

Is the church always repenting or always reforming? The Rev. Dr. Werner Klän's keynote address to the 24th European Lutheran Conference, Antwerp, Belgium, outlines the answer.

REFORMATION THEN AND NOW: ECCLESIA SEMPER REFORMANDA

by Werner Klän

Preliminary Note

BEFORE WE TURN TO UNDERSTAND what it might mean that “the church is always to be reformed,” we must note that this phrase was first used by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth in 1947. It can be shown that an early example is Jodocus van Lodenstein,¹ who claims the “truth ... that also in the Church there is always much to reform.” Another version of the term *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (“the reformed church [is] always to be reformed”) is widely but informally used in Reformed and Presbyterian churches today as their motto. Interestingly, the first term was used by Hans Küng and others in the Roman Catholic Church already prior to the Second Vatican Council. There the formula, in a slightly different verbalisation, found its way into the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 8): “The Church ... at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.”² The expression, thus, has become the demand for an ongoing reformation claimed by many a Christian and kind of common knowledge of — not only — Protestant mainstream self-conception in our age.

Although the formula in its wording is of recent origin only, the issue that it points to can be traced back to the seventeenth century as Theodor Mahlmann has proven in his contribution to the festschrift for Bengt Häggglund in 2010.³ Johannes Hoornbeek, professor of theology at

the University of Leiden (1617–1666), coined the phrase that “every Reformed Christian is one to reform;” and Hoornbeek strives for a reform pertaining to all levels of the church, including even its doctrine.⁴ Much more intriguing, however, is the fact that the first evidence of the proposition that “in the church, reformation is always required” is found in the writings of a Concord-Lutheran theologian, Friedrich Balduin (1575–1628), professor primarius at the University of Wittenberg.⁵ This thesis, however, is directed against the intrusion of false doctrine, a reversal of the gospel, a lapse of faith, and at the same time, positioned to retain the apostolic doctrine that cannot be eliminated.⁶

If the observation is correct, that the phrase “ecclesia semper reformanda” encompasses some ambiguities, to say the least, how then do we as confessional Lutheran churches in the twenty-first century position ourselves over against such a claim? I should like to discuss this question in five sections of my presentation:

1. Sixteenth Century Reformation and Nineteenth Century Confessional Lutheranism as “Modern” Approaches to the Formation of the Church
2. Principles of Confessional Lutheran Identity
3. The Challenge and the Mission of the Church
4. Repentance as the Core Attitude of the Christian Church: *Ecclesia Semper Paenitens*

¹ Jodocus van Lodenstein, *Beschouwinge van Zion* (Contemplation of Zion) (Amsterdam, 1674–1678): (“Sekerlijk de Gereformeerde Waarheyd ... leert dat in de Kerke ook altijd veel te herstellen is.”)

² “Ecclesia ... sancta simul et semper purificanda, poenitentiam et renovationem continuo prosequitur.”

³ Theodor Mahlmann, “‘Ecclesia semper reformanda.’ Eine historische Aufklärung. Neue Bearbeitung,” in *Hermeneutica Sacra: Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Historia Hermeneutica*, eds. Torbjörn Jhansson, Robert Kolb, and Johann Anselm Steiger, Series Studia 9 (Berlin / New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 381–442.

⁴ Mahlmann, “Ecclesia semper reformanda,” 426–432, here 431: “Omnis reformatus est & reformans.”

⁵ Mahlmann, “Ecclesia semper reformanda,” 438–442, here 438: “Semper in ecclesia opus est reformation.”

⁶ Mahlmann, “Ecclesia semper reformanda,” 440, but even confessional Lutheran theologians of the nineteenth century, like Wilhelm Loehe, spoke about an elaboration that was needed in the church, as its reformation was incomplete in the consequences of its doctrine. Friedrich Schleiermacher, on the other hand, noted that progress in the church meant “restoration,” or “restitution,” but not “melioration.”

