Lutheran Mission Matters

Volume XXIX, No. 1 (Issue 58) May 2021

Confession Is Crucial, and Context Counts[1]

Werner Klän

Abstract: Lutheran identity is not first and foremost a special identity; it rather lays claim to catholicity. The Lutheran Confessions are intended to be a guideline for the understanding of what Christian faith is and what Christian life is.

What is demanded of us, then, is a theological answer to the challenges we as confessional Lutheran churches, pastors, and scholars are facing in our time and day, and to our specific situations and living conditions in our various countries, continents, and climes. Translation, therefore, is inevitable for any theological endeavour: It is and remains our task. For the church and its members function as communicators of God's message to all people, not least to those who have not yet been addressed, or reached by the biblical message.

Thorough analyses of the "secular age" we live in are necessary. Of course, the different conditions, Lutheran Christians and churches are facing around the globe, have to be taken into consideration. Therefore, the Church, wherever it lives, should critically deal with contemporary issues in a given context. When it does so, this demonstrates that it is aware that it is inevitably connected with its context. If our message is to be credible, the Church will speak what we have to say to the world outside of our doors, first to ourselves.

That is to say, that the implications the global changes have for our identity as Lutherans and our confessional witness must be rethought within our own (confessional Lutheran) ranks. Moreover, the changes in the kind of Christianity that

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Rev. Dr. Werner Klän is professor emeritus in systematic theology at the Theologische Hochschule, Oberursel, Germany. He has lectured frequently at the Lutheran Theological Seminary of the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, affiliated with the University of Pretoria, in Tshwane (Pretoria), South Africa. He served as guest professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in fall quarter 2000, and at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, St. Catharines, ON, Canada in winter semester 2020. In 2020, he received an honorary Doctor of Letters (DLitt) from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He is the author and editor of many books and articles on Lutheran theology as well as the history and theology of Lutheran mission, and he is a frequent presenter at ecumenical meetings. werner.klaen@gmx.de

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is emerging, especially in what is labelled the "Global South," cannot be neglected. It may seem as though the process of secularization, as it has taken place in the "western(ized)" world, at least, was irreversible—which, on the other hand, is not yet decided.

I have been and continue to be pleading for a global fellowship between our confessional Lutheran churches through the International Lutheran Council. It would certainly be foolish to underestimate the geographical, historical, organizational, and financial problems accompanying such a project on the world level. But all these things should not be real obstacles on the way to a global confessional Lutheran Church if we want to take our heritage and our responsibilities seriously.

An Outline

For Luther it is of central importance to take seriously the existence of the Church, or of "Christianity," as he prefers to say,[2] 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.[3]

This approach includes an ecumenical dimension as well—using the term "ecumenical" in the best sense: If you look at the front page of the first part in the Book of Concord, you will find the rubric "*Tria Symbola catholica sive oecumenica*" (The Three Ecumenical Creeds).[4] Lutherans indeed understand themselves as being at once evangelical, catholic, orthodox, and ecumenical 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."[5]

Translation, however, is inevitable for any theological endeavour: Translation—linguistically, culturally, contextually, historically, ecumenically, not to mention our daily work as teachers and preachers—is our task. However, Christianity is and remains under an obligation to be critical of its own contemporaneity.

The Lutheran Confessions, then, 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.

What is demanded of us, then, is a theological answer to the challenges we as confessional Lutheran churches, pastors, and scholars are facing in our time and day, and to our specific situations and living conditions in our various countries, continents, and climes.

On Confessional Identity

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.[6] 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 basic 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 (Gal 1:7).

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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. Herein consists the identity of the Lutheran Church.[7] 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 rendering 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.

The Lutheran Church, however, in a special manner is characterised as being "confessional." This is due to the fact that "confession," in the Lutheran use of the term, is meant to be 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 Scriptures, and thus, with doctrine of the church.

Therefore, the confessions focus on the center of the Scripture, namely the Gospel, of which Jesus Christ is the quintessence and the living reality. These documents 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 as an event in which God imparts Himself, in which God communicates Himself to man and indeed *salvifically*.

It is nonetheless 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."

