

# Ecumenical Roundtable

## III

29<sup>th</sup> May 2017

### *Luther at 500: Taking the Ecumenical Pulse*

Revd Dr Ray Williamson OAM

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# INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Ecumenical Studies (Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture) held its third Ecumenical Roundtable on Monday, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

This being the year for marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation in the Western Church – Luther’s publishing of his *95 Theses* in 1517 – the topic chosen for this Roundtable was *Luther at 500: Taking the Ecumenical Pulse*. There were five speakers who presented papers: Pastor James Winderlich (Principal, Australian Lutheran College, Adelaide); Dr Josephine Laffin (Australian Catholic University, Adelaide); Revd Prince Devanandan (President, Methodist Church in Aotearoa-New Zealand); Revd Fr Anastasios Bozikis (Greek Orthodox Church, South Brisbane) and Mr Doug Hynd (Doctoral student at ACU and a member of Canberra Baptist Church). Altogether, there were thirty-one participants.

In an ecumenical context, any discussion of ‘Luther at 500’ inevitably will raise the ecumenical question of the Church’s unity and the sin of disunity. The discussion at this Roundtable was no exception. James Winderlich began with the comment that the reform movement, which Luther began, appears to be “anything but ecumenical”; rather, it was “schismatic, disruptive, destructive and, at its most extreme, deadly”. Similarly, Prince Devanandan observed that, while Luther was seeking to reform the Church, his efforts caused great divisions – that “sin of disunity”.

But the fact remains, as Josephine Laffin pointed out, Luther had not sought schism; his motivation was a deep desire for reform and renewal of the Church: as James Winderlich put it, catholic unity grounded in a faithful and true confession of Jesus Christ, the product of a re-formed doctrine of justification, remained Luther’s desire. That desire for concord and those core theological values gave Luther his basis for dialogue and remain “a Lutheran ecumenical model”.

Josephine Laffin spoke about a current dialogue, in which she is involved and from which has come a great deal of ecumenical convergence, namely, the Australian Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogue. She highlighted three theological issues – the doctrine of Justification, the Ministry of Oversight and the Petrine Ministry – that have been the cause of great misunderstanding and division, but now are matters on which there has been an agreed statement (justification) or at least a significant degree of convergence has been discovered.

James Winderlich Luther’s values and his basis for dialogue as shaping the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia. That formation he described as “the first ecumenical project” of Lutherans in Australia. The LCA officially came into being in 1966 as a result of many years of dialogue between two branches of the Lutheran Church in this country. But there was a much more complex history behind that achievement going back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, there having been “as many as nine distinct synodical identities or communions”. The story of the formation of the LCA is one of a great accomplishment, but it is also an ongoing project because the ever present reality of “tension between unity and right confession remains”.

Prince Devanandan saw the Reformation as not just one event but as an ongoing process as its objectives of reform and renewal of the Church are still relevant. But he also saw the negative effects of the Reformation that gave rise to hostility and proliferating divisions in the Church, and he emphasised this aspect very strongly. One of the causes of division is the question of authority, the place of scripture and its interpretation: a very positive achievement of the reformers was making the Bible available to people in their own language; but for many it meant the focus of authority shifted from an infallible pope to an infallible bible. He also made the observation that the nature of Western Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century meant that the Reformation occurred in the context of a single-faith society, whereas now most societies in

which Christianity is present are multi-religious. In such contexts, the denominationalism in the Church that has arisen since the Reformation is far more damaging than beneficial. To illustrate the point, he drew on his own background in Sri Lanka and its colonial past: to a Buddhist and Hindu society the Portuguese brought Roman Catholicism and the Dutch brought Protestantism, and the negative impact of the battles between them “was excessively observable”.

Doug Hynd’s focus was the more radical wing of the Reformation, often gathered under the term ‘Anabaptism’. He explained the meaning and origin of the term as well as the complex nature of the movement, though also identifying “traces of a coherent narrative”, such as sharing “a commitment to the radical principle of voluntary, or believers’, baptism and to a life of practical discipleship, including the love of enemies”. Also, “they envisioned the church as a gathered community of true believers, followers of Christ who were ready to leave behind the tradition and assumptions of late-medieval Christendom to shape an alternative community. It was their practice of believers’ baptism, and also their understanding of the Christian’s relation to the state that separated them from Luther and led to condemnations from both sides. As well as the difficulties in finding consensus among themselves, there were many other differences between the Anabaptists and the Reformers such as Luther, for example, disagreements over the interpretation and application of scripture even though they agreed about the Bible’s authority. Today, the global family of churches that have their roots in the Radical Reformation is represented by the Mennonite World Conference, and it is that body that has been engaged in ecumenical dialogue during recent decades.

Fr Anastasios Bozikis addressed issues of the relationships between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Lutheran reformers. Those relationships began when, in 1558, the Ecumenical Patriarch sent Deacon Demetrios Mysos to Wittenberg, to find out about the new religious movement in Germany, and while there, Mysos worked with Phillip Melancthon to complete a Greek translation of the Augsburg Confession – though it never reached its destination. More fruitful contact was not made for another fifteen years, when Lutheran theologians at Tübingen entered into correspondence with the Patriarchate, and in 1575 sent a copy of the Greek translation of the Augsburg Confession to the Patriarch to ask his opinion. Over the next six years, a friendly but candid exchange of extensive doctrinal correspondence occurred, discussing topics such as the authority of scripture and tradition; the filioque; the nature of the church; grace and free will; justification, faith, and good works; and others. However, except for those doctrines and customs of the Roman church that the East had never accepted, the Orthodox could not accept the theological and ecclesiological changes that the Lutherans advocated, and the exploratory relationship was brought to an abrupt end by a letter from the Patriarch. Part of the problem was the way Western theology had been shaped differently from the East through the dominant influence of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, and the Orthodox saw the reformers as seeking to address problems that arose from the Augustinian tradition. It took another 400 years for dialogue to be renewed between the Eastern Orthodox and Lutheran Churches, but now new problems have emerged, particularly the ordination of women and issues of morality, such as human sexuality.

In all the presentations at this Ecumenical Roundtable there were many examples of the ecumenical challenge, which the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary turns into an imperative. The objectives of reform, renewal and unity of the Church, which so stirred Martin Luther initially, are still before us and with greater urgency.

# LUTHER, THE REFORMATION AND LUTHERAN ECUMENISM IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

James Winderlich<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

This presentation will briefly explore how the reforming, Lutheran movement of the sixteenth century has influenced and even promoted ecumenical participation in the contemporary Australian Lutheran Church. This is not without its challenges as such a conclusion, when considered against evidence, may seem dissonant or even absurd. It could be argued that the Lutheran reforming movement was anything but ecumenical. Instead, it was schismatic, disruptive, destructive and, at its most extreme, deadly. These are antithetical to the marks of what might normally identify as an ecumenical venture. To be sure, they would certainly be regarded as the marks of failure. None-the-less, Luther's recovery and representation of the church's doctrine of *salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus* along with his consistent confession of the 'one holy catholic and apostolic church', has become the basis and motivation for many effective ecumenical projects in the life of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

In the expansive, medieval, socio-religious-political upheaval of the sixteenth century reformation event certain ecumenical values emerged. The first was Luther's initial desire for concord, not schism. The second was an appreciative process whereby common, core theological values were identified as the footing for dialogue and the hope for the restoration of disputatious parties. This was most evident in the Augsburg Confession. While these values and practices did not ultimately avert schism in the sixteenth century they are certainly articulated among many Christian denominations, including the Lutheran Church of Australia, in our contemporary context<sup>2</sup>. This is borne out in the Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity entitled *From Conflict to Communion*. In the foreword it states:

The true unity of the church can only exist as unity in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fact that the struggle for this truth in the sixteenth century led to the loss of unity in Western Christendom belongs to the dark pages of church history. In 2017, we must confess openly that we have been guilty before Christ of damaging the unity of the church. This commemorative year presents us with two challenges: the purification and healing of memories, and the restoration of Christian unity in accordance with the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:4-16)<sup>3</sup>.

Notwithstanding extensive (global) contemporary interdenominational dialogue, Luther's theological and early ecumenical values have significantly shaped the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia itself, a community and communion little more than 50 years old whose own formation remains its first ecumenical project.

## Reformation and Ecumenism

Ecumenism, be it full communion or appreciative - receptive dialogue, as a discreet theological category and activity in our modern age cannot be reasonably applied to Luther and the reformation era. As already stated, if the Reformation is to be judged by its immediate and latter fruits then it must surely be antithetical to any ecumenical sensibility. None-the-less, unity grounded in a faithful and true

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<sup>1</sup>Pastor James Winderlich is the Principal of the Lutheran Theological College of Australia

<sup>2</sup>Along with participating in this Ecumenical Roundtable, the Lutheran Church of Australia is also a member of the National Council of Churches in Australia and a signatory to selected parts and dimensions of 'Australian Churches Covenanting Together'. This national involvement is articulated in many local contexts, along with formal participation in three national and one international inter-church dialogues.

<sup>3</sup>The Lutheran World Federation and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt and Buch: Banifatius Druck, 2013), 7.

confession of Jesus Christ remained Luther's desire. The tension between the desire for catholic unity, compelled by faith in Christ Jesus, and the true confession of that faith, both as products of the reformed doctrine of justification, was and remains a Lutheran ecumenical model. This tension is demonstrated in Luther's response to Charles V following the Diet of Worms:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

When, on 31 October 1517, Martin Luther published his 95 Theses he was not signalling a desire to break from Rome. What may have appeared to be a defiant and rebellious act, and which has at times been exploited as such in the formation of a contemporary self-serving reformation myth, was an invitation or request for rigorous dialogue. Driven by pastoral concern, a concern for people initially around the sale of Indulgences, Martin Luther called the faithful not to leave or dismantle the Church but to (re)turn to God and to the fullness of the Church's traditional, received teaching. He called the Church to (re)form around its centre, Christ Jesus and no other. By locating himself in this way Luther also signalled the centrality, once again, of the doctrine of justification. Confronted by the oppressive commercialisation of repentance and the growing industrialization of the Church, Luther openly and reasonably published his 95 Theses, of which the first five state:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
3. Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortification of the flesh.
4. The penalty of sin remains as long as the hatred of self (that is, true inner repentance), namely till our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.<sup>5</sup>

Luther's was not an underground, seditious movement. His aim was agreement, an accord and alignment with the Church's biblical and apostolic theology and teaching, and concord in the life and piety of God's people. He wanted the Church and its leaders to be all that were created and called to be for the sake of the faithful (and creation). This began through his encounter and scrap with Romans 1:17<sup>6</sup> and the core theological maxim that it ultimately (re)produced in him:

Salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

Luther, the Augustinian, was himself re-formed by this encounter and so he wrote in his commentary on Romans:

Human teachers set forth and drill into their students human righteousness. They teach how a person becomes righteous, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. But the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God, that is, who it is that is righteous and how a person becomes righteous before God, namely, alone by faith and by trusting the Word of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>George W. Forell ed., *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer II, vol 32* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 112.

