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Aspects of Lutheran Identity:

A Confessional Perspective

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According to Hermann Sasse, the Lutheran church is "the confessional church *par excellence*". And indeed, the confessional habit is significant for the profile of Lutheran faith, theology, and church, and thus an unmistakable mark of Lutheran identity.

Yet, from the very beginning, biblical faith has striven to give answer to the Word of God, by praising Him. Christian faith has always included to render account for its contents, both to God and humanity alike. From the early days of Christianity, believers were eager to express their faith in unison. Short formulas, like the "Sh'ma Yisrael" function as identity-markers to the people of God; concise phrases, like "k_rios Iesoûs" reveal their speakers as members of the Christian community. Baptism, at the beginning of Christian life, is an excellent occasion of expressing one's faith as corresponding to the basic convictions of the congregation. Persecutions and trials provide a particular opportunity to defend against accusations, and to bear witness to kings and the political public. Misinterpretations of God's Word, and consequently false concepts of Christian dogmas, challenge the church to clarify disputes, and to (re-)establish consensus among its ranks. Throughout the history of Israel and Christendom, apologies and creeds, like the ancient, or ecumenical symbols of faith originate from these situations.

The Lutheran church, however, in a special manner is characterized as being "confessional". This is due to the fact that "confession", in the Lutheran use of the term, is meant a responsible reaction to God's faith-creating action through His word, expressing not only a person's "private" convictions on religious matters, but formulating an agreement on the obligatory feature of Christian faith, revealing the accordance of a person's belief with the doctrine of the church. This can be shown easily with regard to Martin Luther's concept of confession.



1. Luther's Concept of Confession

To the great public, it was Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms in 1521, that made him seem a true confessor. Indeed, Luther had to appear twice in the assembly. The first time, he asked for time for reflection; on the next day, he refused to retract: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (...), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. So help me God!" (LW 32, 112-113).

The scene before the German emperor has grown into mythological dimensions. But beyond the myth of Luther as a "hero of faith", the profit of Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms for modern European and Western history, is the maintenance of an individual knowing his conscience captured by the Word of God. This being the sole authority he was willing to obey in spiritual affairs, Luther had found the steadfastness to resist the threats of the greatest political power, and to oppose to the ecclesiastical authorities of his times.

To confess, in this regard, meant not to give in to the compulsion of revocation: "For this is the way, the opportunity, and the result of the Word of God" (LW 32, 111). As a response to the Word of God, Luther took the responsibility for what he had learned from Scriptures by proclaiming and teaching the Gospel as a preacher and professor at the university of Wittenberg.

To confess, in this understanding, is an act of (Christian) faith, which is created by the very Word of God that faith is related to. (Kolb, *Confessing the faith*, 22sq.) In its essentially evangelical sense, the Word of God is His promise of salvation which calls for faith, and in doing so, conveys the faith that is able to accept God's promise. Luther, indeed, indicates what he labels a "correlation of promise and faith" ("promissio ac fides sunt correlativa").

As the Gospel recounts and conveys God's action to the believer, confessing the Gospel is the "natural" reaction of faith - faith itself being a gift of God (Kolb *Confessing the faith*, 21). Faith consequently cannot but express itself in terms of confession. Conversely, this confession is "dependent on" and "initiated by ... the Word of God" (Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 17).

Therefore, in the first place, confession, according to Luther, means: assertion, as he stressed in the debate with Erasmus on the freedom or bondage of will: "For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions; on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian. And by assertion - ... - I mean a constant adhering, affirming, confessing, maintaining, and an invincible persevering. (...) Nothing is better known or more common among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions and you take away Christianity." (LW 33, 19-20) Assertion, or affirmation is the positive, constructive, edifying, restoring, consoling expression of faith, congruent to the content of God's promise. So the essence of Christian theology is to be found in assertion, which is "the only appropriate form for theological existence" (Asendorf/ Kolb, *Confessing the faith*, 26).

By emphasizing the affirmative character of confession, Luther does not at all deny the defensive nature of confessing the faith as an integral part of Christian doctrine. Therefore, confession includes the demarcation of error and misinterpretation of



God's word as well. In order to preserve the truth of the biblical message, rejections have to be articulated. To his most important treatise on the subject of the Eucharist, in 1528, he added a "confession" which he presented as a doctrinal testament.

