

10-1-1976

# Basic Theological Convictions Essential to Lutheran Identity

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### Recommended Citation

(1976) "Basic Theological Convictions Essential to Lutheran Identity," *Consensus*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol2/iss4/2>

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# **BASIC THEOLOGICAL**

## **CONVICTIONS ESSENTIAL TO**

### **LUTHERAN IDENTITY**

The goal of the Lutheran Reformation was not the formation of a separate church with specific confessional identity. The Reformation aimed at recovering the evangelical message for all of Christendom. Historical circumstances, however, led to the formation of a Lutheran Church with distinctive confessional features. This process, which by analogy can also be demonstrated in other church and denominations, cannot simply be reversed by going back to the Reformation. Viewed historically, it was unavoidable, even necessary, since the Reformation call for a renewal of the church was not heeded. For that reason Lutheran churches, existing since then as particular churches, have understood themselves as custodians of convictions considered essential for the witness and life of all Christians.

We are using the term “identity” in order to bring together and to designate by means of one concept the basic confessional and theological convictions, forms of worship and life, piety, the structures and the ethos which, together with other components, make up the specific “profile,” “confessionality” or “self-understanding” of Lutheranism. We are aware of the philosophical origin of the term “identity” and its specific employment in modern psychology. In the more general sense indicated above it has also been adopted by the language of church and theology. As such it must not, however, be taken in a static sense, as its philosophical origin might suggest, but rather as including the dimension of historical change.

Among the various components that constitute and characterize “Lutheran identity” the basic theological convictions occupy the essential position in the centre. The basic convictions singled out in what follows are such as Lutheran churches have preserved, above all, in order to bear witness to them. There is no intention to present a comprehensive description of the heritage of faith by which

the Lutheran churches live. Rather, the concern is with the decisive and central intentions that have shaped the life, witness and action of Lutheran churches. As historically realized, however, these intentions have also experienced repudiation, modification or expansion and have become linked with weaknesses and one-sidedness.

Not all of the following points represent exclusively Lutheran convictions. Many of them the Lutherans have in common with other churches. It is only in their totality, their integration and inter-relation that they constitute essential marks of Lutheran confessionality and identity.

## CONVICTIONS OF LUTHERAN IDENTITY

### *Affirming God's loving condescension as the only way to salvation*

God, the Creator of this world, comes to men for their salvation in his Son Jesus Christ. Disguised in weakness, he gives himself up to them and allows them to grasp him in the incarnation and humanity of Jesus, in his suffering and death on the cross. For all times he creates faith by means of the human character of the Word and the physical character of the Sacraments through the Holy Spirit. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ he also proves himself to be the victorious Lord who has overcome death and all the forces of human enslavement. This saving work of God who continues to condescend in Word and sacrament will be completed on the day when human beings shall see God face to face.

### *Witnessing to God's justifying action in Jesus Christ as the essence of salvation (gospel), as criterion of the church's proclamation and as the foundation of Christian existence*

God created man for fellowship with himself. He made him in his image and thereby granted him the dignity of participating in God's activity in the world in a manner responsible to him. True humanity exists only where man affirms this relation to God his Creator, lives by it and lets it determine his involvement in the human community.

By his own fault man forfeited this relationship with God and is unable to restore it by himself. There is nothing for him but to rely on himself alone and base his existence on his own achievements. He has become altogether sinful.

God himself makes a new beginning for this lost creature and by grace alone espouses his cause. In the death of Jesus Christ for us and in his victorious resurrection God, by forgiving men their sins, opens up for them a genuine humanity in fellowship with himself. He leads them to a new life, free from the power of sin, hoping for resurrection and eternal life, trusting in his grace even in judgement. In this way man is set free and called to praise God, to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to give himself in service to his fellowmen. That is the gospel.

Here the church has its centre that cannot be surrendered and that determines all of the church's proclamation and activity.