<sup>5</sup>Kurt Aland, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 51.

<sup>6</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.' (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup>Hilton C. Oswald ed., *Luther's Work: Lectures on Romans, volume 25* (Saint Lewis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 151.

In publishing his 95 Theses Luther demonstrated certain naivety. He wished to alert Leo X to Tetzels revenue raising abuse of 'St Peter's' indulgences, as though this was something that the crowd funded, and basilica building Leo was unaware of:

Luther the Saxon naively assumed that the Pope, distant in Rome and probably not aware of the scene near Wittenberg, would applaud his efforts to correct abuses which climaxed in the indulgence system.<sup>8</sup>

Faith and faithfulness were not the only things to be considered. Two empires also needed preservation: the Holy See and the empire under Charles V. Not everything, was about a faithful confession and right theology. A more left-leaning, worldly ecumenism or *detente* was also sought.

Charles V was concerned about Islamic incursions into his European territories. His empire was threatened by something far greater than an 'unhinged' Augustinian monk. He needed internal peace to prevent this external threat. To settle things, he called an Imperial Diet for Augsburg (1530). It was for this purpose, together with responding to Johann Eck's scathing *404 Propositions Against the Lutheran Heresy*, that Luther and Phillip Melancthon remodelled and extended two previous documents, the *Torgau Articles* and *Schwabach Articles*, to produce the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession was itself an ecumenical project. While it sought to distance the Luther movement from radical Anabaptists it strained to take a conciliatory approach to Rome. It reaffirmed the movement's connection with historical church teaching and ecclesial practice. This is evident in the titles of the first 15 (of 28) articles:

1. God
2. Original Sin
3. The Son of God
4. Justification
5. The Ministry
6. New Obedience
7. The Church
8. What the Church Is
9. Baptism
10. The Lord's Supper
11. Confession
12. Repentance
13. The Use of the Sacraments
14. Ecclesiastical Order
15. Ecclesiastical Usages,

and in its introductory words addressed to Charles V (quoting the imperial summons), which are not dissimilar to the previously cited quotation from *From Conflict to Communion*:

...to deliberate "and diligently to consider how we may act concerning the dissension in the holy faith and Christian religion and to hear, understand, and consider with love and graciousness everyone's judgement, opinion, and beliefs among us, to unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth, and to lay aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by

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Later Luther also wrote: I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by the gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel, namely the passive righteousness [not something we do] in which God through mercy justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'. Now I felt exactly as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors.

Lewis W. Spitz ed., *Luther's Works: Career of the Reformer IV, volume 34* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 337.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin Books 2004), 31.

either side, so that all of us can accept and preserve a single, true religion. Inasmuch as we are all enlisted under one Christ, we are all to live together in one communion and in one church.”<sup>9</sup>

The Augsburg Confession was, to its very core, an ecumenical document. It was not driven by political dissent nor by a desire to establish a new ecclesial or social form. Instead, it affirmed God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, through scripture and in the life and tradition of the church. It was a contextualised summary of the Church’s apostolic faith and tradition with Christ and Christ’s work always at its centre. This is clearly stated in the acutely ecumenical, trajectory setting Article IV:

Furthermore, it is taught we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St Paul says in Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5].<sup>10</sup>

There was more at stake at Augsburg and Article IV, to the surprise of its supporters, was disputed. This resulted in its lengthy Apology.

It took 500 years to resolve this. In 1999 this ecumenical teaching was affirmed both internationally and locally by the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches. *From Conflict to Communion* also foregrounds the centrality of the church’s ecumenical teaching concerning justification:

Although this thesis [AC IV] is anything but self-evident today, we Lutheran and Catholic Christians want to take it seriously by directing our critical glance first at ourselves and not at each other. We take as our guiding rule the doctrine of justification, which expresses the message of the gospel and therefore “constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ” (*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*).<sup>11</sup>

While it is not reasonable explicitly to portray Luther as an ecumenist (by contemporary standards) there can be little doubt that as he faithfully, stridently and stubbornly confessed the ecumenical teaching that Jesus Christ and his continuing redemptive work are at the centre of the church he did promote foundational ecumenical values. Christian unity is both a gift and a task, always at work together while also held in tension with each other.

## **THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA, AN ECUMENICAL PROJECT**

While the Lutheran Church of Australia, along with most global Lutheran communions, is engaged in ecumenical or interdenominational activities at local, national and international levels, its union or amalgamation must surely be its most defining ecumenical project, a project which continues.

The Lutheran Church of Australia came into official existence on the 29 October 1966. This occurred after many years of inter-synodical dialogue between what was formerly named the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia.

While already having much in common, such as shared ethnic identities and migration and settler narratives, the two Lutheran synods earnestly worked for confessional unity. Theological concord,

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Arand *et al*, trans., and Robert Kolb *et al*, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 30.

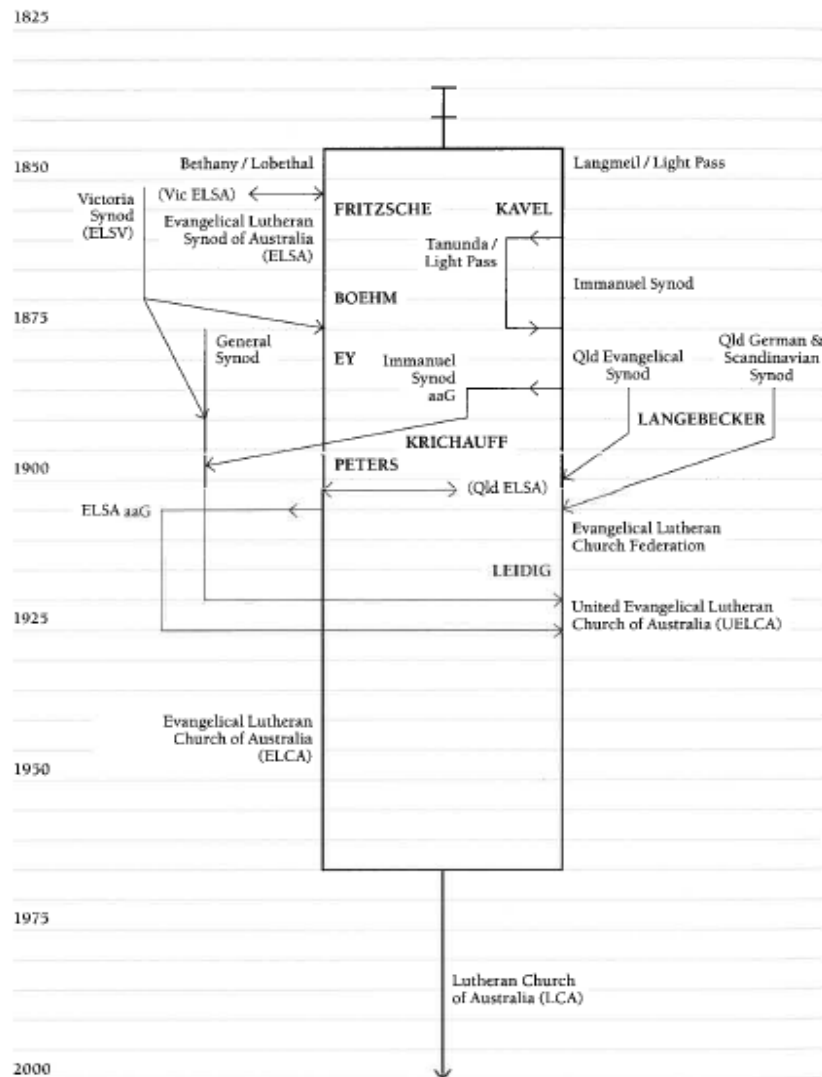
<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 40-41

<sup>11</sup> The Lutheran World Federation *et al* (*From Conflict to Communion*), 9.

expressed in the confessional documents of the Reformation<sup>12</sup>, would mark the identity of this longed for communion and synodical form.

What may not be as well known is that this union came off a very long run up which began in the mid-nineteenth century. As can be seen from the following diagram<sup>13</sup>, the Lutheran Church of Australia was not formed from only two Lutheran Synods but from as many as nine distinct synodical identities or communions. Many of these synods or communions were initially aligned with migration and settlement patterns. As a result, some of the initial inter-communion amalgamations were more for practical reasons than confessional ones.

## Australian Lutheran Synods



<sup>12</sup>The three ecumenical creeds (confessed by Christians around the world): the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed; and

- the Augsburg Confession;
- the Apology of the Augsburg Confession
- the Smalcald Articles
- the Small Catechism of Luther
- the Large Catechism of Luther
- the Formula of Concord.

<sup>13</sup> R J Hauser, *The Patriarchs: A History of Australian Lutheran Schooling*, Adelaide: Openbook Howden, 2009. P192.



As the Lutheran Church of Australia eagerly formed against this diverse background, the tension that existed at the time of the Reformation re-emerged. That tension could be characterised as: Balancing evangelical exuberance for unity, with confessional fidelity. To be sure, while Christ perichoretically prays that all should be one (John 17) the same Christ asks, 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:29). For us, Christ's question confounds his own desire. The resolution to this conundrum rests only with Christ and his redemptive and restorative work (*sola scriptura, sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fide* – the four solas who are never alone, another conundrum). Our unity is a gift from Christ and from nowhere else. This is received by the church through the Apostolic witness, to which the Lutheran confessional documents testify. The point, therefore, of confessional fidelity is that we look to Christ for our unity and to no-one else: 'Some say Moses, some say Elijah, others say a prophet'. The new Lutheran Church of Australia gained its identity, motivation and direction from Article IV of the Augsburg Confession.

As the Lutheran Church of Australia formed, its foundational documents linked to those earlier confessional writings and the ecumenical witness to which they testified in 'unbroken' continuity. This can be seen in the following excerpts from the Church's constitution:

#### ARTICLE 2. CONFESSION

2.1 The Church accepts without reservation the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, written and inerrant Word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life.

