens, actively participating in social life and church services, the Reformation gradually contributed to implementing the vision of education for all.

Questions related to reforms in the field of education and laying the foundations for public education were of great importance to Melancthon. Many of his writings dealt with these issues and he underlined the importance of reconciling faith with education and training. He considered

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 206.

education to be the foundation of the development in all spheres of life. Melanchthon believed that training and education resulted from piety and claimed that education, which strengthens communities, was the key to its maturity. He once said that no fortification will make the city stronger. This can only be achieved through educated, wise and talented people.

Melanchthon was a very popular teacher and his lectures were attended by an audience of up to six hundred people. He was convinced that boredom was the enemy of science and believed in the joy of learning.

The creation of universal education can be traced back to Melanchthon. He believed it to be the task of every Lutheran parish to organize a school and to hire a teacher. Melanchthon was called Praeceptor Germaniae (teacher of Germany) and was regarded as one of the greatest educational reformers in German history. Next to him, also Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558) needs to be mentioned as he played a crucial role in developing of a new system of elementary, secondary and higher education. In several parts of Europe, the Protestant communities used those new standards when establishing their own educational system, adjusting the new proposals to their contextual realities.

In addition, as a result of the Protestant activities in the field of education, a competition developed between Jesuits and Protestants in the organization of education and work on the translation of the Bible. While Melanchthon, Bugenhagen and other Reformers took care of educational reforms among Protestant Christians, the Jesuits influenced the formation of Roman Catholic schools. The latter also tried to improve the level of education among regular Roman Catholic priests. Piotr Skarga (1536–1612), a Polish Jesuit, preacher, hagiographer, polemicist, and leading figure of the Counter-Reformation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, describes the sad condition of many priests' education during the Reformation. According to his descriptions, it was mainly scholars who used the translations; the books and the "rusty Bibles" were often laid aside unused.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF VERNACULAR BIBLE TRANSLATIONS AND CATECHISMS**

The Reformers understood that it was important to make the language of the Bible easily accessible as they wanted to encourage everyone to engage with it. This insight impacted the development of public education. Those wanting to understand the faith and its principles have to know how comprehensively to talk about it and learn how correctly to name symbols and experiences of faith. Therefore Martin Luther emphasized that it was crucial for people to have access to the Bible in their own language. Luther

recognized the importance of the Bible and what its translation means to believers. In order to spread the Word of God in the language understood by everyone, the Reformation gave people a chance to have direct access to the Bible. While some translations of the complete Bible, or some of parts of it, had been made available already before the Reformation, they were not accessible to regular church folk and to many priests.

Martin Luther also made use of the late medieval genre of catechism, a collection of certain basic explanations of Christian teaching. The catechisms became very popular among lay people as they provided a simple, yet comprehensive, explanation of the Christian faith; they encouraged theological reflection and freedom rather than uniformity in the practice of the church. Luther's "Small Catechism" or catechisms compiled according to this example were translated into several languages already during the times of the Reformation (e.g., Finnish, Polish, Estonian, Slovenian, etc.). Those catechisms became the first printed books in many of those languages and were a milestone in the development of respective literary languages.

Also in Poland the translations of the Bible and catechisms played an important role in the development of literary language. The first publication of the complete Bible in Polish dates back to 1563 and was initiated by the Reformation. Stanisław Sarnicki (1530–1594), a Polish historian, testifies that before there were only three places in Poland where the Bible could be found: the king had one, the second one belonged to the archbishop and the third one was owned by the Protestant Ostroróg family. Before the publication of the complete Bible in Polish several parts of it, for example a few Psalters, had already been translated. New translations of the Psalms, published during and after the Reformation, helped to deepen the love for the Psalms. In 1545 Mikolaj Rej's Psalter was published, and other Polish translations followed.

The first Polish translation of the New Testament (1551/1552) was prepared by Stanisław Murzynowski (1527/8–1553), a Polish writer, translator and Lutheran activist during the Reformation. Murzynowski met Luther and Melanchthon during his studies in Wittenberg. His translation was published in several editions in Królewiec/Königsberg, today's Kalininograd, and was even used by Roman Catholics who did not have their own translation. It was described as being more significant and precious to the Polish nation than the king joining new lands to the Polish kingdom. The translation was finalized at the height of the Reformation in Poland despite a number of difficulties, the most significant of which was the lack of terminology as a result of which many words and sentences were translated literally. There were many Protestant parishes in Poland at the time and their number was constantly growing as did the longing to have the complete Bible, not only the New Testament, available in Polish.



Prince Mikołaj Czarny Radziwiłł, “the Black” Radziwiłł (1515–1565), covered the costs of publishing the complete Bible translation (3000 ducats). The Brest Bible (Polish: Biblia Brzeska) was the first complete Protestant Bible translation into Polish, published in 1563 in Brest and dedicated to King Sigismund II Augustus. The dedication shows the strength of the evangelical faith. The translators had benefitted from the work of many scholars as well as from the translations of the Bible done by other communities. The Brest Bible is the result of a collaboration between academics from different disciplines—scientists, linguists and theologians.

Based on best foreign models (including the French Lefevre d’Etaples Bible) and not referring to the older Polish Catholic translation of the Vulgate, the Brest Bible is in fact the first Polish translation of the Bible from the original languages, perfectly combining the principle of fidelity to the original with the beauty of language. It reminds one of Luther’s claims that a person who wishes to translate something, must know plenty of synonyms. A translator should listen attentively to the mother in her home, children on the street, and simple people at the market, and should translate in such a manner that they can understand the translated text. The Brest Bible contains a note on the usefulness of the Scriptures and the translation as such, a short note on the content of the Bible, the order according to which biblical books were translated and, finally, instructions for reading the Bible throughout the year. It was printed in a large gothic font, annotated and included beautiful woodcuts on the title page and throughout the Old Testament. Translators talk about their work in the preface, sharing information about the fidelity of the translation to the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. It is the creation of Protestant theologians who lived in the most beautiful period of the Reformation in Poland. The power and majesty of the Scriptures correspond to the strength of the Reformation movement in those days.

## **SUNDAY SCHOOLS AND THE PREPARATION FOR CONFIRMATION**

Sunday schools date back to the late eighteenth century. Because many children were working very hard during the whole week, literacy was the main aim of Sunday classes. The Bible was an important teaching aid and the main source of the Christian faith. In the nineteenth century, Sunday schools were also called “Bible classes.” Later these turned into church services for children. These activities were led by pastors as well as by educated lay people.

The history of confirmation work reveals that this field also played a significant role in elementary education. From an educational perspective,

confirmation was preceded by intense preparations. Students took part in confirmation classes and each Lutheran child/teenager had to learn almost the whole text of Luther's "Small Catechism" by heart. For them it was a real textbook that helped them to develop their literacy skills.