5. Towards the Celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

The answer I am trying to suggest may be conducted by two of the 95 Theses published by Martin Luther in 1517: “1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance,” and “62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”⁷

1. Sixteenth Century Reformation and Nineteenth Century Confessional Lutheranism as “Modern” Approaches to the Formation of the Church

A historical truth is apparent and seems to me irrefutable: the Lutheran Reformation was in its time in academic theology, politically, and in many social areas, a forward-looking, if not to say progressive, movement. Realizing that the reform of the church, as effected by the Reformation, was concerned with the rediscovery of the gospel and the necessity of preserving the one church does not alter this assessment. In my opinion it is undeniable that the confessional age, which produced such important basic works as the Augsburg Confession and the Book of Concord, both now an integral part next to the Bible as the main sources of confessional Lutheran identity, made a considerable, if not essential, contribution towards modernizing early modern society and forming states in Europe.⁸

At the root of these “modern” developments lies Luther’s distinction of the “two kingdoms,” or two realms, which provides a way for distinguishing between penultimate realities, values, and goals on the one hand, and the ultimate destiny of human existence on the other. One might tend to blame Luther and the Lutheran confessions for having initiated, instigated, and theologically legitimized the decline of what used to be “Christian Europe” into secularization. This process, however, was far more complex and cannot be reduced to a monocausal

and linear deduction. On the contrary, the Lutheran distinction of the two realms exonerates the church by restricting its tasks to the proclamation of law and gospel apart from ruling and regulating the affairs of state and society. This fundamental distinction does not at all intimate that the law of God would not apply to mundane matters, and thus the application of God’s universal will would have no place in the proclamation of the church; quite the opposite. The “political use of the law” has to be an integral part of the church’s message.⁹

But the church, being according to its Magna Charta in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession the “assembly of saints” commissioned to “purely preach and teach the Gospel and to rightly administer the sacraments” (AC VII,1 [Kolb-Wengert, 43]), does not strive for totalitarian domination of the world: “For the Gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one,” and “does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage” (AC XVI, 4f [Kolb-Wengert, 48f]). Right from the outset, the Lutherans claimed that they did “not understand the church to be an external government of certain nations”; rather, the true Christians were regarded as “people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments” (Ap VII/VIII, 10 [Kolb-Wengert, 175]).

Therefore, the (“New” or “Old”) Lutheran fathers and mothers in the nineteenth century, filled with the spirit of the revival, discovered the confessional inheritance of the Lutheran reformation as the fulfilment of their longing for the gospel of sin and grace, for the saviour of sinners, and desired to preserve in an undiminished form for themselves and their posterity the heritage of Concord-Lutheranism from the sixteenth century. Hand in hand with this confessional assurance, they discovered the church as an organic, institutional, and communicative strength, in the framework of which their commitment to

Lutheran identity is not first and foremost a special identity; it rather lays claim to catholicity. As in the Reformation, to renew the church means to remain faithful to the one, holy, catholic church.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31: *The Career of the Reformer* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 25, 31.

⁸ This insight was basically triggered by the results of the 1988 symposium of the Verein für Reformationsgeschichte: cf. *Die lutherische Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland* (Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte 197, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh), ed. Hans-Christoph Rublack, 1992.

⁹ This was a prevalent idea in the theology of August Christian Vilmar, a staunch opponent to the state-church-system in the state of Hesse in the nineteenth century. Cf. Werner Klän, “Das Augsbürgische Bekenntnis als Grundlage einer neuen Konfessionalisierung in Hessen,” *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 26 (2002): 114–134.

God's holy word and the Lutheran confession could take shape. They recognized that church services, confession, and church constitution are integrally correlated. That is why they were prepared to make great sacrifices to maintain their belief, their confession, and their church.

It was no accident that the crystallization point of the confessional awakening, which led in the end to the emergence of independent evangelical Lutheran churches, was the sacrament of the altar. The concern that forced confessional Lutherans onto "solitary paths" was that of preserving their biblical Lutheran understanding in an ecclesiastically binding form, of defending it in its exclusivity against every kind of false compromise. It was these churches that created a new awareness of the Concord-Lutheran principles of the sixteenth century and gave them renewed ecclesiological reality. They wanted to manifest Lutheran identity in the ecclesiastical dimension by establishing that, as the expression of full church fellowship, fellowship in public worship, particularly at the communion table, has as its unconditional prerequisite a consensus in faith, doctrine, and confession.