In this document, which became the source of and the pattern to the confessions that the Protestant territories were to formulate only a few years later, like the Augsburg Confession of 1530, Luther laid down his personal faith; but he did so pursuing a doctrinal and ecclesiastical intention. Obviously, Luther's confession of 1528 follows the structure of the Apostolic Creed, integrating a great deal of the contemporary issues questioned in theology and church: "I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ." (LW 37, 360).

Here, the contemporary and, at the same time, the eschatological dimension of Luther's concept of confession becomes perceptible. Far beyond of being just a personal act of a single individual, this testimony type of testament was conceived by Luther as a true expression of the faith that all Christianity shares: "This is my faith, for so all true Christians believe and so the Holy Scriptures teach us." Thus, a personal testimony of faith cannot be, by definition, different from what the one, holy, catholic church has believed and confessed from the very beginning.

Inevitably, from the Lutheran point of view, the doctrine of the church, has to be proved by the Scriptures. Confession, as a personal action as well as a statement on behalf of the church, responds to the scriptural witness, and is determined to its correspondence with the basic testimony of God's word. The doctrinal documents, for their part, define and regulate the teaching and preaching, and the life of the church by normative standards, derived from the Scriptures, and applied to the necessities and needs of the church. Though this application occurs at certain times and places in history, it is intended to confess the truth of faith valid for all times. Believers of all times and ages take part in the confessional obligation of all Christians.

2. Lutheran identity as ecclesiastical identity

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

In this manner Luther elucidates the phrase "the congregation of saints" in the Large Catechism. For Luther it is of central importance to take seriously the existence of the Church, or of "Christendom", as he prefers to say, and the priority of the community of the faithful over one's own belief. This commitment to the Church precludes identifying oneself as an atomized individual with one's own private belief and piety, and includes seeing oneself within a community of faith which is always prior to oneself and of which God the Holy Spirit makes use for the accomplishment of His work.



This approach includes an ecumenical dimension as well. Lutherans understand themselves as being at once evangelical, catholic, and orthodox in the best sense of the word and professing a church which shall last forever. "It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church." Lutheran identity is not first and foremost a special identity; it rather lays claim to catholicity. As in the Reformation, to renew the Church means to remain faithful to the one, holy, catholic Church. For this reason the renewal of the Church in the Reformation and after has repeatedly been accompanied by the recourse to the Scriptures, the origin and the founding document of faith. For the Gospel, whose rediscovery and preservation were the primary concerns of the Reformation, is indeed the same Gospel to which witness is given in the Holy Scriptures by the Apostles and the Prophets and can be no other Gospel.

It is therefore of great import to reach an understanding, to establish a "consensus", about what in fact this Gospel is, and that with intention of proclaiming it: "It is enough for the true unity of the Christian church [singular, cf. the Latin text: *ad veram unitatem ecclesiae*] that the Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and that the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word."

If therefore the Church comes about through the preaching of the Gospel and the administering of the sacraments, then the following holds true: What is necessary for the unity of the Church is that which constitutes the essence of the Church. The converse is likewise true: What constitutes the essence of the Church is that which is required for its unity. The existence and the unity of the Church depend upon one and the same thing: upon the Gospel in the form of the proclamation of the Word in accordance with the Scripture, and upon the sacraments in the form of administration in conformity with their institution. Here lies the identity of the Lutheran Church and, as a consequence, the standard for the practice (*Betätigung*) and confirmation (*Bestätigung*) of church fellowship.

These impulses from the beginnings of the Reformation have been appropriately incorporated into the constitution (*Grundordnung*) of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (*Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* [SELK]). Firstly, Article One determines the specific place of the SELK within the context of the one Christendom: It "stands within the unity of the Holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church, which exists wherever the Word of God is preached in purity and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the institution of Christ." Here as well the emphasis lies on the fact that we profess the Gospel as it is believed, or at any rate should be believed, in all of Christendom. Secondly, the SELK is bound by the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the infallible Word of God. And this indeed characterizes the SELK as an *evangelical* church in contradistinction to other denominations that, alongside the Scripture, give quasi-equal rank to other elements for guidance concerning the doctrine and life of the Church. Scriptural conformity is thus indispensable for Lutheran identity. It is likewise essential for the clarification of internal conflicts, as well as for the external alignment with other Churches and denominations.

