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Inclusive Liturgical Language: Off-Ramp to Apostasy?

Paul J. Grime

Baptism and the Lord's Supper in John

Charles A. Gieschen

Once More to John 6

David P. Scaer

The Bread of Life Discourse and Lord's Supper

Jason M. Braaten

The Doctrine of the Ministry in Salomon Glassius

Armin Wenz

Defining Humanity in the Lutheran Confessions

Roland F. Ziegler

Natural Law and Same-Sex Marriage

Scott Stiegemeier

C
T
Q

Theological Observer

A Vision for Lutheranism in Central Europe

[The following essay was first delivered as one of the Luther Academy Lectures for the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Czech Republic at Saint Charles University in Prague on September 28, 2013. The Editors.]

Prague has been the location for many notable events and anniversaries over the past millennium. Many of these events, such as the Second Defenestration of Prague, led to the tragic events of the execution of the twenty-seven nobles and the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, both of which had a negative effect on the influence of Lutheranism in the world. On September 29, 2013, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Czech Republic observed the twentieth anniversary of its founding with a celebration at St. Michael's Church on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. The appointed readings for this particular feast demonstrate that the power of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh are defeated not with might of arms but with the word of God alone. In fact, the very same weapon Jesus used to fend off Satan when he was being tempted, "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4), is the very same weapon that he has given to his church on earth. This very word of God, both the law and the gospel, provides the vision for Lutheranism not only in Central Europe but also throughout the world.

I. Anniversaries and the Reformation

As the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation approaches, it might do us well to reflect for a moment upon past centennial anniversaries. The year 1617 marked one of the first significant celebrations of the Reformation. The apparent organizers of the centennial celebration were none other than the Lutherans in Saxony, Germany, the birthplace of the Reformation. Broadsheets commemorating the Reformation were produced. In January 1617, the pope began the centennial of the Reformation with a prayer calling for a reunification of Christendom and for the eradication of heretics.¹ In response to the pope's tacit war against non-Roman

¹ Neil MacGregor, "Reformation centenary broadsheet (printed in 1617), from Germany," *BBC & The British Museum: A History of the World*, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co>.

Catholic Christians, the Lutherans responded with the first Reformation celebration on October 31, 1617.



Fig. 1. A 1617 centennial Reformation broadsheet.

The broadsheet produced for this first Reformation celebration depicts Martin Luther with a giant ink-quill in his hand writing his complaint against indulgences on the castle door in Wittenberg. The other end of Luther's ink-quill goes through both ears of a lion that represents Pope Leo X, knocking off his tiara and destroying the power of the pope. This first Reformation broadsheet was intended to rally the hearts and minds of the Lutherans/Protestants to prepare for war against Rome and her allies. Hans Herbele, a Lutheran cobbler, wrote in his diary about the 1617 Reformation celebration: "The anniversary festival was the beginning of the war, for one can read frequently in Catholic records about how the sight of this celebration stuck painfully in their eyes."² Indeed, war quickly

uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/transcripts/episode85/ (accessed September 27, 2013).

² Eric Lund, *Documents from the History of Lutheranism, 1517–1750* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2002), 174.

came the following year with the Second Defenestration of Prague on May 23, 1618, the event that began the Thirty Years' War.³

Subsequent centenary celebrations of the Reformation were fraught with similar challenges. In 1717, the Reformation was observed during a highly political moment in time. In 1817 and 1917, Reformation celebrations were guided by nationalism.⁴ The great ecumenist and defender of confessional Lutheranism, Herman Sasse, once said, "Beware of Reformation anniversaries!" He writes, "In view of the many Reformation anniversaries which we have celebrated . . . one might well ask whether we have now had enough of looking back to the past, whether we have heard enough speeches and read enough anniversary articles."⁵ The purpose of Reformation anniversaries rarely promotes the primary theme of the Reformation, which is encapsulated in Thesis 1 of the Ninety-five Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."⁶ The message of repentance never has been popular in this world, given that it caused the Old Testament prophets to become martyrs, led to the crucifixion of Jesus, the death of untold martyrs and would-be reformers, and to the inception of the Reformation.

