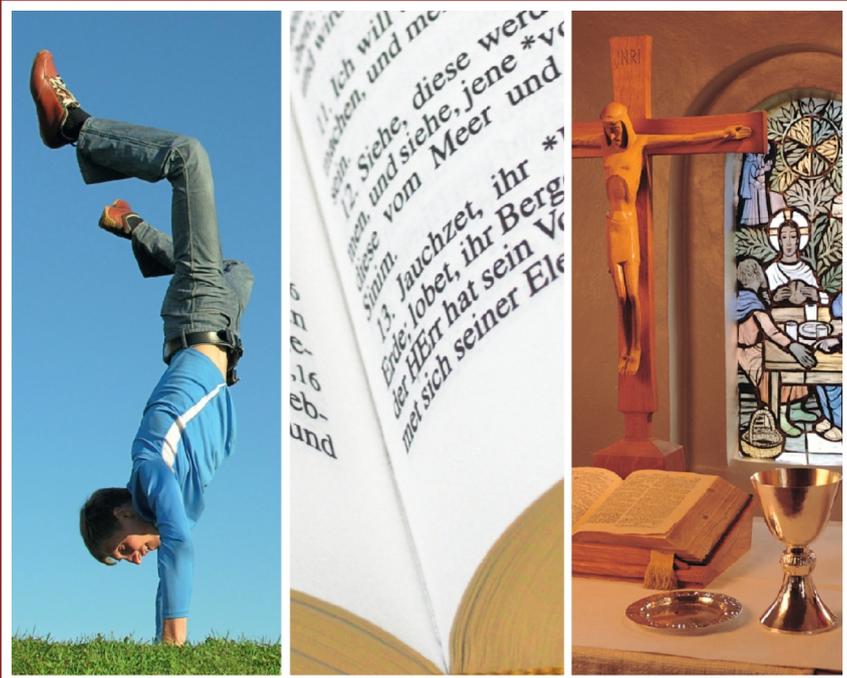


Wolfgang Hörner

Truly Alive

The Encouraging Richness
of Biblical Lutheran Doctrine



Sola-Gratia-Verlag

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Translated by Nathaniel S. Jensen



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Introduction

In many nominally Lutheran churches of our time, essential things that the Lutheran Reformation brought to light have been forgotten. What the Lutheran reformers taught is often adhered to only selectively. As a result, members of other Christian churches often-times also have a blurred picture of what the Lutheran reformers taught. The result is that much of the richness of the Lutheran teaching has been lost. Already in the 19th century, forced unions between Lutherans and the Reformed in particular state churches in Germany as well as increasing biblical criticism in the universities led to the formation of confessional Lutheran churches. Their desire was to preserve the biblical insights of the Lutheran reformers. Most confessional Lutheran churches in the world today associate with either the International Lutheran Council (ILC) or with the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC).¹ But even these churches have to struggle continually to keep the biblical faith in all points.

Do you belong to a congregation of a confessional Lutheran church? Are you there because your parents belong to it, or because you appreciate what is taught and lived there and consider it to be biblical?

Or are you a member of a mainstream Lutheran church? Have you already grappled with what exactly Luther wanted and what he was even prepared to put his life in danger for? Does your congregation preserve what was rediscovered and arduously won in the Reformation?

Are you in another church or independent congregation? When you hear “Lutheran” or “Luther”, do you think about the mainstream Lutheran churches? Then the following presentation of Lutheran

¹ <https://ilc-online.org/> ; <https://celc.info/> ; At these websites you can also check whether there is a member church in your country.

teaching, or doctrine, will probably surprise you. Please don't lay aside the book right away if parts trouble you, but rather take time to consider more carefully whether these parts really are unbiblical or whether your present view in certain points is in fact not really grounded in the Bible.

Or are you perhaps Roman Catholic, but question the high significance placed on tradition and the Papacy? Then read further!

I would be happy if this book led to lively discussions and if the Lutheran teaching would be discovered once again.

The Church of the Lutheran Reformation, from my point of view, is *truly alive* because it is a "Church of the Word"² and because Jesus Christ³ stands in the center⁴ as the one acting. I consider its insights to be *biblical*: The Bible is the only measure of doctrine and life. It is in the Bible that the Triune God reveals Himself. Law and Gospel are distinguished and not mixed with each other. The Church of the Lutheran Reformation adheres to God's promises about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution, which are each the Gospel in concentrated form. That is very comforting and *encouraging*.

I find it proper when, like the first Christians, we regularly test our own beliefs and what we hear against the Bible (cf. Acts 17:11) and when we are prepared to question our own positions and to revise them if necessary. That's why, for example, Luther before the emperor at the Diet of Worms in 1521 said that he would recant if someone would refute him based on the Bible. I consider this readiness – for myself and all Lutherans – to be crucial.

² Everything depends on the living and life-giving Word of God.

³ "Jesus" means: Jahwe (i. e. God the Lord) is salvation (Matthew 1:21). "Christ" or "Messiah" means: the Anointed one (see Acts 10:38).

⁴ Jesus Christ is not only the center of the Bible and the salvation history but also in the life of the believers, especially in the divine service where He is the one truly acting.

Even if I highlight in this book why I don't share certain views of other confessions or tendencies of belief, I know that there are genuine Christians there, of whom many positive things can be said. During my time as a student, I got to know the SMD (which is the German member organization of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students) intensively and I look back gratefully to what I was able to learn spiritually at that time. For example, love for mission, readiness to contribute to a group (that is, to a congregation), encouragement to regular Bible reading and prayer, and a life accountable to other Christians. I first got to know an intentionally Lutheran Church during a study trip to the USA. I grew up in a German union state church and there heard hardly anything of the Lutheran teaching which I have treasured since my stay in the USA.

So is doctrine important at all? Isn't it crucial to live in a personal relationship with Jesus? Certainly, but both belong together. Jesus says that all who abide in His Word are truly His disciples (cf. John 8:31 f.). Jesus cannot be separated from His Word because He Himself is the Word that has become flesh (cf. John 1:1, 14). Because Jesus is Lord of the Church, His entire Word has authority for the Church and must be taught (cf. 1 Peter 4:11; Jeremiah 23:28,31).

The Lutheran Understanding of Scripture

First I will get into the Lutheran understanding of the Bible, or of Scripture. Many churches arrive at different answers only because they have a different understanding of Scripture. In this section I will also cite Luther and the Lutheran Confessions⁵ to make clear that the Reformation's understanding of the Bible is fundamentally different than the prevailing understanding in mainstream Lutheran churches.⁶ Dr. Armin Buchholz also attests to this in *The Scriptures of God in Doctrinal Controversy*.⁷ He shows that the Lutheran understanding of Scripture and Lutheran theology are inseparably joined together.

⁵ The Confessions of the Lutheran Church from the 16th century are the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther (1529), the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (statement of defense) from the year 1530, the Smalcald Articles (1537), the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537), and the Formula of Concord (1577). In addition to that, the Lutheran Church subscribes to the Ecumenical Confessions of faith of the Early Church: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. All the Confessions mentioned here are found assembled in the Book of Concord of 1580.

⁶ That being said, it is not contested that there are also pious congregations in mainstream Lutheran churches with a conservative understanding of Scripture. But in the state church as a whole and in the universities where pastors are trained by the state church, the biblical criticism of the historical-critical method is widespread.

⁷ Armin Buchholz, *Schrift Gottes im Lehrstreit* (Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 2007). See also: Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* vol. I, especially chapter 14 "On the Doctrine De Scriptura Sacra".

According to the Lutheran view, the Bible is God's Word.⁸ It does not just contain it (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16). In this regard, then, it is irrelevant whether a word from the Bible was spoken or written down by Jesus Himself, by Paul, or by a prophet, because the Holy Spirit is the actual author (cf., for example, Hebrews 3:7). Concerning this the Lutheran Confessions say: "Peter says, 'For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' [2 Peter 1:21]. Without the outward Word, however, they were not holy... They were holy, says he, since the Holy Spirit spoke through them."⁹ For Luther, the Bible is "the special book, writing, and word of the Holy Spirit".¹⁰ In the Apology (Defense) of the Augsburg Confession it is asked with regard to the Roman Catholic Church and her understanding of the justification of man before God: "Do they think that the Holy Spirit does not posit His word with certainty and deliberately or does not know what He is saying?"¹¹ That means that the Holy Spirit did not only inspire the writers of the Bible with the meaning, but each word was selected with consideration.¹² Luther even writes: "For not only the words but also the manner of speaking which the Holy Spirit and Scripture employs is from God."¹³

That does *not* mean, however, that with the inspiration of the Bible the personality of the authors was eliminated and that they became

⁸ Sometimes it is alleged that Luther had a liberal understanding of Scripture. These remarks about how to understand Scripture should show that this is not the case.

⁹ Smalcald Articles III:VIII:13.

¹⁰ WA (Luther's Works, Weimar edition) 38:340.

¹¹ Apology IV:108.

¹² Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:13 and "verbal inspiration". Cf. also Numbers 22:38; 23:5; 2 Samuel 23:2; Jeremiah 1:9; Matthew 10:19f.; Luke 1:70; Acts 1:16; 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

¹³ On Psalm 127:3. WA 4:1960.

mindless writing instruments of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 1:1-4). God stooped down to reveal Himself in human language. Each human author of the Bible indeed has his own way of speaking, that is, his personal style. That is why it is helpful and necessary in interpretation to deal with the manner of speaking and the culture of that time. The divine character of the Bible, though, is underestimated when without biblical foundation statements of the Bible are seen as conditioned by time and culture and are therefore no longer considered relevant, or when it is contested that the Bible in its entirety *is* God's Word.

Without the working of the Holy Spirit the Bible is foolishness to men (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18ff.). God's Word is living and active.¹⁴ It is true, inerrant, and contains no contradictions.¹⁵ Luther writes: "The saints could err in their writings and sin in their lives, but the Scriptures cannot err..."¹⁶

It is especially comforting with regard to God's promises that the Bible is God's steadfast Word and not imperfect human opinion or experience.

Because the Old and New Testaments *are* God's Word, they have the highest authority for the Church of the Lutheran Reformation: "We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures

¹⁴ Cf. John 6:63; Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 4:12.

¹⁵ If our reason detects apparent contradictions or notices tensions, the reason is the narrowness of human logic. For God's Word contains no errors. For truth and inerrancy, cf., for example, Numbers 23:19; Psalm 119:160; John 10:35; 17:17.

¹⁶ From "The Misuse of the Mass" (1521), WA 19:1073.

of the Old and New Testament¹⁷ alone. For it is written in Psalm 119:105, ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’ St. Paul has written, ‘even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.’ (Galatians 1:8)”¹⁸ “The true rule is this: God’s Word shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel can do so.”¹⁹

When Holy Scripture is the *only* norm²⁰ (*sola scriptura*), then “infallible” statements of a pope, the tradition of the Church, scientific insights,²¹ human reason, the prevailing spirit of the times (“zeitgeist”), ideologies, or new revelations have no place next to or over God’s Word.²²

If the teaching of the Church can only be taken from God’s Word, then it follows that Scripture can only be interpreted by Scripture. Otherwise we are in danger of reading our own (possibly false) presuppositions into the Bible. That’s why we should try to interpret difficult Bible passages with clear Bible passages.²³ A deviation from the literal understanding of a Bible passage, that is, a

¹⁷ Cf. Ephesians 2:19-21. This faith has been passed down to the saints by the Apostles and Prophets once and for all (cf. Jude 3) and does not have to be supplemented by further revelations.

¹⁸ Formula of Concord, Epitome, The Summary Content, Rule, and Norm, 1.

¹⁹ Smalcald Articles II:II:15.

²⁰ 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7; Acts 17:11; 18:28; 26:22; Luke 16:27ff.; 24:27; John 5:39.

²¹ For example: philosophy, natural sciences, social sciences.

²² Even the historical statements of the Bible are absolutely reliable. God is Lord over history. This can be recognized, for example, in the fulfillment of many biblical prophecies.

²³ Cf. Apology XXVII:60.

symbolical or figurative understanding, must be explainable from the Bible.²⁴

It also follows that if the Bible says nothing to a question, the question should remain open. No fixed answer to the question should be taught. However, in Christian freedom, congregations and churches can indeed clarify the handling of certain matters²⁵ as long as it does not run contrary to other biblical principles. All teachings of the Church should be based on clear passages of Scripture.

It is frequently maintained today that it is only important to agree on fundamental doctrinal questions and that others are rather minor. But what kind of an interaction is that with God's holy Word, to divide it into important and unimportant statements (cf. Matthew 28:20)? Some statements are certainly more important than others, but can we declare parts of God's Word to be unimportant, even though God considered it important to reveal them to us? If we begin to limit the authority of God's Word to certain parts, we are tempted to leave only those parts that are pleasant to us. The examples of some churches show that in the long run they do not even preserve fundamental teachings. So, for example, in member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) today even the bodily resurrection of Jesus is frequently denied. The biblical principle of Scripture should not be used selectively. Otherwise man places himself over the Bible by selecting according to *his* own notions. Later we will see how closely individual doctrinal questions relate to each other. That's why deviation in individual questions of biblical doctrine easily leads to deviation in other doctrinal questions.²⁶

²⁴ For example, with parables such as Matthew 13:3ff.

²⁵ For example, certain items of a church constitution, or the order of the Divine Service.

²⁶ Cf. Galatians 5:9; Matthew 16:6, 12; 2 Timothy 2:17f.

In interpreting the Bible, it is important not to separate Bible verses from their immediate context or from the context of salvation history. It is important not to ignore Bible passages or play them against each other, but to consider the entirety of the biblical witness.

It is also extremely important to recognize that Christ is the center of Holy Scripture (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:2). For without Him the Bible is a “book with seven seals” (cf. Revelation 5). In Him “all Scripture”, that is, all prophecies, are fulfilled (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20). We should seek and find Him in Scripture.²⁷ That’s why the Old Testament is to be understood in light of the New Testament.

The Bible is clear and unambiguous in the entirety of its witness.²⁸ It is not true that only theologians can recognize this witness. That does not take away from the fact that some Bible passages are hard to understand and that a well-grounded education of pastors is very important.

The question of how people can become righteous before God and thereby be delivered from eternal damnation (justification) is the question to which Christ *alone* (Solus Christus)²⁹ is the clear biblical answer. Other religions offer nothing. Christ’s vicarious sacrifice makes us righteous through faith *alone* (sola fide) by grace *alone* (sola gratia), not through our works and good deeds.³⁰ God’s plan of salvation and His activity with regard to our deliverance pervade the entire Bible.

A trademark of Lutheran theology is the consistent distinction of Law and Gospel and the understanding that the Christian is at the

²⁷ Cf. Luke 24:26-27, 44-47.

²⁸ Cf. Psalm 119:105, 130; 2 Timothy 3:15.

²⁹ Cf. Acts 4:12.

³⁰ Cf. Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 3:28.

same time sinner *and* saint.³¹ We will see later how important for the understanding of the Bible the distinction of Law and Gospel is, the distinction between God’s demand of us and the consolation of His grace.

Thus Schwan’s explanation of the Small Catechism says: “The Law teaches what *we* are to do and not to do. It shows us our sin and the wrath of God. It demands, threatens, and condemns. It works wrath and kills. The Gospel teaches what *God* has done and still does, for our salvation. It shows us our Savior and the grace of God. It promises, gives, and seals unto us, forgiveness, life, and salvation. It invites us and draws us to Christ, works faith, and thus gives us spiritual life.”³²

Excursus:

A Few Examples of the Violation of the Scriptural Principle

In treating the understanding of Scripture, certain things were mentioned that should be subordinated to the authority of the Bible, that is, to God’s Word. The spirit of the times (“zeitgeist”) is usually directly contrary to God’s Word. This manifests itself, for example, in the dissolution of God-given regulations. Quite a few of these regulations or relations are characterized by two aspects: service and authority.

We rediscover these aspects of service and authority, for example, in the relation between Jesus and the believer: “...as the Son of Man

³¹ Cf. Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:17.

³² Heinrich Christian Schwan (1819-1905) was President of the Missouri Synod from 1878 to 1899. The “Schwan Catechism” appeared in 1896 and was widely used in both German and English in the Missouri Synod. The reference here is from question 101: “What difference is there between the Law and the Gospel?” A bilingual edition of Schwan’s Catechism can be found online at:

<https://archive.org/details/shortexpositiono00luth/page/n5/mode/2up>

came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). He washed His disciples’ feet (cf. John 13:5), a service otherwise rendered by slaves. In the Kingdom of God, rules apply that stand in the way of the thinking of our society: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Jesus Christ went through suffering and death for us. On the other hand, He is not only our brother but He is also the Lord and He exercises authority: “Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

In Ephesians 5:21ff., Paul draws a comparison between Christ and the congregation on the one hand and marriage on the other. So, for example, the subordination of the woman³³ and the devotion (love) of the man³⁴ to the woman are mentioned and compared with Christ and the congregation. Everything should happen in mutual love. Verse 21 (“submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”) does not rescind the relationship between man and woman formulated in the following verses – even Jesus humbled Himself for service and is nevertheless the Lord. “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband” (1 Corinthians 11:3). Admittedly this does not fit with the usual mentality of our time. The ideas of the emancipation movement³⁵ have also found their way into Christian circles. The word “emancipation” etymologically includes the liberation or the separation from a thing – in this case that of women from men.³⁶ What would this mean carried over to the picture of Christ and the

³³ Cf. Titus 2:4f.; 1 Peter 3:1,6; Colossians 3:18.

³⁴ Cf. 1 Peter 3:7; Colossians 3:19.

³⁵ At the same time it remains undisputed that the feminist movement – especially at the beginning – certainly also had positive effects and fixed things that were unjust to women.

³⁶ Etymologically, the word “emancipation” comes from the Latin verb *emancipare*: e- (variant of ex-) meaning “out”, and *mancipium* meaning “slave”.

congregation? If marriage ought to be a picture of Christ and the congregation, then a marriage that is being lived according to God's will has an aspect of confession: Christ and the congregation are reflected in such a marriage.

Why is the theme of the relation between man and woman emotionally charged even in many Christian circles? Why are many Christians not ready to consider and see that many Bible passages are also valid today, that there is a biblical model for marriage that does not match the "partnerships" popular today? From my perspective, the following aspects play a particular role:

First, the past in which women were discriminated against and were considered inferior to men, sometimes even with reference to the Bible, is firmly established in the memory of many people. So, for example, higher education was much less open to women than men. That's why the word "submission" has mainly negative associations, which nevertheless do not fit with what God demands of man and woman.³⁷ Second, some Christian women and men allow themselves to be guided in this question by the spirit of the times ("zeitgeist"), scrutinizing it either too little or not at all. Oftentimes we do not realize how much we have been shaped in school or at the university by the thoughts of Humanism and the Enlightenment, which are based on subjective reason and experience as the standard. Third, personal experiences can be a reason for the rejection of God's order of marriage. This can happen, for example, when a husband egoistically abuses his chief task,³⁸ does not have the welfare of his

³⁷ A husband should love and honor his wife and encourage her with the development of her gifts. She should follow him, respect him as the husband, and stand by him in word and deed.

³⁸ Cf. 1 Timothy 3:4: He must manage his own household well, especially the bishops. But this is also the task of husbands. The chief or "head" thing for the man (and the subordination of the woman respectively) applies to all areas, according to Ephesians 5:24. But for that reason the husband also bears the main responsibility before God for the way of life in the marriage. The wife, however, should think critically for herself. Already Adam did not

wife first in mind, does not take her opinions, wishes, and needs seriously, or does not assume responsibility. In this case it can be helpful to remember the comparison between Christ and the congregation. God does not want husbands to domineer over their wives, but to serve them. Moreover, submission should never be confused with inferiority.³⁹ God created man and woman different and distinct, but of equal value.⁴⁰ Whoever despises the other sex or values it less than one's own offends God the creator!

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:12f.: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve." This passage and also 1 Corinthians 14:34 exclude the ordination of women, because according to the above Bible passage, women should not teach before men. The pastoral office, which today is carried out mostly by full-time pastors (Latin for "shepherds") is indeed an office of service, but also one in which authority is exercised.⁴¹ Moreover, Paul substantiates this with the order of the creation of Adam and Eve, that is, the relationship between man and woman existing already from the beginning, even before the fall into sin.⁴² Some see an obstacle for the Gospel in the exclusion of women from the pastoral office, or object that women with a talent for preaching

get this leading responsibility right, because he allowed Eve and himself to be tempted. God had told Adam which trees he should not eat from even before Eve was created (cf. Genesis 2:16f.). That is why God also spoke to him first after they had broken this commandment (cf. Genesis 3:9f.).