A further determination that has been effected in the constitution of the SELK is the commitment to the Book of Concord. This reflects the opinion that the confessional texts of the Ancient Church and the Reformation, which were collected in the Book

of Concord in 1580, and the truths they express are biblically grounded and therefore ecclesiastically binding. From this it follows that church fellowship is not possible with churches which are of the opinion that they can retract the positions here laid down, or somehow harmonize them with contrary positions - be it by means of the mitigation of doctrinal rejections, be it on the premise of the complementarity of ecclesiastical-theological "concerns".

3. On reviving the question of "Lutheran identity" – a German perspective

The question of "Lutheran identity" has been raised recently on various occasions. Last year alone, several essay collections on the subject were published by representatives from the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD). These publications are no doubt to be seen in connection with the debate about a new structure of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), and a stronger integration of the VELKD. However, the deliberations they contain are categorically connected with a basic principle that is tantamount to a shibboleth: With the reception of the "Agreement of Protestant Churches in Europe" (Leuenberg Agreement, 1973) there is no question about the existence of church fellowship between Lutheran, Reformed and Unionist denominations; it is an unquestionable - and unquestioned - fact.

From the Concord-Lutheran point of view there are, now as before, substantial reasons to disagree with the statement that the passages of the Leuenberg Agreement concerning the Holy Communion articulate an "agreement in the understanding of the Gospel". Still, it clearly does function as an after-the-fact theological legitimization of the informal union that from the point of view of the confessional Lutheran churches was already manifested by the founding of the EKD in 1948. It has been, in my opinion, indisputably demonstrated that this document stands in a direct line of descent from the (Old)Prussian Union of 1817/1830, despite the fact that it avails itself of new approaches in ecumenical methodology. By means of the systematic legerdemain of making a distinction between the "ground" and the "expression" of faith it became possible to relativize the historical confessions of faith of the 16th century in their present-day relevance, especially with respect to their doctrinal rejections. These were relativized inasmuch as fundamental and central importance was accorded only to "justifying faith"; as a consequence it alone was viewed as necessary for the establishment of church fellowship, whereas the doctrinal formulation of such faith, for example in the confession of faith of the respective church, was said to belong in the sphere of "expression". This renders it peripheral and unnecessary for the determination of church fellowship. Against this background a consensus in matters of faith, doctrines and confession is therefore no longer a prerequisite for the declaration of church fellowship; this can much rather be put into practice proleptically, if and because (at any rate from this point of view) consensus about justifying faith exists.

The Leuenberg Agreement does not then simply confront one with the old historical issue at the root of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church(es) in the 19th century, namely the issue of the possibility of a church "union" of denominations with divergent confessions. On the contrary: This issue continues to be of concern to us today when we see that the EKD is plainly attempting to make the Leuenberg model quasi-normative for its understanding of church fellowship. And even if it



were the case, as representatives of the VELKD would like us to believe, "that the Leuenberg Agreement is not a new confession and 'leaves in effect the obligatory nature of the confessions in the participating churches' ", hence "does not change the confession of faith of the church", especially since the Leuenberg Agreement "is not a unionist confession", it would still remain unclarified how the purported continuing validity of the confessions is reconcilable with the fact that at least their doctrinal rejections are to be considered as having no present-day validity. In any event, the largely uncontested significance of the reception of Leuenberg is that on this basis "fellowship in Word and Eucharist obtains among the Evangelical state churches in Germany".

If one follows the official interpretation of this state of affairs by the Evangelical Church in Germany, then the church fellowship declared on the basis of the Leuenberg Agreement has for its part ecclesiastical status, with the result that the EKD "in the theological sense of the word already is 'church', for church fellowship is church". What in the Leuenberg Agreement itself was only mapped out is thereby translated into fact. The final text from 1973 does indeed state that unity had been attained "in a quantitative manner in the central doctrines". Thereby that not unproblematic "proleptical consensus" - which was supposed to find expression in church fellowship in the sense of fellowship in Word and Eucharist, including intercommunion and intercelebration - was transformed into a hybrid "between a mere association of churches and a real ecclesiastical unity". Henceforth "church fellowship" became identified with "Church", thereby attributing a church status to the EKD that in earlier years had always been contested, not least by the Lutheran state (or territorial) churches in the VELKD.