The message of repentance is the delivery of the law of God, which condemns sinful human beings, and the proclamation of the gospel, which

³ Herbele later recorded in the diary, "In the year 1619 Ferdinand II became the Holy Roman Emperor, and under him a great persecution arose, with war, rebellion, and the shedding of much blood, as a few examples will demonstrate. First, a great war began in Bohemia, which he attempted to restore by force to his religion. After that, war spread in the following years to the territories of Braunschweig, Mecklenburg, Lüneburg, Friesland, Brandenburg, Pomerania, Gottland, Austria, Moravia, Silesia, Heidelberg, indeed, to almost all of Germany, about which I cannot tell or describe anything . . ." Lund, *Documents from the History of Lutheranism*, 174.

⁴ Hartmut Lehmann, "From the Reformation until today: politics on Luther's back" (Interview with the historian Hartmut Lehmann about the celebrations of Reformation Day during history and in modern times), *Luther 2017*, <http://www.luther2017.de/en/24637/reformation-until-today-politics-luthers-back> (accessed September 27, 2013).

⁵ Hermann Sasse, "The Social Doctrine of the Augsburg Confession and Its Significance for the Present," in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters (1927-1939)*, vol. 1, ed. Ronald Feuerhahn, trans. Matthew Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 89.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31: *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 25. Hereafter abbreviated as AE.

delivers humans from condemnation by the forgiveness of sins bestowed because of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Every Reformation anniversary and anniversary of a Lutheran church needs to focus on the core of the Reformation and on the very words of Jesus' earthly ministry, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near" (Matt 4:17). Martin Luther, reflecting on the history of the Christian church and that of his own German people, notes how the proclamation of God's word passes from one region to another, and that it is essential to seize the moment of the gospel when it is upon you. Luther writes,

If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been."⁷

The dreadful "darkness and plague" that Luther describes, which is caused by an ingratitude for the gospel, is upon world Lutheranism. In fact, it is upon all of western civilization.

II. Challenges Facing World Lutheranism

In world Lutheranism, a divide exists between the global north and south as well as between the east and west. The cause of the divide is multi-faceted, involving culture, language, geo-politics, economic development, demographics, and a different perspective toward the Holy Scriptures. A demographic reality driving part of the shift is the declining birth rate among western European and North American people groups, while in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia the birth rate has remained constant or has increased. A logical consequence of a lower birth rate is fewer people to attend church in Europe and North America. In the global south, there is a demographic increase of people as well as more people attending church. Demographics, of course, do not account for the entire decline, but they are a factor.

At the same time, the churches of Europe and North America, while smaller numerically than many of the African churches, still possess the majority of monetary resources, allowing the churches of the global north

⁷ AE 45:352.

to influence disproportionately the churches of the global south. The churches of the global north generally possess better education than the churches of the global south, making it more difficult for the latter to express disagreement in a manner that is considered intellectually sophisticated and hermeneutically sound according to academic standards. Such differences in educational standards allow North American and European theologians to dismiss the position of African theologians when the latter hold a view that is unpopular in America or Europe. Recent examples of this include the biblical prohibition of homosexual activity, abortion, and the ordination of women. When disagreements arise on topics such as these, the European or American theologian can “confidently” dismiss the view of an African theologian, for example, because he is ignorant of proper biblical hermeneutics.

To help bridge the gap between the theologians of the global north and those of the global south with regard to biblical interpretation, the Lutheran World Federation has launched an initiative on biblical hermeneutics that “seeks to strengthen the capacities of member churches to understand the word of God that comes through Scripture and the Lutheran theological heritage that looks to renew the church and society.”⁸ While on the surface this statement has the appearance of being Lutheran, it is necessary to deconstruct it. Note what is actually said: “to understand the word of God *that* comes through Scripture.” A distinction is made between “the word of God” and the “Scripture.” According to this statement, “hermeneutics” is required to sort out or to detect the “word of God” that might be found in the text of the Scripture. In essence, the position of the Lutheran World Federation is that the Scriptures as we have received them are a mixture of God’s word and human words, requiring hermeneutics to make a determination of what part of the Bible is God’s word and what is not. Once again, this procedure is very effective at removing parts of the Scriptures that do not fit the global north’s agenda, societal norms, or social and political agendas. Quite literally, the LWF’s hermeneutics program causes one to ask, “Did God really say?” (Gen 3:1).⁹

⁸ “Lutheran Hermeneutics,” *Lutheran World Federation*, 2013; <http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/lutheran-hermeneutics> (accessed September 28, 2013).