In the Nordic countries, confirmation work and confirmation had a special meaning. In Denmark for instance it was not only an ecclesiastical matter, but also connected to civil rights and duties. In Norway, the law on confirmation passed in 1736 described confirmation training as one of the first forms of public education. It significantly contributed to the development of schooling. Confirmation training included some regular elements—baptismal education, catechization, which meant a public demonstration of the knowledge acquired during the period of baptismal education, a public confession of the creed and the first participation in Holy Communion. Additionally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some civil rights such as marriage or even the creation of a bank account depended on the act of confirmation. In Sweden, catechization as such was initiated by the Lutheran church. It was written into church law in 1668 that the church is responsible for the process of teaching literacy skills. The most important subject was "Christendom," which prepared pupils for confirmation. The church worked closely together with the school and frequently one of the local pastors was the chairperson of the school. This close connection between school and church persisted for a long time but, over time, it became increasingly weak. Due to the new education regulations of 1919, Luther's catechisms were replaced by various text books and schools became non-confessional institutions. In Finland, a state church system was created during the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy, which since 1686 has formally been part of the Church Act. The Finnish Lutheran church was responsible for the entire national education system and confirmation classes were prepared in a way that supported the education of the citizens. In order to get married one had to have received Holy Communion and know Luther's "Small Catechism," which required that one was literate.

Next to the importance of Sunday schools and confirmation work, one also needs to mention new initiatives that combined educational, diaconal and missionary tasks and occurred especially in the nineteenth century in urban areas. One prominent example that served as a model for many similar diaconal initiatives was the foundation of the Inner Mission (German: *Innere Mission*, also translated as Home Mission). This was a movement of German evangelists, set up by Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808–1881) in Hamburg in 1848 (Wichern had partly been inspired by the City Mission in London and Glasgow). The Inner Mission worked for the deprived people and opened new perspectives to many young people who came from socially difficult conditions.

## CHURCH EDUCATION OF LUTHERAN YOUTH

Reformation impulses had a remarkable influence on the development of education and pedagogical thinking. They contributed to the spreading of the interest in education beyond the church walls. Members of the city council were called to found elementary and modern classical grammar schools. The idea of training based on autonomy, freedom, maturity, rationality and responsibility proliferated. One of the reasons why Protestant churches were so successful in the field of education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the fact that they kept up the dialogue with the ideas of the Enlightenment. This dialogue was often not an easy one, yet it triggered many fruitful discussions within the churches.

To this day, one of the main areas of the church's work is taking care of the education of young people. The Reformation movement played a vital role by developing its own teaching systems and taking into consideration human needs and expectations. It is said that achieving the highest educational standards and professional qualifications is considered as one of the most important aspects of Protestant identity. In the diaspora, it has had an impact on the development of a positive image of the Protestant ethos.

In the Polish context, from the very beginnings of the history of Lutheranism, there are many examples of where a school was founded immediately after establishing a congregation. A school building was often even built before the church building. Just to give an example from the early days of Lutheranism in Poland: around 1550, Martin Glossa, professor at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow, arrived in Pisz, Masuria, and assumed the office of Lutheran pastor there. Founding a school, he became one of the precursors of the Polish education system.

Although numerous difficulties arose during the times of the Counter-Reformation, Polish Protestants remained very much aware of their religious identity and recognized the importance of education in building this identity. When Lutherans were forbidden to build churches with towers, they decided to build church towers with schools because those buildings belonged to them. They continued to teach the importance of education and remained clearly visible also in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wherever Protestants settled, their life in a new place started with the construction of a building that served as a school as well as a house of prayer. In central Poland, Lutherans and Reformed, coming mostly from Germany, Switzerland or the Netherlands, focused their religious life around the school. A school was not only a place of teaching but also the seat of the cantor who led the church services.

Lutheranism (as well as other mainstream Protestant movements) played a crucial role in the development of public education in Poland in

general—a commitment that is still visible: today public schools are often housed in the buildings of former Protestant schools, such as Mikołaj Rej Secondary School in Warsaw. After the political changes in Poland in 1989, Protestant educational associations started to reestablish Protestant schools and kindergartens. Today, several schools are officially called “evangelical” and these institutions have a special place in local communities. These institutions are not created for Lutherans only and their educational goals, based on ideas deriving from Lutheranism such as tolerance, openness and a Protestant ethos, apply to all believers.

Reformation through education is a key Lutheran concept; reforming education is key to the fulfilled life of society in general and individuals in particular. However, questions regarding teaching remain valid. Evangelical schools are expected to provide high quality education and to propose innovative solutions to the existing educational crisis. Polish Lutherans appreciate and cherish their history, in particular their contribution to education. On the way towards the Reformation Anniversary in 2017, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland has embarked on an open discussion on youth education.

Religious educators have repeatedly referred to the Lutheran tradition and emphasize the importance of the church's educational responsibility within the religious community, in society and at school. Religious education is not merely about communicating a doctrine to all students, but also about being a responsible church and a responsible citizen in society. It shapes each student holistically and helps to improve the quality of life. This view of religious education in Poland was developed in 1990 when religious education was reintroduced at schools.

## EDUCATION AND THE GOSPEL

Religious renewal during the Reformation underlined that the justification of every human being is solely based on faith (*sola fide*) and that faith is something given solely by grace (*sola gratia*). “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). Martin Luther insisted that the human being is justified by grace through faith and that every human being should look for a gracious God. For this purpose they need a Bible, the ability to read and write and a well-managed educational process.

If human beings have the opportunity to discover something about God and to reflect on religion and faith, they start to pose questions, seek answers and voice their concerns and doubts. This is very helpful for the process of understanding the message of the gospel: Christ's redeeming

death, the liberation from sin and the power of God's grace. Faith that is not afraid of posing questions, seeking answers and staying in dialogue with those who do not share one's own opinion, is a living faith, one that will be able to survive in today's multilateral and complex world. A world where "right" answers given by external authorities do not necessarily speak to people but where Christians, liberated by God's grace, have a responsibility to talk about this grace to others and to be ready to engage in difficult dialogues. Our Reformation tradition has never been afraid of being in dialogue with prevalent philosophical and social paradigms which have often been mutually beneficial, even if frequently controversial.

Well-educated, mature and responsible Christians and citizens have been empowered through education to understand in depth, differentiate between primary and secondary questions and to be creative, open minded and responsive to the needs of others.

## QUESTIONS

*What has been the most important contribution of your church to education? How is it linked to the ideas emerging from the Reformation?*

*Does church dogma create limits for the educational process as such?*

*In your opinion, what kind of educational responsibilities and challenges emerge from the understanding that human beings are liberated by God's grace?*



# FREED BY GOD'S LOVE TO CHANGE THE WORLD: A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

*Monica M. Villarreal*

## **YOUTH ARE LEADERS: YOUTH ARE CHURCH**

I have served as an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) for over three years. My youthfulness shocks many when I answer the church door and greet people as the pastor. I have entered hospital rooms for visitation, only to be greeted by people exclaiming, "Are you old enough to be a pastor?" And as a woman serving in a community where few women are clergy the shock is twofold. But, I have to admit, as a young female pastor, challenging people's stereotypes of what or who a pastor looks like is one of my joys of faith.