2.2 The Church acknowledges and accepts as true expositions of the Word of God and as its own confession all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, namely, the three Ecumenical Creeds: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed; the Unaltered Augsburg Confession; the Apology of the Augsburg Confession; the Smalcald Articles; the Small Catechism of Luther; the Large Catechism of Luther; and the Formula of Concord.

#### ARTICLE 3. OBJECTS OF THE CHURCH

(a) fulfil the mission of the Christian Church in the world by proclaiming the Word of God and administering the Sacraments in accordance with the Confession of the Church laid down in the preceding Article 2;

(b) unite in one body Evangelical Lutheran congregations in Australia and New Zealand for the more effective work of the Church;

(c) promote and maintain true Christian unity in the bond of peace;

(d) ensure that preaching, teaching and practice in the Church are in conformity with the Confession of the Church;

(e) provide pastors and teachers and other church workers for service in the Church and its congregations, and for this purpose to establish and maintain institutions for their training;

(f) encourage every congregation to carry out its mission to its local community;

(g) establish, develop and support new congregations where it is not possible for individual congregations to do so;

(h) support and cooperate with selected churches in other lands as they seek to carry out their mission;

(i) dialogue with other Christian church bodies;

(j) establish and maintain schools and other institutions and to foster all other means whereby the members of the congregations receive Christian education;

(k) cultivate uniformity in worship, ecclesiastical practice and customs in accord with the principles laid down in Article X. of the Formula of Concord;

(l) publish, procure, and distribute literature compatible with the Confession and principles of the Church;

(m) minister to human need in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord in the spirit of Christian love and service, and to provide institutions and agencies for this purpose; and

(n) take such action as is necessary for the protection of the congregations, pastors, teachers and other church workers in the performance of their duties and the maintenance of their rights.

While these foundational articles defined and continue to define the Lutheran Church of Australia, the tension between unity and right confession remains. For Lutheran people, this gift remains a challenging task. This challenge is managed by two notable 'safeguards' through which the standard of justification (AC IV) is applied. For external relationships the measure is the outward or visible form of Article IV. That is, the true and full proclamation of God's word and the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Internally, this tension was safeguarded by establishing one, united seminary and one common liturgy through which, once again, the fullness of Article IV for the whole of life would be 'properly' communicated and practised.

This unity, or ecumenical spirit, remains, however, under constant pressure to re-form and re-apply. A contemporary example of this is an issue which has been before the Church for approximately 30 years, namely the ordination of women. As the Church seeks faithfully to resolve this issue it also, by implication, seeks to resolve it ecumenically. How does the centrality of the confessed Christ help in this case? How does Article IV of the Augsburg Confession guide us? One way is to state dismissively that gender is an *adiaphora*, that it has nothing to do with a faithful confession of Christ Jesus and the unity that lies within that confession.

Such a 'look away' approach does not satisfy the rigour of Augsburg IV. In the confessional writings the term *adiaphora* refers to ceremonies, to things, and not to people. Conversely, the doctrine of justification applies to people and not to things. For all concerned human identity expressed in gender and ordination are core, gospel issues which call for faithful witness: How is the re-forming, unifying Christ Jesus faithfully confessed in this matter?

## **CONCLUSION**

In this brief, and somewhat rudimentary paper, I have connected an ecumenical model, derived from and centred around the apostolic and reformation teaching of justification by grace through faith in Christ Jesus within the contemporary context of the Lutheran Church of Australia. This model locates (ecumenical) unity in Christ Jesus and his continuing work in creation while at the same time faithfully (and equally ecumenically) fully confessing Christ. Both are held in tension through the reclaimed doctrine of justification as, in the hands of humans, each can also produce schism.

## **A FURTHER QUESTION**

Looking again at the diagram on page 6 a question arises: Has the momentum and trajectory of union, represented by one single arrow, ultimately produced ecumenical unity or close conformity?

# LUTHER AT 500 - TAKING THE ECUMENICAL PULSE

## A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Josephine Laffin<sup>14</sup>

It is a great pleasure to be here today to commemorate such a significant anniversary in Christian history. I will offer a Catholic perspective on Martin Luther but I will do so in three different ways. First, as I taught Reformation history for over twenty years, I will reflect on how my students have responded to Luther. Then, as a member of the Australian Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, I will consider some of our recent deliberations. Finally, I will turn to a twenty-first century papal statement on Martin Luther which is rather different in tone from Pope Leo X's bull of excommunication in 1521.

### 1. TEACHING MARTIN LUTHER

Until 2014 I had the privilege of teaching in an ecumenical consortium, the Adelaide College of Divinity, with its links to Flinders University. I very much appreciated the opportunity to teach Reformation History to classes which included Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Church students. I always looked forward, in particular, to the sessions on Martin Luther, because I knew the students would be deeply engaged. What, however, attracted them?

The great issue which troubled Luther so much in 1517—the sale of indulgences—is not a concern today. The offering of indulgences—in a heavily qualified and theologically nuanced way—has not entirely disappeared from the Catholic tradition. It resurfaces on occasions such as the Year 2000 Jubilee in Rome and the Year of Mercy last year. However, the sale of indulgences was condemned by the Council of Trent and banned by Pope Pius V in 1567. Thus Catholics today are not troubled by travelling indulgence-sellers hawking their wares with the sort of advertising jingles which shocked Martin Luther: “Place your penny on the drum; the pearly gates open and in strolls Mum”. I strongly suspect that the great majority of Catholics today do not have a burning desire to acquire indulgences. If they are known about at all, they are likely to be regarded as a rather baffling pious practice, if not an embarrassing relic from a distant past.

Mainstream Catholic scholars, as Cardinal Walter Kasper points out in his recent booklet on *Martin Luther*, no longer regard Luther's Ninety-Five Theses as a revolutionary document but an invitation to an academic discussion, which unfortunately never took place.<sup>15</sup> There is much greater recognition that Luther in 1517 was not seeking to create a schismatic church but to reform manifest abuses in the Catholic Church. The sale of indulgences may not be a concern today, but there are other issues which trouble students. Late in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, I had several Catholic women in my Reformation class who were embittered by the pope's refusal to consider the ordination of women. They transferred their frustrations with contemporary Catholicism to the sixteenth century, were appalled at the unjust way Luther was treated, and greatly admired his bravery in standing up to the institutional church.

Sympathy for a fellow dissident does not, however, fully explain Luther's appeal. One year, I rather rashly decided to offer students an alternative to a final essay: they could submit a work of art and reflection paper. The results were predictably mixed. By far the best was an oil painting which depicted an open book, with portraits of Reformation characters emerging from it, most notably a very

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Kasper, *Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2016), 10.

good copy of Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1525 portrait of Luther. The student explained in the accompanying paper how history had come to life for her during the course, with Luther, in particular, leaping out of the history books. Like other students, she was struck by his passionate intensity, his honesty, his battle with depression, his love of music, his glorious hymns, his embrace of family life, and not least, his colourful and at times crude language. There is something for everyone in Luther's writings and "Table Talk". My personal favourite is his advice to new fathers that it is not unmanly for a man to change nappies. Other men might mock, but God and angels rejoice at the sight.<sup>16</sup> I also pass on his practical advice for dealing with the devil: "When the argument that the Christian is without the law and above the law doesn't help, I instantly chase him away with a fart".<sup>17</sup>

Bernard Cottret begins his biography of John Calvin with the comment that while he could imagine having a beer with Luther in a pub, "Calvin was not the sort of man you could take out for a drink".<sup>18</sup> Given the choice of a Reformation character to meet, I suspect most students would agree that John Calvin would be too scholarly and austere, and Henry VIII too intimidating (you might get a better meal but lose your head if he was in a bad mood). Leo X could be too pompous, and Ignatius Loyola might try to persuade you to give up home and family and go on mission to the other end of the earth. Luther, in contrast, seems much more approachable, more grounded, at least after his marriage to the redoubtable Katie, in ordinary life.

## 2. AUSTRALIAN LUTHERAN-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

Since 2004 I have had the privilege of being a member of the Australian Lutheran – Roman Catholic Dialogue. The Dialogue commenced in Adelaide in 1975 and has had some notable achievements, including an agreed statement on the doctrine so close to Luther's heart: justification. This was finalised in 1998, one year ahead of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification issued by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Cardinal Kasper, who became secretary of the Pontifical Council in 1999, is rumoured to have said that he preferred the Australian version).

My colleague Denis Edwards, who was involved in that Dialogue, summarised the outcome in an article in *Pacifica* two years ago:

The level of agreement reached on this issue, so central to the Reformation, in both the international Joint Declaration, which was to be fully received by both churches, and in the more detailed Australian statement, was remarkable. It constituted a wonderful new moment, and an unparalleled new context, for Lutheran/Roman Catholic relations in Australia, and raised hopes for movement towards more formal mutual recognition of the two churches.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, by the time I joined the Dialogue, it had hit a hurdle. A declaration from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in August 2000, titled *Dominus Iesus*, reiterated Catholic teaching on the essential place of the episcopate in the church and insisted that "ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense." Our Lutheran Dialogue partners were understandably hurt by this, but willing to discuss the ministry of oversight in our respective churches, which we did for the next seven years.

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), 277.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *Luther's Works: Table Talk* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 78.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, Michigan & Edinburgh: Eerdmans & T&T Clark, 2000), xv

<sup>19</sup> Denis Edwards, "Synodality and Primacy: Reflections from the Australian Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue", *Pacifica* 28, no. 2 (2015), 139.

This was, in many respects, an exercise in receptive ecumenism. You are doubtless familiar with Paul Murray's work on receptive ecumenism at Durham University, and the shift in emphasis which he has promoted, from focussing on the deficiencies in other traditions to acknowledging the weaknesses and wounds in our own, and what we can learn and receive from the other.<sup>20</sup> In ecumenical encounters, Murray strongly recommends that we do not "get out the best china tea set"—I can testify that the members of the Australian Lutheran Catholic Dialogue have moved beyond such polite formality, although a more apt analogy would be that we do not get out the crystal wine decanters when we open bottles of Barossa Shiraz and Clare Valley Riesling.