⁹ Many “biblical” scholars would dispute that Genesis 3 is legitimately God’s word, given that the first three chapters of Genesis allegedly contradict western science. Once again, the “hermeneutical” presuppositions would answer the question, “Did God really say?” with “No, he did not.”

One of the goals of the LWF's hermeneutics program is to "hold hermeneutics workshops for member churches to strengthen the capacity of pastors" and to "train theology and seminary faculties in transformative hermeneutics." The more "western" style hermeneutics that member churches of the LWF are taught, the more that these churches in the global south will ostensibly accept the positions of the North American and European churches. However, with the position that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Church of Sweden have taken regarding the acceptance of practicing homosexuals as pastors and bishops, the churches in the global south are holding fast in rejecting this new hermeneutic, which would literally steal the word of God from them.

A final note on this "transformative" hermeneutics promoted by the Lutheran World Federation. The first time the phrase "transformative hermeneutics" appeared in academic literature was in Alan Sokal's 1996 article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity."¹⁰ Alan Sokal invented the nonsense category of "transformative hermeneutics" to see if an American humanities journal would publish an article that "sounded good" and flattered the "editors' ideological preconceptions."¹¹ Sokal wrote his bogus paper in order to demonstrate the lack of academic rigor, as compared to the hard sciences such as physics, in the humanities and social sciences. From this ignoble origin comes the term "transformative hermeneutics."

What is meant by transformative hermeneutics? Presumably the LWF is not aware of this history and does not intend to discredit itself. The LWF intends that a "transformative hermeneutic" help Europeans and North Americans develop a shared meaning with Africans and the global south. The global south tends to read the biblical text in a literal manner, while

¹⁰ Alan D. Sokal, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* 46/47 (Spring/Summer 1996): 217-252; http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/transgress_v2/transgress_v2_singlefile.html (accessed September 27, 2013).

¹¹ Alan D. Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies," *Lingua Franca* (May/June 1996). http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/lingua_franca_v4/lingua_franca_v4.html (accessed September 27, 2013): "So, to test the prevailing intellectual standards, I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment: Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies—whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross—publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions? The answer, unfortunately, is yes."

the global north tends to read and apply the biblical text to a particular social situation. There is a tension between what the text meant and what it means today. Europeans tend to think of their context as far removed from that of the ancient biblical writers. Meanwhile, they consider Africans to be closer to the original context of the biblical writers. Thus, there is a conflict in interpretation between the modern European or North American and the typical African of today. Transformative hermeneutics seeks to bridge the gap between the historical basis of the biblical text and the contemporary significance. Transformative hermeneutics is “at its core transformative—that embraces both historical investigation and contemporary significance, then propels them both towards a third horizon: spiritual transformation.”¹²

Perhaps it is too simplistic to see the historical as the thesis, the contemporary significance as the anti-thesis, and the spiritual transformation as the synthesis—as a Hegelian solution to a intransitive situation. Presumably, the agreement between the opposing ways of interpreting the Scriptures is found in its spiritual meaning. In any case, one is left with a Bible that needs to have the word of God divined out and separated out from the human words. Biblical hermeneutics becomes a task of separating the wheat from the chaff. The end result is a loss of the Scriptures, a loss of the word of God, and a loss of not only Lutheran identity but also the Christian faith.

When the results of such a hermeneutic stayed in the classroom, the global south more or less could tolerate, if not ignore, it. Now that this hermeneutic has led from the ordination of women to the ordination of homosexuals, the global south and some Eastern European Lutherans can no longer acquiesce. The understanding of the Scriptures is one of the largest issues confronting Lutherans today. Are the Scriptures the word of God? While saying “yes” exposes a person to intellectual ridicule, it allows that same individual to remain both a Christian and a Lutheran. Many churches in the global south are deciding to keep the Scriptures and remain Christian, rather than lose their souls to western secularism.

¹² Leslie T. Hardin, “Searching for a transformative hermeneutic,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 5, no. 1 (2012): 145.