They were at the same time protagonists of a new freedom of the church from state control and political subordination in character with the gospel. In addition, they were, at least in religious matters, pioneers fighting for social values of the modern era such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience. The founders of the Lutheran confessional churches in Europe, and those among them to emigrate to Australia, America, or southern Africa, proved to be equal contemporaries of the movement for bourgeois emancipation. This remains true even if we recognize that the theological content for which they were prepared to bring great sacrifice was principally conservative, and that the same held true for their political convictions. The claim for religious and ecclesiastical and theological independence in terms of confessional church bodies is nevertheless an integral part of their common heritage.

It has to be recognized, on the other hand, that these Lutheran movements never succeeded in regaining major influence in the intellectual, spiritual, and religious developments in their respective lands. Whereas in most parts

of Europe — except for France, which since the French Revolution preferred to define the republican constitution as "laical" — the state-church system inherited from the Constantinian era prevailed, these confessional movements and churches were, at least for some time, persecuted, driven underground, and in the end, if acknowledged by the state, marginalized.

So, one could summarize that the transformation of the Lutheran heritage in the confessional Lutheran churches in the nineteenth century formed, in a manner of speaking, an avant-garde stance. They posed questions and found answers that, in their fundamental and permanent

reference to Scripture, were also contemporary and appropriate. In this way they found the attention of their contemporaries; thus, a group of Bible-based, church-committed Christians came together and became effective in society, even if only to a certain degree. They formed independent Lutheran church bodies in various German states, but also in America, Australia, and southern Africa. These churches, or

their successors, are for the most part member churches of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) and as such, they are committed to determining their decisions solely on the basis of the word of God, and not on social, cultural, or practical considerations.

2. Principles of Confessional Lutheran Identity

I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, and yet is united in love, without sect and schism. Of this community I also am a part and a member.

In this manner Luther elucidates the phrase "the congregation of saints" in the Large Catechism in his explanation to the third article of the Apostle's Creed (Kolb-Wengert, 437f).

For Luther, it is of central importance to take seriously the existence of the church, or of "Christendom," as he prefers to say (cf. Luther's deliberations on the translation of *communio sanctorum* in LC III, 47–50 [Kolb-Wengert,

Christians and the church, claimed by their Lord, have nothing to sugarcoat, nothing to gloss over, and nothing to conceal concerning the predicament of men and our contemporary society.

436f]), and the priority of the community of the faithful over one's own belief. This commitment to the church precludes identifying oneself as an atomized individual with private beliefs and piety, and includes seeing oneself within a community of faith which is always prior to oneself and which God the Holy Spirit makes use of for the accomplishment of his work (LC III, 52f [Kolb-Wengert, 438f]).

This approach includes an ecumenical dimension as well. Lutherans understand themselves as being simultaneously evangelical, catholic, orthodox, and ecumenical in the best sense of the word, and professing a church that shall last forever. "It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church" (AC VII, 1 [Kolb-Wengert, 42]). Lutheran identity is not first and foremost a special identity; it rather lays claim to catholicity. As in the Reformation, to renew the church means to remain faithful to the one, holy, catholic church. For this reason, the renewal of the church in the Reformation and after has repeatedly been accompanied by the recourse to the Scriptures, the origin and founding document of faith and the church, both of them being *creaturae verbi* — creatures of the word.

The existence and the unity of the church depend upon one and the same thing: the gospel in the form of the proclamation of the word in accordance with the Scripture, and upon the sacraments in the form of administration in conformity with their institution. Herein consists the identity of the Lutheran church and, as a consequence, the standard for the practice and manifestation of church fellowship.

The Lutheran confessions as included in the Book of Concord of 1580 are not intended to be anything other than a rendering of the scriptural truth, concentrated on the gospel. Therefore, the gospel and the doctrine of the gospel are not understood as a collocation of correct propositions, but rather the gospel is understood as an event in which God imparts himself, in which God communicates himself to man and indeed salvifically to man who has broken off the communication with God and, for the reason that he has broken it off, is not in a position to reestablish communication on the strength

of his own efforts.¹⁰ The actual meaning and significance of the gospel, which shines through in the emphasis on its effectualness in *actu*, is in conformity with both the Scriptures and the confession of faith of the Lutheran Reformation. Hence the confession focuses on the centre of the Scripture, namely the gospel, of which Jesus Christ is the quintessence and the living reality.