³⁹ Thus, for example, God the Father is also the head of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3). Although Christ always subordinates His will to the will of His Father unconditionally (Matthew 26:39), Christ is in no way of less worth than His Father.

⁴⁰ Cf. Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Exodus 20:12; Luke 8:1-3; John 4; John 8:1-11; Galatians 3:27f.

⁴¹ Cf. 1 Timothy 5:20; 2 Timothy 2:25; 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13.

⁴² Cf. Genesis 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:8f.

would thereby not be considered. This reasonable objection, however, does not empower us to act against God's will. Does not God's wisdom surpass our wisdom? Has not God also created other orders like this?

If the relationship between man and woman is seen as merely a product of the fall into sin, then it probably becomes difficult to accept this as a good order of God. Ever since the fall into sin we have been living in a world that is shaped by suffering, suspicion, and egoism. This also has implications for God's good creation and its order (cf. Genesis 3:16ff.).

Because it easily happens that we are influenced by the spirit of the times ("zeitgeist") instead of by the Triune God, it is important to test everything according to God's Word, since we do not always realize everything that is against God's good will.

Alongside the spirit of the times ("zeitgeist"), the findings of science are often placed above God's Word today. At the same time, science is fundamentally something positive that can do us a service. But even these services, like all services, are dependent on God's blessing (cf. Psalm 127). God often uses people in their services as tools: Thus He heals not only through direct miracles, but more often through doctors. We also ought not to forget that without God there would be no sciences. God also created the laws of nature (cf., for example, Genesis 8:22) which the natural sciences utilize.

Increasingly even Christians believe that the creation account is not to be taken literally, but more so that macroevolution⁴³ took place, with God as the initiator (so-called theistic evolution, a mixture of atheism and biblical belief). The problem, however, is that the biblical creation account is not compatible with macroevolution. The Bible speaks of days of creation that are marked by phases of light

⁴³ Macroevolution means, development of primitive life forms all the way up to man over a time period of many millions of years. In contrast, microevolution denotes transforming developments within an animal or plant species.

and dark (evening and morning), and in one verse of the creation account uses the words “days” and “years” (cf. Genesis 1:14). Besides, in reference to the creation account, as in Exodus 20:11 or Exodus 31:17, it becomes clear that we are dealing with seven actual days and not a long period of time. God speaks and it happens.⁴⁴ He creates every animal and plant species according to its kind.⁴⁵ Adam and Eve are historical persons from whom all people are descended.⁴⁶ Therefore all people are burdened with original sin by the fall into sin.⁴⁷ If God is the actual Author of the Bible and the Creator of the world, how can we then not take seriously the account of creation? Of course it is not the intention of the Bible to be a science book, but that does not mean that it would err in statements that do not correspond to scientific theories or findings.⁴⁸ The “scientism” of many, particularly of secular people, in my view almost takes on the character of idolatry. It is nice when Christian scientists try to make the creation account scientifically plausible⁴⁹ and research details, but it is *not* because of their findings that we ought to trust the creation account, that is, God’s Word.

Just like with other teachings, the rejection of the creation account in its literal meaning can bring with it other dangerous errors. In the

⁴⁴ Cf. also, for example, Psalm 33:6,9; Psalm 102:25; Hebrews 1:10; 11:3; Isaiah 48:13; Genesis 2:1ff.

⁴⁵ Cf. Genesis 1:11,12,21, 24-25.

⁴⁶ Cf. Genesis 3:20; Luke 3:23-38; Acts 17:26; 1 Corinthians 15:20-22,45.

⁴⁷ Cf. Romans 5:12,18f.: Here Adam’s transgression and Christ’s obedience are put in relation to each other. Therefore the historicity of these two persons and their conduct are inextricably linked with each other. The fall into sin was a historically decisive event, which brought with it far-reaching consequences for the originally good creation.

⁴⁸ Otherwise the biblical statements about the bodily resurrection or the virgin birth would be brought into question!

⁴⁹ Cf., for example, <https://answersingenesis.org/>

Bible, death is referred to as “the wages of sin” (cf. Romans 6:23). So death is not natural but a result of sin (cf. Romans 5:12ff.). Before the fall into sin there was no death. In contrast, according to the *theory* of evolution death is a selection mechanism that makes the development from primitive to valuable life forms possible in the first place. If man, in keeping with the *theory* of evolution is only a product of chance (cf., however, Psalm 139:13), then he is also not responsible to any god, as the weaker one has no worth,⁵⁰ and therefore is not aware that on the Last Day he must give answer to God.

One can also go astray with a literal understanding of the Bible if Bible passages are taken out of the context of the situation or out of the context of salvation history: So, for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses maintain that they *must*, according to Mark 6:7ff., undertake missionary house calls in pairs. And yet Jesus does not explicitly say that His followers *must* do it like this for all times.⁵¹ Jehovah’s Witnesses are also known for understanding the 144,000 from Revelation 14:3 literally as the entirety of those who enter heaven. But they do not recognize that Revelation obviously uses symbolism (as with this number). You should also not look prematurely for the fulfillment of a prophecy in current events, and thereby attempt to calculate the Return of Christ (cf. Mark 13:32f.).

It is also fatal to read into the Bible one’s own impressions and opinions (called “eisegesis”) and then to claim to divinely legitimate them through Bible passages torn out of context or considered apart from the overall biblical witness.

Regarding parables, the details ought not to be overworked. Parables in the Bible clarify a main point, the details only serve to make it understandable. Thus the point of the parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. Matthew 13:24-30,36-43) is that unbelievers will

⁵⁰ Cf. “life unworthy of living” in the Nazi regime.

⁵¹ Perhaps the situation-specific nature of this word of the Lord becomes still clearer from the parallel passage Matthew 10:5ff.

finally be judged on the Last Day. It cannot be inferred from the parable, for example, that some people consistently believe from birth until death and the others consistently do not.

In some Christian circles the *doctrine of the Millennium* is quite popular. It says that Christ will appear on earth again one thousand years before the end of the world and will lead the Church to dominion over the world. This doctrine is built on the difficult Bible passage Revelation 20:1-6, rather than on interpreting this Bible passage on the basis of clearer Bible passages. Thus, passages which would teach such a thing are sought in vain from Jesus' discourses on the End Times in the Gospels.⁵² Even Paul and Peter speak of only *one* return of Jesus on the Last Day.⁵³ The rapture of believers occurs at this time as well.⁵⁴

Moreover, the Bible teaches that Christ's Kingdom is not of this world⁵⁵ but is of a spiritual nature,⁵⁶ that this kingdom on earth will remain under the cross⁵⁷ until the end, and that Jesus will first appear on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead.⁵⁸ There is only one

⁵² Cf. Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21.

⁵³ Cf. 2 Timothy 4:1; 2 Peter 3.

⁵⁴ Cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

⁵⁵ Cf. John 18:36. Even Paul expects a heavenly and not an earthly kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18).

⁵⁶ Cf. Luke 17:20f.; John 3:3-8; Romans 14:17; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:12. It should also be noted that many prophecies, including that of the Kingdom of Christ, have been spiritually fulfilled: For example, Acts 2:29-36 (Psalm 110:1f.); 1 Peter 2:9 (Exodus 19:5f.); Matthew 21:42 (Psalm 118:22f.); Romans 9:6-8 (Genesis 21:12); Hebrews 8:8-13 (Jeremiah 31:33f); 2 Corinthians 6:16 (Ezekiel 37:26f.); Acts 15:15f. (Amos 9:11f.).

⁵⁷ Following Jesus will be connected with temptation, suffering, and persecution until His return. Cf. Acts 14:22; Luke 9:23; 17:20ff; 2 Timothy 4:18.

⁵⁸ Cf. Matthew 24:29-30; 25:39ff.; 2 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 9:28.

bodily resurrection of the dead on the Last Day.⁵⁹ Then all believers in Christ will spend eternity with Jesus in the glory of the Father,⁶⁰ while unbelievers must suffer torment in eternal damnation and separation from God.⁶¹ No one knows when the Last Day will be, not even Jesus knew it when he wandered on earth (cf. Mark 13:32f.). If a thousand-year kingdom were to precede the Last Day then the time of the Last Day could be calculated.⁶²

A few important assertions of Lutheran theology as well as differences to other theological positions will be presented below.

⁵⁹ Cf. Daniel 12:2; John 5:28f.; 6:39f.; 1 Corinthians 15. The “first resurrection” (cf. Revelation 20:4-6) cannot be a bodily one since John sees the souls of the faithful witnesses. By this “resurrection” could be meant conversion, that is, new birth, which the Bible in other places speaks of as awakening from the dead, that is, resurrection (cf. Ephesians 2:1ff.; John 5:21ff.; Colossians 2:12f.).

⁶⁰ Cf. Isaiah 65:13-19; Psalm 16:10; 17:15; Romans 8:18; 1 Corinthians 15:42f.; Revelation 2:7; 21; 22.

⁶¹ Cf. Matthew 25:46; Luke 16:23,28; Jude 7.

⁶² For a deeper understanding of the biblical statements about the End Times, one could read John Stephenson’s “Eschatology” in “The Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Series”.

The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Two Natures of Christ

Christianity believes in *one* God⁶³ in which there are three persons:⁶⁴ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of these three persons is God,⁶⁵ but nevertheless, they are not three gods, but one God. The Holy Spirit is also a person and not just a force. He comes as a helper (cf. John 14:15-17,25f.) and He speaks, knows, and feels.⁶⁶

Whoever denies the tri-unity of God places himself against the testimony of Holy Scripture and is outside of Christianity,⁶⁷ because he does not believe in God as He has revealed Himself through the prophets and apostles.⁶⁸ There can be no spiritual fellowship⁶⁹ with such people.

God reveals Himself in nature as the almighty Creator⁷⁰ and in His Word, Holy Scripture, as the God who graciously redeems and loves

⁶³ Cf. Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 12:4-6; John 10:30.

⁶⁴ They are not just three ways of appearing (Cf. John 5:32,37; Matthew 28:19f.).

⁶⁵ *Father*: Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 8:6; *Son*: John 1:1,14; 20:28; 1 John 5:20; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13; *Holy Spirit*: Acts 5:3f.; John 4:24. Each person is God and not just like God.

⁶⁶ Cf. 1 Timothy 4:1; 1 Corinthians 2:11; Isaiah 63:10.

⁶⁷ So, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and other religions.

⁶⁸ One cannot, for example, believe in the Father and reject Jesus as God's Son (1 John 2:23).

⁶⁹ For example, mutual prayer or joint worship services.

⁷⁰ Cf. Psalm 19:2; Romans 1:19f.

us.⁷¹ In His Word we experience how, that is, what God is. He is (a) eternal, (b) unchanging, (c) all-powerful, (d) all-knowing, (e) ever-present, (f) holy, (g) righteous, (h) faithful, (i) kind, (j) gracious, (k) merciful, (l) Love, and (m) Spirit.⁷²

Jesus Christ is true God,⁷³ but at the same time also true man. In Christ, the divine and human natures are inseparably united,⁷⁴ because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.⁷⁵ But Jesus already existed as the Son in the unity of the Father and the Holy Spirit before He took on human nature.⁷⁶ He is not a creature of God, but is Himself God in the person of the Son.

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). To this end, Christ humbled Himself by taking on human nature, was born under destitute circumstances, served man, and was obedient to the Father unto death on the cross. And yet He only rarely made use of His divine attributes (His miracles). Thus God exalted Him, and so He is worthy to receive worship from us.⁷⁷ In order to vicariously redeem us by His death on the cross, Christ had to be

⁷¹ Cf. John 20:31; 2 Timothy 3:15f.; Hebrews 1:1ff.; Psalm 34:22; 103; Isaiah 43:1; John 3:16; Colossians 1:19-22.

⁷² (a) 1 Timothy 1:17; (b) Malachi 3:6; (c) Genesis 17:1; (d) John 21:17; (e) Jeremiah 23:24; Acts 17:27; (f) Leviticus 19:2; Psalm 5:4f.; (g) Deuteronomy 32:4; (h) 2 Timothy 2:13; (i) Psalm 118:1; (j) Titus 3:5; (k) Exodus 34:6f.; (l) John 3:16; 1 John 4:8,16; (m) John 4:24.

⁷³ Cf. 1 Timothy 2:5; Luke 24:39; Matthew 26:38.

⁷⁴ Cf. Romans 9:5; John 1:14. Not only did the man Jesus die on the cross, but Christ as a whole person. In an analogous way, Christ performed miracles not only according to His divine nature.

⁷⁵ Cf. Matthew 1:18f.; Romans 1:3f.

⁷⁶ John 1:1-14 (incarnation of the Word); John 8:58.

⁷⁷ Cf. Philippians 2:8ff.; Revelation 5:9,12.

true man.⁷⁸ But at the same time He had to be true God in order to conquer sin, death, and the devil.⁷⁹ Since Jesus' being true man and true God is so intertwined with our salvation, this confession should in no way be abandoned.

Jesus did not cast off His being man after His resurrection. He did not show Himself to His disciples as a spirit, but physically (Luke 24:39). Moreover, after His resurrection He is called the "Son of Man" (that is, man) multiple times.⁸⁰ As He is bodily raised so will we also be bodily raised (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20f.). Nevertheless, with the resurrection body a new, perfect body is meant (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35ff.). Consequently, also in the Lord's Supper the Lutheran Church holds fast to the incarnation of Christ, that is, the Word becoming flesh (cf. John 1:14), by confessing that the body and blood of Christ are truly present under bread and wine. Zwingli had rejected the doctrine of the real presence in the Lord's Supper, since in his opinion the "finite" (bread and wine) cannot contain the "infinite" (the God Jesus Christ). This is the logical consequence of his Christology gained by human reason. According to this Christology, Christ left behind so much of the infiniteness of His divine nature as had no place in the finiteness of His human nature and as was necessary to maintain the heavenly Trinity during the humiliation. So a part of His divine nature, which did not unite with the human nature, remained back in heaven. But that would contradict 2 Corinthians 5:19⁸¹ and also Colossians 2:9.⁸²

⁷⁸ Hebrews 2:14ff.; 1 Timothy 2:5; Romans 5:15,19; Galatians 4:4f.; 1 Corinthians 15:21.

⁷⁹ Psalm 49:7f.; Romans 4:25-5:1,10; 1 Corinthians 15:54; 2 Corinthians 5:19; Galatians 3:13; 1 John 5:20; Hebrews 2:14.

⁸⁰ For example, Matthew 24:30; 26:64; Acts 7:56; Revelation 14:14; 1 Timothy 2:5.

⁸¹ "In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself."

⁸² "For in Him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

The Distinction of Law and Gospel⁸³

According to the Lutheran view, the Law has three functions:

1. The Law as a *bar* [curb] would curb the coarsest outbreaks of sin and so make life together possible (cf. Romans 2:14f.). That is also why God established governments (cf. Romans 13:1-7).

2. The Law as a *mirror* shows us that due to our thoughts and actions, our attitudes and cravings, we cannot stand before God because we daily deviate from His commandments and have thereby earned nothing but punishment.⁸⁴ God's Word makes it very clear that no man is justified before God by his works (cf. Romans 3:23) – apart from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became man.⁸⁵ That is why *only He* could redeem us by His perfect observance and fulfilling of the Law, His atoning death⁸⁶ in our place, and His resurrection,⁸⁷ without our merits (cf. Romans 3:24).

The Law must be spoken to indifferent sinners because they neither recognize that they are lost nor do they recognize the necessity of Christ's forgiveness. That is why the Law in its function as a mirror

⁸³ A large part of this section is guided by the "Schwan Catechism".

⁸⁴ Cf. Romans 1:24ff.; 3:20; 7:7,14,23; Galatians 4.

⁸⁵ Cf. John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26f.; 1 John 3:5.

⁸⁶ Isaiah 53:4f.,10f.; John 1:29; Romans 3:25; 4:25; 5:9f.; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 1:7; Hebrews 9:22; 10:10ff. Jesus' atoning death was inevitable (cf. Matthew 26:39).

⁸⁷ Romans 1:4; 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:17; John 3:14f.

is also a guardian to lead us to Christ (cf. Galatians 3:24).⁸⁸ The frightened sinner should, however, be comforted by the Gospel (cf. Psalm 51:8), which also contains within itself the power of change and renewal.⁸⁹

Indeed, the new man in us is perfect,⁹⁰ and in Christ we are a new creation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17), but the old man in us always surfaces, as he did even in Paul.⁹¹ That is why the Law must also be preached to Christians, so that the old man in them might die again and again.⁹²

The Law says: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself... do this, and you will live.” (Luke 10:27f.), and, “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.” (Deuteronomy 27:26, quoted in Galatians 3:10).

The law demands, threatens, condemns, and shows us God’s wrath and holiness.⁹³ It provokes human rejection and brings death to us. The Law indeed offers life – under the condition of keeping the Law

⁸⁸ If man becomes frightened over how little he fulfills the Law and how great his guilt is, then he can recognize in the Gospel that salvation is possible only by the vicarious obedience of Jesus (cf. Romans 5:19; Galatians 4:4f.; Hebrews 7:23-27) and His death on the cross.

⁸⁹ Cf. Romans 1:16; 2:4.

⁹⁰ Cf. 1 John 3:6; Ephesians 4:24.

⁹¹ Cf. Romans 7:14ff.; 1 John 1:8. For the new and old man, see Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10; Romans 6:6. As Christians, we are therefore both righteous and sinners at the same time. If the new *and* the old man did not exist in a Christian, then 1 John 3:6 and 1:8, written in the same letter, would not make sense.

⁹² Cf. Romans 6:6f.; Galatians 2:19.

⁹³ Cf. Romans 2:5; Colossians 3:6; Hebrews 10:30f.; Exodus 33:20.

perfectly. The problem, however, is that no man can fulfill this condition (cf. Romans 3:10).

The Gospel says quite differently: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The Gospel, in contrast to the Law, offers eternal life without condition. Faith is not a requirement that we must, or are able to, fulfill. It is a gift of God. Law and Gospel are *both* God’s Word and *both* necessary. Whoever intends to be saved by fulfilling the Law even a little bit falls from grace.⁹⁴ A mixture of Law and Gospel destroys both Law and Gospel.

The Gospel teaches what God has done to rescue us from our forsakenness by telling of Jesus’ birth, His life, suffering, death, and His resurrection and ascension into Heaven. This is how Christ defeated death and the devil,⁹⁵ took away their power (over us),⁹⁶ freed us from the Law, sin, and the devil,⁹⁷ and purchased us as His own.⁹⁸

Even today He serves us through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. There we are united to Christ,⁹⁹ and forgiveness, eternal life, and certainty of salvation are promised and given to us in faith. The Gospel shows us our Savior and God’s grace. It graciously calls us to Christ (Matthew 11:28) and works faith (cf. John 6:39), by which

⁹⁴ Cf. Romans 4:14; Galatians 2:21; 5:4.

⁹⁵ Cf. Luke 1:67ff.; John 12:31f.; 1 Corinthians 15:25f.,54-57; Colossians 2:13-15; 1 John 3:8.

⁹⁶ Cf. Hebrews 2:14; Colossians 1:13; Revelation 1:18; 20:2.

⁹⁷ Cf. Romans 6:14; 8:1-4; 10:4; Galatians 1:4; 3:13f.; 5:1.

⁹⁸ Cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; 2 Peter 2:1; Revelation 5:9.

⁹⁹ *Word*: John 15:1-8; 1 John 1:1ff.; 1 Corinthians 1:9; *Baptism*: Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Corinthians 12:13,27; *Lord’s Supper*: 1 Corinthians 10:16f.

we desire fellowship with Christ and no longer reject Him to the end of our damnation (cf. Luke 15:32; John 15:6; Ephesians 3:17).

3. The Law as a *standard* shows us God's will according to which we gladly live as God's beloved and richly blessed children.¹⁰⁰ Even though keeping the commandments does *nothing* for our justification, there is nevertheless a blessing in keeping the commandments. Consider, for example, the Fourth Commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long..." (Exodus 20:12).¹⁰¹ God does not want to hassle us with the commandments. He always wants the best for us. Whoever loves God will keep His Word (cf. John 14:23), because we were dearly bought (cf. 1 Peter 1:18f.). Whoever sins flippantly transforms God's grace into cheap grace and does not regard it with enough value (cf. Romans 6).