*Distinguishing between law and gospel so as to safeguard the character of grace in the saving message*

The Word of God issues as a demanding and judging word (law) and as an acquitting and renewing word (gospel). This distinction preserves the gospel's character of grace over against any legalistic interpretation that changes the righteousness given as a gift in the gospel into a righteousness to be earned by humans. All people must face the inescapable demand of the law which accuses and convicts them as sinners. The afflicted sinner who in penitence flees to Christ receives salvation in him. If only the law were proclaimed, the result would be either pride or despair. If only the gospel were proclaimed, it would necessarily become "cheap grace." Consequently, while law and gospel must be distinguished, they must never be isolated from each other.

*Emphasizing the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as means necessary for salvation, means by which Christ creates and preserves his church*

Where the gospel is proclaimed to people and they are assured of the forgiveness of sins, and where baptism and the Lord's Supper are dispensed in accordance with the New Testament charge, there Christ is truly present, effects reconciliation and gathers his community. The proclaimed word and the administered sacraments are, therefore, the means necessary for salvation, the means by which Christ creates and preserves his church.

Accordingly, agreement in proclamation and administration of the sacraments is the decisive condition for the unity of the church.

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

*Stressing the priesthood of all baptized believers to indicate the equality of all Christians before God and the apostolic obligation of the whole Christian community*

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

This does not, however, make the office of the church's public ministry superfluous, a mere question of order, or simply a creature of the congregation. The particular office of the ordained ministry of the church cannot be derived

from the priesthood of all believers. It stands both within the congregation and, with the gospel, over against it. Yet the congregation has both the right and the duty to provide for the appointment of ministers and to be responsible with them for the conduct of their ministry.

*Defining the Christians' secular responsibility as selfless participation in God's activity in the world*

In his love God wants to sustain and promote his creation and preserve it from chaos by means of secular law and order. For this activity of his in the world God engages all people.

Through faith in the gospel the Christian is freed for unselfish service in the world; that is, through the use of reason, through deeds of love and justice and through suffering on behalf of others. However, this activity in the world can lead to salvation as little as the gospel aims at a progressive Christianization of the world or a gradual establishment of the kingdom of God. Indeed, God is already beginning his new creation here, but he will unveil and complete it only at the end of time. That, however, does not release the church from its responsibility to stand up for true human community and to oppose inhuman and unjust situations by means of the proclamation of law and gospel, diaconic action and the witness of its own life.

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

*Using Holy Scripture as the norm for the church's proclamation and teaching while at the same time observing the distinction between Word of God and Scripture*

The Word of God is witnessed in Holy Scripture in a fundamental way. For that reason Scripture is the decisive and permanent norm of the church's teaching and proclamation.

Nevertheless, as a mere collection of texts Scripture is not the active Word of God by which faith and church live. It is only as gospel that the Word of God is the liberating message of salvation disclosed to us by the Holy Spirit. It is the "centre of Scripture," from which all statements of the Bible are to be understood and which desires to be imparted to people in living proclamation. Through this proclamation, bound to Holy Scripture as its norm, the Holy Spirit creates and bestows faith.

*Commitment to the church's confession as a way to safeguard the correct proclamation of the gospel and church fellowship*

Faith is inseparably linked with confessing. This does not exhaust itself in the act of confessing but at the same time finds expression in written confessions and

doctrinal statements which the church formulates and intends to pass on. These are accepted by the Christian community, but they obligate it at the same time and in this way serve to preserve the fellowship of the church in space and time.

Next to the creeds of the ancient church Lutheran churches have, therefore, accepted the Lutheran confessions, in particular the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism.

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

The church's confession is subordinated to Holy Scripture and its content must be tested again and again by the gospel as witnessed in a fundamental way in Scripture. As the church's response to the gospel, the confessional content is not finished but must be interpreted and expressed afresh in new historical situations and by listening anew to the scriptural witness in continuity with the confessions of the fathers.

*Intensive theological-critical quest for the truth of the proclamation which is to take place here and now*

Salvation in Jesus Christ is offered to people in the living proclamation of the gospel. The canon of Holy Scripture, the church's confessions and office are essential presuppositions and instruments of this proclamation. But they are not identical with the gospel to be proclaimed in a living way nor can they, as such, secure or guarantee right proclamation. The sovereignty of the gospel therefore demands unremitting theological effort in quest of the truth of the message to be proclaimed here and now.

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

*(Prepared by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, France, Second Draft, June 1976; translated from the German by Dr. Herbert J.A. Bauman)*