It is nevertheless true that the confession of faith, and no less the (Lutheran) doctrinal confession, is an introduction to the Scriptures and at the same time centres the Scripture from within the Scripture. The confession of faith arises from the word of God in Holy Scripture and leads back into it. However, it is necessary to ensure that the word of Scripture is and remains prior to the word of the confession. All in all, the confession focuses on the Scriptures and within the Scriptures on the focal point of the gospel.

It is therefore both meaningful and helpful, not least in the sense of making certain of one's own identity, to also revert to texts that are several hundred years old. A truly confessional stance, however, is not simply a retreat to distant historical documents; it takes place as recourse to the Scripture and is thus a guideline for the profession of faith. The confessional documents of the sixteenth century can be, and are intended to be, a guideline for the understanding of what Christian faith is, what Christian life is. In other words, how we can exist and lead our lives in the sight of God. Since the answers that can be found in the condensed form of the confessional documents of the sixteenth century (can) have a high degree of plausibility even for today's contemporaries, they offer at the very least guidance for communicating faith today as well — Christian faith in its significance for our contemporaries.

The transfer into our times, which is the duty of the church through proclaiming law and gospel to this time and world, has already been accomplished and set down then and there in an exemplary manner. But precisely in this manner, confessional statements or documents constitute a guideline for actual confessing, statements

Confessional Lutheran churches will have to call people back into the fellowship that God grants with himself and, in doing so, into the freedom that God bestows on those who believe.

¹⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 29–43.

that articulate and make possible an understanding of Christian existence and church life that is at the same time scriptural and contemporary — purely and simply by proclaiming the will of God and by communicating the gospel.

3. The Challenge and the Mission of the Church

At present, it does not seem likely that a major awakening will stir up European Christians, churches, or societies in the near future. All church bodies in Europe face the challenge of “re-Christianizing” areas that have been “de-Christianized” (Rosin 2007), utilizing for this purpose also models of cooperation underneath the levels of church fellowship and full communion. Especially with regard to ethical challenges, Christians and Christian churches ought to strive to respond to those in one voice, as, for example, the Charta Oecumenica (2001) suggests.¹¹

It is far more likely that, at least in Europe, Christianity, or rather the church, will take a shape similar to the one it had throughout the first three centuries — being a minority, despised, mocked, marginalized, suspected, neglected, displaced, persecuted, and even killed. It has always been seductive to Christians, and to church leaders in particular, to see the church as a culturally, politically, morally influential, and even predominant factor or institution in this world. That tempting dream, in some realms of Christianity still lingering on, belongs most intimately to the imperial ideology and ecclesiastical enthusiasm of the Constantinian era.

Nonetheless, it remains the task of the church to proclaim the “righteous, unchanging will of God” (FC SD V, 17 [Kolb-Wengert, 584]) for his world and its population in a manner that is relevant to today. The church is thus obligated to be critical of its contemporary setting. Contemporary life also affects the church and its members. One cannot deny that the church is influenced and affected by worldly societal trends and tendencies. These movements do not only find expression outside and

around the church but also creep into it. Yet the church demonstrates that it is contemporary when it resists current developments of which it cannot approve.

Christians and the church, claimed by their Lord, have nothing to sugarcoat, nothing to gloss over, and nothing to conceal concerning the predicament of men and our contemporary society. They will boldly carry out their task, irrespective of power, richness, or influence of men. They will not cower before the powerful, and not buckle before those in charge of the state, society, or economy. I say this because the history of the church is also a history of failure in light of this responsibility. The history of alliances between throne and altar, Christianity and power, church and dictator, demonstrates these failures all too clearly. If the church desires to do justice to its mission, it will not give in to majority trends and mainstream public and popular opinion.

The call to return to God,
the call to responsibility
before God, is indeed
nothing but the call to
freedom, the freedom of the
children of God.