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 confess, in this understanding, is an act of (Christian) faith, which is created by the very Word of God that faith is related to.[8] 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*).[9] 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.[10] Faith consequently cannot but express itself in terms of confession. Conversely, this confession is "dependent on" and "initiated by . . . the Word of God."[11] Nonetheless, it is always contemporary and contextual.

In Luther's confession of 1528, the contemporary and, at the same time, the eschatological dimension of Luther's concept of confession becomes perceptible. Far beyond being just a personal act of a single individual, this type of testament was conceived by Luther as a personal testimony and, at the same time, 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."[12] 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.

In the confessional documents of the Lutheran Church that observe Luther's pattern, like the Augsburg Confession of 1530, it is therefore of great import to reach an understanding, or to establish a "consensus," about what in fact this Gospel is: "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."[13]

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.

In addition, we may observe that the authors of the Lutheran Confessions always envision the pastoral dimension of Lutheran identity—particularly, whenever reference is made to the Gospel, the embodiment of which is Jesus Christ in person. 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.

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."[14] For us, as confessional Lutheran churches in the ILC, it is therefore both meaningful and helpful, not least in the sense of ascertaining our identity, to also revert to texts that are several hundred years old.

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.

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Since the answers found in the condensed form of the confessional documents of the sixteenth 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.

On Context(s)

"Everything exists in a frame of reference and is viewed and understood in a context."[15] This applies also for theology and theologians: "There is a present context of a thinker/theologian, and there are circumstances surrounding readers/hearers. And

between them . . . stands a text that comes with a context."[16] None of us has direct, immediate access to facts, events, or documents of the past, or to circumstances and living conditions in a different country, even within different areas in a given country. That is why, "in order to understand, layers of culture must be peeled away, examined, and reassembled—not easy, but that is no excuse for half-hearted effort. Worse is being blind to context, as we read our assumptions, perspectives, and values back into the text, finding what we want."[17] Therefore, we will have to pay attention to the gap between our times and the era that we investigate. Or in missions, we will have to look very thoroughly at the differences between our culture, and the culture the gospel is addressed to.

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The fathers of the Lutheran Confessions were of course deliberately conscious of the contemporary character of the confessional writings in the sixteenth century, but at the same time deeply convicted to confess the eternal truth of God's Word. It is noteworthy, however, that nearly all of the Lutheran Confessions were subscribed to by princes and other "worldly " authorities. They were acting on behalf of their territories in defending the Evangelical faith, and at the same time, justifying the ongoing reformation process over against the Pope and the German Emperor. Although, due to the political conditions of their times, the reformation movement(s) ended up in a state-church system which prevailed until the end of World War I (in Germany at least), the Lutheran churches coming out of the Reformation, particularly those adherent to the Book of Concord, may be identified as an expression of emancipation from the political and ecclesiastical powers that had fought for the domination of Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

The fathers and mothers of the confessional Lutheran churches in the nineteenth century formed, in a manner of speaking, an *avant garde* stance. They posed questions and found answers that, with their fundamental and permanent reference to Scripture, were also contemporary and appropriate. In this way they found the attention of their contemporaries; thus, a group of Bible-based, church-committed Christians came together, and became effective in society, even if only to a certain degree. In addition they were, at least in religious matters, pioneers fighting for social values of the modern era such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience. The founders of the Lutheran confessional churches in Europe, Australia, the Americas, Asia, and southern Africa proved to be equal contemporaries of the movement for bourgeois emancipation. This remains true even if we recognize that the theological contents, for which they were prepared to give great sacrifices, were principally conservative. Nonetheless, the claim for religious, ecclesiastical, and

theological independence in terms of confessional church bodies is an integral part of our common inheritance.

Pertinence and Transfer

Translation is inevitable for any theological endeavour. It is and remains our task. The Trinitarian and Christological dogmas modelled from Nicea (325) to Constantinople (381) or Chalcedon (451), e.g., are lucid paradigms for such successful processes of translation. The ὁμοούσιος, although not a biblical term, nevertheless describes appropriately what Scripture tells and teaches about Jesus and His relationship to the Father (and, according to St. Basil, likewise the relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit). Still the fathers of the ancient church held endless debates on how to understand and define the term. Thus it will be essential to transfer the biblical record into the target horizon in an appropriate, comprehensible, cogent, demonstrable manner. This implies that such a process can by no means be spared from conflicts over the plausibility and "correctness" of a given or suggested translation, even while maintaining that the spirit and the contents of the theological documents of past times apply today, particularly the Early Christian Creeds and those of the sixteenth century.[18]