In an aging church, I will be a "young" church leader for another twenty years. Sometimes it is difficult and tiresome feeling the constant need to justify my position as a church leader. As I talk with other young pastors many feel the same way. The same is true for many young people who do not feel called into professional church leadership but desire a voice and place in congregations to serve and make a difference in their community and world. Youth are not always given the support, encouragement, or invitation to lead the church. And sometimes youth are given the opportunity to lead as long as what is said and done is exactly what has been said and done for the last several years. The church will be in a grave leadership crisis if youth are viewed as a category of church. We are church together—young and old.

I have been asked many times why I became a pastor in the church. In North America, mainline Protestant denominations are experiencing a decline in membership and the church does not hold the same power or place in society as it did years ago. It seems like a fading and insecure profession to enter.

I did not grow up in the church like many others who enter the professional church leadership. I was baptized at the age of six alongside my mother who was baptized as an adult. I do not come from a particularly religious or church-going family and I did not often attend Sunday School (faith classes) as a youngster. As a teenager, faith and church made most sense when what was said in worship or Bible class was lived out in the world. For me, helping to build a house for a homeless family helped make sense of faith. Attending youth gatherings or Bible camp offered the opportunity to be a part of intentional Christian community that felt more authentic and real. Having space to ask questions about life and faith taught me that faith is not easy. Faith includes doubt. And I learned that questions are okay. The disciples asked Jesus many questions.

I became a pastor because during all of the really hard times in my life the church was a safe haven for me. Worship gave me a sense of peace and encouragement. The youth group offered opportunities for me to learn, to grow in faith and eventually have a leadership role teaching Bible/faith classes to other youth. The church accepted me, just as I am—a child of God. Through the church I came to know the love of God and my calling to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus that transcends all of the world's brokenness.

## **FREED BY GOD'S LOVE**

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.<sup>1</sup>

In “The Freedom of a Christian,” Martin Luther emphasizes the power of faith as believing in God's promise of a new life. When we believe in God's saving grace as a gift freely given and an expression of God's love then we are freed from the worry about our place before God or about being a “good enough” person to be loved by God. When Christ died on the cross for the injustice, violence and sins of the world he said to his followers, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32).

Contrary to popular cultural values of Americans in the USA, the freedom that Luther speaks of is not freedom to do and say whatever one wants to, or to buy and sell just anything. Luther is not speaking about freedom of religion or freedom of speech or the many other “freedoms” that are the mantras of our culture today. Rather, Luther connects faith and freedom. Faith and freedom are relational. Without faith we cannot know the freedom

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520” in Harold J. Grimm, Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344.



that we have in Christ. And because we have freedom in Christ, our faith in God’s saving grace, which was poured out upon the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, we are drawn to share this love with others. Freed by God’s love we are inescapably bound to one another in Christian community both near and far. We are both “freed from” and “freed for.”

## **FREED FROM—FREED TO**

The Global Young Reformers Network<sup>2</sup> invites youth to think more deeply about what it means to be Lutheran and what it means to be Christian. Connecting through video chat, youth are encouraged to join the Young Reformers by sharing a personal story of being “Freed from” and “Freed to.” For example:

**Freed from: Perfection**—Children and teenagers in Singapore are expected to meet high standards in the pursuit of excellence. As a young person, I struggled with various issues of fear and self-worth. The breakthrough came when the Lord spoke to me through Psalm 139, where the psalmist spoke of how God created his inmost being, and knit him together in his mother’s womb. Knowing that God valued me and had a plan for me even at conception, I knew I had no reason to fear. As the psalmist writes, I praise God because “I am fearfully and wonderfully made”!

**Freed to: Service**—Knowing the grace that is in Christ Jesus, I now share that message of hope and redemption with people so that we might all come to treasure the precious gifts and talents that God has given. I actively serve in my church’s youth ministry as well as other ministries. One verse that I keep in mind at all times is the Apostle Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”

Lee “Darius” Zhen Ying (Lutheran Church in Singapore, for Asia)

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<sup>2</sup> The Global Young Reformers Network is a program of the Lutheran World Federation, created by youth, for youth. Utilizing social media we seek to create a global network of youth to build relationships and dialogue among communion churches about what it means to be Lutheran and Christian in a religiously pluralistic context. We desire to give voice to young people as leaders in their churches and in the world. We are not forming a new Lutheran church, rather we aim to strengthen existing youth ministries across the communion and accompany churches in creating new youth ministries through the work of the LWF Youth Desk. In observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation the Global Young Reformer’s theme is “Freed by God’s Love to Change the World.” Creating a network of young reformers all over the world, we want to show what this means: *ecclesia semper reformanda*—a church in ongoing reformation.

**Freed from: Immovable pews**—When I first walked into the church that I now attend every Sunday I was surprised by the way in which the worship space was arranged. The altar is at the center and all the pews were moved so that they form a circle. What I experienced there, and I still experience every Sunday, is a shared, communal liturgy in which everyone can experience the gospel. We all have active roles during the service: saying the prayer of the day, playing musical instruments or reading the gospel. Being able to worship in the round creates an awareness of each other's presence and also places us at the same level. We are equal; there is no hierarchy in a circle.

**Freed to: Creating new space**—As Lutherans we believe that while traditions are not necessary for salvation, they are sometimes good for order, tranquility and common practice. But when they do not serve their purpose, when people are uncomfortable and the church is no longer inviting and God's message does not reach everyone, then we may need to consider reorganizing the pews.

Carolina Huth (United Evangelical Lutheran Church, Argentina, for Latin America and the Caribbean)

**Freed from: Church walls**—"[T]hose who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 Jn 4:20).

Who is your neighbor? Your brother and sister? Too often church buildings become a place of walls. There are those who are "in" and those who are "out." Our identity and belonging can easily be assigned to what church we attend. The early church wrestled with belonging. Some argued, "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Paul" (1 Cor 1:12). We all belong to Christ. I have been freed from church walls to see the face of Christ in the unexpected. I have been freed from church walls to discover that God is at work in the community all around me. I have been freed from church walls to join in God's work.

**Freed to: Rebuilding community**—Although I live in the USA, the streets are not made of gold and I have yet to discover the land of milk and honey. Where I live and serve as a pastor, God calls us to rise up for justice, restore hope, and rebuild community. Significant poverty, unemployment, lack of transportation, vacant homes and violence shape people's daily lives. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and vision of Isaiah 58:6-12, I have been freed by the love of Christ for the purpose of rebuilding community.

Rev. Monica Villarreal (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for North America)

Many other stories are available at, <http://youngreformers.lutheranworld.org/updates>

## FREED TO CHANGE THE WORLD

God’s love is power for transformation. In the waters of holy baptism we are transformed by God’s love, claimed as children of God, gathered around God’s Word and sent for the sake of the world. Having faith to believe in God’s promise of new life the Holy Spirit empowers us to create new ways of being the church (the body of Christ) together. Our faithful response to God’s love cannot settle for the status quo which so often supports ways of injustice and oppression. The gospel proclaimed must compel people of faith actively to engage in the redeeming work of Christ who is already at work in the world.