But before it speaks to the situation of its time and world and the predicament of fallen humanity in its defective and ruined relationship towards God, the church must first speak to itself, turn to itself, and permit itself to see that its message concerning the situation of mankind and the world is also its own diagnosis. It

is not that the church asserts itself wherever God allegedly authorizes it to; rather, it simply proclaims what the point is to the world to which it is directed. Mankind stands before God and can neither abolish nor create this existence, nor run away from the judgment that man is, as he is, lacking in his state of existence before God.¹²

When the church does this, it will then be able to speak to those issues in our nations and times where the divine standards of God’s will have been abandoned, despised, or wantonly rejected. It will then have to proclaim that God in his holiness will not allow such offenses and revolt to be tolerated or passed over. At the same time, though, it will speak even more clearly that God himself, in his Son, Jesus Christ, has already overcome this evil, so that our contemporary hearers are not thrown into arrogance or despair (FC SD V, 10 [Kolb-Wengert, 583]).

The church will today, as always, warn, and where necessary, even accuse. It speaks to situations where the

¹¹ See Charles Hill, “Charta Oecumenica: Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe,” *Conference of European Churches*, May 2003, <http://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ChartaOecumenica.pdf> and “Ecclesiology and Theological Dialogue,” *Conference of European Churches*, accessed 5 August 2016, <http://www.ceceurope.org/ecclesiology-and-theological-dialogue/>.

¹² Gunther Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, vol. 2 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1998), 73.

validity of the divine standard is being foundationally or practically challenged, but always with the goal of calling men back into the fellowship and freedom that God preserves and offers in himself. The church has to proclaim that God, who is visible in Jesus Christ, took it upon himself to repair the broken fellowship between him and mankind, in order to free the totality of humankind and each individual man out of the injurious bonds in which we are ensnared, out of the dominion of the ruinous powers around and in us, from the self-inflicted lot of threatening destruction.

4. Repentance as the Core Attitude of the Christian Church: *Ecclesia Semper Paenitens*

In confession and repentance, we are placed before God and are asked what our condition is before him. Simultaneously, a judgment is rendered upon us when we wish to master our life with our own powers. In God's eyes, the problem is our conviction that we are our own masters and that we control the world while, in reality, we orbit only around ourselves. Thus, all people are subject to the judgment that their lives are a failure when and because they look to themselves.¹³ We must recognize this and confess "that we neither have nor do what we ought" (LC, Kolb-Wengert, 477). Thus, in our confrontation with the holy God, we realize that we have fallen short of the goal of our existence.

In this moment we are called to self-recognition, to an unadorned, unvarnished, and unsparing regard of our real condition. However, the measures used by such self-assessment, which are grounded in faith, do not lie within us but in God's ordinance. Hence, the insight and confession arises that I am none other than the one exposed before God in the light of his ordinance and according to the measure of his command. Such a confession is a Yes to my No and conversely a No to my Yes. I must affirm that I do not measure up to that which God wants of me, and at the same time deny that such a not-measuring-up is in order.

One of Luther's fundamental insights is that those who realize the untenable state of their being and the abysmal condition of their lives recognize that they can provide neither a foothold nor a foundation for their lives. They rely on and hold fast to the fact that help comes from somewhere else, specifically from God. "For this is the essence of a genuinely Christian life, to acknowledge

that we are sinners and to pray for grace" (LC 9 [Kolb-Wengert, 477]). This desperately desired affirmation of divine aid comes from the gospel, for in absolution God promises us that when we reach the end of our resources he opens new possibilities to us. Exactly at the point where we believe escape is impossible, God lets us know that he provides a new way for us. The fundamental insight of Martin Luther was that "this repentance stays with the Christian unto death" (SA III 3 [Kolb-Wengert, 318]). This insight understands the entire life of a Christian as a process led by the Holy Spirit and aiming at final salvation. The Spirit "works to make the man truly pure and holy" (SA III 3 [Kolb-Wengert, 318]). Here Luther has in mind a procedural event that is founded in a theology of baptism.