The proper distinction between the Law and the Promises (that is, the Gospel) is important in several questions of doctrine, for example, with regard to the Sacraments: In Baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is not we who accomplish the essential actions, but it is God who deals with us according to His promises. So going to the Lord's Supper is not a good work that would be beneficial to salvation. And it is not simply an act of obedience or remembrance. The faith worked by God grasps the promises of God, that is, the reality created by Him through Baptism or the Lord's Supper (see further below).

The correct distinction of Law and Gospel also helps us to understand the Bible correctly. In reading the Bible, you could stumble over verses like (A) "severity [of God] toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off." (Romans 11:22), "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Psalm 63; John 15:8; 2 Corinthians 5:15.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Ephesians 6:2f.; Deuteronomy 11:27; 2 Kings 18:1-8; Psalm 81:13ff.; Malachi 3:10; Galatians 6:9; 1 Timothy 4:7f.; 6:6.

like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8), “...and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith... For some have already strayed after Satan.” (1 Timothy 5:12,15), “they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.” (Luke 8:13), and: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith...” (1 Timothy 4:1) on the one hand,¹⁰² and on the other hand (B) “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.” (Isaiah 54:10), “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38f.), “God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13), and “no one is able to snatch them [the sheep, that is, the believers] out of my [Jesus’] hand.” (John 10:28).¹⁰³

The Bible verses under (A) *appear* to contradict those under (B). If we feel like Bible verses contradict each other, that still should not lead us to question God’s Word or play Bible verses against each other. We also cannot ignore the Bible verses under (A) and assume that falling away from faith is impossible. The verses under (A) do not speak about hypocrites, who were never true believers. Falling away from faith is a real possibility. We can understand the “contradiction” if we recognize that the verses under (A) are the Law and the verses under (B) are the Gospel. The Gospel addresses the new man and the Law addresses the old man, who still lives in

¹⁰² Regarding (A), compare also, for example, Matthew 24:10-13; Luke 15:24; 23:31f.; John 15:1-7; Galatians 5:4; 1 Timothy 6:10,21; 2 Peter 2:15,20-22; Hebrews 2:1; 3:12-14; 10:26f.; James 5:19f.

¹⁰³ Regarding (B), compare also, for example, Psalm 146:5f.; 2 Timothy 2:13; Philippians 1:6.

us. How could the promises of preservation also be directed toward the old man when he has nothing but death to await?¹⁰⁴ Or how could the warning against falling away be directed towards the new man, who is righteous and holy (cf. Ephesians 4:24)? The task of the Law is to warn us and to shatter our self-assurance. The Gospel, on the other hand, wants to comfort, strengthen, and renew us. The verses under (B) are a wonderful pledge. We must let the verses under both (A) and (B) stand on their own, unweakened. We cannot mix them with each other. Because of Bible verses like those under (B), we can and should have *certainty* of salvation. The Bible verses under (A) show that there is no *security* of salvation: No one can snatch us out of Jesus' hand (cf. John 10:28), but we can leave it ourselves and so be lost. This could also occur quite subtly when we again become fond of sin, become entrapped in it, and finally fall from faith (cf. Hebrews 6:4ff.). Whoever lives in sin indifferently, no longer fights against it, and no longer seeks forgiveness forgets that Christ has freed him from sin and the devil. In doing so he finally disregards and rejects the Gospel.¹⁰⁵ Here the congregation is called to follow up with such people – and that also includes inactive congregation members (cf. James 5:19f.) – and to pray for them that by the Law they might recognize that without Christ they are lost.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. John 3:5f.; Romans 8:5f.

¹⁰⁵ This does *not* apply to people who out of weakness fall into (the same) sins again and again, but who want to be rid of them and again and again seek the Gospel.

Sin and Original Sin

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (cf. Genesis 1 and 2). Creation, according to God's own judgement, was "good", that is to say, "very good".¹⁰⁶ Adam and Eve were created according to God's image (cf. Genesis 1:27) and lived in His presence. They allowed themselves to be tempted by the serpent and were disobedient to God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ("fall into sin", Genesis 3). They wanted to be like God (cf. Genesis 3:5). As a result, Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise (cf. Genesis 3:23f.). From that point in time, suffering and hardship marked the life of these two and all other people (Genesis 3:16-19). Sin and its result of death have come into the world by the fall into sin.¹⁰⁷ The image of God has been lost.¹⁰⁸ The will and reason in earthly things, and their being directed toward God the Creator, remain for people, though in a restricted and deformed way. Now all people from birth on bear in themselves a sinful predisposition and disobedience, which have been inherited from Adam and Eve (what is called "original" or "inherited" sin). Thus it says in John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh."¹⁰⁹ And King David lamented: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm 51:5). In Psalm 58:3 we read: "The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies." After the Fall, people are by nature children of wrath (cf. Ephesians 2:3). After the Flood God stated: "The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). The Hebrew

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Genesis 1:10,12,18,21,25, and 31.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Romans 5:12; 6:23.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Colossians 3:9f.; Ephesians 4:17-24.

¹⁰⁹ "Flesh" here stands for the captivity to sin and dependence on it (cf. Romans 7:14ff).

word translated as “youth” also means infancy.¹¹⁰ In 2 Kings 2:23-24, the prophet Elisha curses young boys in the name of the Lord because they taunted him. Then forty-two of the children were ripped apart by two bears. Paul writes in the Epistle to the Romans that all are under sin and he proves this with citations from the Psalms: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one..” (Romans 3:10f.). Thus the term “abysmal depravity” is more accurate than “sinful predisposition.” Temptation no longer only comes to people from the outside, as in Paradise. Now it comes especially from within (cf. Romans 7:20).

What exactly is sin? To sin means to fall short of the goal. As a marksman misses the target, a person falls short of the goal when he acts against God’s will, against His commandments. Jesus summarizes the Law, that is, all commandments, in Luke 10:27 in the following way: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” If we fall short of this commandment even a little, then that is sin. Sinning can mean indifference or insurrection, that is, rebellion against God. It is a sin if we want to be our own master and doubt that God means well for us (distrust). Sin separates from God and destroys our relationship with Him. That was first made apparent when God banished man from His direct presence in Paradise (cf. John 1:18).

Under the category of sin fall not only actions, but also (a) words, (b) thoughts, (c) desires, (d) neglecting to do certain things, or (e) priorities, or time management.¹¹¹ Even a fleshly, that is, a sinful

¹¹⁰ The parallel use of “youth” and “womb” also occurs, for example, in Psalm 71:5f. and Job 31:18.

¹¹¹ (a) Matthew 5:21f.; (b) Matthew 5:28; (c) Ephesians 4:22; (d) Matthew 25:42ff.; (e) Luke 10:25-37.

attitude alone without any visible sin or sinful thoughts is enmity against God and brings with it death, since it does not please God.¹¹²

So there is no one who does not depend on Jesus' forgiveness and purification from sins.¹¹³ For our God is a holy God who hates sin.¹¹⁴ "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23)! Even small children are dependent on God's forgiveness. They are also born of flesh.¹¹⁵ In 1 Kings 8:46¹¹⁶ or in Romans 3:23-24¹¹⁷ and in other statements (see above), no one is exempt from sin. Whoever knows small children can already recognize the effects of original sin in their actions. Based on the reactions of parents, little children are often very well aware that what they have done is not right, but nevertheless they often do it again. They are also very egoistical. Everything has to revolve around them. Without regard for the parents they loudly demand, even at the worst possible moment, the immediate gratification of their wants and needs.

Some Christians, however, think there is a point in time when a person becomes responsible before God for his actions (what is called the "age of accountability"). If you want to use verses from the Old Testament to prove a fixed age, then they have to be torn completely out of context, in my opinion. I also do not believe that there is an individual "age of accountability" which many support by referring to Isaiah 7:16. It is undisputed that with age, the ability to distinguish between good and evil grows more and more. But that

¹¹² Cf. Romans 8:5-8.

¹¹³ Cf. Psalm 51:2; Jeremiah 33:8; Ephesians 5:26; 1 John 1:7,9; 1 Corinthians 6:11.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Exodus 20:5; Leviticus 19:2; Psalm 6:1; 27:9; 45:7; Matthew 3:7; Romans 12:9; Ephesians 5:6.

¹¹⁵ Cf. John 3:6.

¹¹⁶ "There is no one who does not sin."

¹¹⁷ "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

little children would have absolutely no sense in this regard is not so. They are, for example, often disobedient to direct instructions from their parents. Besides that, even adults are responsible for the sins they are not aware of: “Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12). We also cannot conclude by our society’s sense of right and wrong¹¹⁸ that little children should not be held accountable to God. That would contradict the scriptural principle (*sola scriptura*) outlined above. Not even adults could stand before God by living blamelessly according to civil standards. Additionally, proponents of an “age of accountability” often cite Mark 10:14f. as proof: “Let the little children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” The Kingdom of God would automatically belong to all children. But to begin with, Jesus speaks of the children who are brought to Him and not the totality of all children. Moreover, look at verse 15. Here the children are described as an example (for adults!) in how they receive the Kingdom of God. That can only happen in faith (cf. John 3:16,18; Hebrews 11:6). Children are not an example as though they are immune from sinning before God. They are an example in how they receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a gift in their blind confidence and helplessness. Some Christians believe that a person must be able to use reason in order to be able to believe. But it is precisely the reason of the unconverted person that is *not* able to find God (cf. Ephesians 4:18; 1 Corinthians 1:18). Reason is actually a hindrance. God must give faith and enlighten reason (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6).

¹¹⁸ Our society’s sense of right and wrong comes from the sum total of individual consciences. What the Law demands, which the conscience also attests to, is written in the heart of man (cf. Romans 2:15). However, the conscience is also tainted with original sin. That is why only the Bible, as God’s revelation, can reveal God’s will and His commandments undistorted and reliably.

Faith

Is it really possible that little children believe? Yes, because Jesus says: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones *who believe in me* to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:3-6). After the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus says to the Pharisees who were baffled that small children were praising God in the Temple: “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise” (Matthew 21:16). True praise of God, though, is impossible without faith. The Psalmist writes: “Upon you I have leaned from before my birth” (Psalm 71:6). John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit already before his birth (cf. Luke 1:15; 44).

God works faith in infants, as in adults, by His power. It is His gift. Jesus says: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). Jesus is the founder and perfecter of faith (cf. Hebrews 12:2). Faith is a gift of God.¹¹⁹ If, then, faith is completely a gift and worked by God’s power (cf. Colossians 2:12) and not something that we ourselves can earn, then we can understand better that even little children can have faith, as the above passages confirm. Of course the faith of infants is more or less unconscious – an emotional, child-like trust – and we have difficulty imagining how it could manifest itself. The infant cannot yet grasp everything intellectually. But he can trust, and that is the main aspect of faith. Despite his intellectual immaturity, an infant can, for example, trust his mother. This trust has effects: the infant willingly lets himself be held by his mother. Perhaps the growth of such childlike faith, like the growth of the Kingdom of God, can be

¹¹⁹ Cf. Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29.

compared to a mustard seed (cf. Matthew 13:31ff.), which though quite small can become a large tree. Yet all the information is already stored in the mustard seed.

Also in old age (or even earlier) it can happen that with certain illnesses (dementia or unconsciousness, for example) that a person believes in the sense of trust but is no longer in a position to correctly articulate the faith or to perfectly grasp it intellectually.

In order for the faith of children to grow, mature, and become more aware, it is extremely important that the Word of God be made accessible to the child. Christian parents have a great responsibility here. Just as normal food is necessary for life, the child also needs spiritual food (God's Word) in order not to starve spiritually (cf. Matthew 4:4) and to be able to discern and confess with increasing understanding that:

“No man with the sinful depravity described above is righteous before God. Who doesn't sin against the Ten Commandments, especially as Jesus interprets them in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matthew 5-7)? Even I recognize that I am hopelessly lost before God and can contribute *absolutely nothing* to my salvation, but I am completely dependent on Christ's work of salvation (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9). This is revealed to me by God's Word. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God's Word worked faith in me. It is by this faith that I recognize that Christ actually died for me. By faith I receive this and personally make use of the forgiveness acquired by Jesus. My faith does not accomplish salvation, it only receives it. Christ did everything on the cross that was necessary for my salvation (cf. Hebrews 9:24ff.). My faith is founded on God's Word alone and not on me or on itself. The redemptive work of Christ is complete. It must not and cannot be supplemented by my good works as a born-again man (cf. Hebrews 10:14).”

The difference between Christianity and all other religions¹²⁰ is that in Christianity, righteousness before God does not come from one's own good works. Good works are never (not even in part) a *reason* for justification, but always an inevitable *result* of the faith worked by God.¹²¹ The demons themselves have dead faith, a mere "head knowledge" without trust and confidence (cf. James 2:19). Because this is not a living faith worked by God, it does not lead to salvation, and good works never happen. Living faith shows its effects in all spheres of life.

The Bible gives examples of people whose faith was proven although they were not (yet) aware of some important things. For example, the disciples had faith in Jesus even before Jesus' resurrection (cf. John 2:11). But they were still completely in the dark despite the announcements of the suffering and resurrection of Jesus and the prophecies regarding the important events lying before them. It can also be assumed that the believers of the Old Testament were not exactly aware of how certain important events of salvation history would themselves occur. But they all trusted in God alone (cf. Hebrews 11). Here it is important to not equate faith and complete understanding.

Regarding salvation, though, there is no way around Jesus. Whoever rejects Him is lost, for Jesus says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Therefore, it is diabolical to assert that other religions also lead to salvation. The Pharisees, for example, considered themselves to be God's children. But when they rejected Jesus, they also rejected God (cf. John 8:37ff.; 1 John 2:23).

¹²⁰ Christianity is not a religion (cf. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* vol. I, 7-19). All religions qualify that man must do something to get to God or whatever they think it is, that is, to be reconciled to him.

¹²¹ Cf. Matthew 7:16f.; 12:33; Luke 13:6-9; John 15:1-5; Romans 6:21f.; Galatians 5:22.

Conversion and Repentance

Next follow a few thoughts on the topic of conversion, that is, how a person comes to saving faith. What role man plays in conversion, whether and to what extent he can contribute anything, is answered differently within Christianity. As with all questions of doctrine, other doctrines are linked to the understanding of conversion, for example, the question of the certainty of salvation or justification before God.

Today, many evangelical Christians¹²² assume that man cooperates in his conversion fundamentally. In connection with conversion, they also often speak about a “decision for Jesus” or “giving one’s life to Jesus”. This suggests that conversion is of one’s own volition. It is noteworthy that the word “decide” never comes up in connection with conversion; instead words like “returning” or “repentance” do. The question, then, is whether the word “decision” is appropriate. First we will consider what the words “returning” and “repentance” mean and what the Bible says about them.

Throughout time, the prophets and messengers of God have called people to repentance and to return to God because God desires that everyone be saved.¹²³ They call people to give up their former

¹²² The online-encyclopedia Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.de) defines Evangelicalism as “a worldwide, trans-denominational movement within Protestant Christianity that maintains the belief that the essence of the Gospel consists of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, solely through faith in Jesus’ atonement. Evangelicals believe in the centrality of the conversion or ‘born again’ experience in receiving salvation, in the authority of the Bible as God’s revelation to humanity, and in spreading the Christian message.” (Accessed April 23, 2020). Evangelicalism is a cross-denominational movement that agrees on the above points, but where otherwise extremely different positions can be encountered. Evangelical Christians can be, for example, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, or Anglican.

¹²³ Cf. 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9.

individualistic thinking and acting and instead to confidently and completely engage with God and to live according to the First Commandment: “I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2f.). Other gods, or idols (i. e. anything meant to replace the true God) are all those things people trust with their heart. They turn people from God and separate from Him (cf. 1 Kings 15:3). Calls for a return to God are calls for a change of mind (cf. Ephesians 4:17ff.). This includes a renewal of the senses and a change in a person’s way of life. So the new man with renewed senses [desires] no longer finds joy in sin but has become its enemy. Life goals such as starting a family or a career are no longer the decisive purpose of life. The Bible does not only call unconverted people to repentance, but also Christians who have fallen into sin (cf. Revelation 3:3). The repentance of a Christian, however, is to be distinguished from a person’s conversion.

When God calls unconverted people to repentance, the obvious conclusion is that they themselves must have the ability to convert. In everyday life it is also often the case that we are able to do what we are asked to do. But such conclusions by analogy are dangerous because then something is easily read into Scripture that is not there at all. It is God who grants conversion and repentance.¹²⁴ Moreover, Jesus calls on the lame, the blind, and the dead to walk, see, and rise.¹²⁵ People are also called on to believe (cf. Acts 16:31), but it is nevertheless God who gives faith (see above). It is not because the people were able that they followed Jesus’ requests. It is because God’s Word has the power to accomplish that which it demands.¹²⁶ People come to faith through God’s Word (cf. Romans 10:17). That is why conversion, repentance, and the Gospel must be preached. If

¹²⁴ Cf. Romans 2:4; Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25; John 6:44,65; Ezekiel 36:26f.

¹²⁵ Cf. Luke 7:14; Mark 2:11; John 11:43; Mark 10:52.

¹²⁶ On the power of God’s Word, cf. for example Genesis 1:3; Psalm 33:9; Romans 1:16.

a person then converts, turns to God, and says “yes” to God, this may at first glance look like a decision of man. The Bible makes it clear however that people cannot contribute anything to their conversion, but that it is God who works in people this “yes” to God.

As unconverted people we too were spiritually dead¹²⁷ and absolutely blind in spiritual things: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them” (1 Corinthians 2:14).¹²⁸ After the Fall, the defect of original sin is total. For comparison, consider the picture of someone who is *dead*, who can contribute *nothing* (cf. Ephesians 2:5)! We did not possess the ability to decide for Jesus. On the contrary: We did not choose Jesus, but He chose us (cf. John 15:16). If someone speaks a “prayer for salvation” sincerely, it is not the prayer that makes the conversion, rather the prayer expresses the faith already present, the conversion and change of mind that has already happened, for “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). This is how someone can pray Luther’s baptismal confession¹²⁹ (cf. 2 Peter 1:10).

A person is either in faith or unbelief, which means blindness regarding spiritual questions. He is either saved or lost. There is no middle position, even though a person’s faith can be of varying strength and varying awareness. Even in Christian circles that place importance on being able to say the exact moment of conversion, many are not in a position to say exactly when they were converted. The existence of various levels of awareness does not allow for any conclusion about a middle position between faith and unbelief.

¹²⁷ Cf. Ephesians 2:1; Luke 15:24.

¹²⁸ Cf. also 1 Corinthians 1:18,23; Ephesians 4:18.

¹²⁹ “I renounce the Devil and all his works and all his ways and give myself to you, O Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to be true to You in faith and obedience until the end” (cf. Lutheran Service Book, rites of Baptism [p. 268] and Confirmation [p. 272]).

Despite the understanding of the bound will, a Lutheran can say: “This person converted.” In like manner one could say, for example, “The red car turned left.” Here the car is indeed the subject of the sentence, but it is not the car in itself that causes the turning left, it is the driver alone. So also does the Holy Spirit bring about faith, that is, conversion, through the Word of God. So the fact that there are two subjects (the Holy Spirit and man) is not to be confused with even the slightest cooperation of man in conversion (synergism). The fact that there are two subjects is expressed well in Philippians 2:12f.: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” This is also the case with John 1:12, which is often used to establish so-called decision theology (“decision for Jesus”). Here also the willing is worked by the Holy Spirit. If verse 13 is also read, it can be understood that the basis for the new birth is not “in the will of the flesh” nor in the “will of a man.”¹³⁰ So it is not a “decision for Jesus” that prompts the new birth, but the new birth is the basis of someone being able to say “yes” to Jesus. Revelation 3:20 is sometimes cited to support decision theology. But the context shows that the call to repentance here is directed to Christians and not to unbelievers.

In the parables about the Kingdom of God the thought of a “decision for Jesus” never turns up. These parables do not fit with decision theology at all because they deal with things, that is, living beings, which cannot decide for themselves.¹³¹

That many Evangelicals want to include a rational moment in conversion becomes apparent, for example, when weighing the costs of following Jesus is also seen as a reason for conversion. Or even when an attempt is made in conversion testimonies to state

¹³⁰ Cf. also James 1:18 and Romans 9:16.