Martin Luther never intended to create a new church or to change the world. He had hoped the church leadership would heed the message of faith and freedom and be compelled to have mercy on the poor and oppressed. Luther sought to realign the church with the teachings of Scripture to address abuses of power and leadership. The Protestant Reformation became a religious and social movement that took on various perspectives and contexts throughout Europe in the years during and after Luther.

It is always good to examine our personal faith, communal faith and the faith of the whole church. Our first disposition toward God is confession that we have fallen short of the glory of God and are in need of forgiveness. The continued division among people, communities, religious groups and even among Christians is cause enough for self-reflection.

Youth at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, were asked what they hoped would be changed in our world in the next five years? Many expressed concern for public health care pertaining to the current national debate. Many expressed a desire for greater gender equality and less discrimination of people. Students would like to see more sustainable and renewable energy options in the future, and there was a deep desire for more peaceable relationships between peoples and countries. Sharing and proclaiming the love of Christ was identified as being vital for changing the world and church.

Grounded in Scripture and in the tradition of the Reformation we live according to the principle *ecclesia semper reformanda*—a church in ongoing reformation. Reformation is not our work but God’s creative work of renewal.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3:16-17).

God’s love transforms.

## LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20).

In Christ, we have been freed by God's love to change the world.

## QUESTIONS

*What have you been freed from and what are you freed for?*

*What change in the world do you wish to see? How can you as a person of faith help make that change?*

*What does being Lutheran mean to you?*

# LIBERATED BY GOD’S GRACE: GRACE AND PEACE. AN ANGLICAN PERSPECTIVE

*Timothy J. Harris*

Martin Luther’s experiences that gave rise to his very public protest at Wittenberg were at once both profoundly personal and ultimately global. It was nothing less than the rediscovery and reclaiming of the gospel itself, grounded in the grace of God and appropriated by faith in Christ. The gospel message proclaimed on the authority of the church by Johann Tetzel was a selective and skewed proclamation of the gospel.

Since the time of Christ, the gospel message has been entrusted to each generation, with gospel ministry seeking to do more than simply inform a belief system, but to reform and transform people from any and every culture and nation as they accept the invitation to follow Christ. Everyone has a “theology” of sorts, some perception of “god,” even if it is some notion of “god” that is rejected by atheists. The evangelistic task for each generation is to shape and inform such perceptions of God in and through the person of Christ. This may be evangelistic in the sense of introducing people to God as revealed in Christ and bringing people to faith, but no less evangelistic in continuing to reform believers’ understanding of God by entering ever-deeper into the enormity of God, barely glimpsed in and through the gospel traditions centered on Christ.

## **A HUMBLE THESIS**

I have but one thesis to offer in this chapter, a thesis offered in the spirit of ongoing reformation and transformation: **our gospel is too small**. Whether it be the gospel we embrace personally and seek to live out, or the gospel we proclaim and commend to others, our gospel is too small.

This is not a matter of dogmatic formulation, but a broader reality of (inevitable) limitations in the scope and depth of our gospel imagination. There is an inherent dynamic influencing and shaping every generation by which we domesticate the gospel to our own needs and preferences, and reduce it to terms shaped in significant ways by our culture (whether to accommodate, challenge, subvert or transform). The gospel cannot be “owned” by any one culture over against another, and every culture has unique capacities to give expression to gospel truths in ways often overlooked or unrecognized in other cultures and times.

To say “our gospel is too small” is not in itself a criticism, but a truth statement. Our understanding of the gospel will invariably be too small, shaped in part by our limitation in imagination and understanding, but also because of our inevitable cultural blinkers and blind spots. The eyes through which we perceive the gospel are calibrated and orientated around our own experiences, values and “norms” of life. What is “normal” to us and our expectations of life are very different to the experiences and expectations of others.

If my thesis above is in anyway true, then our response should be one of an increased appetite, a hunger for a bigger, richer, deeper understanding of the gospel. I am not seeking to instill a sense of guilt, much less a claim to a greater or truer understanding of the gospel over against others. It is rightly said that at the moment our reading of the teaching and example of Jesus ceases to confront, confound and challenge us that is the moment we have stopped hearing and engaging as disciples. It is no less true with the gospel. We cannot—and must not—reduce it to neatly packaged formulations and explanations and leave it at that. As many have expressed, the gospel of Christ is a wild gospel, a dangerous gospel, and a gospel that exceeds our capacity to comprehend and express.

The apostle Paul struggled to find adequate words to give expression to this gospel. In praying that the Ephesian church (and wider network) may know the riches of the Father’s glory, strengthened through the power of God’s Spirit, and experienced through the dwelling of Christ in their hearts, Paul prayed that “rooted and grounded in love” they may be granted “the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge [...] filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19).

At this point (Eph 3:20) Paul struggled with the inadequacy of language, and drew on a cluster of terms to invite the hearer to think bigger, to recognize a gospel “abundance” that exceeds our comprehension and imagination. The phrase, “able to accomplish abundantly,” perhaps might be conveyed as “able to do infinitely, greatly, ‘abundantly—and more’ above all.” It is a cluster of terms that appeal to the highest notion of comparison imaginable—and exceeds it.

In what ways do we diminish the gospel? First, we need to distinguish between the “how” of the gospel, from the “what” of the gospel. As Luther so robustly asserted and protested, we cannot—and must not—add anything to the “how” of the gospel. The gospel as the “power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom 1:16) is established entirely in God’s grace and in and through the saving work of Christ alone.

It is one thing to affirm that nothing can be added to the “how” of the gospel, but quite another thing when it comes to describing what this salvation looks like. Our gospel proclamation must include both the “how” and the “what.” Our concern to underscore the “by grace alone” dimension tends to focus on the “how” side of things, while speaking of what that grace looks like, what it achieves, is too often given less attention. It is at precisely this point that we invariably diminish the “what” of the gospel.