Since 1973 the SELK has not seen itself in the position of being able to take this path as one compatible with the safeguarding of Lutheran identity. The path taken after the Second World War by the Protestant state churches, including the *Lutheran* state (or territorial) churches, to the EKD - and to the theological justification of this unification by means of the Leuenberg Agreement - has always seemed to the SELK to be in fact the path to the "Union", albeit in a modified form.

The ("New"-, or "Old-")Lutheran fathers and mothers in the 19th century desired to preserve in an undiminished form for themselves and their posterity the heritage of Concord-Lutheranism from the 16th century. It was no accident that the crystallization point of the confessional awakening, which led in the end to the emergence of independent evangelical Lutheran churches, was the sacrament of Holy Communion. The concern that forced confessional Lutherans onto "solitary paths" was that of preserving their biblical Lutheran understanding in an ecclesiastically binding form, of defending it in its exclusivity against every kind of false compromise. Thus the question of church fellowship in the sense of fellowship in Word and Eucharist, including intercommunion and intercelebration, was the foremost concern in the creation of confessional Lutheran churches in Germany. It was these churches that created a new awareness of the Concord-Lutheran principles of the 16th century and gave them renewed ecclesiological reality. They wanted to manifest Lutheran identity in the ecclesiastical dimension by establishing that, as the expression of full church fellowship, fellowship in public worship, particularly at the altar, has as its unconditional prerequisite a consensus in faith, doctrine(s) and confession.

4. The confession of faith as indicator of a common understanding and interpretation of Holy Scripture

The confession of faith, which for the confessional Lutheran churches in the anti-unionist and anti-liberal tradition of the 19th century is compiled in the Book of Concord of 1580, is not simply a recourse to doctrinal documents of times past; its intention is to be a voice in the present. A confession of faith is in this respect indeed first and foremost a *personal response*, but a response intended to enter into communication. It is at once an offer, a reply, and a challenge to those with whom I enter into dialog. Hence the emphasis on, the attainment of, and the striving for a consensus is from the outset an integral part of the nature of a confession of faith - in the Lutheran Reformation as well. This point of departure can already be found in the Latin text of Article 1 of the Augsburg Confession: "The churches among us teach with complete unanimity - *Ecclesiae magno consensu apud nos docent.*" Thus the striving for consensus has been an integral part of the confession from the very beginning of the Lutheran Reformation and throughout its history, up to and including the formulation of doctrinal confessional documents, not least the Formula of Concord in 1577.

The confession of faith is further taken as a key to an appropriate and uniform understanding of Holy Scripture. Of course this can be said only with a certain degree of reservation. For the confession itself is understood as an interpretation of Holy Scripture, i.e. as the proper, objective, and presently relevant interpretation in accordance with the standard and central import of Holy Scripture - in short, the scriptural interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Church identity can be historically formulated only by means of continually renewed recourse to this foundation and its appropriate interpretation, as expressed by the "Binding Summary" [*Summarischer Begriff*] of the Formula of Concord. The intention of the confession of faith is therefore to provide a guideline for the understanding of Scripture, as well as a scriptural test for the fundamental insights laid down in the confession. Properly implemented, the recourse to the confession of faith is the attempt to formulate and perpetuate historical continuity by reverting back to the identity at the origin of a (confessional) church - an identity that for its part was attained from the understanding and application of Scripture and that then became characteristic and habitual.

Hence the confession of faith expresses the personal faith and trust - a scriptural, i.e. Christocentric trust as rediscovered by the Reformation - which then is articulated consensually as a *common trust* that God, as he has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, is determinative for my life and the life of Christendom to which I belong. And to this extent church fellowship both within one denomination and between various denominations is predicated on fellowship in the confessing of faith (*Bekennen*), as well as fellowship in the confession of faith (*Bekennntnis*) in which faith finds its expression.

It is therefore both meaningful and helpful, not least in the sense of making certain of one's own identity, to also revert to texts that are several hundred years old, for they can be and are intended to be a guideline for the understanding of what Christian faith is, what Christian life is, and by that is meant how we can exist and lead our lives in the sight of God. Since the answers that can be found in the condensed form of the confessional documents of the 16th century (can) have a



high degree of plausibility even for today's contemporaries, they offer at the very least guidance for communicating faith today as well - Christian faith in its significance for our contemporaries. To this extent one can say: "It is essential in the confession of faith to take a public stand for experience that has been gained and truth that has occurred." This is precisely what the Lutheran Church attempts to do by reverting (not retreating!) to these confessional texts.