¹³¹ For example, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin (cf. Luke 15:4ff.), the parable of the mustard seed and the leaven (cf. Matthew 13:31f.), the image of the vine and the branches (cf. John 15:1-8).

concretely what tipped the scales towards conversion. Now, in principle there is nothing wrong with giving a testimony of one's own conversion. Even Paul did that.¹³² But it is quite noteworthy that with the straightforward description of Paul's conversion (cf. Acts 9) as well as with later testimonies that nothing is said about what was going on in Paul between the appearance of Jesus and Paul's meeting with Ananias. Apparently God did not find it necessary to let us know this, although it would certainly be very interesting. Couldn't the reason be that you simply cannot decide for Jesus in same way you decide, for example, what kind of job you will have? In his conversion testimonies, Paul does not place himself at the center, even though he makes it clear that his life changed radically. For this he has God alone to thank, who had mercy on him. Although Paul was among the greatest persecutors of the Church of Jesus Christ, he then became the greatest missionary of Christianity. A rational understanding of conversion also easily leads to the further conclusion that children cannot believe and that there must therefore also be an age before which children are not responsible to God. But faith is not a work that we can perform. It is a gift that God can even bestow on children.

For all these reasons, I do not consider it biblical to speak of a "decision for Jesus".¹³³ The biblical teaching is that the *unconverted* person is absolutely blind in spiritual things, and so in this respect has no free will. This does not refer to earthly things. Everyone can freely decide to go to the movie theatre today or what job to have. In his depravity, however, the unconverted person can only decide against Jesus, not for Him. Nevertheless, this does not free man from

¹³² Cf. Acts 22:3-16; 26:9-18.

¹³³ Incidentally, the phrase "decision for Jesus" in comparison with the biblical terms "conversion", "repentance", and "penance", conceals how deep in the swamp of sin man is, how he is on the wrong track. A 180-degree change of direction is required, which God gives. It is not a matter of being pretty much on the right track, and then having to decide whether to turn right or left at a crossroads.

his responsibility before God. If someone is saved, that is God's work alone and therefore God alone is due the honor; if someone is lost, then that happens alone because of his own guilt.¹³⁴ Admittedly, it does not satisfy our human reason that you cannot go beyond these statements without departing from the foundation of Holy Scripture. The Bible cannot be used to solve this problem by supposing either free will or divine predestination of people to damnation. The Bible knows of only the predestination to salvation (cf., for example, Ephesians 1:4f.). With a predestination to damnation, God would be made responsible for those who are lost. But God does not wish "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

If man could cooperate in his conversion then justification "by grace alone" (*sola gratia*) would topple, because then people could obtain salvation by a clever decision (for Jesus), even if Jesus did lay the foundation for justification by His death on the cross.

I consider it dangerous for a "decision for Jesus" to play a role in the certainty of salvation. Thus one hears in Evangelical circles statements like "I am certain of my salvation *because* I decided for Jesus."¹³⁵ The basis for our justification, that is, redemption, lies not in us but outside of us. It is precisely in times of temptation that doubt about the authenticity of one's own "decision for Jesus," and so also over one's own salvation, can arise. I have gotten to know a number of Evangelicals who have decided for Jesus many times because they were not sure whether their repentance and decision for

¹³⁴ Cf. Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:51.

¹³⁵ Even the Evangelical lecturer Dr. Stephan Holthaus laments in his book "Trends 2000 – Christians and the *Zeitgeist*" (Basel: Brunnen, p. 76): "At the end of the 20th century it is confidently said 'I converted myself'. The redemptive work of Christ and the grace of God are no longer responsible for salvation; my individual decision for God is. If you ask Christians what the basis for their certainty of salvation is, many would say it is their conversion experience rather than pointing to the redeeming work of Christ."

Jesus were sincere or whether they had shown sufficient dedication. It is often overlooked that the believing Christian is at the same time saint *and* sinner.¹³⁶ If the certainty of salvation, however, rests upon the objective atoning death and on sincere trust in God and His Word, then tribulations cannot lead to such doubt. It is also no alternative to set God's standards, as they are presented in the above statements on sin, lower than God does in His Word. That would be self-deception and would give a false sense of security. Let each one honestly examine himself according to God's commandments and standards (cf. Matthew 5:48)!

Precisely in this, though, is also something liberating: good works are not the *basis* for justification, they are the *result* of faith. We ought not to mix together the Law (i. e. what we *should* do) and the Gospel (i. e. what God *has* done and does).¹³⁷

When our faith is challenged (Mark 9:24), then we can be comforted that God justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5) and that the righteousness of Christ "leads to justification and life for all men" (Romans 5:18). "In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Faith is indeed absolutely necessary for salvation¹³⁸ as a "medium of reception" for redemption. It does not rely on itself but on Christ's sacrificial death alone. God has come to us unconditionally: Out of love He went to the cross for us and reconciled us with God when we were still His enemies (cf. Romans 5:6-10; 1 John 4:10)!

¹³⁶ Cf. Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:17.

¹³⁷ Against this background I am also opposed to the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church", where much is concealed by terms which are understood differently by the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic churches. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that one is saved by faith and good works. In that regard, redemption would also depend on our merit.

¹³⁸ Cf. Romans 3:22; John 3:18,36.

Baptism and Rebirth

In Christian Baptism, God transfers the baptized to the crucified and risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 6:3ff.). Proclamation of the Word and Baptism awaken, that is, strengthen faith, and the new birth into a new man occurs. By faith in the promises of God's Word, which are attached to Baptism, the baptized has forgiveness of sins and therefore also eternal life. Because Baptism is a means of appropriating salvation by grace, Baptism is also termed a "means of grace" in the Lutheran Church. Other means of grace are the "mere" Word of God, the Lord's Supper, and Confession and Absolution with the consolation of the forgiveness of sin. God's Spirit works mediately through the means of grace.¹³⁹ God's Word plays the decisive role with all the means of grace.

Jesus Christ instituted Baptism with the following words: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

This is what is called the Baptism and Mission *imperative* ("Great Commission"). The Church of Jesus Christ should make disciples of "all nations" by baptizing them in the name of the Triune God and teaching them. Jesus explicitly commanded the Church to baptize and to teach (both together!). They are not left to our discretion. Baptizing and teaching belong together. Linguistically speaking, a temporal sequence of baptizing and then teaching cannot be derived from the words of institution. "All nations" is never qualified, for instance, by only including specific races or age groups. The Greek word "baptizein", which is translated with the word "to baptize", means every kind of washing, whether by immersion in water, by

¹³⁹ Cf. Galatians 3:2,5; Acts 2:38.

sprinkling, or dousing with water.¹⁴⁰ The simple application of water to the one being baptized in one of these three ways is not in itself Christian Baptism. What is decisive is that Christian Baptism was instituted and commanded by Christ and that it happens in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. So the baptismal act is connected with God's Word and promises (cf. Ephesians 5:26).

In Mark 16:15f.¹⁴¹ Jesus sends His disciples into the world with the following words: "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

The Gospel should be proclaimed to "all creation". Jesus could have hardly used a more comprehensive term that includes *all*. Baptism is not practiced in an isolated way but is linked with the proclamation of the Word.¹⁴² Mark 16:16 makes clear that faith *and* baptism belong together as a positive condition for salvation. It cannot be inferred from this that Baptism without faith becomes, or

¹⁴⁰ Cf., for example, Mark 7:4; Luke 11:37f.; 1 Corinthians 10:2. *Baptizein* is an intensive form of *baptein* (to immerse; to submerge; to dip; to bathe; to fill by immersion). Also already in classical Greek: to douse, to deluge, to shower (so, for example, in Plato's *Euthydemus*).

¹⁴¹ Historical-critical theologians doubt that Mark 16:9-20 belongs in the Bible because, among other things, it is not included in the two manuscripts Aleph (Sinaiticus) and B (Vaticanus) from the fourth century. However, many more manuscripts from Italy, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt, cited by Church Fathers from the second century (Tatian, Justin, Irenaeus), contain these verses. Moreover, in the Early Church these verses were the Gospel reading for Easter. This shows that the Early Church considered these verses inspired by God and attributed them to Mark.

¹⁴² Baptism and the proclamation of the Word are not to be seen as separated from each other; they work together.

is, invalid. Faith is based on Baptism and not Baptism on faith.¹⁴³ But it remains pointless if you do not make use of the promises of Baptism in faith, which we will address in the following. As in Matthew 28:18f., so also in Mark 16:16 no chronological order of faith and Baptism can be grammatically inferred. It is correct to say that it is not a lack of Baptism, but a lack of faith that condemns.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Mark 16:16 does *not* read: “Whoever believes will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Baptism is also mentioned as way to salvation. We will see why this is so from additional Bible passages. Whoever refuses to be baptized despises what God’s Word says about Christian Baptism in Mark 16:16 and Matthew 28:18-20 and thereby shows unbelief. In a similar way (cf. Matthew 3:1-12), the Pharisees despised John’s baptism, which God also intended for them (cf. Luke 7:30). Another Bible passage where Baptism is mentioned in connection with salvation is 1 Peter 3:19-21: “He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Luther’s 1545 translation of the Bible says that Baptism is: “the pledge of a good conscience by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁵ In verse 21, Baptism is spoken of “which now saves you”! Noah’s Ark is given as a model for Baptism. There is nothing in the context of the above passage that would justify saying that salvation is merely pictured or symbolized by Baptism. Just as the ark saved and did not just

¹⁴³ Cf., for example, Titus 3:4-7; Romans 6:3ff.; Galatians 3:26f.; Colossians 2:11ff.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. also Luke 23:43.

¹⁴⁵ More recent German translations of the Bible, on the other hand, simply say: “...but we ask God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

symbolize salvation, so also does Baptism save. This Bible passage also makes clear the inseparable connection between Baptism and what happened at Golgotha 2,000 years ago. In Baptism, a person personally appropriates (personal, or “subjective justification”) what Christ acquired for the *whole* world (cf. 1 John 2:2) on the cross (general / universal, or “objective justification”):¹⁴⁶ forgiveness and eternal salvation. We can have a good conscience *because* of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, where His substitutionary death was approved by the Father. So in faith we can base our certainty of salvation on general and personal Justification because God’s Word has revealed to us Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross and the promises of Baptism. If the certainty of salvation is not based on this objective justification, but on a “decision for Jesus,” for example, or on our feelings or anything else, then our faith can be endangered in times of crisis because it is easy to waver between uncertainty and self-deception. That is because only perfect obedience and the unqualified keeping of the Law would be of any benefit to us with regard to Justification before God: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (James 2:10). Have we always, without exception, loved God and our neighbor with our whole heart? Justification and true certainty of salvation cannot be based on even the slightest amount of our own efforts. In connection with Baptism, universal justification, and God’s universal will to save,¹⁴⁷ the doctrine of election to *salvation* is also comforting, which happened¹⁴⁸ before the beginning of the world independent of anything in us.

How can we be saved? We have already seen above that nobody is righteous before God and so everyone needs forgiveness. The

¹⁴⁶ For objective versus subjective justification see also <https://steadfastlutherans.org/2012/10/what-is-objective-justification/>

¹⁴⁷ Cf. 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. 2 Timothy 1:9; Ephesians 1:4f.

purification from sins, that is, their forgiveness, is tied to Baptism:¹⁴⁹ “He [Christ] cleansed her [the congregation] by the washing of water with the word”¹⁵⁰ (Ephesians 5:26). Paul can write that Christ has cleansed the *congregation* from sins because from the time of our Baptism we are members of the Body of Christ¹⁵¹ and because Baptism depicts inclusion in the congregation, that is, the Church of God. Galatians 3:26 says: “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” That we have put on Christ in Baptism means that our sins are covered and that when God looks upon us He no longer sees our sins but the righteousness of Christ. At the Baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and God said: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Because God sees Christ in us, He can also say to us: “This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.”¹⁵² We further read in the Bible: “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16) and “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). It is also plain here that Baptism is linked with conversion and repentance. Baptism is the turning point from a life without God to a life with God and His commandments. It is the change in sovereignty from the devil to Christ (cf. Romans 6).

¹⁴⁹ By the way, already in the Nicene Creed of AD 381 it says: “I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

¹⁵⁰ The “washing of water with the word” only fits with Christian Baptism, because the use of water and God’s Word belongs to Baptism.

¹⁵¹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13,27.

¹⁵² His righteousness is now our righteousness and He carries our self-righteousness. Our rebellion against God and His command falls on Christ. His perfect obedience is accounted to us. Our self-centeredness comes upon Him, His sacrificial, caring love come upon us (this is called the “blessed exchange”).

In Acts 2:38, receiving the Holy Spirit is promised in connection with Baptism. Paul also begins with this connection in Acts 19:1-6. The disciples Paul came across had not yet received the Holy Spirit. When Paul realized this, he immediately asked about what they had been baptized into. It then became apparent that they only received the baptism of John and not Christian Baptism. The Holy Spirit came upon them by the laying on of hands when they received Christian Baptism. Churches that come from the Reformed tradition often deny the connection between Christian Baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit. They distinguish between “water baptism”, (that is, Christian baptism, which for them is often only an act of obedience toward God and which merely pictures the salvation that has already occurred) and “Spirit baptism”, which in their view always happens independent of water baptism.¹⁵³ Along with the two Bible passages from Acts cited above, from which the connection between Christian Baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit is clearly discernible, there are admittedly also biblical examples where baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit are chronologically set apart (for example, Acts 10:44ff.; 11:15f.). However, Peter’s question, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” shows that Peter also considers Christian Baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit as belonging together (cf. Acts 2:38)! Besides Baptism, the reception of the Holy Spirit also happens through the preaching of God’s Word (cf. Galatians 3:2,5). Acts 8:14-17¹⁵⁴ shows that not only Jews but also Samaritans (Gentiles) received the Holy Spirit in a specific way. The Holy Spirit had

¹⁵³ This view does not agree with Ephesians 4:5 speaking of “*one* baptism”.

¹⁵⁴ “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”

already previously worked in the Samaritans, because without His working they would not have received God's Word.¹⁵⁵

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Truly truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Already the early Church Fathers applied this verse to Christian Baptism. So also the Lutheran Church. Titus 3:5 also speaks about Christian Baptism as the "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit". Because of the scriptural passages already cited above, there is no doubt for me that John 3:5 and Titus 3:5 refer to Christian Baptism.¹⁵⁶

So new birth happens through God's Word in Christian Baptism, or it is consummated and confirmed in Christian Baptism (cf. Acts 10:44ff). It is the beginning of a new life. The one who causes the new birth is God, who brought us forth according to His will by the Word of truth (cf. James 1:18). Spiritual birth is distinguished from fleshly birth in John 3:6. Everyone who is born of the flesh is to expect death. That is why it is necessary to be born anew by the Spirit "not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). This new birth leads "to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" with the right to an inheritance in Heaven (cf. 1 Peter 1:3f). According to 1 John 5:1, everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as true God and true man has been born of God. Conversely, the new birth also encompasses faith. The new birth from God does not remain without visible results (cf. 1 John 5:2f).

We can also recognize from Romans 6:3f. how much Baptism is connected with and connects us to salvation and the saving work of God: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into

¹⁵⁵ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 8:9; 1 John 4:2; 5:1.

¹⁵⁶ Even some Baptists, George R. Beasley-Murray for example, apply these passages to Baptism (Baptism in the New Testament. Exeter: Paternoster, 1960). He also speaks out against a separation of "water baptism" and "Spirit baptism".

Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” We find a similar passage in the epistle to the Colossians, in which the significance of faith is also highlighted: “having been buried with him [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him [Christ] from the dead” (Colossians 2:12).

The Bible passages cited above cannot be understood as merely symbolic because the context of these passages does not indicate anything that could justify a deviation from the direct literal sense. Otherwise we would miss what God wants to give to us in Baptism. It is to be noted that in the above Bible passages, God stands out as the one who is actually working in relation to man.

The context of the Bible passage cited above from Romans 6 shows that Baptism is not only an event at a particular point in time. In chapter 6, Paul writes of sin, one’s attitude towards it, and of sanctification in the life of a Christian. In this connection he also recalls Baptism and what happens there. As Christians, we are indeed born again (new men), but our old man emerges again and again. We are at the same time sinners and justified. For believers there is a perpetual battle against sin (cf. Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:17). Therefore the old man must daily die by repenting and returning to the covenant of Baptism and its promises, making renewed use of the promises of Baptism in faith, and thereby being comforted and remaining certain of salvation.

Along with the question of what Baptism is, the question of how the Baptism of infants is to be valued is a further point of contention within Christendom. As a rule, the answer to the second question arises out of the first.

In Church history, one often goes from one extreme to another. Protestants encountered an oftentimes magical understanding in the Catholic Church, i. e. that the mere performance of Baptism worked salvation even without the faith that makes use of the promises of

Baptism. They rightfully recognized this as a dangerous heresy, but they went too far when they robbed Baptism of its promises. Many mainstream Lutheran churches are full of nominal Christians precisely because the command to teach often does not conscientiously follow from the baptismal mandate and the Great Commission. This happens when baptized children are not consistently reared and instructed in a Christian way and when church and doctrinal discipline are hardly practiced or not practiced at all. In my view, it is no wonder that the rejection of infant Baptism could spread so much if in nominally Lutheran churches most of the paying members hardly show up except for Baptism, Confirmation or Communion, marriage, burials, and on Christmas. That is why I completely share the concern of the Pietists that adolescents who have been baptized as children ought to receive a deliberate, that is, a more deliberate faith through a consistent Christian upbringing. I also know that many who were baptized as infants have fallen from the faith. However, this also happens to some people who were baptized as adults. Baptized people with a “magical” understanding of Baptism or those who have fallen from faith must be warned against eventual false security. Nevertheless, the whole fullness of the gifts and promises connected with Baptism must be taught and confessed.

How, then, did the Apostles¹⁵⁷ view the Baptism of infants? They had the baptismal *mandate* and the Great Commission just as we do (cf. Matthew 28:18-20), which make absolutely no restrictions concerning age or maturity. That is why Peter says: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children” (Acts 2:38f). The Greek word “teknon”, which Luther translates as “child”, can indeed in a broader sense also mean “descendant”. But even then, children would be included and not excluded (“*every one* of you”!).

¹⁵⁷ The Greek word “apostolos” means “sent one”. The Apostles were sent by Jesus.

Besides, further above we have already covered that *each* person already since his birth is a sinner.¹⁵⁸ This also applies to infants: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6). We *cannot* conclude from the fact that in our state courts children are not held responsible until a certain age and are not liable that this is also the case with God. We cannot gain a biblical concept of God from our own wishes and notions, but only from God’s revealed Word. An explanation must follow from God’s Word. Because a sinner, and therefore also an infant, according to the Bible cannot stand before the holy God, he needs God’s forgiveness. As a means of forgiveness God points us to His Word, to Baptism, and to the Lord’s Supper. He has not revealed to us whether or not He still saves in some other way, so we cannot and should not rely on that.

To the question of how the Apostles stood when it came to infant Baptism, the following thoughts are helpful as an example: In the New Testament there is *one* people of God. This consists of the Jews who believe in Christ (Jewish Christians, as for example the Apostles) and the Gentiles who came to faith (Gentile Christians). In order to make this plain, Paul uses the example of an olive tree (cf. Romans 11:17ff.), in the Bible a picture for Israel, from which the Jews who rejected Jesus were broken off. On the other hand, Gentiles who came to faith were grafted into the tree. So the New Testament people of God live in continuity with the Old Testament people of God. Nevertheless, the old covenant is obviously different than the new. Johannes Lerle points out that it was self-evident for Jewish Christians that children belonged to the people of God and that in the first few centuries after Christ they were still circumcised according to the Law.¹⁵⁹ It can be recognized in Colossians 2:11f.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Genesis 8:21; 1 Kings 8:26; Psalm 51:5; 58:3; Job 14:4; Romans 3:10-12; Ephesians 2:3.