III. Lutheran Identity

Connected with the challenge to retain the Holy Scriptures is that of maintaining Lutheran identity. Many Lutheran churches around the world are Lutheran in name, or Lutheran by cultural heritage, or Lutheran due to historical circumstance, but not Lutheran by conviction. Remaining a Lutheran by confession or conviction or rediscovering Lutheran identity is both lonely and difficult. Both the Scriptures and Lutheran identity are maintained through the study of the Lutheran Confessions. Herman Sasse writes,

It is a completely incontrovertible fact of church history that the authority of the Bible stands and falls with the authority of the confessions which interpret the Bible. The greatest example of this is the Reformation itself. Without the confession of the church with its "service to the Word," with its respect for the Word, the Bible becomes the plaything of arbitrary, sectarian exposition.¹³

Many Lutheran churches around the world do not have the *Book of Concord*, the Lutheran Symbols, in their own language. If it is available, few pastors own it. Frequently, only parts of the *Book of Concord* have been translated, such as the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. While it is possible to be a Lutheran with only the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession, the task is inordinately more difficult. Yet the Lutheran churches that have strayed the furthest from Lutheran identity are those who have had the Lutheran Confessions in their language, but have relegated them to the bookshelf for lacking cultural relevance. Lutheran identity is connected to the Lutheran Confessions. Without the *Book of Concord*, a church body cannot remain Lutheran for long. As Luther noted, the passing rain shower is caused by ingratitude for the gospel. This is why every Reformation event must begin with repentance.

IV. Towards the Future and Anniversary Remembrances

What will the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 bring? The anniversary in 1617 brought war and great hardship to Central Europe. Subsequent anniversaries in 1717, 1817, and 1917 have been described as anti-ecumenical, not to mention that they also brought war and forced unionism with the Reformed church.¹⁴ Yet an "ecumenical"

¹³ Hermann Sasse, *The Lonely Way*, 1:477.

¹⁴ Charlotte Hays writes: "We can now tell the story of the Reformation in a way

Reformation that does not distinguish truth from error or clearly identify the Reformation message as “repent and believe the gospel” will fail in the same way past Reformation celebrations have failed. The voice of confessional Lutheranism will be lost amongst the din of how Lutherans and Anglicans or Lutherans and the Reformed should worship together. It will be lost in the noise of how if Luther lived today he would welcome dialog with the Roman Catholic Church, or if Luther were alive today he would allow the “gospel” to predominate and accept practicing homosexuals.

In light of the upcoming five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation and the twentieth anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Czech Republic, how should we regard such anniversaries? Herman Sasse, quoting Matthias Hoe von Hoeneegg (1580–1645), the Electoral Saxony Court preacher in Dresden, wrote of the anniversary festival

first as a “remembrance festival,” at which we remember a great historical event; second, as a “praise and thanksgiving festival;” third, as a “miracle festival” concerning God’s miracles; fourth, a “prayer festival” at which we “desire to pray for the preservation of the divine Word;” and fifth, as a “festival of repentance,” at which we pray for the forgiveness of our sins in the despising of the Word of God, “and that we should begin and strive for a new life with greater zeal for and devotion to his preached Word as doers of the same.” Then the festival becomes a “festival of rejoicing and jubilation in heaven”¹⁵ [Luke 15:10].

Those planning anniversary celebrations, whether locally, as in the Czech Republic, or globally, with the upcoming five hundredth anniversary of Reformation, should remember the events that led to the formation of the Lutheran Church. Part of this remembrance is a recovery of the Lutheran Confessions. Without the Lutheran Confessions, Lutheran identity cannot be maintained. In addition, praise and thanksgiving should accompany an

both sides will recognize as accurate,’ Root said. ‘If you look at the celebrations in 1917, 1817 and 1717, they were anti-ecumenical events, with Lutherans often celebrating it as light after darkness.’” In “After Five Centuries of Division, Catholics and Lutherans Consider Their Common Heritage,” *National Catholic Register*; <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/after-five-centuries-of-division-catholics-and-lutherans-consider-their-com/> (accessed September 28, 2013).

¹⁵ Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* 60, 1967; <http://mercyjourney.blogspot.com/2011/10/sasse-definition-of-reformation.html> (accessed September 28, 2013).

anniversary celebration. The praise and thanksgiving must be directed to the Lord God, thanking and praising him for his Holy Scriptures, for the confession of faith, and for the Lutheran Confessions. All of these the Lord has graciously bestowed upon us. The rain shower of the gospel passes away due to ingratitude. May Christ preserve us from taking his precious gospel for granted and for lacking thankfulness for this gift that he bestowed on us! Do we pray, not for the preservation of our kingdom, or the preservation of our church or position, but for the preservation of his word preached purely among us? Do we pray that his word and the true confession of faith will remain among us? Finally, repent! Repent for neglecting God's word. Repent for neglecting the Lutheran Confessions. Repent and receive the gospel.