These texts are not intended to be anything other than a rendering of the scriptural truth, concentrated on the Gospel - hence the Gospel not understood as a collocation of correct propositions, but rather the Gospel understood as an event in which God imparts Himself, in which God communicates Himself to man and indeed *salvifically* - to man who has broken off the communication with God and, for the reason that he has broken it off, is not in a position to reestablish communication on the strength of his own efforts. The *actual* meaning and significance of the Gospel, which shines through in the emphasis on its effectualness *in actu*, is in conformity with both the New Testament and the confession of faith of the Lutheran Reformation. Hence the confession focuses on the center of the Scripture, namely the Gospel, of which Jesus Christ is the quintessence and the living reality.

The confession of faith is accordingly not a comprehensive dogmatic work, as is, thoroughly in the Lutheran tradition of the Reformation, Johann Gerhard's *Loci Theologici*. At the same time, however, it is admittedly the case that the confessions of faith of the 16th century are no longer liturgically suitable texts, such as the "ecumenical symbols" of the ancient church. Already in the early Middle Ages a development in the direction of a *doctrinal* confession began, which was then further formulated in the Reformation.

It is none the less true, however, that the confession of faith, not least the (Lutheran) doctrinal confession, is an introduction to the Scriptures and at the same time centers the Scripture from within the Scripture. This movement has indeed an unavoidably self-referential structure. Hence it is correct to speak of a "hermeneutic circle": The confession of faith arises from the Holy Scripture and leads back into it. It is however necessary to ensure that the Word of Scripture is and remains prior to the word of the confession. And to this extent one can even say that the confession of faith is *constitutive* for the Church, albeit only in this derivative sense. (This standpoint tended to be viewed for quite some time in Protestant theology as "confessionalistic", that is, as an embarrassment.) But then it must be ensured that the confession of the Church is and remains subject to the judgment of Scripture, as has been formulated in a lastingly valid manner by the "Binding Summary" of the Formula of Concord. The confession focuses on the Scriptures and within the Scriptures on the focal point of the Gospel.

5. The pastoral dimension of Lutheran identity

In these reflections the pastoral dimension of Lutheran identity is already present - whenever namely reference is made to the Gospel, the embodiment of which is Jesus Christ in person. This dimension has the greatest significance for the resolution of internal church conflicts as well. The Reformation was in no way spared the most tempestuous conflicts, not only with the papal Church, i.e. the faction of Christendom remaining under the Pope; there were also intense conflicts and heated controversies within the Protestant faction in general and within the



Lutheran camp itself. With respect to the kind of conflict resolution evidenced in the Book of Concord, the attempt to resolve disputes in a pastorally responsible fashion can be observed repeatedly right up through to the latest text.

The question that was always being asked was this: What is the pastoral relevance of the controversial issues and theological minutiae under discussion? What solution, in addition to its scriptural conformity, is appropriate, helpful, and comforting? What is at stake if we fail to take a careful look at this particular matter, if we neglect to formulate precisely? As a rule the decisions then reached were rejections of extreme positions, both on the "left" and the on "right". These extreme positions were rejected because they were viewed as posing a serious danger to the certainty of salvation.

This can be shown, for example, in the articles on "Law and Gospel" in the Formula of Concord. The exposition is based on the premise that the Law is proclaimed falsely if it induces arrogance or despair. Hence the decision was reached in the Formula of Concord to prohibit the Law from having the last word. To the contrary: In the proclamation of the Church it is the Gospel that must always have the last word, because the Law leaves man in the situation of either persisting in pride or - at the other extreme - of falling so deeply into despair that he is bereft of all certainty about being able to survive before God. Both these responses to the Word of God as Law are deemed pernicious and therefore inadmissible. This position could further be illustrated by the doctrine of Holy Communion, or other examples. As Notger Slenczka, a systematician of Mainz university, rightly observes: "The decisions of the FC are accompanied in their entirety by a sure pastoral instinct and a knowledge of the truth of the Gospel - namely, that it is not simply a doctrine but rather a teaching that liberates the sorely tempted from their solipsistic self-preoccupation and provides them with a sure foundation and thus a sure comfort in another - Christ!"