¹⁵⁹ Johannes Lerle, *Haben die Apostel Säuglinge getauft?* (Groß Oesingen: Verlag der Lutherischen Buchhandlung, 1990), 23f. For a discussion of this topic in English, see David Scaer’s *Baptism in “The Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Series”*, and his *Infant Baptism*.

that Baptism replaced circumcision as the sign of the new covenant. It is inconceivable that there would have been no controversy had the Apostles actually excluded infants from Baptism. But we are not aware of anything like that. However, we are informed about other controversies, for example, over the Mosaic Law.¹⁶⁰

Jewish Rabbis and commentators speak of various Jewish baptisms at the time of the Old Testament. All of the Jewish baptisms were also performed on children. So, for example, Gentiles who converted to Judaism received proselyte baptism.¹⁶¹

Had the Apostles considered the Baptism of infants to be against God's will, then with this in mind they would have had to explicitly exclude infants from Baptism. However, Paul indirectly says exactly the opposite. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, he compares the Christian life with Israel's desert wanderings. There, the crossing of the Red Sea, where children were also present, is for Paul an analogy of Baptism. For Israel, the crossing of the Red Sea means salvation because the water buried the pursuing Egyptians. Furthermore, the entire desert wandering can be seen as a picture of the life of Christians: the desert, for example, standing for the hardships of Christian discipleship, and the Promised Land for eternally being together with Jesus in the glory of the Father in Heaven. The previous life in Egypt, then, stands for life as servants under the rule of sin.

Another point are the household baptisms which are recounted for us in the New Testament (cf., for example, Acts 16:15; 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). By the term "house" was understood also children, slaves, and the children of slaves. Since there were more children at that time than in our society, the readers, that is, the hearers, must have assumed that the houses mentioned also included children. If the Apostles had refused their Baptism, they would have had to explicitly mention that no minors were baptized. Thus no

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Acts 6:11-14; 15:1-29; 16:3; Galatians 2:4f; 5:1ff.

¹⁶¹ Lerle, Haben die Apostel Säuglinge getauft?, 23f.

evidence is called for that children were present at every household Baptism. It should also not be overlooked that people at the time of the Apostles knew nothing of the individualism of our time. It was usual for the head of the household to make decisions for the entire household (including children). That is foreign to us in our individualistic time.

If someone wants to conclude that infant Baptism is unbiblical from the fact that the Bible does not explicitly report one, then consequently women must also be excluded from the Lord's Supper, because no women are explicitly mentioned in the Bible as having received the Lord's Supper. However, because the baptismal mandate and the Great Commission do not exclude any age group, passages must instead be sought which explicitly forbid the Baptism of infants.

According to 1 Corinthians 12:13,27, Christians belong to the Body of Christ through Baptism. Jesus attributes the Kingdom of Heaven to children who were brought to Him (cf. Mark 10:14). Can fellowship in the Body of Christ, then, be denied to children?

In the history of the Early Church there was also no dispute about the Baptism of children. In fact, the practice of baptizing children is undoubtedly attested to: for example, by inscriptions on gravestones when gravestones began to appear. Already the Church Father Origen¹⁶² (AD 184-254) writes: "According to the practice of the Church, Baptism is also given to children, for if there were nothing in children that necessitated forgiveness and grace, then the grace of Baptism would also not appear necessary." He further remarks in his Romans commentary: "That is also the reason why the Church has received it passed down from the Apostles to also give Baptism to children. For those who were entrusted with the divine mysteries knew that there is in all people a natural impurity due to sin that

¹⁶² The Church Father quotations for Baptism are taken from: Roland Sckerl, *Die Heilige Taufe – Aufsätze zur christlichen Taufe, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Kindertaufe*, 13ff.

must be done away with by water and the Spirit, which is also why the body itself is called a body of sin.”¹⁶³ He also writes in the context of interpreting Luke 2:21-24: “Little children are to be baptized on account of the forgiveness of sins.”

Not even Tertullian (died after AD 220), who discussed the problems that he had with children’s baptism, maintained that this practice would not have been passed down by the Apostles. He himself advocates the emergency Baptism¹⁶⁴ of infants.

At the Council of Carthage in the year AD 254, the sixty-six bishops said: “We ought not hinder anyone from being baptized or from the grace of God because He is gracious and kindly disposed to all of us. And this rule, because it applies to everyone, according to our opinion ought especially be observed with regard to children, even the newborn.”

And Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyon from AD 170), a student of the Martyr Polycarp of Smyrna (died in AD 155/156) writes in his work *Against Heresies*: “Christ has come that He might save all through Himself. I say: all who through Him are born again to God, the infants and small children no less than those who are boys, or young men, or old men.” Irenaeus does not explicitly mention Baptism here, but in other places he again and again advocates the connection between new birth and Baptism.

The testimony of Church history, of course, cannot be used as proof for one position or the other; that would contradict the principle of “sola scriptura”. However, this testimony is important because it

¹⁶³ In Lerle, *Haben die Apostel Säuglinge getauft?*, p. 33 it is pointed out that Origen’s family had been Christian for generations. He would not have been able to speak this way had he not known that his father and probably even grandfather were baptized as children. In addition, Origen also visited Rome, Greece, western Syria, Cappadocia, and the part of Arabia bordering Palestine on numerous trips [Lerle, p. 35].

¹⁶⁴ Quickly performed Baptism (mostly for infants) when life is in danger.

affirms the practice of the ancient Church as it came from the New Testament.

Characteristic for the theology of many who only baptize adults (for example Baptists, Mennonites, Pentecostal congregations) on the theme of baptizing children is that in spite of the Bible passages listed above, they maintain that infants are not able to believe¹⁶⁵ and therefore should not be baptized. Those who advocate adult Baptism only come to this assertion because for them, reflective understanding is an important, that is, necessary, component of faith. They generally assume that infants are automatically saved up to a certain age. In my view, their theology of Baptism is based more on examples from the Book of Acts rather than starting with the institution by Jesus Christ (that is, His baptismal mandate and Great Commission) – which would be more obvious. They then overlook general assertions of the Bible about Baptism. In addition, many (not all, however) who advocate for adult Baptism advocate for the cooperation of man in conversion and do not recognize that faith, conversion, and repentance are gifts of God (cf. the above remarks on this topic). Above all they see Baptism as primarily man's testimony and act of obedience and not, or less, as God's acting and the assurance of His promises to man. Where does it say in the Bible that Baptism *in itself* is a public confession of man? On the contrary, the Apostles quite often in retrospect preach on the Baptism already received because in it God dealt with the hearers and because this has an abiding significance.¹⁶⁶

Although there is no explicit Bible passage with a prohibition against infant Baptism, those who advocate for adult Baptism persistently remain with their contention that the Baptism of an

¹⁶⁵ What would it mean for infants if they were not able to believe? In Mark 16:16 it says without qualification that “whoever does not believe will be condemned”.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Romans 6:3f.; 1 Corinthians 12:13,27; Galatians 3:26f.; Ephesians 5:26; Colossians 2:12; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:19-21.

infant is not a valid Baptism. These are theological conclusions that, among other things, rest on the theological characteristics presented above and which I therefore do not share. Like the Lutheran Church, those who advocate for adult Baptism teach that there is only one Baptism (cf. Ephesians 4:5). Because those who advocate for adult Baptism consider infant Baptism to be invalid, they have also rejected the name “Anabaptist” (which means, people who baptize again), which from a Lutheran perspective they are when they baptize adults again who were already baptized as infants. The rejection of the Anabaptists by the Lutheran Church is based on Baptism being primarily understood as an action of God and re-baptism, even if done unintentionally, as a rejection of God’s action and the promises connected with Baptism. Therefore they reject re-baptism and desire to remain in obedience to God’s Word in Ephesians 4:5.

Those who advocate for the Baptism of only adults often point out a Bible verse (Acts 8:37) that is not even contained in the earliest versions of the text and first appeared centuries later. There Philip says to the eunuch who came to faith that he could be baptized if he believed with his heart. First, you must be careful about making a generally binding rule from an individual example. Here Philip addresses an individual adult person and does not make a universal rule to be followed by all people and at all times. Besides, Philip says “if you believe” not “if you confess”. Of course a Christian has to confess his faith if he is able. An infant cannot yet confess, nor can adults with certain illnesses. But infants can certainly believe, as we have shown above. It cannot simply be postulated that infants are not able to convert, that is, that their heart cannot be turned to Jesus.¹⁶⁷ Jesus Himself even says that nobody could enter the Kingdom of God who does not receive it *like* a child (cf. Mark 10:15), that is, simply in faith contrary to reason, which considers

¹⁶⁷ Those who advocate for adult Baptism only believe this even with regard to other Bible passages.

God's wisdom to be foolishness (cf. Matthew 11:25; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

Those who advocate adult Baptism only also point to 1 Peter 3:21 in order to justify their rejection of infant Baptism. According to the exact translation of the original text of this Bible passage, Baptism is "an appeal to God for a good conscience". Infants cannot appeal. Thereby it is disregarded that the Holy Spirit can also do this for them: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Even an adult cannot ask without the working of the Holy Spirit.

Most of those who advocate for adult Baptism only locate Baptism primarily in the Law (human action out of obedience towards God). The Lutheran Church, however, locates it in the Gospel (God's action out of pure grace). Compare, for example, Titus 3:4-7. This is made extremely obvious by the evaluation of the Baptism of minors. The grammatical structure of many Bible passages¹⁶⁸ refutes the claim that the order "first teaching, then Baptism" (that is, "first faith, then Baptism") is a divine law, and that the following of this law would be constitutive of Baptism (we have already discussed above what makes Baptism). It is only because Baptism (that is, the Gospel) is valid without a human prerequisite that Jesus Christ *alone* can be the object of our faith. We should turn our gaze to Him because He has done *everything* for our redemption. We do not believe in our faith, but in faith we receive that which God offers, presents, and appoints to us in Baptism.

¹⁶⁸ Cf., for example, Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 2:12.

The Lord's Supper

In the Lord's Supper (celebrated in accordance with its institution), everyone who takes part receives the true body and the true blood of Jesus Christ *in, with, and under*.¹⁶⁹ the bread and wine. The guests at the Lord's Supper who believe Jesus' words "given for you" and "poured out for the forgiveness of sins" have what these words say: the forgiveness of sins. The guests at the Lord's Supper who do not believe these words take it unto judgement (cf. the Schwan Catechism).

Before Jesus was betrayed and crucified, He celebrated the Passover with His disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper: "After they had eaten, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said: Take, eat; this is my body. And He also took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them saying: Drink of it all of you."¹⁷⁰ This is my blood of the New Testament,¹⁷¹ which is poured

¹⁶⁹ These three prepositions testify against three other views of the Lord's Supper. "In" is directed against the understanding of the Reformed, who maintain that believers enjoy Christ's body and blood outside of the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. "With" means that the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper are still present. "Under" is directed against the impression that something new is made from the bread / body and from the wine / blood in their union, something like how dough is made out of water and flour. The last two prepositions are directed against the Roman Catholic understanding.

¹⁷⁰ To deny the congregation members the cup, as has been done in the Catholic Church, is not consistent with the words: "Drink of it *all* of you" (Mark 14:23).

¹⁷¹ The Greek word "diatheke", which Luther translates as "testament", can also be translated with "covenant", as is the case in the revised Luther translation of 1984. Both meanings belong together: the covenant of God with believers sealed as a last will and testament with the death of Jesus. The new covenant is instituted by the sacrificial blood of Jesus. The old

out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28).¹⁷² Paul recites the words of institution again in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. From verses 23-26 of the Corinthian passage it is clear that the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated until Jesus comes again.

Jesus gives the bread to His disciples with the words “Take, eat; this is my body.” Why do many Christians not understand the words of Jesus “this is my body” in the simple and direct literal sense? Perhaps it is because our reason says that it is not possible that Jesus’ body truly is present, except spiritually, and that it is only symbolized by the bread. When our reason raises objections, we should remember that nothing is impossible for God (cf. Luke 1:37) and that He can do what He says (cf. Romans 4:21). God’s Word creates reality.¹⁷³ Jesus walked on water (cf. Matthew 14:25), He came to His disciples through closed doors (cf. John 20:19), and He became invisible (cf. Luke 24:31). So objections according to reason can be invalidated. Also, a rejection of the direct, literal sense of the words (a rejection of the Real Presence) cannot be based on speculative objections but must follow from the Bible. The Greek word “*estin*” means “is”. It cannot be translated as “symbolizes” or “stands for”. And it is found in all four Bible passages that pass on the words of institution to us.

covenant, on the other hand, was instituted on Sinai with the sacrificial blood of bulls (cf. Exodus 24:8). A testament is the last will of a person who is counting on death as a near possibility. In a testament it is determined what is to be done after the death and who will inherit what. A testament takes effect at death (Hebrews 9:16f.). A testament is to be handled very carefully, especially when it was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (cf. Galatians 3:15). Generally speaking, in a testament the writer attempts to express himself as clearly as possible. As regards the word “testament” in this context, compare also Hebrews 9:11-22!

¹⁷² Cf. also Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20.

¹⁷³ Cf. Psalm 33:9; Genesis 1.

One objection is that in other places Jesus does say “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7), “I am the way” (John 14:6), or “I am the vine” (John 15:5) without physically being a door, a way, or a vine. However, also here the word “*estin*” is not used in the sense of “to symbolize”. The “am” really means “am”. At the very most, the noun related to the verb “*estin*”, not the verb itself, can be understood figuratively. In the first case, it is an allegory where Jesus is the door and believers are the sheep. Here Jesus paints a picture of comparison. *Within* this picture, He *is* the door to the sheep stall. Of course Jesus is not Himself a stable door because only an allegory is dealt with here (cf. verse 6). In the second case also, Jesus actually *is* the way, even if not a way made of material, which is made clear by the context. The third case again is also an allegory where Jesus *is* the vine.

In the words of institution, the body cannot be understood as a symbol or picture because it does not deal with an allegory and the body is clearly identified by the possessive pronoun “my”.

In Paul’s repetition of the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11, or even in Luke 22:19f., the additional relative clause “which is given for you” is added. His body was given for us at Golgotha. It was indeed no symbolic or spiritual body, but truly the body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who suffered immeasurable agonies in His body. Besides, Jesus says “this is my blood of the new testament.” The new testament was sealed with the true blood of Jesus and not only with a symbol of His blood (cf. Hebrews 9:11-22). In addition we find the words “is” and “my”. And Jesus adds the relative clause “which is given for you for the forgiveness of sins.” That means that according to Jesus’ own words, the guests at the Lord’s Supper receive His body and blood for food, the body that hung on the cross, the blood that was poured out for us at Golgotha.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ For that matter, after His resurrection Jesus still had both natures as such: not only the divine but also the human (“the man Christ Jesus”, 1 Timothy 2:5). He was raised bodily (cf. Luke 24:39).

Can there be a better assurance that God has forgiven and forgives our sins and that we should have eternal life than that Jesus gives us His body and blood as a pledge? In the Lord's Supper, the temporal and spatial distance to Golgotha is bridged. God is not bound by it. For in the Lord's Supper we receive here and today the body and blood of Christ, which He gave up for us on the cross. The present tense in the words of institution emphasizes this. We only have the forgiveness of sins through Christ's true blood, not through a symbol.¹⁷⁵

The words of institution depend on the individual words (for example, "est in"). This shows how important it is to also adhere to verbal inspiration: Every word was deliberately chosen by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did *not* choose "stands for" or "symbolizes" instead of "is".

The attempt to explain the mystery of the Real Presence by transforming the bread and wine into the body and blood does not bear in mind that according to the Bible bread and wine are still present (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26,28). There is no Bible passage that could support such a notion. When we eat the bread and wine in a natural way, the body and blood are also eaten in an inexplicable, supernatural, and therefore *not* cannibalistic way. There are other examples in the Bible where two things present at the same time form a unity. For example, Jesus has a divine and a human nature. He is therefore man and God. In Paradise, at the Fall into sin (cf. Genesis 3:1ff), the devil was a snake.¹⁷⁶ Another example for such a unity of two things, though not in the Bible, is a glowing iron rod in which iron and fire are combined with each other.

Fundamental or essential in celebrating the Lord's Supper is to celebrate it in the sense Jesus instituted it in a recognizable way. The

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Hebrews 9:22; 10:19-22; 1 John 1:7; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18f.; Colossians 1:20; Revelation 1:5; Romans 5:9.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Revelation 12:9; 20:2.

elements to be used are the ones Jesus used (bread and wine¹⁷⁷), and the same words of institution which Jesus used are to be spoken.¹⁷⁸ For Jesus speaks the words of institution Himself by the mouth of the pastor (cf. Luke 10:16). So He is the true host.

Paul writes to the Corinthians: “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Corinthians 11:23-29).

The words “to remember” and “remembrance” were used in the Bible and in the Jewish environment differently than we commonly understand the words today.¹⁷⁹ So, for example, the one criminal said to Jesus on the cross: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). He did not merely hope that Jesus would simply think about him and do nothing more. This remembrance at the side of Jesus meant salvation for the thief (cf.

¹⁷⁷ The “fruit of the vine” is a Hebraism (expression from the Hebrew language) that clearly means wine and not grape juice. Besides, at the time the Passover was celebrated, there would be no grape juice because of the fermentation process.

¹⁷⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:17 refers to the consecration: “The cup of *blessing* that we *bless...*”, which happens by speaking the words of institution.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Kenneth Wieting, *The Blessings of Weekly Communion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 206f.

Luke 23:43).¹⁸⁰ Similarly, God eternally remembers His covenant and impressively confirms it by giving us in the Lord's Supper as a pledge what belongs to the institution of the new covenant – Christ's true body and His true blood.¹⁸¹ He instituted such a remembrance because we easily forget what He has done for us or doubt whether His grace (still) counts for us despite all our sins.

Today we understand “remembrance” as thinking about someone who is absent. In the case of the Lord's Supper, this would be a mere recollection of what Jesus has done: His suffering and death on the cross. Then the Lord's Supper would ultimately be a good work: remembering the Lord Jesus because He commanded it or because that is just what a Christian does. Luther rediscovered that the Lord's Supper is pure Gospel, not a good work that we offer to God. It is Gospel because our sins are forgiven in the confidence of God's promises in the Lord's Supper, and because God comforts us and strengthens our faith. With the traditional Roman Catholic celebration of the Lord's Supper, the integrity of the sacrificial death

¹⁸⁰ In a similar way (connection between remembrance and God's help) are, for example, Genesis 8:1; 9:15; Nehemiah 5:19; Psalm 25:6f.; and Luke 1:54-55,68-73. Human remembrance of God's mercy, that is, in God's promises and remembrance, His caring dealing with us, all hang together (cf. Malachi 3:16; Psalm 106:4,44f.; 74:2).

¹⁸¹ Cf. Psalm 111:4. It was already customary in the Old Testament to seal a covenant with a common meal (cf. Genesis 26:26ff.; 31:44ff.; Exodus 24:1-11; Joshua 9:1ff.).

of Jesus is overturned by notions about the sacrifice of the Mass,¹⁸² where the work of the priest supplements the work of Golgotha.

Remembrance in the biblical and Jewish sense never takes a past event in an isolated way, but always has its effects and consequences in view, that is, for the present and future.¹⁸³ Therefore at every celebration of the Lord's Supper, we hold before our eyes what Jesus has acquired *for us* on the cross. And we joyfully¹⁸⁴ proclaim and extol¹⁸⁵ the death of our Lord, because that is how His testament became effective and we now as heirs receive His gifts (His body and His blood) unto eternal life (Hebrews 9:11-22). So to remember here means to believe, that is, to trust Christ's promises and to recognize what He gives and wants to bestow upon us in the Lord's Supper. Moreover, the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the heavenly

¹⁸² According to Hebrews 9:28 and 10:14,18, Christ was only sacrificed once. He is not offered again to God by the priest as an unbloody sacrifice at every celebration of the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist (cf., however, John 19:30). The essential direction of redemption is downwards and not upwards, that is, God comes to us and not we to Him, which is especially made clear in the incarnation of the Son: Here this one comes down from heaven to earth and goes the way to the cross when we were still sinners (cf. Romans 5:10). The same thing applies to the Lord's Supper. In the Roman Catholic liturgy of the Mass, however, the many prayers before and after the words of institution emphasize the direction from man to God. As a result, the words of institution as pure Gospel lose weight, also because the distribution, the eating, and the drinking of the gifts connected with them are deferred and thus the connection to the words of institution is less apparent.

¹⁸³ Cf. Exodus 20:8; Numbers 15:40; Psalm 39:2f.; 45:17; 103:18; Philippians 1:3.