In what ways then may we say our gospel is too small? Any answer to this will of course need to be varied, and recognize that the gospel is given a wide range of expression in differing contexts and through a variety of church and theological traditions. My thoughts below reflect my own context—essentially Western articulations of the gospel, and especially those associated with Reformed and Protestant traditions. Given this caveat, I suggest that our gospel is:

- **Selective:** Our reading of Scripture with reference to what we recognize as the “gospel” is invariably selective. Reformed traditions tend to privilege Pauline expressions of the gospel, and more often than not are oriented primarily around Romans and Galatians. Yet there is more to Paul’s Gospel than addressed in Romans and Galatians, and there is more to the New Testament articulation of the gospel than identified with Paul. Where does the proclamation of Christ and the gospel traditions expressed in the Synoptic Gospels fit within our understanding of the gospel? How do we give expression to Johannine expressions of the gospel, or Lucan gospel theology, and that of the writer to the Hebrews and the “catholic” epistles? There is a profound unity of confession in the Lordship of Christ, but many distinctive streams make up this gospel tradition, and it is dangerous to privilege one over another. A more faithful approach is to draw widely on the rich gospel tapestry reflected in Scripture.
- **Reductionist:** Our desire for clarity and simplicity of message very often results in gospel summaries and schemas. While these may be effective in introducing gospel truths, they must never replace the richness and vastness of the gospel as reflected in Scripture, any more than a cartoon might replace a great work of art. Yet the danger

of reductionism is deeper than gospel summaries and schemas. It is all too easy to reduce the gospel in ways that reflect our personal preferences in discerning truth and making sense of life. For some, it will be reducing the gospel to a series of propositional statements or affirmations. All may be true and well founded, but the gospel is also expressed evocatively and with an appeal to the imagination in Scripture. For others, it will be to focus on the experiential and the language of the heart and devotion. Again, this may be very true and faithful, but not at the cost of setting aside gospel affirmations found in Scripture. Either way, there is a very real danger of reductionism.

- **Individualist:** The moment we say “our Father” we automatically have brothers and sisters in the family of Christ. There is a great confusion in our Western thinking between “personal” and “individual.” Salvation always has a profoundly personal character. We are known to God by name, a knowledge that started before we were created, and continues into eternity where our place within the kingdom of God is no less in personal terms. However, our personal relationship with God is not to be confused with an individual relationship with God. We are never individuals in the sense that we stand alone and apart from all other relationships. This is just not possible in our relationship with God, where we are required to recognize our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, and those who are otherwise pushed to the margins of society. We are never individuals in that sense. Yet, a proclamation of the gospel is often expressed in very individual terms, and runs a very real risk of reflecting our very individualistic Western culture, where (so media frequently tells us) life is “all about me.” Expressed in such terms, our message can sound as though the gospel is similarly “all about me,” and my need for the assurance that I’m alright with God. If this is the sum total of the gospel message, then it neglects a profound dimension of the great commandment, where our relationship with our neighbor is no less important than our relationship with God. Redemption certainly involves personal forgiveness and reconciliation, our sins washed away through the blood of Jesus. Our gospel should be no less personal, but so much more than addressing our personal needs alone.
- **Dualist:** The separation of the spiritual from the material and physical realms is a Greek way of thinking that is not reflected in Scripture. The flesh and blood realities of life as God has created it is no less a dimension of life within the kingdom than the spiritual realm. Again, the gospel may be presented in terms that imply that all that truly matters is “spiritual” salvation and the entry of our “soul” into the



heavenly realm, while the material is ultimately insignificant. Salvation is presented as a spiritual reality over against material or physical realities. However, Scripture never separates the spiritual from the material, and indeed has a fear of being stripped “naked” in the sense of being without a body (2 Cor 5:3). When Paul speaks of the “spiritual” over against the “physical” (1 Cor 15:44) he is not speaking in material terms, but in terms of what it is that animates or drives us. How we were shaped and energized by the Spirit, over against being driven by the “flesh” (understood as our human rebellious nature). The proclamation of the gospel and God’s work of salvation is in and through creation in its fullness, and we dishonor the gospel when we separate or strip away the physical and material world as being of no significance to the gospel message. This world does matter, and God’s creative purposes have not been set aside. Our gospel becomes too small when we separate salvation from creation, and God’s ongoing mission in bringing creation to be all that it was created to be and to become. More on this later.

- **Stripped of the great scriptural narrative:** Salvation comes to us in Scripture as part of a much bigger narrative. The gospel is in a very profound sense God’s story, from the creation of this world, the drama of a disobedient humanity, and a fall from grace that impacts on all the world, the integrated storylines of redemption, the gathering of people of God, called and chosen by God to be a blessing to all nations, all of which prepares for and culminates in the story of Christ—the gospel cannot be separated from this greater narrative without becoming less than the gospel as revealed in Scripture. We will never fully comprehend the extent of this narrative that reaches back before the creation of this world, and will reach its ultimate expression when the kingdom reign of God comes in its fullness.
- **In need of perpetual reformation:** The gospel is bigger than any and every culture, and no ethnic grouping, nation or culture can claim any supremacy in their particular expression of the gospel. In cultural terms, the gospel needs to be continually “translated” into the many and varied expressions of gospel articulation, proclamation and lived realities that are part and parcel of human life. Whether the gospel challenges, confronts, accommodates or transforms, the evangelistic outcome sought is the same in each case—a better, richer and healthier version of that culture and society, not the imposition of another culture from elsewhere. There is no default “gospel culture,” except as translated into and given expression in and through the social and

cultural diversity across this planet, and across the ages. And just as culture is dynamic and continually being reinterpreted and given new expression, so too the gospel needs to be perpetually reforming as it spreads, grows and extends in making disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19).

The realization that our gospel is invariably too small should not only instill in us a hunger to go deeper and to expand our horizons. It should help us to see a richness in our received gospel traditions that may be all-too-easily overlooked in our familiarity with time-honored gospel terminology.

At this point, however, we need to ask a more fundamental question. Just what did the word “gospel” mean to the average person in the world of the early church? The word “gospel” simply means “good news,” and just what the message of “good news” indicated depends on who is making the pronouncement. In the Graeco-Roman world of the New Testament, the public announcement of “good news” frequently orientated around the emperor, with associated assurances of benefaction (grace) and peace at the hands of the emperor, reinforcing claims of lordship, dedication and loyalty.

## **GRACE AND PEACE**

Within Scripture, two terms that are frequently paired together function as icons of the gospel: grace and peace. Grace speaks of the character of God, and all that flows from this quality and attribute of God's being: God is a God of grace, the ultimate Giver. The existence of all things cannot be explained or valued without reference to the grace of God. This is given profound expression at the end of Romans 11 (verses 33–36) as Paul brings his extended treatment and statement of the gospel as “the power of God for salvation” in Romans 1 to 11 to completion. The passage merits repeating in full:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen

## **GOD THE GIVER**

God is the ultimate Giver. There is not a single person in all the world, nor in all history, to whom God is in any way indebted. Who is in any position to give God anything, to offer God advice, or claim to know the mind of

God? The grace of God is as extensive as the phrase “all things,” and in the context of Paul’s argument reflects Romans 1:18 through to the reference to the gifts and calling of God to Israel (Rom 11:29), now extended to all those identified “in Christ.” The threefold “from him and through him and to him” probably reflects the threefold graces of creation, redemption and final salvation.

The grace of God is revealed in the mission of God, God in action. From the first words of Scripture, God is at work. God creates, moves, speaks, forms, brings order, shares God’s dwelling place. God provides, brings forth fruitfulness and growth, and invites, enables and expects humanity to share in the outworking of God’s grace.