In the final document, what we had shared about the weaknesses and strengths of our respective traditions was put in as positive way as possible. For example, paragraph 115 states:

The Roman Catholic community has a strong conviction about the role of the bishop in the church. We suggest that the Lutheran community may have something to learn from this understanding of the bishop as the focus of unity of the church. The Lutheran community in Australia, and elsewhere, has a strong history of participation through synodical structures. We suggest that the Roman Catholic Church, as it attempts to bring about more effective participation, may have something to learn from the synodical practices of the Lutheran community.

The Catholic members of the Dialogue were delighted in 2013 when the General Convention of Synod of the Lutheran Church of Australia decided to change the designation of its 'presidents' to 'bishops'. We hope that our lengthy deliberations on the ministry of oversight contributed in some way to this development.

The elephant in the room during our discussions on the ministry of oversight was the bishop of Rome. Accordingly, from 2011 to 2016 we made the Petrine Ministry the focus of our Dialogue. The biblical scholars on the Dialogue did not take long to reach a consensus on the leadership role of Peter in the New Testament. Despite his human weaknesses, Peter was singled out by Jesus to fulfil a unique leadership role, one of witness and service, of shepherding Jesus' flock and strengthening the other disciples. The theologians on the Dialogue discussed at somewhat greater length controversial issues such as infallibility, universal jurisdiction, and the papacy in relation to the centrality of Christ. As always with our Dialogue deliberations, once misunderstandings were clarified and resolved, we discovered a significant degree of convergence in our thinking.

My contribution to the Dialogue was to prepare, with Dean Zweck from Australian Lutheran College, a paper on the papacy through history. Dean is a quiet, gentle man, deeply committed to the ecumenical movement. Responsible for the section on the sixteenth-century, Dean could not bring himself to quote from one of Martin Luther's last works, *Against the papacy at Rome, founded by the devil*. In this treatise, dashed off in 1545, Luther lashed out at the pope as (among other things) "a brothel-keeper above all brothel-keepers and all lewdness, including what cannot be named; an antichrist ... a genuine werewolf". Dean searched through Luther's many writings, and managed to find a statement that was a bit more positive. Although Luther still had some rather severe things to say about the pope in the Smalcald Articles, he could, nevertheless, envisage as late as 1537 a form of the papacy which could be accepted as legitimate:

Suppose that the pope would renounce the claim that he is the head of the church by divine right or by God's command; suppose that it were necessary to have a head, to whom all others should adhere, in order that the unity of Christendom might better be preserved against the attacks of sects and heresies; and suppose that such a head would then be elected by men and it remained in their power and choice to change or depose this head ... (SA II.4).

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<sup>20</sup>P. D. Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism", *The Ecumenist* 51 (2014), 4.

This gave our Dialogue something to build on, because almost five hundred years after Martin Luther made this concession, Pope John Paul II, in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* in 1995, asked for forgiveness for past failings of the papacy (88), and invited “church leaders and their theologians to engage ... in a patient and fraternal dialogue” on the contribution which the papal office could make to Christian unity (96). In 2013 Pope Francis quoted John Paul’s words in his apostolic exhortation on the joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii gaudium*. Francis also expressed frustration at the lack of progress:

It is my duty, as the Bishop of Rome, to be open to suggestions which can help make the exercise of my ministry more faithful to the meaning which Jesus Christ wished to give it and to the present needs of evangelization. Pope John Paul II asked for help in finding ‘a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation’. We have made little progress in this regard. The papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion ... Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach. (*Evangelii gaudium*, 32)

There is no easy response to the challenges this raises but we have at least begun to contemplate what reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics might look like, possibly in some analogous way to the relationship which exists between the Vatican and the eastern-rite Catholic churches. We have also named some of the steps which need to be taken for this to occur. One of those steps involves exploring whether much loved teaching documents in the Lutheran tradition, such as the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism, could be accepted as “legitimate and authoritative catechetical materials in a church in communion with Rome”. The Australian Lutheran – Roman Catholic Dialogue is currently reflecting on this.

### **3. MARTIN LUTHER AND POPE BENEDICT XVI**

I have mentioned Popes John Paul II and Francis. I also want to acknowledge that the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century has had, what would have been almost unimaginable in Luther’s time, a German pope. I have printed out a copy of Pope Benedict XVI’s address to representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany which was delivered in the Chapter Hall of the former Augustinian Convent in Erfurt in 2011. I have seen photographs of this event and, in contrast to the one last week of Pope Francis with a visiting head of state, Benedict looked genuinely happy. While Francis would have little in common with Donald Trump, Benedict does share with Martin Luther not only a great love of Scripture but also a strong connection to Augustine of Hippo. The young Joseph Ratzinger wrote his doctoral thesis on Augustine’s ecclesiology. The elderly pope acknowledged in a General Audience in 2010 that “St Augustine, whom I have had the great gift to know, so to speak, close at hand through study and prayer ... has become a good “travelling companion” in my life and my ministry.<sup>21</sup> Visiting Germany in 2011 he said:

As the Bishop of Rome, it is deeply moving for me to be meeting you here in the ancient Augustinian convent in Erfurt. As we have just heard, this is where Luther studied theology. This is where he celebrated his first Mass. Against his father’s wishes, he did not continue the study of Law, but instead he studied theology and set off on the path towards priesthood in the Order of Saint Augustine. And on this path, he was not simply concerned with this or that. What constantly exercised him was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life’s journey. “How do I receive the grace of God?”: this question struck him in the heart and lay at the foundation of all his theological searching and inner struggle. For Luther theology was no mere academic pursuit, but the struggle for oneself, which in turn was a struggle for and with God. “How

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<sup>21</sup>General Audience, 25 August 2010. See the Vatican website:  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100825.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100825.html)

do I receive the grace of God?" The fact that this question was the driving force of his whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me. For who is actually concerned about this today – even among Christians? What does the question of God mean in our lives? In our preaching? Most people today, even Christians, set out from the presupposition that God is not fundamentally interested in our sins and virtues. He knows that we are all mere flesh. And insofar as people believe in an afterlife and a divine judgement at all, nearly everyone presumes for all practical purposes that God is bound to be magnanimous and that ultimately he mercifully overlooks our small failings. The question no longer troubles us. But are they really so small, our failings? Is not the world laid waste through the corruption of the great, but also of the small, who think only of their own advantage? Is it not laid waste through the power of drugs, which thrives on the one hand on greed and avarice, and on the other hand on the craving for pleasure of those who become addicted? Is the world not threatened by the growing readiness to use violence, frequently masking itself with claims to religious motivation? Could hunger and poverty so devastate parts of the world if love for God and godly love of neighbour – of his creatures, of men and women – were more alive in us? I could go on. No, evil is no small matter. Were we truly to place God at the centre of our lives, it could not be so powerful. The question: what is God's position towards me, where do I stand before God? – Luther's burning question must once more, doubtless in a new form, become our question too, not an academic question, but a real one. In my view, this is the first summons we should attend to in our encounter with Martin Luther.<sup>22</sup>

On 1 April this year a report circulated on the internet that Pope Francis would canonize Martin Luther on 31 October. This would, of course, be the ultimate rejection of the traditional Catholic interpretation of Luther as the arch-heretic who wantonly destroyed the unity of Western Christendom. I am afraid that this report was just an April Fool's Day joke, but as Pope Benedict's address implies, "Luther has", in Cardinal Kasper's words, "almost become a common church father".<sup>23</sup>The international Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue document released in 2013 to prepare for this anniversary year, *From Conflict to Communion*, also highlights this shift. I can't help but wonder what Martin Luther himself would make of it. What do you think?

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<sup>22</sup> The address is available on the Vatican website: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110923\\_evangelical-church-erfurt.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110923_evangelical-church-erfurt.html)

<sup>23</sup> Kasper, *Martin Luther*, 1.

# LUTHER AT 500 - TAKING THE ECUMENICAL PULSE

## ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Prince Devanandan<sup>24</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

I am not certain whether I am the right person to address this topic. I come as one ordained in the Diocese of Colombo of the Church of Ceylon (Anglican), and now continuing my ministry in the footsteps of John Wesley in the Methodist Church of New Zealand. I am bringing this presentation in English which is my third language and I hope I can do justice to this topic “Luther at 500 – Taking the Ecumenical Pulse”.

### LUTHER AT 500 – TAKING THE ECUMENICAL PULSE

It is 500 years since the Reformation. Reformation is not something that happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and ended then and there; instead it is an ongoing process as it is still inconclusive of achieving the objectives of renewal of the church. The attempt to renew the churches led to more disunity and divisions. I wonder whether it is more appropriate to call it defamation instead of reformation due to the hostility that followed the event in Wittenberg. This paper looks at the effects of the Reformation that happened with Martin Luther’s nailing of his thesis and the division of the Church over the past 500 years which resulted in the sin of disunion. Therefore I believe the opportunity for ecumenism is imperative in the observing of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The anniversary poses a challenge to the churches to work towards achieving the true objectives of reformation which are renewal and unity. I will attempt to highlight the divisions as a consequence of reformation and to seek unity. Division of the church is contrary to God’s will that requires repentance to restore the unity on the foundation of the gospel. It is not possible to cover the 500 years of church history in 20 minutes. To make it more concise I have categorised this presentation under three headings: Event, Effect and Ecumenical Pulse.

### THE EVENT

We may know that the event is not a one off that happened at once with Luther nailing the thesis on the door of Wittenberg Church. There were many other aspects related to the event. Even though it is the observation of the 500<sup>th</sup> year of the Reformation, the event did not take place within a set date or time; it “involved a series of changes in the Western Christendom between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but more commonly restricted to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>25</sup> Besides a raft of issues that led to the event, primarily the hierarchical structure of the church and papal authority and finances were at the core. Efforts of the monarchies of England and France to influence the national churches indicated political conflicts with Rome. The final collapse of the council of Basle in 1449 left critics dissatisfied with some aspects of papal monarchy in the church. “There were more frequent attacks on financial exactions of the Papacy and Curia and upon their worldliness and involvement in the dynastic politics of Italy”.<sup>26</sup> In addition, we all know that another corrupt practice of the church was the sale of indulgences which was meaningless and unchristian but used to collect money and which Luther and others opposed.

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<sup>24</sup> The Reverend Prince Devanandan is the current President of the Methodist Church of New Zealand.

<sup>25</sup> Cross F. L and Livingstone E. A. (Ed), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press 1997 p. 1374.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Amidst these conditions there were reformation movements seeking to return to primitive excellence rather than innovative changes to the operations. Luther's protest was first towards the corrupt practice of the church. Secondly, to tell the biblical truth of justification by faith through grace. Luther expressed his protests widely and later his writings began to influence the laity of German towns.