¹⁸⁴ The Lord's Supper is a meal of joy and hope (cf. Acts 2:46f.). In the foreground is what Christ acquired for us by His sacrificial death and what is distributed to us in the Lord's Supper: "[the body of Christ] given *for you*"; "[the blood of Christ] poured out *for you*" (Luke 22:19f.). The appropriate response to this can only be hearty thanks and exuberant praise.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Philippians 2:8ff.; Revelation 5:9,12.

wedding banquet we long for, which we will one day celebrate with Christ.¹⁸⁶ That is why before the celebration of the Lord's Supper the Early Church used the biblical prayer "Come Lord Jesus".¹⁸⁷ They were asking for the second coming of Jesus for the consummation of His work of salvation. "Until He comes" in verse 26 of the above passage from Corinthians does not only give the time until which the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated, but also the goal that should be reached. The meaning of the original Greek text, according to Joachim Jeremias, reads something like "until (the goal has been achieved, that) He comes."¹⁸⁸

The presence of Jesus' body and blood during a celebration of the Lord's Supper, administered according to the institution, does not depend on the faith of the pastor who is leading the celebration. Nor does it depend on the faith of any individual guests at the Lord's Supper, because it only depends on the word of Jesus that is spoken by the pastor in the form of the words of institution. But the Lord's Supper does have different effects on the guests present. Paul indeed writes: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily (that is, in an unworthy manner)¹⁸⁹ will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord." Whoever cannot distinguish between the Lord's Supper and any ordinary meal, whoever approaches the altar with unbelief, whoever thinks he does

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Revelation 19:6-9; Matthew 8:11; Luke 12:35-37; 22:16-18,30.

¹⁸⁷ This is the translation of "Maranatha!" (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20). In addition, the prayer also referred to the promised Real Presence of the risen one in the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 16:22f.).

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 243f.

¹⁸⁹ Note that "unworthy" here is used with the adverbial form "unworthily". If "unworthy" referred to the communicants and not to the way in which they receive the Lord's Supper, then nobody could receive the Lord's Supper. But the Lord's Supper was indeed instituted precisely for sinners (cf. Matthew 9:13).

not need forgiveness, and whoever does not repent of his sins receives the Lord's Supper unworthily. According to Paul, each one should examine himself! You do *not* receive the Lord's Supper unworthily if you receive it as a repentant sinner, because Jesus indeed instituted the Lord's Supper precisely for such repentant sinners (cf. Revelation 3:20). Whoever receives the Lord's Supper trusting in God's promises has forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

How could eating be connected with being guilty of the body of Christ if this body were not truly present in the eating? Why does Paul not speak here of a sin against God or against a command of the Lord, but of being guilty of the body and blood of Christ? Thus the Real Presence is also proven by these facts!

Paul warns against not regarding the body of Christ because otherwise people would eat and drink judgment upon themselves. For one thing, Paul says this with regard to the situation of the congregation in Corinth where the Lord's Supper was celebrated carelessly. On the other hand, this also affects those who do not think they need forgiveness, or those who do not recognize or believe that they receive the true body of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

Another important passage for the Lord's Supper is 1 Corinthians 10:14-22: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation [or 'fellowship'] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation [or 'fellowship'] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (verses 16-17). Some translations render the Greek word "koinonia" here with "participation" or "to have a share" [in the body and blood of Christ] rather than with "fellowship". The content of the statement is more clearly and understandably asserted with the term "participation". In today's linguistic usage, "fellowship" describes above all a social relationship between persons. The Lord's Supper is about participation in the true body and the true blood of Christ, by which we also have a part in what Christ acquired for us on the cross. The "body of Christ" cannot be interpreted here like Colossians 1:24 as a picture of the Christian

congregation because the narrow context of the Lord's Supper does not allow for this interpretation. Besides, the body of Christ is mentioned parallel to the blood of Christ, and for this there would be no corresponding spiritual interpretation. According to verse 17, we are *one* body by common participation in the Lord's Supper (sharing in *one* bread) just as by Baptism we are *one* body (1 Corinthians 12:12ff.). Here it is clearly expressed what a deep fellowship the communicants have with Christ and with one another.

1 Corinthians 10:14-15 and 18-22 make it clear that the celebration of the Lord's Supper with unbelievers is impossible. Based on 1 Corinthians 11:27,29, the Church of the Lutheran Reformation does not distribute the Lord's Supper to openly unrepentant sinners (cf. 1 Corinthians 5) or to those who deny the Real Presence in the sense presented here. Altogether, participation in the Lord's Supper constitutes a confession of the teachings of the church distributing it.¹⁹⁰ It is a communal meal that expresses the unity of the guests at the Lord's Supper. Participating in the Lord's Supper at a church that teaches something different about the Lord's Supper, or even about other topics, pretends to have unity where in truth no unity exists. The entire Church has practiced "closed communion" for most of Church history. Not allowing a Christian with a different public confession to come to the Lord's Supper does *not* mean, however, to deny that they are Christians or to consider them second-class Christians. I did not take it negatively when I was at first not admitted to the Lord's Supper in a confessional Lutheran congregation in the USA, but I used the opportunity to examine my own theological understanding and the teachings of the congregation. This led me to change my opinion on a few topics because I no longer saw them as biblical. So it should not be forgotten that the pastor of a congregation has a great responsibility when it comes to admitting to the Lord's Supper (cf. Hebrews 13:17). He ought to

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Acts 2:42. If a congregation / church has unbiblical teachings, it would be contradictory to seek communion fellowship with them using Bible passages like Romans 16:17 and Titus 3:5.

Speak with both those who are going to be confirmed and with guests before their first admission to the Lord's Supper at that congregation.

I also believe that the following verses from John 6 prophetically refer to the Lord's Supper: "Whoever believes has eternal life... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' So Jesus said to them, 'Truly truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.'" (verses 47,51 ff.)

How Jesus will give them His flesh¹⁹¹ to eat goes above the reason of the Jews who were listening. After that, Jesus repeats His statement again and elaborates still further that we have eternal life in the Lord's Supper when we believe Jesus' words.¹⁹² Whoever despises the Lord's Supper and unnecessarily avoids it has no life in him (cf. verse 53).

The Lord's Supper is "provisions for the journey" for the sanctification of a Christian (cf. Hebrews 13:10-12). For the love with which we love God and our neighbor and the love with which we ought to keep God's commandments does not come from us but

¹⁹¹ Jesus gave His flesh for the life of the world at Golgotha (cf. John 6:51). The word "flesh" is already used at the beginning of John's Gospel in the same sense: "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). So the Lord's Supper is closely connected with the incarnation of Jesus. For the Word that has become flesh is present for us in the Lord's Supper. Jesus literally speaks of "chewing" His flesh. This, too, speaks against a purely symbolic understanding.

¹⁹² The promise is not to be understood as detached from verse 47.

feeds on the love that Jesus has shown and shows to us.¹⁹³ We must also again and again be freed from the entanglements of our sins,¹⁹⁴ which take us captive and prevent us from doing God's will.

It is precisely because they knew what treasure was given them in the Lord's Supper that the early Christians celebrated it often.¹⁹⁵

It is astonishing that the great and almighty God makes use of such simple means and elements as bread and wine in the Lord's Supper and water in Baptism in order to apply to us the redemption and forgiveness acquired by Christ at Golgotha. It is also astounding that food and meals more often than not have a special meaning in the Bible. This is already the case with the trees in Paradise.¹⁹⁶ Also, for example, the "forerunner" of the Lord's Supper, the Passover meal, is deeply connected with the rescue of the people of Israel from the Egyptians (cf. Exodus 12). This stands clearly opposed to a Gnostic way of thinking.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, the Lord's Supper is not only nourish-

¹⁹³ Cf. 1 John 3:16; 4:7,9,16; 2 John 6; Galatians 2:20.

¹⁹⁴ Cf., for example, Acts 8:23; 1 Timothy 6:9; 2 Timothy 2:26.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Acts 2:42,46; 20:7.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Genesis 2:9; 3:22.

¹⁹⁷ The word "Gnosis" means knowledge in a general sense. Gnostics deny the incarnation of the Son of God. They regard the material world as evil and also view the body negatively. Therefore they also have problems with the doctrine of the Real Presence. Ignatius of Antioch writes on this point in the epistle to the congregation in Smyrna around AD 107 (ch. 7.1): "The Gnostics stay away from the Eucharist [the Lord's Supper] because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father in His goodness raised again from the dead." Moreover, he writes to the Ephesians (ch. 20.2): "We break one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote so that we need not die, that we might live eternally in Jesus Christ." The Gnostics teach that a divine spark lies dormant in every person, which people must recognize in order to not remain imprisoned in the material world.

ment for our soul, but also, in a wider sense, for our body. For with our body (although in glorified form) we will rise again to eternal life.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Romans 8:11,23; 1 Corinthians 15:53; Philippians 3:21.

The Christian Congregation

The Greek word for “congregation” in the New Testament is “Ekklesia”, which comes from “ekkalein” (to call out). “Ekklesia” also means “church” as a plurality of congregations. So both congregation and church consist of those who have been called out of the godlessness of this world (for example, Romans 1:6f.). The congregation is church in the full sense. A congregation is not kept back from doing what only the church ought to do. The church is not dependent on organizational forms (synods, for example). “Ekklesia” in the proper sense is not the totality of the paying members of a congregation or church, the outward members (“visible church”), but the totality of all those who believe in Christ (“the hidden church”), the “communion of saints”, as we confess in the Apostles’ Creed.¹⁹⁹ This is not bound to a confession or denomination.²⁰⁰

In Acts 2:41-47, we find the answer to the questions of a) who builds the congregation and in what way b) with what and how the congregation lives and how the congregation is to be recognized.

a) *Who builds the congregation and in what way?*

In the first and last verses of this Bible passage it says that “there were added” and “the Lord added”. It does not say in these verses that the Apostles added, or that the people decided to become members. This distinguishes the Christian congregation from a club.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; 1 John 2:19.

²⁰⁰ The Nicene Creed: “*One* holy Christian and *apostolic* [and therefore not, for example, ‘papal’] Church.” The Bible does not limit this Church to an outward institution as for example the Roman Catholic Church: cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2; Luke 17:20f.; Acts 5:14; Ephesians 2:19-22. The Church is “apostolic” because the faith was once and for all delivered to the saints by the Apostles (cf. Jude 3) and therefore the content of the faith stands unalterably firm.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the true builder of the Christian congregation: “I will build my congregation, that is, my Church” (Matthew 16:18). He builds the Church through the means of grace in Word and Sacrament.²⁰¹ The true “Ekklesia” is indeed hidden, but according to the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, it can be recognized in that the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are administered according to Scripture. For the public administration of the means of grace God instituted the *pastoral office*. It is a divine institution.²⁰² The picture of the shepherd also shows that this office is in place of, that is, acting on behalf of Christ because Christ is the true shepherd.²⁰³ Jesus also says: “The one who hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16). Pastors (Latin for “shepherds”) exercise the pastoral office as successors of the Apostles as bishops in their congregations.²⁰⁴ The pastoral office is an office of service,²⁰⁵ but it is also connected with authority.²⁰⁶ This authority lies in “the Office of the Keys”: the proclamation, the administration of the sacraments,²⁰⁷ as well as forgiving and retaining the sins of congregation members on behalf of Christ.²⁰⁸ Although every

²⁰¹ Cf. Mark 4:26-27; Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 1:16-17; 10:14-17; 1 Peter 1:23; John 3:3-5; Titus 3:5. – Being connected / fellowship: 1 John 1:1ff.; John 15:1-8; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Corinthians 12:13,27; 10:16f.

²⁰² Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Jeremiah 3:15; Acts 20:28; 14:23; Titus 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:2; Ephesians 4:11.

²⁰³ Cf. Psalm 23:1; Matthew 9:36; 25:32; John 10:11; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:2-4; 2 Corinthians 5:20.

²⁰⁴ Cf. 1 Timothy 1:18; 6:20; 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; 1 Timothy 5:22.

²⁰⁵ Cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1 / Titus 1:7; 1 Timothy 4:6; Acts 6:4; 21:19; 26:16.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Hebrews 13:17; 1 Timothy 4:11; 5:20; Titus 1:9.

²⁰⁷ Admission to or exclusion from the Lord’s Supper, for example, also falls under this.

²⁰⁸ The office of ambassador: cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 4:11.

believer is a priest²⁰⁹ with the pastor not being on a higher spiritual level (cf. 1 Peter 5:3), that does not mean that everyone should publicly preach the Word of God in the congregation and administer the Sacraments, but only those men whom Christ has assigned as shepherds, that is, called and appointed. This is audibly and visibly confirmed in ordination and by the congregational call.²¹⁰

Christ calls people out of the godlessness of this world into the congregation. Those who are called out of this world indeed still live in this world, but they no longer belong to the component that is turned against God. Instead they stand (correctly understood) at a critical distance from the world. They are *in* the world but not *of* the world. The “either / or” (congregation or world) becomes especially clear in dictatorships and in countries where Christians are persecuted. The fact that the Lord Himself builds the congregation – even though He uses people as His instruments – is comforting for the mission, especially when what is hoped for does not happen, in spite of bold testimonies of faith. The outcome does not lie in our power. If the Christian congregation and the Church are God’s work, then in both cases it must go according to *His* will.

b) *With what and how does the congregation live, and how is the congregation to be recognized?*

In Acts 2:42 we are told of four things in which the first congregation remained *consistent*: in the teaching of the Apostles,

²⁰⁹ “The priesthood of all believers”: 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6. – “Priestly” acts (metaphorical comparison with the sacrificial acts in the Old Testament): Revelation 8:3f; 14:4f.; Romans 12:1; Hebrews 13:15f.; Philippians 4:18. – The pastoral office is *not* tied to the priestly office in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is the only mediator who stands between God and the believer (Hebrews 9:15; 1 Timothy 2:5f.).

²¹⁰ Cf. James 3:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28f.; 4:1; Acts 20:17f.,28; 13:2-4; 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; Titus 1:5f.; Romans 10:15; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1f.; Mark 3:13-19.

in fellowship, in the Lord's Supper ("the breaking of bread"), and in prayer.

The first congregation did not remain consistent in just any teaching, but precisely in the teaching of the Apostles. This teaching is the Word of God, as are all the writings of the Bible. God's Word is a word of life. It is powerful and active.²¹¹ As man without bread to eat and air to breathe loses his life, so is there no spiritual life without God's Word (cf. Matthew 4:4). That is why it is important to attend the Divine Service and to daily read God's Word. Unfortunately, many Bible classes and religious instruction are attended and offered less and less. Teaching and instruction, even on other occasions than the sermon, are often neglected, which has largely led to the spiritual disintegration of congregations (see on the other hand Colossians 3:16).

Regarding fellowship, the picture of the congregation as the Body of Christ, in which we are members as Christians, is very helpful. In the human organism, not every member lives for itself alone, but when one member suffers then all suffer together (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:26). The congregation members also have spiritual responsibility for each other. Possible penitential questions to invigorate the congregation again are: Do we take to heart the spiritual and bodily wellbeing of our sisters and brothers in the faith? Do we take time to comfort another congregation member, to encourage and to help when needed? Can we speak freely about problems and hardships without having to fear rejection and misunderstanding? Do we talk *with* each other or *about* each other? Do we visit the sick and dying? Do we pray and read God's Word with each other? Do we help effectively, when necessary also financially or materially (cf. Acts 2:45)? Do we also help people outside of the congregation? Does it still move us that people who do not believe in Jesus are going to hell? From Acts 2:44-47 it follows that the first congregation had very intimate fellowship among each other and that this did not remain without

²¹¹ Cf. John 6:63; Isaiah 55:10f.; Romans 1:16; 2 Timothy 3:15.

effect on their non-Christian environment. Outsiders might have wondered what moved the congregation and how Christians could have such love among each other. However, we must also not forget that every congregation consists of sinners. Whoever is not aware of this and seeks the perfect congregation will be disappointed.

The Lord's Supper was celebrated quite often in the first congregation. Along with verse 42, verse 46 indicates that the Lord's Supper was a regular core part of their gatherings. The congregation knew that the Lord Jesus Christ gives His body and His blood to eat and to drink and thereby bestows forgiveness of sins and thus eternal life with Him. And He strengthens their faith. The Lord's Supper already gave them a foretaste of the heavenly, joyful feast with Jesus Christ (cf. Revelation 19:9).

Prayer was another important component of the first congregation. Here is meant not only prayer "in a quiet room" (cf. Matthew 6:6). In Acts 4:23 it is related how the congregation prayed together on a particular occasion. This had effects! Prayers are spoken in the Divine Service, but they can be even more concrete and specific in prayer circles.

Baptism is also mentioned (cf. Acts 2:41), which portrays entrance into the congregation (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13,27).

The Bible knows of no Christianity outside of the congregation. To live one's faith in an isolated way contradicts the picture of the congregation as the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12), the intimate fellowship (cf. Acts 2), and the command not to neglect the gatherings of the congregation (cf. Hebrews 10:25). That is why we ought to join a congregation in a binding way.

Which congregation or church should you join? For many Christians, the church they grew up in plays a role, as does where they feel the most at home, where the most possible Christians of the same age group are, where a captivating pastor is, etc. So in Christian freedom we can determine a few criteria. Criteria from the Bible, however, must stand above these self-chosen criteria. Thus the Bible admonishes us, for example, to avoid unbiblical teachers

and teachings, that is, to choose congregations / churches²¹² with biblical teaching.²¹³ Biblical teaching is indeed an indispensable prerequisite for a “healthy” congregation, but in the circular letter of Revelation, Jesus calls to repentance for leaving the first love (cf. Revelation 2:4) or for falling asleep (cf. Revelation 3:1f.). Doctrine and practice cannot be separated from each other.

Another important point in congregations is how sins are dealt with. Is there a relationship of trust so that we can confess our sins to one another (cf. James 5:16) without being rejected and condemned? Are we aware that we are all sinners (cf. John 8:1-10), or do we only see the “splinter” in our brother’s eye and not notice the “beam” in our own eye (cf. Matthew 7:3)? Relationships among each other can easily be poisoned if we do not mutually forgive²¹⁴ each other and respond to each other with humility. That is why we read in Galatians 6:1-4: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor.”

²¹² I, for example, could no longer reconcile it with my conscience to remain in the German state church of Württemberg because even then a pious congregation of the state church with Lutheran character is a member of a state church where the denial of even basic Christian truths occurs and is tolerated.

²¹³ Cf. Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10f.; Galatians 5:9; 2 Timothy 2:16ff.; Acts 20:29f.; Acts 2:42; John 8:31f.

²¹⁴ To forgive a sin means that it is never again held against the person who has sinned and that the forgiven sin does not negatively influence behavior toward the person. Otherwise the sin is not really forgiven. The person who has sinned should clearly acknowledge his mistake and *explicitly* ask for forgiveness, and the person who was sinned against should *explicitly* state that he forgives the other person.

It is wrong to judge and to condemn (cf. Matthew 7:1f.) self-righteously or only according to appearance (cf. John 7:24). Nevertheless, the Bible calls upon us to exhort²¹⁵ each other and in some circumstances even to judge.²¹⁶ It can be especially given to some to exhort in love (cf. Romans 12:8). The pastors of the congregations are especially compelled to exhort when necessary.²¹⁷ In Luke 17:3-4 and Matthew 18:15-18 we have further guidelines for dealing with blatant sin:

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent’, you must forgive him.”

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector [that is, as one who is unconverted]. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” To “loosen” here means that a repentant sinner is forgiven and to “bind” means that an unrepentant sinner’s sins are retained.²¹⁸

Repentance is turning away from sin and returning to God. Repentance involves the recognition of sin, sincere remorse,²¹⁹ and

²¹⁵ Cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 3:13.

²¹⁶ Cf. 1 Corinthians 5, especially verse 12.

²¹⁷ Cf. 1 Timothy 4:13; 6:2.

²¹⁸ See also Matthew 16:19; John 20:22f.

²¹⁹ Cf. Psalm 34:18; 51:17.

faith in the forgiveness of sin through Jesus.²²⁰ The carrying out of the binding and loosing is called the “*Office of the Keys*” in the Lutheran Church because by forgiving or retaining sins Heaven is opened or closed. So it is God Himself acting through His servants. *Confession* is also to be mentioned in connection with the Office of the Keys. In the Lutheran Church, Confession is often practiced as “general Confession” in or before the Divine Service, or as individual Confession. The utilization of Confession should be voluntary. It involves two steps: the confession of sins (out of remorse) and the forgiveness of sins (called *Absolution*; which is a gift to be received in faith). Absolution is the Gospel in concentrated form and it is as though God has spoken it (cf. Luke 10:16). It is unfortunate that individual Confession is so little used, because it can be very freeing.