Accordingly, the Lutheran confessions of faith are not simply "instruction about" the Gospel, propositions and theory, nor are they merely an "introduction to" the gospel, but rather a guideline for making practical application of the Gospel in order to cope with certain existential situations, preeminently that of the human being standing as a sinner before God. To this extent the confessional texts constitute a guideline for pastoral care: "The doctrinal confession leads to and guides the interpretation and proclamation of Scripture - and that in a particular pastoral context", hence precisely not in an abstract manner.

6. "Doctrine" as the medium of church governance for the safeguarding of identity

It will be recalled that in Concord-Lutheran usage the confession of faith in the sense of "doctrine" has several dimensions, which need to be distinguished from one another. First of all, in its fundamental sense, confession as doctrine means the proclamation of the Gospel, particularly the proclamation in public worship. This is what is referred to by the formulation "*pura doctrina evangelii*" in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Secondly, confession has the dimension of a theological determination as ecclesiastically binding knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) and is in this sense confession (*Bekentnis*). That is the dimension designated by "*magnus consensus*" in Article I of the Augsburg Confession and is understood as an



ecclesiastically binding determination. In the Formula of Concord this tenet is taken up in the formulation: "We believe, teach and confess!" This formulation includes all these dimensions - viz. personal confession, ecclesiastical obligation, and systematic theological reconfirmation. In the third place, that is, in a derivative manner, there is the exclusion, in the form of "doctrinal rejections", of positions identified as contrary to Scripture. However, here it is necessary to understand the line of argument and adhere to it procedurally: The position comes before the negation. The fourth dimension of the confession in the sense of doctrine is finally that of academic teaching. In the SELK this dimension is ecclesiastically circumscribed, for instruction is carried out by the Lutherische Theologische Hochschule in Oberursel under the auspices of, and responsible to, the Church for the purpose of training future theologians.

"Church governance" is here understood as the self-regulation of the Church for the attainment of its specific, i.e. God-given purpose, namely the preaching of the Word of God in Law and Gospel, and the dispensation of the Gospel in proclamation and sacraments. This fundamental principle is directed on the one hand against external influences on the work of the Church; it is directed on the other hand against internal deviations from the underlying standards of the Church. In other words, it is not only a question of a defense of the Church against *external* influences, but also one of *internal regulation*.

Such self-regulation can from the Lutheran viewpoint take place only by means of recourse to the church foundations from which it has grown and in accordance with which it understands itself. That means for Reformational churches, specifically Lutheran churches, that self-regulation can be effected only by reverting to the Holy Scripture and - in a derivative manner - to the confession of faith as its proper interpretation, whereby both are authorities that are outside and beyond the sphere of all that which is within our discretion or at our disposal.

This principle is also manifested in the constitution of the SELK, and indeed in two regulations: firstly, that the *status confessionis* is unalterable - for a contrary resolution would mean that this church is no longer this church; secondly in the proviso that resolutions by authoritative bodies, particularly those of the church synods, which are contrary to the Holy Scripture and the confession of faith, are invalid. These two reservations mean the following: There are regulative principles that are neither alterable nor at the disposition of the Church, not even within its power of self-regulation.

This is a self-imposed obligation of the SELK in the form of a prior consensus to which every person agrees who enters into the service of this church. This prior consensus also finds expression in the ordination vows of the ministry. Disagreement with these fundamental principles means disagreement with this church, which means putting into question the acceptance of church identity as set forth in its fundamental texts. That is to say that the Church is guided by the interpretation of doctrine in the sense of these nondisposable and nondiscretionary underlying factors. At the same time the Confession in its capacity as ecclesiastical frame of reference is thereby understood as a prior consensus.

Although Church governance is indeed legitimated by recourse to these nondiscretionary factors, it must at the same time be discursively transparent with

respect to consensus and communication; it cannot be simply based on fiat. This basic principle is recorded in the Lutheran confession in the famous formulation that (episcopal) church governance takes place "not with human power, but by the Word - *sine vi humana, sed verbo*". This is predicated on the priority of the Holy Scripture over the confession in accordance with the statement in the Book of Concord to the effect that confessional texts have derivative authority and hence do not have equal status with Holy Scripture. This means that they are in principle subject to criticism - criticism, that is, which is based on the Scripture. The identity of a church is therefore bound up with the demonstration of both the continuity with its foundations, viz. Scripture and confession, and the "substantial" conformity with these foundational elements - a conformity which must at all times be susceptible of discursive demonstration.