In addition Luther's attacks were on transubstantiation, clerical celibacy and religious orders. Moreover his demand was for the abolition of Papal power in Germany. It was Luther's commentary on the Book of Romans that led to John Wesley's conversion on 24 May 1738. Out of which the world wide Methodist Church was born.

In addition to Luther, Zwingli in Zurich managed to get the support of the civic authorities and carried out anti papal, anti-hierarchic and anti-monastic reforms in the city. "The influence of Zurich was restricted after its military defeat by the Catholic Cantons and the death of Zwingli in 1531, and thereafter leadership of the Swiss Reformation passed to Geneva".<sup>27</sup>From 1541 John Calvin in Geneva organised the reform more systematically. Calvin's progress of reformation with stronger theological foundations became intricately involved with a series of political struggles. The notable ones are wars of religion in France, the freedom of the Netherlands from Spain and in Scotland the reaction against French control.

The English Reformation took place with a different agenda. Henry VIII accomplished the overthrow of Papal supremacy and dissolved the monasteries. This course of action may indicate a significant extension of royal controls for personal interests. To describe a long process briefly, the English reformation grafted elements of reformed theology and worship upon a traditional church structure. The continuities ensured peaceful change and ultimately widespread public acceptance. "In England, as on the continent, the reformation secured legal endorsement more easily than individual conversions: its spiritual impact was most obvious among those attracted by the new emphasis upon Bible-reading, while the illiterate majority conformed with less enthusiasm".<sup>28</sup>

To put it succinctly, the moves on the European continent as well as in England indicate that the reformation was not only religious, but also political seeking freedom from Papal control religiously and politically. Looking at the Reformation 500 years on, we must note one important aspect of the context over and above all others in which reformation took place and the effects it had. That is, the context in which all these changes happened was 99.9 % of people who had church allegiance to Roman Catholicism. When the churches in different states began to claim independence of papal authority they also led to political independence. These divisions of land according to political demarcation also formed the national church in each of those states. The point I want to make is, there were no other world religions involved or had any interactions with these demarcations and divisions. I wish to underline this political and religious change as it leads us to ecumenical challenges. 500 years later we are meeting people of multiple religions and trying to find the power of the gospel and meaning of the event of reformation.

## EFFECTS

When we look at the effects of reformation, the primary thing that may come to our thoughts is the availability of the Bible, which hitherto was confined to the clerics, now became available for everyone to read. This is the most positive aspect of reformation for many Christians around the world. The unfortunate shift was from an infallible papacy to an infallible word of God as many Bible-church

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.1375

Christians claim. But the undesirable aspect of the positive move is everyone having his or her own interpretation of the scriptures let alone the aspect of its infallibility which is again debatable. In other words, the infallible papal authority is now given to the written scriptures.

The reading of the Bible and the interpretation and the emergence of many theologies in place of one theology led to the divisions in the church. One may argue that it was of least concern in the Christian European continent as the borders were drawn and independence of each nation was established. But the effect of reformation that led to denominationalism in my view is more damaging than beneficial to the church. Why do I say so?

I wish to draw your attention to Sri Lanka and its colonial past where I was born and raised and had my undergraduate theological formation. The first colonisers, the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505. Geoffrey Powell describes the historical event: "The Portuguese hated the Muslims and envied the Venetians. To open a sea route around the cape would divert this trade from their rivals into their own hands and would give them direct access not only to the spice trade, but other fabulous riches of the east ... but it was not only avarice that inspired them. There were other spurs - ... the missionary zeal of Catholicism".<sup>29</sup> Roman Catholicism was introduced in Sri Lanka and it was growing. Whether it was growing as a religion or as a privilege for the local people to gain recognition by the new ruler is debated. 133 years later the Dutch arrived in Sri Lanka in 1638 with two items in their agenda. "First, they wanted to enrich themselves with the wealth of the East. Secondly, the Protestant Dutch wanted to establish themselves in opposition to the Portuguese who were Roman Catholic".<sup>30</sup> In the post reformation era, the 1656 hostilities between the Dutch and the Portuguese in Europe had been another stimulant for the Dutch attack of the Portuguese in Colombo leading to their capturing of the area with its seaport. "This is one amongst many of the European wars of colonisation taking place at this time in other Asian lands".<sup>31</sup> The battle was between Portuguese Roman Catholics and Protestant Dutch. They were fighting each other in the presence of a large majority of Buddhists and Hindus. The effects of reformation in terms of negativity was excessively observable in these battles. "Despite the significant difference between the Portuguese and the Dutch, those who had become Roman Catholics in Sri Lanka during the Portuguese occupation did not have any difficulty in switching to Calvinism with the change of political power. This shift in religious affiliation itself shows the kind of Christianity the indigenous people adopted in order to get privileges from the colonial powers".<sup>32</sup> The Dutch Christians enthusiastically embarked on a policy of hostility to Roman Catholicism and prohibited the Roman Catholic way of worship by law.<sup>33</sup> The Dutch proved more tolerant to the so called 'Heathen' indigenous religions than to the Portuguese religion of Roman Catholicism.

The above description of events from history portrays the effects of reformation at a different dimension in Sri Lanka. This may be true of other Asian contexts as well, but I do not want to comment on them. The effects of reformation had a negative impact on the mission of the church in Sri Lanka. From 1505 to 2017, 512 years of Christian presence gained only 7.3 % of the population of Sri Lanka to become Christians, while the already present religions that originated from India prevailed over the European religion introduced by colonial masters. This is one example of the adverse impact of reformation and in history we may trace many other examples, like the wars in Northern Ireland, and many more.

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<sup>29</sup> Powell, G. (1973) *The Kandyan Wars: The British Army in Ceylon 1803 – 1818*. Leo Cooper, London p. 23-24

<sup>30</sup> Devanandan, B. P. *Jesus The Neighbour: the Significance of Galilean Jesus for an Ethnically Divided and Religiously Plural Sri Lanka* (M.Theo Thesis, University of Auckland, 2000) p.16

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.17

<sup>33</sup> De Silva, K. M. *A History of Sri Lanka* (C. Hurst & Co. London, 1981) p. 195.

Reflecting on the effects of reformation, the question we need to address to Luther at 500 is, were the opening of the scriptures beneficial to the spread of the gospel or have they weakened the spread of the gospel with the divisions of the churches.

### **THE ECUMENICAL PULSE**

Luther at 500 – what must be the ecumenical pulse of the moment?

Jeremy Worthen of the Council for Christian Unity in the Church of England states, “...The way Christians narrate reformation continues to frame accounts of the divisions between churches. If we regard the Protestant Reformation as a providential work of God that many sadly refused to acknowledge, then the greatest fault for Christian disunity lies with those who opposed it then and those who even today will not accept its vital insights”.<sup>34</sup>The stalemate is having even more adverse effects on the church 500 years later. The faith we confess is more a replica of the institutionalised churches that were born as an effect of reformation in Europe rather than a church that came into existence with the faith of our own. The divisions with which we are struggling now are not ours, but what we inherited over the past 500 years. In arguing the significance of Jesus to Sri Lanka, I called and continue to call for a shift from the Christ of the Colonisers to an authentic faith as followers of Jesus, for all to be one so that the world may believe. Over the 500 years of the Reformation “Sri Lankans inherited a domesticated Jesus from the European Missionaries and colonisers. Even though colonial rule came to an end, the church in Sri Lanka maintained a European model of Christianity”.<sup>35</sup>This is not only for Sri Lanka, but also for many other countries including Australia and New Zealand. The current divisions of the Christian community are a legacy of the form of religion they inherited from the West. In the 500 years of the post reformation era Rienzie Perera, in his doctoral thesis, states “The Asian Christians inherited from the West a ready-made institutional form of churches. They also received along with this a domesticated Jesus Christ ... indeed it is this Christ, shaped to suit the needs of the colonial empire, who finds himself ill-suited to the Asian context with its dynamic pluralism”.<sup>36</sup>This may also be a reality in many other countries where the divisions of the church cause it to be weaker than what it must be. This state of the weaker church in the presence of other religions is none other than an adverse effect of reformation.

In view of the above mentioned facts, the need of the hour of Luther at 500 is to seek and work to achieve a viable form of unity. The splits that appeared as a result of the Reformation are now requiring a process to mend them. Worthen’s call to the churches today is: “... the best way to make this anniversary a properly ecumenical occasion, engaging all churches and serving the cause of Christian unity, is to tell the story instead as one about unity lost with responsibility shared on all sides, the result of a collective failure to obey the Lord’s commandment to love one another. The regrettable failings of the sixteenth century in this regard can then be contrasted with the noble efforts of ecumenists over the past century to heal its legacy of sinful divisions”.<sup>37</sup>It is clear as crystal that the attempts of the reformers were for renewal and unity in the gospel; but became bound up with actions that resulted in separation between the churches. On the one hand it is blamed on human sinfulness and on the other it is the political freedom that the national leaders were waiting to attain. “We should remember the Reformation as driven in part – only in part – by a desire that should also be the desire of those

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<sup>34</sup> Worthen, J. *The 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation: An Ecumenical Event?* (Ed. Robin Gill, Theology Vol 120 No.2 March / April 2017) p.101.

<sup>35</sup> Devanandan B. P. (2000) p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Perera, R E C *Who is Jesus Christ to the people of Asia?* (Union Theological Seminary, New York City, 1984) p.2.

<sup>37</sup> Worthen J. p.102.

committed to ecumenism 500 years later: to be renewed and united in the gospel".<sup>38</sup>The need for repentance on the part of the churches as an integral part of an ecumenical response to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reformation is stressed repeatedly in the document *From Conflict to Communion*. "The message of the gospel cannot be received or proclaimed in its wholeness by a divided Church, and the Church can only be united on the foundation of the gospel and not on some other basis".<sup>39</sup>

I wish to conclude this presentation with this: at the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation we as churches must address the differences around sacraments, ordained ministry and the *episcopé* and seek to unite. The objective of reformation for Luther and the reformers was not divisions of the church but renewal and to be united in the gospel. Let us all strive to achieve this goal ecumenically, so that we all may be one for the world to believe that God sent Jesus Christ not to condemn but to save the world.

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<sup>38</sup> LWF & Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* p.7 (Forward)

<sup>39</sup> Worthen J. p 104.