To return to the guidelines for dealing with blatant sin in the congregation: For the one who was sinned against, it is important that he face the other with true humility, love, and readiness to forgive. Jesus has forgiven him much greater guilt (cf. Matthew 18:21-35). The one who has sinned should experience remorse. This is not easy with the basic attitude of our contemporary society, which can hardly accept criticism without striking back with counter-criticism, and where the acknowledgment of guilt is seen as weakness. The first step according to the community rule (cf. Matthew 18:15-17) is *not* to tell everyone about the sin, but to first speak with the other person alone. The next steps should only be taken if that does not work. In doing so, neither pride nor self-righteousness should play a role. The motivation for exhorting and rebuking must always be love, even if excommunication is in order after unsuccessfully going through the steps of the community rule (see above).²²¹ Excommunication can prevent other congregation members from also being led into sin (cf. 1 Corinthians

²²⁰ Judas indeed recognized his sin and regretted it, but he did not believe that this sin could be forgiven him: cf. Matthew 27:3-5.

²²¹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 1 Timothy 1:19f.

5:6f.) and once again in a particular way makes the one excluded aware that he is jeopardizing his salvation if he does not turn back and repent. The goal of excommunication is that the persistent, unrepentant sinner would be won back again (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5). The congregations in the cities of Pergamum and Thyatira are accused in the circular letter (cf. Revelation 2) of not exercising the congregational or doctrinal discipline that had become necessary and they are warned of the consequences of this failure.

The Lutheran Divine Service

The biblical foundation for the Divine Service lies in the First Commandment. There, according to the explanation of the Small Catechism by Martin Luther, God requires that man fear, love, and trust in Him. God desires that we believe in Him only and not place our trust in other things or gods. A Divine Service is wrong if other things replace God or if they supposedly allow a way to Him (for example, work-righteousness; see above).

Hence the true Divine Service is always an expression of our justification by God. Jesus Christ is present as the risen Lord in order to work, to bestow, and to strengthen faith through Word and Sacrament, which man is not able to attain by his own powers.

Christ deals with His congregation by Word and Sacrament, where God's own divine service happens to us, and we respond with prayer and songs of praise.

The Lutheran Divine Service consists of two main parts: the service of the Word and the service of the Sacrament. The opening and closing parts are before and after.

The opening part is dominated by prayer, which prepares for meeting the Lord. There we go through the confession of sins (in the general Confession or in a prayer of preparation) to bowing before God. To be given what God wants to give, it is a prerequisite to come with empty hands. In the *Didache*, the earliest Church Order of Christianity (from the second century), the confession of sins is already explicitly called a component of the Divine Service. It is also interesting that in the Old Testament, "to confess sins" and "to praise God" are already grouped together (for example, Joshua 7:19).

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Divine Service. He enters the Divine Service and is called upon by the congregation, praised, and

implored for mercy. The Introit (entrance Psalm),²²² the Kyrie eleison,²²³ and the Gloria in Excelsis²²⁴ correspond to this.

The service of the Word (the part for proclamation) consists of three “waves”: the Epistle reading,²²⁵ the reading from the Gospel, and the Sermon.²²⁶ For each wave there is return flow. The congregation responds to the Epistle reading with “Hallelujah” (praise be to God) and a hymn, and to the reading from the Gospels with the Creed. The Sermon Hymn follows the Sermon, oftentimes also the offering of thanksgiving (a collect) and the Prayer of the Church.

Luther gave the Sermon a central place in the Divine Service again after it had been lost. The sermon should give the congregation direction and include Law and Gospel in proper distinction. In doing so, the Gospel should predominate and not be made into a new Law. The Gospel not only causes conversion, but also gives the power for sanctification.²²⁷ The actual preacher is not the pastor, but Christ Himself (Luke 10:16).

²²² In Psalm 95:2 it says: “Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God and a great King above all gods.” Encouragements to use the Psalms are found in Psalm 118:14; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; and James 5:13. Even Jesus Christ on the cross, for example, prayed in words from Psalm 22 (cf. Matthew 27:46).

²²³ “Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.” The threefold Kyrie alludes to the Triune God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are called upon. The Kyrie is not an actual confession of sins, but it is a prayerful recognition of Him from whom alone mercy is to be expected.

²²⁴ This “Glory be to God in the Highest” comes from Luke 2:14 where the angels praise and extol the birth of the Savior.

²²⁵ Reading from a New Testament letter.

²²⁶ Some congregations also have an additional first reading from the Old Testament.

²²⁷ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14f.; Titus 2:11-14.

Besides the Sermon, the second highpoint is the celebration of the Lord's Supper in which Jesus Himself gives us His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. For the Lutheran Church at the time of the Reformation it was taken for granted that the Lord's Supper would be offered every Sunday and also on other days, even if there were only a few congregation members who wanted to receive it.²²⁸ The first Christians also celebrated the Lord's Supper quite often.²²⁹

In the Lord's Supper, the communicants are united in profound fellowship with each other and with God. Leading up to the Lord's Supper are a few very old liturgical elements that prepare for the Lord's Supper and bring praise to God. This includes the Preface, the Sanctus, the Lord's Prayer, and the Agnus Dei.²³⁰ In the Preface,²³¹ salvation history is portrayed with a focus on the time of the Church year and Christ is praised and exalted for His salvific acts. In the Sanctus,²³² the congregation on earth joins in the heavenly praise.²³³ The heavenly Divine Service comes down to the congregation on earth in the Holy Supper just as the Son of God descended and became man. Thus heaven and earth are united. In the Lord's Supper, the congregation has heaven on earth. The liturgical elements that precede the Lord's Supper flow into the words of institution, by which Christ Himself makes His body and blood really present.

²²⁸ Cf. the Augsburg Confession XXIV:34-37 and the Apology XXIV:1.

²²⁹ Cf. Acts 20:7; 2:42.

²³⁰ "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God"; cf. John 1:29.

²³¹ Latin "praefatio": prologue, introduction.

²³² Latin: holy. The two parts of the Sanctus come from the song of the angels in Isaiah 6:1ff., when Isaiah was called as a prophet, and from the acclamation of the people of Jerusalem, when Jesus entered on Palm Sunday.

²³³ Cf. also Revelation 4.

After the Lord's Supper, the congregation replies to God's gift with songs of praise and prayer. During the distribution, songs of thanks and praise are also sung in adoration of God.

In the concluding part, the congregation is blessed and sent back into the world. The blessing is not merely a pious wish but it is efficacious. Read, for example, the book of Genesis with regard to blessing. As the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Sunday is the day of the Lord (cf. the Spanish "Domingo"). It is the *first* day of the week, where in the Divine Service we receive preparation and strengthening for the rest of the week. The sending is important because we should also live with Christ during the week, asking His will in all things and serving Him (cf. Romans 12:1).

The liturgical Divine Service is often criticized. It is said that it is cold, you can't feel comfortable, it isn't lively, and it adheres to outdated forms and songs. In case you also think this is the case, then read a book that explains the liturgy, for example "Heaven on Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service" by Arthur Just. Perhaps you will find how much is contained in the liturgy and that the individual parts of the liturgy are texts of the Bible and therefore God's Word. When the individual liturgical elements are no longer understood or the sense is not recognized, then the liturgy should be explained well in the congregations. Moreover, a linguistic reworking of many liturgical elements and some old hymns where many words that no longer appear today are used would be helpful. It was already a concern for Luther that the entire Divine Service be well understood. That is why he supported having the liturgy in German (the vernacular) rather than Latin. He also preached so vividly that the people could understand him well.

In many modern forms of the Divine Service with modern praise songs, it appears to be of primary necessity that the guests feel comfortable, which is why uncomfortable elements such as the confession of sin are left out. But what constitutes vitality? That songs are sung with quick rhythms and jazzy sounds? Or does it depend more on Christ being the center, that He shows us His way and serves us with His Word and Sacrament? Fundamentally there

is no objection to new songs. Nevertheless, with both old and new songs it depends on whether or not the content is correct. Jesus Christ and His work should be at the center and not the “pious I”. Some songs that come from the charismatic movement often appear to me as though certain feelings should be “produced” and as though the content must be held back in favor of melody and rhythm.

Modern praise worship often takes the place of the Lord’s Supper. In the Lord’s Supper we have God’s promise that Christ enters into us and that He is there *for us* by forgiving our sin and strengthening our faith. This is far more than the general promise that God is among two or three who gather in His name (cf. Matthew 18:20). Modern worship is no longer about seeking Christ in God’s promises in Word and Sacrament, but it is about a feeling of nearness generated through worship, or about building yourself up through visions, experiences, and your own thoughts and feelings. The focus in modern worship songs (which by the way are mostly Reformed and charismatic and not Lutheran in origin) often shifts away from Christ as the Crucified, our Savior, directly to Him as the almighty Lord (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:2).

The theology of a church is always reflected in how her Divine Service goes, and conversely, conclusions can be drawn about a Church based on how she worships. Thus in every Lutheran Divine Service, the fundamental content of the faith is proclaimed and confessed by the liturgy independent of the respective sermon. In that way God is worshipped and praised.

Another aspect of the Lutheran liturgy is that it also unites Christianity of all times, that is, all Christians who live and ever have lived. The birthday of the Christian Church is Pentecost and not the point in time when some new denomination or sect arose! Most liturgical elements reach back to the Early Church. It is not surprising then that the Divine Service of the Early Church takes up

elements of synagogue worship.²³⁴ Ultimately, Jesus and all the Apostles were Jews. The Lutheran Church believes in “one holy Christian Church”, as the Apostles’ Creed says. This goes through all Christian confessions and includes the amount of all those who believe in Christ. Incidentally, it was not the intention of the Reformation to establish a new church but rather to reform the existing church. This can be seen in that Luther fundamentally maintained the catholic liturgy but purified it of unbiblical excesses. The conflicts with the Roman Catholic Church admittedly allowed the Reformation to develop only outside of the institution of the Roman Catholic Church.

²³⁴ The Church is not in a vacuum but is rooted in Judaism. Cf., for example, Romans 11:17f.; John 4:22; Mark 1:21; Luke 4:20ff.; John 6:59; Acts 13:14ff.; 17:1ff.; 18:4,19,26; 19:8. This background is also important for understanding many Bible passages.

Prayer²³⁵

Prayer is communication or speaking with God. It includes, for example, adoration, thanksgiving, and petition. Christians pray alone or together with other Christians (in the congregation or family, for example). It is good to keep open a fixed time to read the Bible every day, to ponder God's Word (cf. Psalm 1:2f.), pray, and possibly sing. The special promise of Christ applies to praying together for something: "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:19). This promise encourages exchanging prayer requests among each other and to bring concrete requests together before God.²³⁶

Prayer is a fruit of faith, it is a part of the sanctified life, but it is not a reason for our faith or for our justification before God. We have forgiveness by trusting in God's promises in Word and Sacrament, not on account of spoken prayers. If, for example as in the Lord's Prayer, we ask for the forgiveness of our sins, then *in confidence in God's promises* these sins are also forgiven us.

The Holy Spirit compels His children, leading them to address God as Father and to pray in the Spirit (cf. Romans 8:14f., 26f.; Jude 20). God even opens our lips that we might declare His praise (cf. Psalm 51:15).

²³⁵ The remarks about prayer are guided by: A. L. Barry, *Let us Pray: A Study of Prayer and the Devotional Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998).

²³⁶ For example, in the family, in the congregation, in prayer circles, or spontaneously (cf. Acts 4:23ff.; 12:5,12; 16:25; 21:5; 1 Peter 3:7). Note: in *the* prayer that Christ gives to the Church, the Lord's Prayer, it says "us" and "our", that is, the entire Church brings these petitions together before God!

God invites us and requests us to pray regularly and relentlessly.²³⁷ We ought to understand however that it is a privilege to pray to God, especially because He has attached so many wonderful promises to prayer!²³⁸ We ought to remind God of His promises and His characteristics, for example, mercy and honor.²³⁹ Even Jesus prays for us!²⁴⁰

A prayer to someone or something other than the Triune God – to idols – is of no use (cf. 1 Kings 18) and offends God. As Christians, when we pray in Jesus’ name (cf. John 14:13f.) we ought to expect that God hears us for the sake of His Son because His Son has taken our sins away and thereby reconciled us with God. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between us and God (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5).

God also desires that we pray for others, even for our enemies.²⁴¹ Furthermore, we can and should trust that our prayers are heard.²⁴² And yet we should be aware that God does not always answer in the way we might imagine.²⁴³ God remains sovereign! Sometimes we only recognize later, for example, how good it was that God did not give us what we asked for.

²³⁷ Cf. Matthew 7:7f.; 1 Timothy 2:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Matthew 4:10; Philippians 4:6.

²³⁸ *Deliverance from adversity*: Psalm 50:15; 91:15; *that He will answer*: John 16:23; Romans 8:32; Ephesians 3:20; James 5:16; Isaiah 65:24; Psalm 65:2; 145:18f.; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:13.

²³⁹ Cf. Exodus 33:12ff.; 2 Kings 19; Psalm 25:6ff.; 74:20; Acts 4:23ff.

²⁴⁰ Cf. John 17:20; Hebrews 7:25.

²⁴¹ Cf. 1 Timothy 2:1f. (for all people); Matthew 5:44 (for our enemies); Luke 23:34 (Jesus’ prayer from the cross); Isaiah 53:12 (for the godless); Jeremiah 29:7 (for our city and our country); Matthew 9:37f. (for missions); Ephesians 6:18 (for the Christian congregation); 2 Thessalonians 3:1 (for pastors and teachers in the Church); James 5:14 (for the sick).

²⁴² Cf. Matthew 21:22; James 1:6f.

²⁴³ Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:8-9; Luke 18:1-8.

Our prayer should be in harmony with what God has revealed in the Bible as His will.²⁴⁴ God speaks to us through His Word and His action. We respond in prayer (cf. Psalm 19:14). We also find this pattern of communication in the Lutheran Divine Service. We can easily get lost in praying for our own wishes if prayer does not happen in connection with hearing and reading God's Word. The great danger with personal revelation is that it is only imagined, and you actually confuse it with your own will. In this case, communication with God would turn into a conversation with yourself.

Obviously true prayer must be learned because in Matthew 6:5ff. Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray. Thus prayer should not be some pious show. To say many words is not necessary, "for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). Jesus gives His disciples a particular prayer: the Lord's Prayer. This is not only a pattern for prayer but a prayer that should actually be prayed. This can be seen from the original text of Matthew 6:9. The Psalms also played a large role in the prayers of the first Christians (for example, Acts 4:24ff.). Jesus Himself prayed on the cross with the words of Psalm 22 (cf. Matthew 27:46). So God's Word can also be spoken directly as prayer, be incorporated into prayer, or refer back to God's Word. Thus God's Word can be used as an anchor for prayer. So, for example, each petition of the Lord's Prayer can be used as a starting point for more free, personal prayer. Other possible starting points, for example, are the Ten Commandments or the Creed.

Luther recommends as a possible structure for the subsequent free prayer: 1) What does God's Word demand, or mean here? 2) Thanksgiving for this Word and action of God. 3) Confession of one's own transgressions in this regard. 4) Petition for forgiveness, and that the Word might more and more become reality.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Cf. Luke 22:42; 1 John 5:14; Romans 8:26.

²⁴⁵ See Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, translated by Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012).

Following Jesus, Discipleship, and Sanctification

In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly invites people to follow Him and to become His disciples.²⁴⁶ Discipleship presupposes that we are God's children; that we are baptized and instructed and believe in Jesus Christ alone.²⁴⁷ For God's children are driven by God's Spirit.²⁴⁸

We should follow Jesus, deny ourselves, take up our cross,²⁴⁹ and lead our entire life in all its areas under His rule.²⁵⁰ If we confess Jesus, which He has instructed us to do, this will also bring us derision and hate²⁵¹ and perhaps even persecution and death.²⁵² In particular, standing up for Jesus as the only way to salvation and advocating for clear ethical viewpoints will more and more evoke the opposition of the world,²⁵³ for example, in the questions of abortion, homosexuality, living together before marriage, sex outside of marriage, divorce, and gender mainstreaming. We must not only suffer as all people do on account of the Fall into sin, but also

²⁴⁶ For example, Matthew 10:38; John 8:12; Ephesians 5:1ff.; 1 Peter 2:21.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:16-26.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Luke 9:23; 14:27.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 10:31. Note: people can only live *either* under the rule of the Triune God *or* under the rule of the devil (cf. Romans 6:15-18). God has freed us from the tyranny and rule of the devil, adopted us as His children, and as our Father wants only the best for us. Jesus Christ is our Savior *and* our Lord.

²⁵¹ Cf. John 17:14; Matthew 10:22.

²⁵² If we experience absolutely no resistance and misunderstanding, this ought to give us pause to think to what extent we profess God. God can also grant the joyful confession here if we ask Him for it.

²⁵³ Cf. John 15:19f.; 2 Timothy 3:12.

because we belong to Christ and not to the world. God helps us through all challenges and suffering, however, and takes care that we do not perish eternally (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7ff.). We should always be alert and expect Jesus' second coming at any time. We should look forward to it!

God desires that as His children we live according to His will as it is revealed in the Bible.²⁵⁴ Accordingly, we should search the Scriptures while at the same time praying that we correctly recognize His will. However, the Bible does not give an answer to every question. In *Christian freedom* then, we can and should make decisions that serve the good and do not take us captive (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:12). We should not limit this freedom by making up new commandments. But we should also not misuse this freedom (Galatians 5:13).

In following Jesus, we must recognize that we are abysmally corrupted by sin and of ourselves can do nothing good.²⁵⁵

We are indeed born again and new creatures (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17), but the old man still lives in us and assails us. Paul himself had this distressing experience (cf. Romans 7:14-25). We are righteous in Christ but at the same time sinners through and through. The battle between the old man and the new man will last until Jesus comes again to deliver those who believe in Him. At the same time, it does not help to want to treat or improve the old man with one's own powers. The old man must daily die in that we repent and return to our Baptism (cf. Romans 6) and again make use of it anew. God does not step back from His promises (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13). We can daily draw strength from our personal justification that Jesus acquired for us, be renewed (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16), and so also rejoice.

²⁵⁴ Cf. Matthew 5:17ff.; 19:17ff. (the Ten Commandments); Ephesians 5:21-6:9; Romans 6:11ff.; 1:5; 16:26; 1 Peter 1:13ff.

²⁵⁵ Cf. John 15:5; Romans 7:15.

The recognition of sin comes through the Law (cf. Romans 3:20); the power for repentance and conversion is in the Gospel.²⁵⁶ That is why both must be preached (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:2, 5). If only the Law were preached, this would lead either to self-deceit when the Law is not apprehended in its full severity, or to doubt when the comfort of the Gospel is missing, the power of change and renewal.²⁵⁷ If the Law is no longer preached, then the Gospel is no longer good news and the danger arises that the hearers slip into false security. Moreover, *concrete* sins should be preached, not mere generic sinfulness. If we come to God as beggars²⁵⁸ and are aware of our sins, then we are all the more thankful towards God that He gives us everything (life by grace) and that we have found repentance (cf. Luke 7:36ff.).

Luther writes about the right interaction between Law and Gospel in preaching: “True and evangelical preaching is to magnify the sins as much as possible that man may develop fear of God and come to repentance... I must confess that as long as I read the scholastic teachers I never really understood what or how great an offense a venial sin was. Whether or not they themselves understand it I do not know. I say this briefly, however: One who does not constantly fear and act as if he were filled with mortal sins, will hardly be saved at all, for the Scripture says, ‘Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord’ [Ps. 143:2]. Not only venial sins, as they generally call them today, but even good works cannot endure the judgment of God, for both of them need the forgiving compassion of God. The Scripture does not say, ‘Enter not into judgment with your enemy’, but ‘with your son who serves you’. Therefore fear should teach us to groan for the compassion of God and to put our confidence in that. When

²⁵⁶ Cf. Romans 1:16; 2:4.

²⁵⁷ Cf. Romans 12:1 (“by the mercies of God”); 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 5:14f. (“the love of Christ controls us”); Titus 2:11-14 (“the salvific grace of God trains us to renounce”); Titus 3:4-8; Romans 6:3ff.