7. The obligation to the confession of faith

Lutheran identity is therefore put into practice by demonstrating conformity to the fundamentals in all areas of activity - in every sermon, in church education, in the training of the upcoming church generation. It is therefore also required. Thus the confessions of faith circumscribe and define a sphere, a framework, in which ecclesiastically legitimate proclamation is possible.

It is a notable characteristic of the Lutheran Church that, unlike the Roman Catholic Church (even after the Second Vatican Council), something along the lines of a papal or ecclesiastical magisterium, even a collegially circumscribed one, is foreign to it. Hence there is no authority that is such simply by virtue of divine appointment (*Amtsgnade*). For the Church in accordance with the Reformational understanding is something like a "community of interpretation", even in the exercising of church governance by means of doctrine. That means that there are no single authorities that as such have monopolies of interpretation. This state of affairs follows from the fundamental Reformational concept of the Church, which has reference to the "priesthood of all believers" without, however, being exhaustively determined by it.

Reiner Preul, a practical theologian of Kiel university, has specified four very helpful rules for such a procedure of church governance by means of the interpretation of doctrine. Firstly: *recourse to the Biblical and Reformational texts*, hence for us the Holy Scripture and the Book of Concord. Secondly: *no privileged hermeneutics*, i.e. no identity-reconfirmation strategies of a charismatic or any other "privileged" nature. For the interpretation of Scripture, as well as for the acceptance of the confession of faith, there must be a hermeneutical principle and procedure accessible to all and capable of being participated in by all. Thirdly: *communication between the levels of responsibility*, i.e. from the congregation up through the districts, the dioceses, the church administration, to the entire church and back again - here as well with free interchange, no separation of the levels from one another. Fourthly: at all levels of decision making it should be ensured that a high degree of *theological competence* is involved.

This means that in all dimensions of church work, the decision makers, at least those commissioned by the Church, must continue to reflect anew on, and apply to our times, the Word of God, to which the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament give fundamental, exemplary, and inviolable witness. In this manner the life and work of the Church takes place on the basis of the interpretation of,



reflection upon, and application of the Scriptures and the confession of faith. For this reason it appears necessary at all levels of church work to continue to take a fresh look at the confession of faith, which is bound by the Holy Scripture as the documented Word of God and therefore obligates the Church in doctrine, liturgy, self-expression, and governance. This raises the question of whether our churches are in need of something like a "*Curriculum Confession*".

8. The existential dimension of Christian identity

A truly confessional stance, as outlined above, is not simply a retreat to distant historical documents; it takes place as the recourse to the Scripture and is thus a guideline for the profession of faith. It can be shown that such a guideline is preserved in the Lutheran confessions themselves, e.g. in Luther's catechisms. Notger Slenczka has provided a fine illustration of this by reformulating Luther's question "What is this?" in the Small Catechism in terms of a modern language game: One can express the question "What is this?", which forms the introduction to the explanations in the Small Catechism, in existential terms and ask, "How does this affect *you*?", or "What does this say about *you*?", or "Where do you recognize *yourself* here?" For example: " 'I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.' What does this say about *you*? 'I believe that God has created *me*.' 'I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, the only begotten Son of God.' What does this say about *you*? 'I believe that Jesus Christ is my Lord, who has saved *me* in order that *I* may belong to *Him*.'"

The confession of faith functions as a guideline for the act of confessing one's faith. In Slenczka's reformulation, the transfer into our times - which has been discussed here and which is the duty of the Church to perform - has already been accomplished and set down in an exemplary manner. Slenczka is therefore correct in emphasizing that the Lutheran Confessions are so copious that they require no addition. Properly read and understood, the Book of Concord is sufficient in itself and requires nothing further.

But just in this manner confessional statements or documents constitute a guideline for actual confessing, statements that articulate and make possible an understanding of Christian existence and Church life that is at once Scriptural and contemporary - purely and simply by communicating the Gospel.

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