# **LUTHER AT 500:**

## **REFLECTIONS FROM THE ANABAPTIST TRADITION**

Doug Hynd<sup>40</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION**

While I am not a member of an Anabaptist church or denomination, I have been deeply influenced by that tradition of discipleship, and am a member of the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand. My account of the emergence of Anabaptism set in the context of, and in response to, the Lutheran Reformation reflects that ambiguous location.

### **TERMINOLOGY**

Names matter and end up carrying unexpected messages. Whereas Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed alike baptized infants, the so-called “Anabaptists” argued that true Christian baptism assumed a prior recognition of one’s sin and need for repentance, followed by a conscious decision to accept God’s gracious gift of forgiveness and to become a disciple of Jesus—something they believed no infant could do. In their minds they were not “re-” baptizing, but rather baptizing correctly for the first time.

Anabaptists called themselves Christians or brothers and sisters, baptisers, or the baptism minded; their opponents called them enthusiasts, revolutionaries or “Anabaptists”. Still, the name “Anabaptist” used by their opponents stuck, not least because Roman law regarded “rebaptism” as a criminal offense, punishable by death. Despite its negative overtones in the sixteenth century, in contemporary English usage “Anabaptist” has become an accepted umbrella term for all Reformation groups who practiced believers’ (rather than infant) baptism, and the contemporary denominations directly descended from them such as the Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites.

### **ORIGINS**

The radical reformation, which survived almost exclusively in its Anabaptist form, while critical of Luther was fundamentally a movement towards a form of discipleship and community which had complex origins in a range of medieval movements of spiritual and social renewal and took differing shapes with differing theological emphases across the areas impacted by the Reformation.

Swiss Anabaptism emerged from Zwinglian reform in Zurich from 1522 onwards, characterised by a strong Biblicism whose movement beyond Zwingli was influenced by sometime colleague of Luther, Andreas Karlstadt. Reform in the region was also driven by economic and social concerns that had sparked the Peasants War, including a drive for local community autonomy, including the right of communities to appoint their own clergy.

South German/Austrian Anabaptism also emerged from the ashes of the Peasants’ War though with a different emphasis. It manifested strong mystical, spiritualist and apocalyptic tendencies in the preaching and theology of its evangelists. In the Tirol the expression of church reform was Anabaptist in character, taking up under its banner the concerns of the peasant revolts. In Moravia Anabaptism had a strong communitarian strand with an emphasis on the community of goods, an emphasis which survived in the Hutterite communities, which unlikely as it seems maintained their community life and

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<sup>40</sup> Mr Doug Hynd successfully completed his doctoral thesis in the School of Theology, Australian Catholic University, and is a member of the Canberra Baptist Church.

eventually migrated to the US and Canada. I understand that a Hutterite community has now been established in Tasmania.

The city of Strasbourg, with a well-deserved reputation for relative tolerance for dissent through the 1520s and 30s, briefly provided a cross roads for dialogue not only between Anabaptists and the Strasbourg Reformers, but also between spiritualist and biblically oriented Anabaptists. Significant Anabaptist leaders and non-Anabaptist radicals from Switzerland, South Germany, Moravia and the Low Countries all spent varying amounts of time in Strasbourg during this period, making it a hive of theological reflection and contestation.

In contrast, Anabaptism in the Low Countries had roots in the local tendencies of monastic renewal, lay devotion and an anti-clerical populism that was to have a turbulent path through the horror of apocalyptic violence in Münster before being nurtured into a pacifist separatist community through the extended ministry of Menno Simons. The role of Anabaptists in the terror of Münster was generated by an apocalyptic reading of scripture that led it to be treated in a manner equivalent in our time to that of Islamic terrorism. The radical reformation includes episodes such as this which its descendants would treat with distancing and denial, as well as episodes that are remembered with gratitude, and identification,

The story of Anabaptist beginnings sketched out above is filled with a host of colourful characters, they are the ones we know about. It had an intricate story-line, and some complex subplots. Yet traces of a coherent narrative are still evident. The Swiss Brethren, Hutterites and Mennonites all emerged out of the same soil: they all drew deeply on forms of piety inherited from late medieval spirituality; they all were indebted to the Protestant reformers of their day for a new awareness of the power of Scripture as the “Word of God”; and they all reflected something of the utopian vision of the peasant revolutionaries who tried, unsuccessfully, to restructure medieval village life around a New Testament blueprint. With few exceptions, the first generation of Anabaptist leaders shared a commitment to the radical principle of voluntary, or believers’, baptism and to a life of practical discipleship, including the love of enemies. And they envisioned the church as a gathered community of true believers, followers of Christ who were ready to leave behind the tradition and assumptions of late-medieval Christendom to shape an alternative community.

Anabaptist teachings, to the degree that they were understood by the religious and political leaders of their day, were deeply unsettling for those in power. Within the context of Anabaptist association with the Peasants’ Revolt of 1525 and the debacle at Münster a decade later any teachings labelled as Anabaptist seemed to call into question not only the gospel message but also the very foundations of sixteenth century European society.

## **TWO STORIES**

I want to tell two stories, one about Anabaptist practice, and another about Anabaptist theological discernment that I hope will convey the character of the emerging movement as much as any formal theological account. The first story has been told and retold many times over the centuries as expressing something essential to the Anabaptist understanding of Christian discipleship:

*On a mild winter’s day in 1569, Dirk Willems escaped his second story prison cell in a residential palace on the outskirts of the Dutch village of Asperen. Willems had been imprisoned for espousing heretical beliefs – among them adult rather than infant baptism and the principle of non-violence. Many of Dirk’s fellow believers, as many as 2,000 by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, were to be executed by Dutch magistrates in their enforcement of the mandate of the church against heretics. Hundreds more were imprisoned and tortured for persisting in their beliefs and practices.*

*When Dirk set foot in the icy moat surrounding his castle prison he was literally running for his life. What he had not expected, however, was that his escape would be noticed by the palace guard. Nor had he anticipated that the ice on which he now stood would be so thin. Almost as soon as the chase began it was over. Dirk made it safely over the thin ice, but the heavier guard - burdened, no doubt, by his sword and armour, broke through the ice. Fearing that he would drown, the guard called out for help. Defying his natural impulses to continue fleeing, Dirk returned and helped his pursuer out of the icy waters. Dirk was then re-arrested and imprisoned at the top of a nearby church tower. On May 16, 1569 he was led to the edge of Asperen, bound to a pole and burned to death as a heretic.*

The second story is about an early Anabaptist exercise in doing theology. In 1527 the radical Baptists of south Germany, Austria and Switzerland were struggling with the future shape of their movement. With the willingness of the Reformers to use civil power against dissenters, their future within the mainstream Reformation did not look bright. Should they accept the limited reform proposed by Zwingli and Luther on the grounds that outward forms did not matter?

The radicals called a meeting, referred to as the *dialogue of the concerned*, that was held on a mountainside near the Swiss-Austrian border town of Schleithem in February 1527. No first hand report has come down to us, but the conclusions, and the seven articles, that came to be known as the *Schleithem Confession*, and the covering letter were shared widely. The confession pushed towards a voluntary church independent of the state and in tension with the prevailing society. From the articles we learn that:

- Participants met as equals though as a security measure no names appear on the resultant documents so the references are only to “brothers and sisters”, to “sons and daughters of God”, to “members of God”.
- The conclusion they reached was an agreed commitment to a radical disciplined community, a form of church life with roots in the Benedictine monastic order. Some early leaders came from religious orders and brought with them a focus on community and structured forms of life shaped by the Gospels.
- The meeting was characterised by a sense of realistic danger. Michael Sattler, the person most closely linked to the Schleithem documents, was tried and burnt at the stake in May that year.
- The confession is shaped by a call to live out the ethics of the resurrection in the present. Baptism is for all those who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## **REMEMBERING**

Anabaptist memories of the Reformation differ from those of the Lutheran and the Reformed churches. This is reflected in key collections of documents in the Anabaptist tradition. The *Hutterite Chronicle* places the baptisms in Zurich and the persecution by Zwingli within a theological context that begins with Creation and in which the Reformation is not a point of origin but yet another context for faithful witness. In the Dutch Anabaptist tradition, *The Martyrs Mirror* starts with John’s baptism of Christ and his crucifixion as the consequence of a life modelled on Christ’s teaching. The narrative recounts a list of Christian martyrs who suffered for holding firm to the principle of believer’s baptism and non-resistance in following of Christ. Luther and Zwingli in this account are minor characters in the larger story of God’s witness in the world carried forward through the testimony of suffering by a faithful minority.

The tensions that came to separate Lutherans and Anabaptists, particularly those related to baptism and understandings of the Christians’ relation to the state, crystallized only gradually in the opening years of the Reformation. The separation resulted less from a series of closely argued, face-to-face debates over theological doctrine, than as an evolving process of group formation within the complex, sometimes confusing, dynamics of religious convictions, political self-interest, and a struggle for survival. Many of the differences that eventually came to divide Lutherans and Anabaptists were certainly expressed in theological vocabulary. But those concerns took on particular urgency since

popular understandings of the Anabaptists became associated with the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 and the violent seizure of the north German city of Münster. Any understanding of the vehemence behind Luther and Melancthon's denunciation of the Anabaptists, or their condemnation in the Augsburg Confession, must acknowledge the importance of this context.

The impact of Anabaptists can be seen in the explicit denials of Anabaptism and its teachings in the *Thirty Nine Articles* of the Anglican Church, even though direct Anabaptist presence in England was almost non-existent. The relevant articles are:

- **Article XXXVII – on serving in war**
- **Article XXXVIII – on common ownership of goods**
- **Article XXXIX – on swearing of oaths**

In the Augsburg Confession, **Article XVI** has the Anabaptists in view when it states of Lutheran teaching on civil affairs ... *that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to judge matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oath when required by the magistrates ...*

*They condemn the Anabaptists who forbid these civil offices to Christians.*

*They condemn also those who do not place evangelical perfection in the fear of God and in faith, but in forsaking civil offices, for the Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart.*

After early attempts at dialogue with Protestant reformers in Switzerland and Strasbourg, the Anabaptist voice largely disappears from the theological record. In the face of persecution Hutterites, Mennonites and Amish withdrew to rural areas to become "the quiet in the land", many eventually migrating to Russia and later to North and South America.

## **THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES**

From the onset of the reformation era there was criticism by the radicals of the Reformers' unwillingness to carry through their biblical convictions consistently and letting themselves be constrained by the concerns of civic authorities. The radicals rejected the entwining of church and state, and sought the restoration of what they understood to be a New Testament practice of church.