The future of the Lutheran Church in Central Europe is connected to repentance. Without repentance, the Lutheran Church in Central Europe will become a distant memory. The rain shower of the gospel will depart Central Europe and find a repentant people elsewhere—a people who will be thankful to receive the word of God and the Lutheran Confession. The future of the Lutheran Church in Central Europe is no different than that of any other Lutheran Church. The future of the Lutheran Church rests in repentance, forgiveness, and a bold confession of the truth. Confession brings *martyria*, that is, a witness to a world that does not want to hear the message of the Reformation: “Repent and believe the gospel.” The Reformation, the revitalization of the Lutheran Church in Central Europe, must be founded in repentance. Repentance will lead to a church life together lived in the gospel. It will lead to a renewal in the study of the Holy Scriptures. It will lead to an embrace of the Lutheran Confessions. It will lead to bold proclamation of the gospel. It also will bring cross, suffering, and hardship. Yet the Lord promises to work all this for the good of his church (Romans 8).

V. Conclusion

The future of the church is bright because Christ is the future of the church. Because Christ has a future, so too, does his church. The Lutheran Church is equipped to proclaim the light of the gospel to a world lost in darkness. There is a shift in world Lutheranism. The churches of the global south have come to recognize that the acceptance of western societal norms will cause them to lose the truth of the Holy Scriptures. These churches are not only seeking to grow deeper in the Holy Scriptures but to reaffirm their Lutheran identity. As these churches seek to grow in their

Lutheran identity, they seek the assistance of western churches. As a result, both churches are able to grow in their knowledge of and their conviction in the Lutheran Confessions. Now is the moment to be Lutheran, not by birth, not by cultural heritage, but by conviction of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The Reformation of the church always begins with repentance. May we learn from those who have gone before us, from Martin Luther, Třranovský, and others: "Repent and believe the gospel." The Lord is faithful; he will fulfill his promises and grant us a future with him.

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"Noah": A Movie Review

"Noah" is a recent blockbuster movie that is full of action, adventure, and spectacular special effects. It is certainly the equal of the Indiana Jones movies and has a little Harry Potter sentiment as well. It might fall short of some of the recent sci-fi releases in terms of over-the-top special effects, but a raging flood gives many an opportunity for thrills. "Noah" doesn't quite measure up to the parting of the Red Sea in "The Ten Commandments"—even with a six-decade advancement in technology—but it is still riveting. All this makes Noah a great secular epic worth seeing.

However, if you are expecting a biblical epic, see another movie such as "The Son of God," also recently released and very faithful to Scripture. "Noah" is way off-target biblically. For starters, the director gets the headcount wrong regarding the number of people on the ark. Noah is depicted as a stern, mean man—even to the point of being willing to kill those on the ark. And, in a huge bow to political correctness—and to make the film appealing to Jews and Muslims—"god" is never referred to as God, but instead as "the creator." The viewer can supply his own god as "the creator." The true Creator—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is never mentioned in the film. That is sad, for the biblical account of Noah is all about salvation in the flood of sin through the coming Christ.

Be aware that there is a strong dose of environmentalism and animalism in the movie as well. The animals are mostly cute, benign, and cooperative as they file onto the ark. A pretty, little daisy pops up out of a

rock once the ark hits land. “Noah” is more concerned with saving the earth than humanity. I guess all this is not surprising, given the Easter egg hunt for dogs held in a Fort Wayne public park this past Easter Sunday, replete with little doggie bones in the plastic eggs!

So, go see “Noah.” Do so only after first reading Genesis 6–9 in order to remember the whole, correct account of how a gracious God saved a faithful remnant out of a disobedient world. Do so looking for a fun, entertaining tale. You might even recommend the movie to others, but only to those who know the real story and who will not be negatively catechized by it. And for an insightful review of “Noah,” see Charlotte Allen’s recent commentary in the *Wall Street Journal*, “A ‘Noah’ for Our Secular Times.” (The URL is too complicated to include here. Simply go to wsj.com and use the Journal’s search feature using the keywords “Noah” and “secular.”)

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