## PEACE AND THE GIFTS OF GOD

Our appreciation of the grace of God is given profound liturgical expression in a classic Anglican prayer of thanksgiving (this version based on *An Australian Prayer Book*):

Almighty God and merciful Father,  
we give you humble and hearty thanks  
for all your goodness and loving kindness  
to us and to all people.  
We praise you for creating and sustaining us  
and for all the blessings of this life;  
but above all for your amazing love  
in redeeming the world by our Lord Jesus Christ,  
giving us grace and the hope of glory.  
Give us such a sense of all your goodness,  
that we may be truly thankful and may praise you  
not only with our lips, but in our lives,  
by serving you in holy and righteous ways;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,  
be all honour and glory, now and for ever.  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Within the wider biblical narrative, the evocative imagery of the Garden of Eden as a place of safety and flourishing, of sanctuary as being drawn into the residence of God and of Sabbath rest as the goal (*telos*) of creation

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<sup>1</sup> *A Prayer Book for Australia* (Mulgrave Vic: Broughton Publishing, 1995), 16.

are revisited time and again. Like a semantic basket, the rich Hebrew term *shalom* gathers up such notions and provides another expression of the gospel as the “peace of God,” a peace that is at once profoundly personal, yet extended to all creation (Romans 8) and ultimately cosmic.

The notion of *shalom* is effectively summed up in a quote from Cornelius Plantinga:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.<sup>2</sup>

The “promised land,” the goal of the journey out of slavery (the “exodus”) and through the wilderness, the realization of the land promised to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, is expressed in terms of being a “sanctuary” (Ex 15:17). The well-known priestly blessing drawn from Numbers 6:24–26 sets the blessing from God in parallel to the quality of *shalom* received from God. In Deuteronomy, the land about to be entered is similarly described in Edenic-type terms (Deut 8:7–9), and the prophets use *shalom* as descriptive of redemptive hope: e.g., Isaiah 32:17; 48:18; 53:5; 60:17.

By the time of the New Testament, *shalom* had become the primary Jewish form of greeting (welcome and farewell). This is specifically picked up in Paul’s variation in his greetings “grace and peace,” which become his short hand for the gospel itself. The “peace” here (*eirenē*) is very much an expression of the *shalom* motif.

The language of salvation/being saved (*soteria*/*sōzō*) also has significant overlap with *shalom* (conceptually and theologically), and in the Synoptic Gospels includes social, mental, psychological and spiritual healing—very much in a holistic sense (avoiding a body/soul dualism). About one third of the content of the Synoptic Gospels details the outworking of *soteria* in the form of healings (understood in a wide semantic range)—this is what *shalom* looks like as a foretaste of the fullness of the kingdom.

The work of the cross and resurrection also relates to the work of God in Christ establishing “peace”: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

have obtained access to this grace in which we stand [...]” (Rom 5:1–2a). Similarly, understanding the “first fruits” of the resurrection as expressed in the New Testament as an all-encompassing reality—all creation is redeemed to become all it was and is intended to be. The “new creation” motif here is similarly tied to the prophetic vision of shalom being realized through the kingdom of God.

In the Gospel of John the motif of “life” is similarly tied to a quality of life now breaking into the present order through Jesus (Jn 10:10: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”), and is also expressed through the language of “peace”—for example, John 20:19–26—“Peace be with you”; compare the commission in Luke 10:5 “Peace to this house.” Paul also uses similar language in “proclaiming peace” (Eph 2:17) to both Jews and Gentiles, and in doing so “In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21). In short, “preaching peace” is the realization of shalom through Christ and the Spirit, now manifest in the community of the church.

Similar connections can be made with references to God’s provision of “rest” (Mt 11:28), and the movement of the people of God towards a state of “rest” (as the fulfillment of the promised land); see Hebrews 4.

Returning to Paul, the quality of shalom-peace is a distinctive attribute of experiencing the mind of Christ. The notion of “mind” is much wider than our narrow post-enlightenment limitation of mind to rational capacities. In the world of St Paul such “thinking” conveys a much deeper sense of intellect, desires, emotions, ambitions and will, combining to produce an “attitude of mind.”

It is in this sense that Paul highlights in Philippians 4 what it means to be drawn into the “mindset” of Jesus. The path to true joy and the absence of anxiety is found in thinking as Christ does. Shalom, heart and mind and the gospel converge:

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil 4:7–9).

## **GRACE, PEACE AND LIBERATION**

When the breadth of the gospel is understood in such terms, a variety of dimensions of liberation may be identified, the outworking of the gospel of

grace that speaks as profoundly to today's contexts as it did in the world of the early church.

## **LIBERATED FROM PRESSURES OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

Questions of how to live the “good life” featured as much in the ancient world as they do today. For some in the ancient world, the answer was to live entirely in the present: this is as good as it gets, so you may as well “eat, drink and be merry,” for future prospects are bleak. This was essentially a nihilist outlook on life, devoid of greater purpose or any ground for future expectation. It was life without any deeper reason for hope. For others, the safest option was to withdraw into oneself. Where could someone go to find things which no one else can impact or control? The answer was to look within, and the capacity to respond to external matters (or people) that the individual alone was able to make. Such ancient approaches to the “good life” have popular counterparts in our world today.

It is true that to withdraw into that space in which we alone may respond holds anything or anyone who may threaten us at arm's length. It is true that a certain freedom may come in discounting any enduring or profound value in things that are external and transitory. However, the cost of such inner protection from anything that may disturb us is that it leaves us in a very lonely place. It has little space for sympathy or compassion (sharing in the joys or pains of others), and resembles Paul Simon's classic song “I am a rock”:

I've built walls,  
A fortress deep and mighty,  
That none may penetrate.  
I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.  
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.  
I am a rock,  
I am an island.<sup>3</sup>

In another direction, the desire for self-sufficiency is the ambition to depend on no one, and to be in no person's debt. It is an approach to life that minimizes the need for faith or trust in others, for we control as much as possible. We are “masters and mistresses” of our own destinies. An inverse version of this approach to life is reflected in the rhetoric that “you can do whatever you want,” if you have sufficient resolve and determination.

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<sup>3</sup> At [www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/simongarfunkel/iamarock.html](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/simongarfunkel/iamarock.html)

While it may be commended for encouraging people to have a go and not to be constrained by fears or an undue powerless identity, this approach only takes us so far, and nagging questions arise of “what if I cannot control everything?” or “what if I fail or my capacities are diminished in some way?” The end result is very frequently used to increase stress and anxiety levels. To be lord over our own lives results in making much depend on our own capacity to deliver our hopes, dreams and ambitions. And deep down, that can be a profoundly anxious place to be.

The gospel of liberation, whether articulated by Jesus (e.g., Mt 6:24-25) or Paul (e.g., Rom 6:19-20), locates true freedom not in self-sufficiency, but in being devoted to the most trustworthy and grace-filled of “masters,” the Lord Jesus Christ. The language of becoming “enslaved” to God is the language of devotion to one who is worthy of our dedication, and through whom we are given life now and into eternity:

But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:22-23).