As a grassroots movement, the first generation of Anabaptists struggled to reach agreement on the principles that would distinguish their core membership from the fringe teachings of inspired eccentrics. One notable exception in addition to Schleithem was the Martyrs Synod held in Augsburg in 1527. Some of its early converts were disillusioned veterans of the Peasants' War still hoping to transform social and political realities according to a biblical template. Others reflected the apocalyptic mood of the times, drawing from the prophetic writings of Daniel and Revelation a message of God's imminent judgment. Still others were gripped by the teachings of Jesus and assuming that the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the early church offered a clear blueprint for a renewed and purified church, separated from a fallen world. Contributing to the fluid boundaries of the movement was a general suspicion of formal theology, preferring to focus on the concrete practices of Christian discipleship within the context of the local congregation. Most of the first generation of educated leaders were executed by 1530. This combined with the on-going threat of persecution, made communication among various Anabaptist groups difficult and complicated efforts of the various Anabaptist groups to reach consensus in matters of belief and practice.

Beyond differences with the reformers over baptism and the relationship to the state, the distinguishing features of the radical reformation included putting Jesus at the centre of their understanding of the Christian faith, an emphasis on new birth and discipleship in the power of the Spirit, establishment of believers' churches free from state control, and a commitment to economic sharing.



Anabaptists agreed with the Reformers about the Bible's authority but disagreed strongly about its interpretation and application. Anabaptists started from Jesus and interpreted everything in the light of him. Anabaptists regarded the Bible as an unfolding of God's purposes, with the New Testament providing normative guidelines for ethics and church life. They challenged the Reformers' use of Old Testament models and disagreed with them about such issues as baptism, war, tithing, church government and swearing oaths.

The Reformers emphasised justification by faith and forgiveness of past sins. Anabaptists emphasised new birth and power to live as Jesus' disciples. The Reformers feared Anabaptists were reverting to salvation by works; the Anabaptists accused the Reformers of failing to address moral issues and of tolerating unchristian behaviour in their churches. Hans Denck insisted that faith and discipleship were inter-connected: "*no one can truly know Christ unless he follows him in life, and no one may follow him unless he has first known him*".

Anabaptists formed churches of committed disciples. Church membership was voluntary. They resisted state control and the assumption that citizens of a political community were automatically members of the church. They challenged the way the clergy dominated church life and the use of coercion in matters of faith. Although they gradually became more formal, early gatherings were sometimes charismatic and unstructured, concentrating on Bible study. Some churches encouraged women to participate much more actively than was normal in contemporary church or society.

The Reformers did not generally practise evangelism. Where they had state support, they relied on sanctions to coerce attendance and pastoring people through the parish system, rather than evangelising them. The Anabaptists rejected this interpretation of church and society and refused to use coercion to control belief. They embarked on a spontaneous missionary venture to evangelise Europe. Evangelists travelled widely preached in homes and fields, interrupted state church services, baptised converts and planted churches.

Some Anabaptists questioned the validity of private property. Hutterites continue to live in communities and hold possessions in common. Most Anabaptists though retained personal ownership, but all taught that their possessions were not their own but were available to those in need.

Anabaptists rejected the use of violence, refusing to defend themselves by force. They urged love for enemies and respect for human life. Anabaptists accepted that governments would use force but regarded this as inappropriate for Christians. Anabaptists aimed to build an alternative community, changing society from the bottom up.

Oaths were very important in sixteenth-century Europe, encouraging truth telling in court and loyalty to the state. Anabaptists often rejected these, citing Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 and arguing that they should always be truthful, not just under oath and would not swear loyalty to any secular authority.

Anabaptists were not surprised by persecution. They regarded suffering for obedience to Christ as unavoidable and biblical: suffering was a mark of the true church, as Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

Most Anabaptists did not have the time and opportunity to theologise extensively about the state. One exception was Pilgram Marpeck who had a background as a public servant, a mining magistrate under the Hapsburgs provides the most substantial reflection on this issue, deconstructed the Christendom settlement theologically through:

- Rejecting the use of coercion by the state either to uphold a single religious option, or to enforce participation in a particular religious institution as an essential element of citizenship, making possible pluralism of belief and practice.

- Withdrawing from the mandate of government the role of enforcing matters of policy, belief and structure within religious organisations, thus opening up the space for independent community organisations and civil society.
- Rejecting the use of coercion by government against individuals in the exercise of religious conscience. This creates space for conviction by argument within a society or political community and the exercise of witness to that community.
- Limiting the responsibilities of the state to the maintenance of social order and justice, de-sacralising the character of government.

Themes from the emergence and recent development of the Anabaptist tradition:

- Discipleship – following rather than belief – this emphasis is evident in the summary statements in the contemporary *Confession of faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.
- Gathering – the church as a new society independent of civil authority and not concerned solely about individual religion but new patterns of economic and social relationship.
- Peace and non-violence – exploring new possibilities through for example the practice of restorative justice, and the witness of Christian Peacemaker Teams, getting in the way of violence.
- Envisioning and practicing the priority of Christian commitment over the claims of the state through conscientious objection.

### CONTEMPORARY ECUMENICAL ENGAGEMENT

The Mennonite World Conference represents the global family of Christian churches rooted in the 16th century Radical Reformation in Europe, particularly in the Anabaptist movement. MWC membership in 2015 included 102 Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national churches from 56 countries, with around 1.4 million baptized believers. MWC sees itself as a communion of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness. ... *we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modelled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ. We seek to walk in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we confidently await Christ's return and the final fulfilment of God's kingdom.*

The MWC in recent decades has engaged in a range of ecumenical dialogue shaped by the historical memory of its emergence. Ecumenical conversations by the MWC have fallen into two groups:

- With those churches that are similar in ecclesiology, specifically Pentecostals, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists
- Churches with whom there is deep pain associated with the emergence of Anabaptism during the Reformation – the Reformed Churches, Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

Key themes in ecumenical conversations include:

- **Baptism:** a trilateral dialogue between Mennonites, Roman Catholics and Lutherans, on baptism commenced in 2013.
- Reconciliation – dealing with the conflicts of 16<sup>th</sup> century with the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches
- Peacemaking - the Church of the Brethren, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Mennonite Central Committee and the Friends General Conference have issued *A Declaration on Peace: In God's People the world's Renewal Has Begun* (1991). Mennonites have worked together with Roman Catholics in the Decade to Overcome Violence programme of the World Council of Churches.

In a time when discussions involving Christian responses to violence, terrorism and the accumulation of power and sacral status to the state are becoming both tense and necessary, remembering the witness and the failures of the Anabaptists is a timely resource.

## Resources

### Web

- *On the Road: Journal of the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand*  
<https://ontheroad.org.au/>
- Mennonite World Conference: <https://www.mwc-cmm.org/>
- Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online  
[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Welcome to GAMEO](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Welcome_to_GAMEO)

### Articles

- ‘A Debt of Gratitude’: Martin Luther, Anabaptists and Baptists’ by Marita Munro, *Zadok Perspectives*, No. 134, Autumn, 2017, 16-18
- ‘Confession and forgiveness mark historic Anabaptist-Reformed gathering in Zurich’ *Courier*, 2004, Quarter 3, 12-13
- ‘How to Commemorate a Division? Reflections on the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation and its Relevance for the Global Anabaptist-Mennonite church today” by John D. Roth, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91, January 2017, 5-35
- ‘Lutherans and Anabaptists’ *Courier*, 2010, Issue 1, 15 and Issue 3 & 4, 2-7
- ‘Why Should We Hold “Formal” Conversations with Other Christian Bodies? An interview with Larry Miller’ *Courier* Second Quarter, 2001, Vol 16 No.2, 3-7

### Books

John D Roth (ed), *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition* (Herald Press, 2001)

Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Herald Press, 2010)

Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Conrad Press, 1973)

John H Yoder *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers* (Pandora Press, 2004)

Douglas Gwyn (et al) *A Declaration on Peace” In God’s People the World’s Renewal has Begun* (Herald Press, 19910)

C.A. Snyder *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Herald Press, 1999)

*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Herald Press, 1995)

Web: <http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/>

## Ecumenical dialogues

### Believers' Baptism Churches

- [Report on the Consultation on Believers’ Baptism](#) Kingston, Jamaica, January 2015

### Seventh-day Adventists

- Two rounds of dialogue in 2011-2012. [Living the Christian Life in Today’s World: Adventists and Mennonites in Conversation, 2011-2012](#)

- [Book](#) includes all papers presented in the two rounds of dialogue, summary and recommendations, responses to questions that Mennonites and Seventh-day Adventists frequently ask of each other.

### **Lutherans**

- [Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ](#), the final report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission, 2010. The report laid the foundation for the July 2010 Lutheran World Federation reconciliation action dealing with the legacy of Lutheran persecution of Anabaptists, with particular reference to condemnation of the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession. This discussion built on local Lutheran Anabaptist Dialogues in France, 1981-4, Germany, 1989-92 and the USA, 2001-4.
- [January 2014 letter](#) from MWC to Mennonite colleges, universities, seminaries, information centres, and local/regional historical societies.

### **Roman Catholics**

- [Called Together to be Peacemakers](#), the report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998 – 2003.
- See [A Mennonite and Catholic Contribution to the World Council' Decade to Overcome Violence](#), the report from the Mennonite-Catholic conference 23-25 October 2007. Also dialogues in Latin America and Germany
- See [letter of congratulations](#) on the appointment of Pope Francis, sent by Cesar Garcia on behalf of MWC to the Vatican.

### **Baptists**

- [Baptists and Mennonites in Dialogue](#), the report on conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Mennonite World Conference: 1989-1992.

### **Pentecostals**

- 2006 – dialogue between MWC and Pentecostal leaders in Southern California on 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of emergence of the Pentecostal movement.