²⁵⁸ Spiritually poor: Matthew 5:3; Luke 17:10.

that is lacking, we begin to place our confidence in our own conscience rather than in the mercy of God, until we are no longer conscious of any great sin which we might have committed. Such individuals will meet a horrible judgment.”²⁵⁹

Paul is also aware of the magnitude of his sins when he writes: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom *I am the foremost*” (1 Timothy 1:15). The present tense is used meaning that Paul describes himself as the foremost of sinners even after his conversion! Thus Paul knew that he needs Jesus’ forgiveness even for the “little sins”, which according to God’s standard really are not that small (cf. James 2:10).²⁶⁰ This assessment of one’s own sin does *not* arise from a lack of self-confidence, but from taking God’s standards seriously. So, too, can we again and again become newly aware of the infinite grace in the Gospel, returning to Christ and serving Him in thankfulness and with strengthened self-confidence. Thereby God is glorified.²⁶¹

God gladly forgives us again and again and would like us to make use of His forgiveness. How would it be in a marriage where “I love you” and “I forgive you” are not repeatedly expressed from the heart or where the husband and wife do not forgive each other? Moreover, the Bible invites us to confess our sins to one another (cf. James 5:16) and to forgive each other (cf. Matthew 18:21ff.).

As Christians, we find the Gospel not only in the sermon, but also in a concentrated form in the Lord’s Supper and with the Absolution.

²⁵⁹ WA 18:518ff. (translation from American Edition of Luther’s Works 31:241-242).

²⁶⁰ This is also recognizable in that the Fall into sin came about because of “only” *one* act of disobedience.

²⁶¹ Cf. Matthew 3:8; John 15:8; 1 Peter 4:11.

Our sanctification is the work of the Triune God in and through us²⁶² and is the result of God's forgiveness granted to us in the Gospel, in Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution.²⁶³

Luther explains for the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism: "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."²⁶⁴ Under "enlightened" falls also conversion (cf. Acts 26:18). Sanctification presupposes justification (cf. Hebrews 10:14). God sanctified us in Baptism as we were born to new life.²⁶⁵

The new life in the power of the Holy Spirit consists of putting off the old man²⁶⁶ and putting on the new man.²⁶⁷ This requires a constant battle against all sinful desires and inclinations. It deals especially with a change of attitude and of the interior of a person,²⁶⁸ which then has an impact on the entire way of life.²⁶⁹ God wants us to live in sanctification according to our identity in Christ.²⁷⁰ To this

²⁶² *Father*: John 17:17; *Son*: Ephesians 5:25-27; *Holy Spirit*: Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18,22; Colossians 1:29; 2 Timothy 1:7.

²⁶³ Cf. Psalm 119:32; John 17:17; Romans 12:1; 6:3f.; 1 Corinthians 10:16; Hebrews 13:10-12.

²⁶⁴ "Called": cf. 2 Timothy 1:9; "enlightened": cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6; "sanctified": cf. John 17:17.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Ephesians 5:26; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Colossians 3:8f.; 1 Peter 2:1; Romans 13:12; Titus 2:12; Ephesians 4:22.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Colossians 3:10; Romans 13:12; Ephesians 4:24.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Romans 7:22; 12:2; Ephesians 3:16f.; 4:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 Peter 3:4.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Matthew 5:16; 10:32f.; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 3:12ff.; Titus 2:12; 3:8,14; 1 Peter 2:12; 3:8.

²⁷⁰ Cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:3ff.; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15f.; Ephesians 5:1ff.; Luke 1:74ff.; Galatians 6:9f.; Colossians 1:19-23.

end we have been called.²⁷¹ We should grow in our sanctification,²⁷² but in our earthly life we will remain imperfect (cf. Philippians 3:12) until God perfects us on the Last Day (Philippians 1:6). We should also remember that without God's working we can achieve nothing (2 Corinthians 3:5). God works in us both the willing and the doing.²⁷³ Paul writes: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). When Christ lives in us, He does good works in and through us, which His Father has already prepared (cf. Ephesians 2:10). We are absolutely dependent on Christ (cf. John 15:1ff.). Christ is powerful in the weak.²⁷⁴ Through Him everything is possible; without Him we achieve nothing. Therefore we should allow ourselves to be led by Him, trust in Him in all things, pray regularly,²⁷⁵ and read the Bible daily (cf. Acts 17:11).

Love for Christ is the correct motivation for living a life of sanctification (cf. 1 John 4:9,10,19). We *cannot* thereby contribute anything to our redemption. So the fear that the Lutheran doctrine of justification would lead to a life without good fruits and good works is unfounded. It is precisely the Gospel in Word and Sacrament that is indeed the power source for our new life, because it is here that we experience God's love. The Law or the fear of damnation do *not* lead to inner renewal, but at most to an outward lifestyle that appears pious, and to hypocrisy. However, the sanctified life must also be concretely handled and preached (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16f.). This is, in clear distinction from justification, *not* a preaching of works-righteousness.

²⁷¹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 2:24; Ephesians 4:1f; 1 Timothy 6:10-12; Titus 2:11-14.

²⁷² Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:58; Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

²⁷³ Cf. Philippians 2:13; 1:6.

²⁷⁴ Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9; 3:5.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Philippians 4:6; Romans 12:12; James 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms and His Understanding of Vocation

God very often acts in our world by using people as His tools, although on the basis of His omnipotence it is not necessary that He does this. He thereby rules in two “kingdoms”: In the first place, God rules by the governments and authorities of this world that He has established (“kingdom of the left”), thus setting in place an outward order to which Christians should also subordinate themselves.²⁷⁶ In the second place, God rules in the kingdom of Christian believers (“kingdom of the right”) in such a way that He here awards man forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In the kingdom of the left He rules by the Law and compulsion, in the kingdom of the right by the Gospel and the Sacraments. Jesus Himself distinguishes between these two kingdoms.²⁷⁷

The two kingdoms should not be mingled, for instance by the Church intervening in worldly regulations²⁷⁸ or by the government intruding in the kingdom of the right.²⁷⁹ The government should no longer be followed if doing so would go against God’s will (cf. Acts 5:29). The mere existence of a godless government however does not entitle you to refuse obedience, because even that government has been instituted by God.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Cf. Proverbs 8:15; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13f.; Titus 3:1.

²⁷⁷ Cf. John 18:36; Matthew 22:21.

²⁷⁸ For example, the earthly power of the popes in the Middle Ages.

²⁷⁹ For example, when the state forbids the Church from labeling homosexuality a sin or when secular courts are used for disputes in the congregation.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Romans 13:1-2; John 19:11.

Each Christian exercises his “vocation” in the “kingdom of the left” and in the “kingdom of the right”, whereby God wants to act.²⁸¹ So, for example, a baker serves his fellowmen by baking bread, a physician by healing the sick, and a cleaning lady by cleaning the building. In the foreground should be service to the neighbor (cf. Matthew 22:39), not your career or income. If the vocation is a service to the neighbor, then this naturally excludes some professions that are against God’s will and harm others (for example, a pimp). The word “vocation” understood as the activity that serves to earn a living is still common today. However, it is becoming more common to speak about one’s “job,” which is exercised without necessarily identifying with it or wanting to perform it well.

For Luther, to be a father or mother, a husband or wife, is also a “vocation”. Unfortunately, in our society the woman is often (only) defined by her occupation, motherhood however is disdained²⁸² and children – supported by civil laws – are more and more put in childcare.²⁸³ Parents have the very important task of taking enough time to raise their children in a Christian way. There are some “vocations” that are unjustly considered low, others however unjustly high. Furthermore, as citizens of our country we have the “vocation”, for example, to provide First Aid. For Luther, non-spiritual vocations are equal to spiritual vocations (e. g. pastors or missionaries) in God’s sight. Both should be carried out both well and conscientiously.

²⁸¹ Cf. Psalm 127; God calls to this: 1 Corinthians 7:17,20ff.

²⁸² Cf. 1 Timothy 5:14; Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 127:3.

²⁸³ Nevertheless there are single parents who may not have any other opportunity earning a living.

As Christians, we have the additional “calling” of assisting in the congregation and praying.²⁸⁴ Paul describes the congregation as a body, which has various members with various functions. If one member is sick or cannot carry out its function, so also do the other members suffer (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12ff.). Not only do pastors have a responsibility for the members of a congregation (even if they have this in a special measure), but so also does every member of the congregation for the brothers and sisters in faith (cf. Galatians 6:1ff.). Furthermore, we should always be ready to witness to the hope we have in Christ (about witnessing, cf. 1 Peter 3:15), and to take the opportunity to speak about Jesus Christ and to help in practical ways. Mission is also an expression of the love of neighbor, which wants the best for the neighbor! Additionally, some are called to serve as pastors or missionaries (Paul was called as an Apostle: 1 Corinthians 1:1).

We ought to make sure to exercise our “vocations” (occupation, family, congregation, for example) in balanced proportion to each other.

²⁸⁴ “As we become helpers of God, who wants to feed us, when we work in the fields, sow and reap, so we participate in his world government when we pray.” (WA 43:81-83)

The Necessity of Mission

“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16).

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

“How are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of God” (Romans 10:14,17 according to Luther’s 1545 translation of the Bible).²⁸⁵

These Bible passages make it very clear that those who do not believe in Jesus will be damned. But God does not want anyone to be lost. That is also why His Son died for the sins of *all* people.²⁸⁶ According to Romans 10:17, God’s Spirit works faith through the proclaimed Word of God, that is, the Word of God that is passed down.

Missionary preaching must contain pure Law and Gospel without mixing the two. It is only in that way that people come to justifying faith. This faith trusts alone in Jesus Christ as Savior and not in one’s own works. This faith affirms the contents of the biblical message and is above all things a trust of the heart, not an impersonal, intellectual body of knowledge.

Some Christian circles emphasize that the “felt” needs of people and their wishes, feelings, and notions must be met. But with that it is easily forgotten that God knows best what needs we humans actually have. Do most people feel how lost they are in sin and that Jesus

²⁸⁵ More recent translations say: “through the word of Christ.”

²⁸⁶ General justification (cf. 1 John 2:2).

Christ died and rose for them? Do they feel the need to not try to get by on their own but that they must be helped by Christ? In addition, people also do not come to faith by being persuaded or by pondering and deciding for themselves, as a person does in choosing a career. It is the Holy Spirit alone who works conversion and faith through the Word and Baptism.²⁸⁷ God's Word does not return empty, but it accomplishes that for which He sends it (cf. Isaiah 55:11). So frantic methods do not need to be devised to help the Word along.²⁸⁸ The Church should go out²⁸⁹ and proclaim the Gospel to all the world. Whoever comes to faith is in God's hands and not ours. We have no promise to have growth like the first congregation. That a congregation is growing does not yet mean that it is spiritually well-ordered, and also conversely: if a congregation is not growing, that does not have to mean that it is not doing well spiritually. So, for example, Noah, Jeremiah, and Paul in Athens had little visible success, although they preached God's Word correctly. Even if we see no direct success, it could be that others will harvest where we have sown. It is not surprising if there is resistance and rejection. Even the Apostles experienced this.²⁹⁰ The word of the cross is foolishness and a stumbling block to those who are perishing.²⁹¹ So

²⁸⁷ Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:4f.; Acts 10:44; Galatians 3:2,5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5. God's Spirit does not work faith apart from the means of grace. However, this does not exclude that in individual cases God can as an exception also bring to faith through personal revelation or extraordinary, special occurrences.

²⁸⁸ By this I do not mean that you cannot think about how and when you should bear witness to your faith or how evangelism should happen. That can be quite helpful.

²⁸⁹ So the Church should not wait until people come by themselves (cf. Mark 16:15)!

²⁹⁰ Cf. Acts 3–5; 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12.

²⁹¹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18; Galatians 5:11.

we should rather ask ourselves whether we would still proclaim the Word of God in its fullness when there is absolutely no resistance.

In liberal churches it happens that the Gospel is shortened or suppressed, for example, when politics, environmentalism, and asylum law is preached, or when it is asserted that the main task of the Church is social work or world improvement. It is also incorrect when the “theology of the cross”²⁹² is replaced by a theology of prosperity and glory.²⁹³

All Christians are called to bear witness, not just missionaries and pastors.²⁹⁴ God promises us (explosive) power from on high and the right words for this witnessing.²⁹⁵ Are we aware that we are dealing with spiritual life and death here, where spiritual death is much worse than physical death? Would we not help if someone’s life were in danger? Do we really believe the uncomfortable biblical statement that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ must suffer

²⁹² How unspectacular the birth of the Savior in a manger is, the cross, or that God makes use of the simple means of grace to give to us the salvation won for us at Golgotha! How unattractive it must appear to the world to suffer on account of fellowship with Christ!

²⁹³ For example, promises that everything will go well once someone becomes a Christian. Or that Christ steps back as Savior from sin and is proclaimed primarily as the almighty Lord who solves our problems.

²⁹⁴ Cf., for example, 1 Peter 3:15; Matthew 5:14ff.; 2 Corinthians 4:13. Note: the Greek term for “witness” is “martyr”! A witness often causes offence or nobody wants to hear him. But Christ warns against denying Him or being ashamed of Him (cf. Matthew 10:33; Luke 9:26). He wants to be known (cf. Romans 1:16; Psalm 119:46).

²⁹⁵ Cf. Luke 24:48f. (here, Luther translated the Greek word “dynamis” with “power”, which is actually too weak; note that from “dynamis” also comes the word “dynamite”!); Matthew 10:19f.

eternal torments in hell?²⁹⁶ However, I consider the conclusion of some Christians to be incorrect that non-Christians should be warned about hell as emphatically as possible, because faith in Jesus Christ comes only by the Gospel and cannot be enkindled by the Law, even if the Law should in no way be absent in the proclamation.

In witnessing to the baptized who have fallen from faith, reference can be made to the Baptism already received. In this case it depends on whether the person has turned back to Jesus and again makes use of the gift of Baptism in faith. For the pledge in Baptism from God's side always remains in force (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13).

At the same time, prayer is an enormously important component of mission (for example, for coworkers, teachers, professors, superiors; in the family: for marriage, children, etc.), because "the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:16).²⁹⁷

How should people take notice of us so that we can pass on the Gospel at all? By us standing out, by showing love among each other: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). And by having an open eye and ear for our neighbor, taking them seriously as a whole person, and engaging with them. Then there will also be opportunities to give witness of your own hope.

²⁹⁶ Cf., for example, Isaiah 66:15ff.; Psalm 21:9; Matthew 8:12; 10:28; 24:25; Luke 16:23,28; 2 Thessalonians 1:8f.; Hebrews 10:31; 2 Peter 3:7; Jude 7; Revelation 6:16f.; 9:6; 14:10.

²⁹⁷ Cf. Colossians 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:1f.

About the Last Things

As Christians, we are born again and are new creatures. God's Kingdom is already now in the midst of us.²⁹⁸ Jesus Christ also promises to be with us until the end of the world (cf. Matthew 28:20). However, we are not perfect (cf. Philippians 3:12) and we live in suffering, tribulation, and sin. That is why we long for our heavenly home in the direct presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, where our suffering will have an end.²⁹⁹ Now we still walk in faith, but then we will see our Lord face to face.³⁰⁰ So also did Paul long to be with Christ, but he also knew the importance of his service for the Gospel (cf. Philippians 1:23f.). Jesus urges us to watchfulness with the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (cf. Matthew 25:1-13) in order that we might not be surprised by His second coming. Since nobody knows the time of His coming, we should be prepared for the possibility that Jesus Christ returns today. Eternity with Jesus Christ is the goal, which like Paul we should pursue (cf. Philippians 3:14).

Those who believe in Christ will be with Christ directly after their death with their soul, with their self.³⁰¹ Because Jesus Christ rose bodily, they too, will bodily rise in glory on the Last Day (1 Corinthians 15:21). Thus body and soul are united again. Unbelievers will also rise, but only to be judged and condemned.³⁰² In contrast to our current body, our resurrection body will be perfect. There will no longer be mourning, suffering, and death for those

²⁹⁸ Cf. Matthew 12:28; Luke 17:21.

²⁹⁹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Romans 8:18-23; Revelation 21:4.

³⁰⁰ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:7; Psalm 17:15; Matthew 5:8; 1 John 3:2.

³⁰¹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:8; Revelation 6:9-11; Luke 23:43.

³⁰² Cf. John 3:18; 5:29; 12:46ff. – Luke 16:19-31 suggests that unbelievers already immediately after their death must suffer torments.

who are saved.³⁰³ Christ's work is then completed in them (Philippians 1:6) and the image of God is again completely restored.³⁰⁴ The direct presence of God will fill³⁰⁵ the redeemed with such joy that they will praise and exalt God without end.³⁰⁶ Moreover, God will create a new heaven and a new earth that will be so incomparable and glorious that it can only be described in pictures (Revelation 21 and 22).

³⁰³ Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35-58; Revelation 21:4.

³⁰⁴ Cf. 1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 15:49f.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Psalm 16:11; John 16:22; 1 Peter 1:5ff.; 1 Peter 4:13.

³⁰⁶ Cf. Psalm 126; Psalm 84:4; Isaiah 25:6ff.; Isaiah 65:13f.

Is Truth Absolute or Relative?

Advocating for absolute truths does not at all suit the understanding of the society in which we live. In the postmodern world, it is almost advocated that there is absolutely no absolute truth, which already in itself is an inherent contradiction. According to the postmodern imagination, the truth is for each person what he holds to be the truth, and such pluralism is seen as enriching. How much must Jesus cause scandal in this world when He says that He is the Truth in person (cf. John 14:6). In addition, the Bible exclusively speaks of Jesus as the only Redeemer (cf. Acts 4:12).

Conversely, however, let us consider: What would Christianity mean if there were no absolute truth?³⁰⁷ Then all the promises of God would have no value. Then it would be merely tradition to go to church. Then we could have no hope. Jesus Himself says, however, that if we act according to what He says and thus conform to the truth, then we have built on the rock and can withstand the storms of life. The truth liberates (cf. John 8:32).

The mindset of postmodernism, however, is more and more finding its way into Christian circles. Completely liberal circles even posit ecumenism between different religions, although other religions burden men with the path from below to divinity above, which nevertheless does not lead to God. The Christian message, by contrast, reveals the way of God's love to people in His Son in order to bring them to Himself above. Others do not go so far, but see a richness in the divisive diversity of doctrine that rules in the Church where God urges unity.³⁰⁸ Some Christians say that unity in the teachings relevant to salvation or in the "important" doctrines would be enough. But does such a mindset not injure the holiness and

³⁰⁷ By the way, traditionally no religion renounces the claim of absolute truth.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Ephesians 4:3-5; Philippians 2:2.

authority of God's Word, which it also has in "unimportant" doctrinal questions? Must we not seek a unity in all questions of doctrine that the Bible answers clearly, whether or not we rank these as "important" or "unimportant"? Only such a stance, in my opinion, takes into account the character of God's Word. In reality this poses the question of what the Bible says "clearly" and what it does not.

Epilogue

In our present time, there is an innumerable amount of different currents of belief and opinions within Christianity. That is why it is all the more important today to reflect on the source of all teaching, the Bible, and to become aware of one's own preconceptions, in order to be able to approach the Bible as impartially as possible.

The character of this little book is deliberately biblical and apologetic. It is worthwhile to look up the Bible passages given to further enlarge upon the topics. Of course, the entire Lutheran theology along with biblical proofs cannot be comprehensively treated in this short work. So I refer you to the book list that follows and to conversation with confessional Lutheran pastors.

This little book shows that many topics hang together. So, for example, the understanding of the distinction of Law and Gospel, of sin and original sin, as well as the character of faith all have effects on the understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, justification, and the certainty of salvation. That is why Luther compares the entirety of the articles of faith with a golden ring. If the ring becomes cracked, it is *as a whole* no longer undamaged, and it could easily shatter and become useless (cf. also Galatians 5:9).

With many doctrines, for example, the doctrines of forgiveness and justification, the practical relevance only becomes clear when the teaching is understood not only intellectually, but also from the heart. Pure doctrine and correct practice should not be played against each other. Both belong together, both are important.

If you found this book helpful, recommend it to a friend!

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Some helpful websites for those interested in the Lutheran faith are:

www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.html

<https://steadfastlutherans.org/>

<https://wolfmuehler.co/>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/>

<https://revfisk.com/>

(look also for videos from Bryan Wolfmuehler, Jordan Cooper and Jonathan Fisk on youtube.com)

<https://issuesetc.org/>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/>

<https://weedon.blogspot.com/>