In the words of another classic Anglican prayer, the “Collect for Peace,” addressed to “God the author of peace,” continues with the memorable affirmation “whose service is perfect freedom.” The God of grace and peace provides in the gospel the ultimate foundation for true liberation, at once both personal yet extended to all creation, inaugurating a realm where heaven and earth is in a process of becoming one reality.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

I offer three brief reflections in conclusion.

First, any reconsideration of the breadth and extent of the gospel must be shaped by the breadth and extent of the overarching biblical narrative. The Scriptural account of God revealed in action, from Genesis 1 through to Revelation 22, is a story that develops in the purposes of God from creation, through redemption in and through Christ, towards the fulfillment of God’s missional purposes in the new creation, all that creation was intended to be and to become.

Secondly, locating the gospel in such terms also affirms that our service in the “here and now” matters. In the grace of God we are drawn into the mission of God. Our endeavors undertaken as we seek “excelling in the work of the Lord” will not prove in vain (1 Cor 15:58). In the greater biblical narrative there is continuity extending from the present realm into the

fullness of the kingdom. Having said that, we live in anticipation of the “not yet,” the confidence, hope and assurance that the best is yet to come.

Finally, a deepening of our understanding of the greatness of the gospel will result in a rediscovery of our awe and joy in God's purposes. In God's grace, we are part of the ongoing drama of creation and redemption. We are part of something so much bigger than ourselves. As in every generation, the challenge of our times is to rediscover our confidence in the gospel, to see God at work no less in our own time and experiences. The mission of God is seen in the sending of God of God's Son, who has promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age. The sending of God is seen in the sending of the Spirit, the ultimate “game changer” in sanctifying and transforming the people of God. This spirit of adoption extends to both the children of God (Rom 8:16) and to all creation as it waits redemption from the present travails, together drawn into the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

Martin Luther's discovery of the grace of God not only addressed his own need for personal assurance from his spiritual angst, it sparked a movement of ongoing reform, the heart of which must always be shaped by and draw us back to a deeper appreciation of the great gospel message of grace and peace. To God be the glory!

## QUESTIONS

*If someone outside the church approached you and asked, “What is a Christian?” (rather than “How do you become a Christian?”), how might you answer?*

*This chapter argues that the gospel is personal, but never individual (in the sense that it is just a matter between us and God). Do you agree, and what are the relational implications of the gospel?*

*The Christian message is often perceived by people outside the church to be quite a negative one (about things you have to stop doing): how might the church convey a more positive witness to the gospel understood as “grace and peace/shalom” in both word and action?*



# BIBLE STUDY: ISAIAH 55:1-2

*Zephania Kameeta*

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food (Isa 55:1-2).

## **INTRODUCTION**

To each and every Namibian, young and old, this divine invitation in the prophecy of Isaiah is indeed Good News to their ears and fills their hearts with great joy. The invitation is amazing and exciting.

[C]ome to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

This is unbelievable! Not only those who are privileged, but all those who are thirsty are invited. No one is left behind. The invitation is also talking of “waters” and not just water. This means that there is plenty of water the supply of which will never be exhausted and each and everyone will have more than enough—not just for a few days, but for a whole lifetime.

## **SIMILARITIES IN CLIMATE BETWEEN NAMIBIA AND ISRAEL/PALESTINE**

The Mediterranean climate of Israel/Palestine is characterized by long, hot, dry summers. Rainfall is unevenly distributed, decreasing sharply as

one moves southward. In the extreme south, rainfall averages less than 100mm annually. Rainfall varies from season to season and from year to year, particularly in the Negev Desert.

In the same way, Namibia's climate is hot and dry with erratic rainfall. Within Africa its climate is second only to the Sahara in its aridity. The average annual rainfall varies from less than 50mm along the coast to 350mm in the central interior and 700mm in the northeast. As in Israel/Palestine, rainfall varies from season to season and from year to year.

According to the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation, Namibia spends about three percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GNP) on the operation of its water utilities. This is by far the highest percentage of all Sub-Saharan countries. Per capita, Namibia spends about 80 USD annually on water supply and sanitation, while other countries in the region spend between 1 and 10 USD. In Namibia, providing direct access to water costs approximately 4,000 USD per capita on average.

Despite the shortage of water, the peoples of Israel/Palestine and Namibia, regard their countries as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8)—and I am not excluded.

Therefore, when we hear the Isaiah's metaphor of water in God's invitation we in Namibia exactly understand this means.

## **NOT FOR SALE—sola gratia (VERSE 1)**

The Reformation takes us back to the roots of Scripture. While the world is shouting at the poor, "Go away"—especially you the masses with no money or collateral, you who are not known or have no connection with those on top of the power structures—the Word of God is calling all who thirst for justice and peace. Here God's grace is at play versus the harsh and merciless capital which chases millions away to the rubbish dumps of this world, while the very few are filling their pockets with the wealth derived from the resources of all. Come and do not go away! This calling overrules the rejection by this world. The "go away" pronounced by those with capital power against the poor, lead to death; God's call to all of us to come leads to life in all its fullness.

While the world is dividing us into classes, God is calling each and every one of us—all. This is how we know God. When God sent Moses to Pharaoh, God did not say, Let some of my people go. God simply said, Let my people go. God loved the world and not only some in the world, and gave God's one and only Son. God's grace does not select some or divide into classes but it includes all who admit that they are thirsty.

Our commemoration of the 500 years of Reformation must address practically and meaningfully the thirst of millions of our people in our

different countries. They thirst for justice and peace in their countries. We are thinking here about the thousands and millions who had to flee their homes and countries because of religious intolerance; those who on a daily basis are facing the ultra-barbarism of our times and are killed mercilessly; the millions who are thirsty for the eradication of the growing gap between the rich and the poor; women and men who are thirsty for gender justice and equality; the young people who are thirsty for employment; and those who are working but whose salaries are almost entirely eaten up by the high costs of rents for apartments—all of them thirst for a dwelling place of their own.

All the things that cause so much suffering in our world today are pointing to spiritual emptiness. Therefore, there is no excuse for churches born out of the Reformation not to take the lead in addressing these ailments haunting our generation and those to come, in a decisive and urgent way. We have spent a lot of time talking, what is now needed is action.

We are invited to come and to buy without money and without cost. If there is no money and no cost involved, why are we buying then? Why not “just come and take it?” What we are being offered is not cheap but expensive, not in the value of the world, but in God’s value. Therefore this cannot be bought with money or any other riches of this world. No one in this world is able to pay for or buy that which is offered by God except God—and God already did that by giving God’s Son to die for us so that we can be saved and live in his death and resurrection. We buy what is offered by God, not with our earthly possessions but with what God has already paid for. And this kind of divine transaction is what is called: The grace of God.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8–9).