Repentance is therefore "nothing other than a return and stepping towards baptism" (LC IV Baptism, 79 [Kolb-Wengert, 466]),¹⁴ "nothing other ... than baptism" (LC IV, 74 [Kolb/Wengert, 465]), indeed, on a daily basis. On the other hand, Luther can also emphasize the progressive aspect of baptism, which connects to the idea of sanctification as it was developed in the exposition of the Third Article of the Creed.¹⁵ Regarding the basis set in baptism, it states: "started once and continuously proceeding in it" (LC IV, 65 [Kolb-Wengert, 465]), or, in the nexus of the aspects of the return into baptism and the proceeding forth from this baptism, it states: "This is what it means truly to plunge into baptism and daily to come forth again" (LC IV, 71 [Kolb-Wengert, 465]). In this daily process of return to the founding date of Christian existence lies the prerequisite for all continuation forward on the path of Christian faith and life. "The new life should be lived so that it continually increases and proceeds forward" (LC V, 24 [Kolb-Wengert, 469]). This is no less than the catechetical exposition on Martin Luther's first of the 95 Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."¹⁶

What is usually applied to the life and conduct of individual Christians may be suitable for the life of the church as well, for according to Martin Luther, the church is *maxima peccatrix* — the biggest sinner of all.

¹⁴ See Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen 4, Die Taufe. Das Abendmahl* (Göttingen, 1993), 94–100; Wenz, *Theologie*, 118–123.

¹⁵ Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 278–280; Wenz, *Theologie*, 611–613.

¹⁶ LW 31, 25.

¹³ "This is really what it means to begin true repentance. Here a person must listen to a judgment such as this: 'You are of no account...here no one is righteous,'" (SA III, 3 [Kolb-Wengert, 312]).

The Wittenberg Reformation had in mind to recall the Roman church to the biblical truths as summarized in the Augsburg Confession:

As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers. Because this is so, those who claim that our people are to be regarded as heretics judge too harshly. The entire dissension concerns a few specific abuses which have crept into the churches without any proper authority. (AC, Conclusion of Part One [Kolb-Wengert, 59])

This said, Melancthon and the Augsburg confessors issue a call for repentance to the adherents of the papal church. For with deep-rooted certitude, Melancthon can say that “just as the church has the promise that it will always have the Holy Spirit, so it also has the warning that there will be ungodly teachers and wolves” (Ap VII, VIII, 22 [Kolb-Wengert, 177]). The church as it exists under the circumstances of this time and age, is a “corpus permixtum,” a “mixed body” consisting of “saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ,” and at the same time, of “many hypocrites and wicked people, who are mixed in with these” (Ap VII/VIII, 28 [Kolb-Wengert, 178]).

For the church to manage its contemporaneity in a critical manner therefore means, first and foremost, that it becomes aware of its own interwovenness with the times in which it exists. It will therefore first take to heart that which it voices in a critical manner to the world outside itself, if it wants to ensure the credibility of its declaration and message. Thus the church itself will always have to answer to the question as to whether and to what extent it, together with its members, holds itself to those divine standards that it feels compelled to address.

Therefore, the church is obliged to confess and admit to many a transgression against divine standards, both on behalf of its members and also of itself in its aggregate. However, it is exactly this stance that will not affect its credibility but rather strengthen it, provided that it is spoken not from a position of hubris, but from one of befitting humility and informed by the knowledge of its own failings with regard to the divine standards when it speaks from its conscience in this manner. In that case a confession of guilt spoken by the church — repentance! — does have its place and is meaningful. For here, too,

applies Luther’s thesis: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”¹⁷

5. Towards the Celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation

What fundamental insights can Lutheran theology and church provide as genuine contribution to the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and how can these insights be communicated to our time?¹⁸

It should be noted¹⁹ that where the authors of the Lutheran Confessions are concerned, Luther is regarded as being the authoritative, hermeneutic frame of reference for the proper understanding of especially the Confessio Augustana (FC SD VII, 41 [Kolb-Wengert, 600]). They explicitly follow this Luther in determining the relation between the word of God in the Holy Scriptures and the subordinate Confessions of the early church, as well as the Lutheran Reformation, so that Holy Scripture alone is the “one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated” (FC SD, Binding Summary 3 [Kolb-Wengert, 527]). Holy Scripture is and remains exclusively canon, whereas the Confessions take up a witness function, admittedly with the claim to truth (FC SD, Binding Summary 12 [Kolb-Wengert, 529]). By contrast, the theologians of one’s own camp are at least on principle not denied the capability to err (FC SD, Antitheses 19 [Kolb-Wengert, 529-531]). During the second half of the sixteenth century, and with this “canonisation” of Luther, Melancthon’s scholars, who understood themselves to be Luther’s heirs, have attempted to reconstitute and safeguard the tension-filled unity and polar harmony of Lutheran theology and church.