### **Reformed**

- 2004 – Reformed – Anabaptist Reconciliation Conference in Zurich

### **On-going Dialogues**

Trilateral dialogue between Mennonites, Catholics and Lutherans

The third meeting of the trilateral commission will take place in February 2015 in the Netherlands, hosted by Mennonite World Conference, and discuss the theme "Baptism: Communicating Grace and Faith". A fourth meeting is anticipated in 2016, after which the commission is expected to submit its final report to the Lutheran World Federation, the Mennonite World Conference and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

- [Mennonites, Catholics and Lutherans hold second round of dialogue on baptism](#) (March 2014)
- [Baptism the focus of trilateral dialogue by Mennonites, Catholics and Lutherans](#) (January 2013)

# LUTHER AT 500 – TAKING THE ECUMENICAL PULSE *AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE*

Anastasios Bozikis<sup>41</sup>

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

The history of encounter between the Orthodox Church and the nascent Lutheran Church can be traced back to the mid-sixteenth century when, in 1558, Ecumenical Patriarch Joasaph II dispatched Deacon Demetrios Mysos to Wittenberg to learn more about the new Protestant movement. Mysos spent six months there with Philip Melanchthon and forged a close friendship with him. Together they translated the Augsburg Confession into Greek. Melanchthon sent a copy of the Confession, and some personal letters, with Mysos to be delivered to Patriarch Joasaph. Unfortunately they never arrived at their destination for Mysos detoured and, entering into the employ of Prince Heraclides of Romania, failed to return to Constantinople.

It was another fifteen years before the first fruitful contact took place between the Lutheran theologians of the University of Tübingen and Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremiah II. From 1574 to 1582 an exchange of personal letters and discourses between the two parties took place. On the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1575 Stephen Gerlach, a young Lutheran scholar and newly appointed chaplain to the Imperial Ambassador in Constantinople, handed a copy of the Augsburg Confession in Greek to the Patriarch seeking a theological response. The hope was that the Eastern Church would recognise, that despite some differences in practice the Protestants remained faithful to the scriptural and conciliar tradition of the early Church.

Patriarch Jeremiah commented on the Confession in detail in a series of three letters. His tone was kindly and paternal and he urged the theologians of Tübingen to accept the doctrines of the Orthodox Church. In this correspondence, the Patriarch identified points of agreement and disagreement. He acknowledged that *both sides rejected* such things as: indulgences; purgatory; the excess of transferable grace left by the saints; enforced clerical celibacy; and papal primacy. At the same time *both Confessions accepted* the truth and inspiration of the Scriptures; a belief in God as Holy Trinity; the ancestral sin and its transmission to all; the fact that evil is not created by God but caused by creatures; Christ as one person with two natures; Christ as Head of the Church; the Second Coming; the Final Judgment, the future life and eternal reward and punishment; and, the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ offered in two species.

The correspondence also revealed many points of *divergence* on such issues as:

- Sacred Tradition
- the *filioque*
- free will
- predestination
- the substance and means of Justification
- the substance and the number of the sacraments
- the form of Baptism

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- Chrismation or Confirmation
- the first Eucharist for children
- the meaning of 'change' and the nature of the Eucharistic sacrifice
- the infallibility of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils
- the invocations of the Saints
- icons
- relics
- the Fasts and other Church traditions

By his third letter Patriarch Jeremiah's frustration with the direction of the discussion began to show and he concluded the correspondence abruptly, refusing to engage in any further doctrinal discussion but leaving the door open for communication at other levels:

*'Therefore, we request that from henceforth you do not cause us more grief, nor write to us on the same subject if you should wish to treat these luminaries and theologians of the Church in a different manner. You honour and exalt them in words, but you reject them in deeds. For you try to prove our weapons which are their holy and divine discourses as unsuitable. And it is with these documents that we would have to write and contradict you. Thus, as for you, please release us from these cares. Therefore, going about your own ways, write no longer concerning dogmas; but if you do, write only for friendship's sake. Farewell.'*<sup>42</sup>

It is noteworthy to point out that Pope Gregory XIII congratulated the Patriarch on his firm stand against the Reformers and the latter affirmed to him that he would in no way compromise on matters of faith.

## **AN UNDERLYING ISSUE?**

### **The Augustinian Inheritance**

Many Orthodox theologians trace the roots of doctrinal difficulties between East and West to St Augustine of Hippo and a convergence of his theology with the methodology and teaching of two subsequent Doctors of the Western Church, Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. St Augustine identified God as the supreme Good and, as such, a rationally conceivable essence. Evil, then, he understood as the absence of this Good. He believed God's transcendence was relative to the fallenness of humanity and understood grace as enabling the soul to know the essence of God once it was liberated from dependence on the body. St Augustine proposed a doctrine of original sin that was based on inherited guilt and provided a juridical view of salvation. He considered humanity guilty before God and justified by grace which, first forgives and, ultimately restores the soul's capacity to contemplate God's essence in the next life.

### **Anselm's Theory of Satisfaction**

Anselm of Canterbury expounded a theory of satisfaction that understood Christ's redemptive sacrifice as justifying all before God. The fruits of this sacrifice are bestowed by grace which justifies and grants our works a *meritorious* character. The Church, in turn, disposes the gifts of grace in this world and can

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<sup>42</sup> For a detailed discussion of the exchange between the Lutherans and Orthodox and publication of the correspondence in English see George Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople: The Correspondence between the Tübingen Theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople on the Augsburg Confession* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982).

bestow a meritorious character on acts of our free will, hence, it is argued, leading to the practice of indulgences.

### **Aquinas' Aristotelianism**

Thomas Aquinas adopted the Aristotelian theory that all human knowledge begins with *sensible* experience and the mind's ability to make it intelligible. This can then lead to a *relative* and *indirect* knowledge of God. Any *direct* knowledge of God can only come from Revelation through Scripture or Tradition. Theology, then, is the intellectual task of rationalising it according to the rules of scientific research. The Church's *magisterium* now becomes necessary to guide and correct theologians. A *direct* vision of God's essence must await the future life.

### **The Reformers Reaction**

Luther reacted against and rejected this inherited scholastic system and sought to understand salvation as the direct power of God's love which is to be received by human faith. He abjured the notion of 'meritorious' works able to be bought for money and proclaimed the power of the Gospel as enough to savea powerless humanity. The reformer was able to re-conceive salvation in terms of the Biblical drama of battle between God and the powers of sin and death and he was able to recover a sense of the mystery of God as revealed and yet unknown (*revelatus et absconditus*).

### **The Eastern Patristic Tradition**

In contradistinction to St Augustine, the Eastern Fathers understood God as being beyond all conceivable categories and was to be approached *apophatically*. They believed God absolutely transcendent in His essence and never to be known or seen in this life or the next. Grace was the divine life itself given to humanity which has been created to receive it and share in it. The Fathers rejected any notion of inherited guilt and posited that only the consequences of Adam's sin, namely corruption and death, are inherited by humankind. Salvation was understood as a dynamic participation in the divine life; a process of *purification*, *illumination* and *deification* (*theosis*). It was then possible to have a direct knowledge of God in this life through His Uncreated Energies.<sup>43</sup>

### **THE REFORMERS ON THE FRONTIERS OF ORTHODOXY**

The Reformers then sought to restore the catholic tradition of the Church but as far as the East was concerned they were essentially responding to Western Augustinian problematics. They did indeed approach some of the important elements of the patristic synthesis. The Reformers rejected the notion of *created grace* and meritorious works as the media which sought to dispense it. They sought to free the Gospel from the philosophical systems which they felt had bound it for too long. Nevertheless, they were ultimately limited by the Augustinian framework within which they themselves were formed. It was not possible for them to conceive of the transcendental God other than as pure essence and so excluded the possibility of having a real and direct participation in God in this life. For the Orthodox, the rejection of sacramental realism, the veneration of the Saints, relics etc. followed directly from this.

### **THE DIALOGUE**

After a 400 year hiatus, an official Orthodox-Lutheran Dialogue began in 1981. Its aim was to arrive at 'convergence and full communion and mutual recognition' (Espoo, Finland, 1981). Over the years, it

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<sup>43</sup> For further discussion on the theological differences between East and West in light of the Reformation see John Meyendorff, 'The Significance of the Reformation in the History of Christendom' in *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983).

dealt with such themes as ecclesiology, revelation, scripture, tradition, the ecumenical councils, soteriology and the sacraments.<sup>44</sup>It is undeniable that mutual understanding has deepened and many theological terms have been clarified, but still many differences remain. In fact, it has been argued that controversial responses by the Lutheran Churches to the challenges posed by modern society since the beginning of the dialogue, especially in terms of women's ordination and the understanding of human sexuality, have pushed the two churches further apart. Tellingly, in evaluating the Dialogue, on the occasion of its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, an Inter-Orthodox Consultation (Penteli, Greece, 2011) observed that it was necessary for the Dialogue to move beyond discussion of traditional confessional differences and pursue new initiatives that are being prompted by changing societal circumstances:

*[These initiatives have been] necessitated by new developments that have occurred in the Lutheran Churches...eg. the ordination of women on all levels of clerical orders, which is a clear deviation from Christian practice, and the emergence of a new moral code concerning human sexuality and especially homosexual relations, which has far-reaching implications for Christian anthropology, both on the personal and social levels etc. In the eyes of most Orthodox, these new ecclesiological and controversial anthropological innovations in the Lutheran world constitute radical challenges and serious obstacles to the ...dialogue...'*<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Protestant Reformation of 1517 was of Western provenance and dealt mainly with Western Christian problematics. Nevertheless, within half a century the Eastern Church was called on to engage with issues largely not of Her making and with hopelessly inadequate material and theological resources at Her disposal. The succeeding centuries would see the opposing Roman Catholic and Protestant parties vying for the support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and often interfering in its affairs through their political influence in Constantinople. The Orthodox Church sought to survive, often by playing one side against the other, and adopting Roman Catholic theological language and method to counter the Protestants and vice-versa. It was not possible, then, for a dialogue of equals to begin before the late twentieth century. By then, though, many of the old debates and controversies were no long socially relevant. The Official Dialogue has sought to cover much old ground and move on to the new challenges presented by post-modernity with enforced haste. Ultimately, how successful it will be remains to be seen.

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<sup>44</sup> For a documentary history and common statements of the Orthodox-Lutheran Dialogue see <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue-2/>

<sup>45</sup> Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran World Federation. *An Inter-Orthodox Evaluation of the Dialogue (1981-2011)*. Inter-Orthodox Center of Penteli, Athens, Greece, 2-5 May 2011. The full text available at [https://www.patriarchate.org/-/joint-international-commission-for-the-theological-dialogue-between-the-orthodox-church-and-the-lutheran-world-federation-an-inter-orthodox-evaluation?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_jSr7xbXp3kBW\\_languageId=en\\_US](https://www.patriarchate.org/-/joint-international-commission-for-the-theological-dialogue-between-the-orthodox-church-and-the-lutheran-world-federation-an-inter-orthodox-evaluation?_101_INSTANCE_jSr7xbXp3kBW_languageId=en_US)