## **THE ROOT OF THE SORES HAUNTING HUMANITY (VERSE 2)**

“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” This question points to sores from which we are suffering today: The European Union Bail Out of its member countries as a way of addressing the Euro zone crisis; the alarmingly growing gap between rich and poor; abject poverty; maternal mortality; malnutrition as an underlying cause of the death of infants and young children; corruption and theft of national resources from countries that lack the know-how of adding value to what is taken in big quantities from their lands; terrorism; refugees; untold suffering and the death of thousands of people who are not directly involved in the current wars to name but some.

If we only listened to this wake-up call and spend what is valuable for real bread and labor on what does satisfy, our world would be different and a better place to live in. The basis on which we are building to change the world for the better is completely wrong and therefore it produced the above mentioned and will make it worse, leading to total destruction. The foundation is wrong because it is the insatiable love for wealth (Mammon). Anything or anyone in way of that beastly love is crushed and destroyed. Money is spent for what is not bread but for crushing, destroying and poisoning humanity; creation is destroyed for the benefit of a handful greedy people and millions of poor workers are exploited to labor for what does not satisfy them and humanity as a whole.

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul points to a right foundation for believers, but also to all humanity especially for the world today:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. [...] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. [...] If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:9-13, 16, 18)

The way in which we deal with our earthly possessions and with people around us must not be detached or separated from these divine values expressed so eloquently by the Apostle. Sincere love, the hate of evil and love of what is good; the loving devotion to each other and to humanity; respect for each other, humanity and the creation; joy and hope for the well-being of all; sharing and hospitality; harmony among one another, the nations and creation; humility and embracing those people of low positions and the radiation of peace wherever you are, should be the inspiration and basis of how one deals with one's money and earthly possessions. Equally, this is also what should happen within and between churches, governments and nations. This kind of Bail Out will yield more desirable fruits for all of humanity and the entire creation.

Governments and nations are deliberately blind to this simple but very powerful message of the prophets and apostles, therefore the churches commemorating 500 years of Reformation are challenged to put these prophetic and apostolic values into a reforming action. This indeed should be at the core of the commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. This will give relevance to the sub-themes of the Anniversary: Salvation not for sale; Human beings not for sale; Creation not for sale.

## WHAT THIS INVITATION MEANS TO US HERE IN NAMIBIA

“And you that have no money, come, buy and eat”—this is of great relevance to us today and is indeed good. In the twenty-five years after independence there have been many serious attempts to address and fulfill the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), but there still remain many challenges that need urgent and further serious consideration and action.

It is general knowledge that in this twenty-first century over 3 million children around the world still die every year of hunger, and Namibia is no exception. It is not for fun that children are scouring the rubbish dumps of our towns and villages around the country—they are trying to find something there which might fill their stomachs. Primary education in Namibia is now free of charge, but going to school on an empty stomach is a painful exercise and therefore, as a result of hunger, many children drop out of school and are exposed to all sorts of dangers and vices. When you see them you would not immediately notice that they are hungry, but after talking to them and knowing them closely, you realize that they have not eaten for a week or more.

As Ramadhani Abdallah Noor, a Tanzanian doctor and research associate at the Harvard School of Public Health and New Voices Fellow at the Aspen Institute wrote in September 2014,

As an African doctor, I know that the ravages of serious malnutrition and hunger are not always visible. They are not always as manifest as they are in the protruding ribs of ghostly children hooked up to feeding tubes, like those I used to see in hospital wards in Tanzania. Chronic malnutrition, or “hidden hunger,” shows itself in other ways—but it can be just as devastating and deadly. And while deaths from many other diseases, including acute malnutrition, have declined, hidden hunger remains pervasive.<sup>1</sup>

Not only young children are suffering from hunger, but also students. Those who do not stay in a hostel, but come from outside, survive the whole day at the university on a meager or no meal; and this adversely impacts their studies. As Noor notes,

In Africa, hunger remains the leading cause of death in children, accounting for half of all deaths of children under the age of five and killing more than AIDS, TB, and malaria combined.

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<sup>1</sup> At [www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ramadhani-a--noor-laments-the-scourge-of-malnutrition-ravaging-the-continent-s-children](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ramadhani-a--noor-laments-the-scourge-of-malnutrition-ravaging-the-continent-s-children)

## Furthermore

Addressing this ongoing crisis requires money—**an estimated \$10 billion per year**—and new and better strategies to bring life-saving solutions to the mothers and children who most need them.

But the cost looks far less daunting when one considers the cost of hunger. UNICEF estimates that the cost of Africa's child malnutrition is **\$25 billion a year**. And this is not the whole story. Malnutrition costs an estimated **\$3.5 trillion every year** to the global economy, owing to loss of productivity and higher health-care costs.<sup>2</sup>

I firmly believe that one of the new and better strategies to implement life-saving solutions for those who are ravaged by abject poverty and hunger is a national Basic Income Grant (BIG), which proved itself at Otjivero, and will drastically reduce poverty and unemployment, increase economic activities and improve educational outcomes and the health condition of the majority of the people of Namibia. As one aspect of redistribution the BIG needs to be accompanied by other measures to achieve transformative structural changes.

It is a false notion that giving money to the poor is like putting water in a bottomless pit. BIG will stimulate and inspire economic activity, growth and prosperity, not only for the poor, but for the country at large. It will furthermore uplift and bring life to the rural areas and this, in turn, will gradually remove the burden of supplying water and electricity to the urban areas, because as a result of economic activities in the rural areas, people will be attracted to move back there.

This happened on a smaller scale when people moved back from Windhoek and other places to Otjivero, because of the economic activities and life there. Therefore BIG will not only lift up and benefit the poor, but benefit the country and set us firmly on the course of a developed country in which the gap between rich and poor is narrowed and redistribution takes place, toward prosperity for all.

This is not an unrealistic dream or utopia, but an attainable reality for which many have suffered and sacrificed their lives. What we need to achieve now is the political will of unselfish leaders who carry the needs of the poor and of the whole country in their hearts. We equally need courageous and committed women and men who, walking in the footsteps of the prophets and apostles, confront the gods of capital and greed and challenge them with the good news of liberation, justice and peace for the poor.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

This should have happened the day before yesterday and not today. For Namibia it should have been twenty-five years ago. The poor and the hungry are tired of words, they want to see actions of redemption! The text of this Bible study does not say, Come so that you can be counted or registered or so that research can be done why you are thirsty; but just simply, come and drink. This is what is needed in this hour of need. Those in need want help now before they perish. Now is your hour and your moment. Budgets and money are not the question: come, eat and drink, so that you can live.

I want to conclude this article with my contextual translation of Isaiah 55:1-2:

You are free!  
The Lord says,  
Come, everyone who thinks  
he is still a slave –  
liberation is at hand!  
Come, you who believe  
you are nobody,  
come out and be somebody!  
Come! Buy justice and integrity–  
it will cost you nothing!  
Why continue living like nobody  
while I am making you somebody again?  
Why continue living like a slave  
while liberation is a reality?  
Listen to me and act on what I say,  
and you will enjoy life in its fullness.





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