For the Lutheran church, it is that Luther who became instrumental with his catechisms in presenting the Christian community with an introduction to a life guided by God.²⁰ He thereby points out that Holy Baptism is God’s salutary self-communication, which brings to us “God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Ghost with his gifts” (LC IV, 41 [Kolb-Wengert, 461]), just as the

¹⁷ LW 31, 31.

¹⁸ Joachim Track, “Die lutherische Stimme in der Ökumene,” in *Was heißt hier Lutherisch! Aktuelle Perspektiven aus Theologie und Kirche* (Hannover 2004), 234–275.

¹⁹ Cf. Werner Klän, *Was machen wir aus Luther?*, in *Das Bekenntnis der Kirche zu Fragen von Ehe und Kirche. Die Vorträge der lutherischen Tage 2009 und 2010*, (Lutherisch glauben 6), ed. Karl-Hermann Kandler (Neuendettelsau, 2011), 90–117, esp. 113–117.

²⁰ Cf. Werner Klän, “Anleitung zu einem Gott-gelenkten Leben: Die innere Systematik der Katechismen Luthers,” *LuThK* 29 (2005): 18–35.

sacrament of the altar, which he views as “this great a treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians,” provides the new human being with constant fortification in his battle against Satan, death, and sin (LC V, 39 [Kolb-Wengert, 470f]); and just as the Lord’s Prayer invokes God’s irrefutable willingness for mercy in just such a battle, a battle that becomes inevitable for a Christian precisely by partaking in God’s self-giving and self-revelation, a Christian who, in the battle of the gospel for the gospel, takes on his enemies (LC III, 65-67 [Kolb-Wengert, 448f] and LC III, 80-81 [Kolb-Wengert, 451]).

Luther is perceived and presumed as being the one who construes the Credo for us, thereby gratefully accepting “what God does for us and gives to us” (LC II, 67 [Kolb-Wengert, 440]) and the implementation thereof in the reality of Christ’s liberation act, since Christ “has brought us from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there” (LC II, 31 [Kolb-Wengert, 434]).

It is that Luther who substantiates the identity of Christianity and church as being Trinitarian, and who identifies the Christocentric aspect as being a distinctive feature of Christendom and Christianity, compared to all other forms of religiosity (and areligiosity) that are not based on Christ or inspired by the Holy Spirit (LC II, 63 [Kolb-Wengert, 440]).

It is the Luther who is able to discern law and gospel as being God’s immanent manner of speaking and acting²¹ in which the gradient from the extrinsic to the actual work of God proceeds in such a way (FC SD V, 23 [Kolb-Wengert, 585f]) that the church must never be found wanting in proclaiming the declaration of forgiveness and the salvation in Christ, seeing that it is a matter of “comforting and consoling” those that are frightened and “fainthearted” (FC SD V, 12 [Kolb-Wengert, 584]).

It is precisely this Luther who delineates God’s Commandments in the context of faith as a directive for everyone to make them “a matter of daily practice in all circumstances, in all activities and dealings” (LC, 332 [Kolb-Wengert, 431]) and to serve as an instruction manual for a Christian life of human sympathy that is pleasing to God. It is this Luther who places the gospel in its forms of implementation — proclamation, baptism, Eucharist, and confessional penitence as the “third sacrament” (LC IV, 74 [Kolb-Wengert, 465]) — at the

centre of an encompassing Christian understanding of a worship service (SA III, 4, Concerning the Gospel [Kolb-Wengert, 319]).

It is the Luther for whom the wording of the sacrament’s words of institution in their literal sense was so immovably fixed that he could not back down in this regard whenever the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the celebratory worship of precisely this testament of Christ was called into question (LC V, 8-14 [Kolb-Wengert, 467f]), and is therefore being invoked against the crypto-Philippistic deviances of the second-generation theologians in Wittenberg.²²

It is the Luther who, with his Christological deliberations on the conceptual conceivability of the universal presence of the human nature in Christ even after Easter and Ascension, as well as on the promised sacramental presence of Christ sacrificed, has played a crucial role in the formation of the Lutheran profile concerning Eucharistic doctrine and Christology during the internal reformatory disputes of the sixteenth century.²³

It is the Luther who, by the differentiation of the two realms (LC II, 150ff, 158ff [Kolb-Wengert, 407f]), the release of secularism from clerical paternalism, as well as the theological facilitation of the differentiation between “penultimate” and “ultimate” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), thereby paved the way for the separation of church and state, yet without ever having relinquished God’s reign of power over all ages, nations, people and spheres of life (LC II, 26 [Kolb-Wengert, 389]).²⁴

It is the Luther who urged the Christian community of solidarity to bear in mind that we “must all indeed help us to believe, to love, to pray, and to fight against the devil” (LC V, 87 [Kolb-Wengert, 476]), meaning the elementary and fundamental day-to-day life of a Christian existence, advising us to engage in the lifelong practice of being a Christian. Luther in his commentary on St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans had stated: “To stand still in God’s way, means to go backward, and to go forward means ever to begin anew.”²⁵ This is what daily reformation in personal life and in the church is about! *Ecclesia semper reformanda, hoc est: Ecclesia semper paenitens.*

²² Cf. e.g., FC SD VIII, 41-43 (Kolb-Wengert, 623f).

²³ Cf. the citations from Luther, Large Confession concerning the Holy Supper (1528) in FC SD VII, 92-103 (Kolb-Wengert, 609f).

²⁴ Also LC, The Lord’s Prayer, Fourth Petition, 76-79 (Kolb-Wengert, 451).

²⁵ “Stare in via Dei est retrocedere, sed proficere est de novo incipere,” (WA 56, 486, 7f).

²¹ Cf. the citations from Luther’s exegesis of Luke 5, 1-11 in the summer homily of 1544, in FC SD V, 12 (Kolb-Wengert, 583f).

6. Conclusion: Confessional Lutheran Churches — Their Mission in a Globalizing World

Coming from a post-Christian environment like Germany, the once land of the Reformation, I have learned that for the mission of the church, it is most necessary for us to cling faithfully to the biblical roots and to assure ourselves of our historical and even confessional identity. “Reformation” in this sense, is nothing but going back to the roots and starting all over again. And if it holds true that Christianity is in the process of moving from the Northwest Hemisphere to the South and the Southeast, or that it is emerging there, then Christians in Europe (and northern America) are undoubtedly obligated to dialogue with the emerging southern churches about what was once given to the Northern Hemisphere in the biblical record and in the theological legacy of the fathers of the early church, like Cyprian, Athanasius, and Augustine, notably Africans all of them. Moreover, in the era of globalization, the northern churches will have to listen very carefully to what the emerging churches in the south have to say on Christian identity and authenticity, not least in the area of Christian conduct and ethics.

All in all, confessional Lutheran churches will have to call people back into the fellowship that God grants with himself and, in doing so, into the freedom that God bestows on those who believe. In this sense the biblical-reformatory Doctrine of Justification is at the same time “the doctrine of Christian freedom” and as such the “chief article of the Gospel,” the preservation of which is paramount.²⁶ In the context of the reality and effectiveness of the gospel, the believers subsequently live in a liberated lebensraum (environment), albeit by means of the will of God, the “Law.”²⁷ In this sense human freedom in the context of Christian faith and thus church proclamation means response,²⁸ grateful response of the human being who has been liberated towards freedom by God

himself through the sacrificial, death-defying commitment of his Son (GAL 5:1). The call to return to God, the call to responsibility before God, is indeed nothing but the call to freedom, the freedom of the children of God.

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²⁶ “For it is necessary to retain the teaching of Christian freedom in the churches ... It is necessary to retain the chief article of the Gospel,” (AC XXVIII, 51f [Kolb-Wengert, 99]).

²⁷ In this context Peters speaks of the “breathing space of Christ’s everlasting grace.” Cf. Albrecht Peters, “Gesetz und Evangelium,” HST 2 (Gütersloh 1981, 1994²): 54.

²⁸ Oswald Bayer, *Freiheit als Antwort: Zur theologischen Ethik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995), 74.