What is necessary, is the transfer of the important heritage of the history of Christianity, and the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation in particular. Inevitably, we will have to consider the circumstances, times, contexts, people, relationships, and traditions, which have been deposited in the texts of the Lutheran reformers. An historical-contextual understanding of the texts and confessions of the sixteenth century is crucial.[19] That means, we will have to understand Luther's message within the context of his own time. Neither Luther's striving for a new formulation of the Christian life, nor the real world situation of the addressees in the sixteenth century, nor the difference between the worldview of the Reformation era and our day[20] may be neglected.

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Together with Robert Kolb, we claim that Luther's *theologia crucis* is the "over-arching concept needed to understand the following: God's revelation and the trusting in it which only first becomes truly possible with human life, the atonement against the background of Christ's death and resurrection, and the Christian life."[21] For Luther, it is only under the cross that one can know: (1) who God really is, (2) how a person should behave in relation to God, (3) what happens to people without God and what God inflicts on such a *conditio humana*, and (4) what the life of a disciple who trusts in Christ looks like in the day-to-day."[22] Further, Kolb sees Luther's concept of "two

kinds of righteousness" as the actual prime discovery of Lutheran theology and thereby the actual theological program of the Wittenberg Reformation.[23]

Luther's way of thinking includes an illuminating view of the *conditio humana* and is qualified to answer the questions of our contemporaries: "Who am I? Why am I on this earth? What makes life worth living? How do I establish appropriate boundaries to define my life? How can I truly be free?"[24] In a translation of Luther's *theologia crucis*[25] it sounds like this: "In a time of deepest doubt on the existence and love of God, the cross shows us how God reveals himself in the midst of evil which threatens our life. In Christ, the cross shows us who God is. In a time of deepest doubt about human existence and its value, the theology of the cross defines life from the standpoint of the presence of God and his love to his creatures. In Christ, the cross reveals God's divinity and our humanity."[26]

Instead of somehow regretting the uniqueness of the Lutheran Church, in writing down its understanding of the Gospel and its own self-understanding in a *Corpus Doctrinae* with the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord, we ought to value this approach as a contribution to the ecumenical work in our modern day. This is so since Christianity in the twenty-first century is still about proclaiming the Word of God and further speaking the message of justification in Jesus Christ.[27] "[The sixteenth century confessors] placed much, including their lives, on the line to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to his Church and their society. In this they provide a model for Christian life and witness in our time as well."[28] And for exactly this reason, the "Wittenberg Way of Thinking" is fruitful for the Church in the present day.[29] Luther almost becomes a conversation partner for Christians in the twenty-first century, also in relation to developing critical situations.[30] Last but not least, such an approach is a way of translating across the historical gap of centuries and across cultural barriers.[31]

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Two presuppositions here must be made clear: the first one posits that God formed human existence with two fundamental aspects, the second that God works through His Word in many different modes of application. The anthropological presupposition means first, that human beings are truly human, i.e., God's creation, because of God's goodness and favor alone, and second, that humanity demonstrates its relationship to other creatures in the form of acts of love. The theological presupposition posits that

the application of the Word of God in its oral, written, and sacramental forms[32] does not only inform concerning God's heavenly disposition, but much more on the basis of the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, it really effects and delivers actual new life.[33]

It is possible indeed, to make a bridge between Luther's (and Melanchthon's) approach to questions of the meaning of humanity and of the self-revelation of God and a similar approach in our time and for our questions.[34] What "the good life" means and can be, is constituted even today by the readiness of Christians to enter each day with a readiness to serve within the different and overlapping stations of life, which correspond to the current calling of God to my situation and the call of God to my present circumstances.[35] It is all about a responsible, community-oriented, and community-serving life within a world given all together by God.

Further, Christians involve themselves intensively in society in the ways of life and cultural practices of their context on the one hand, just as on the other hand they carry their values into the life and world of society.[36] The manner and kind of interaction between the two is highly complex, and therefore just as complex is carrying out any kind of evaluation of their interactions.[37] This cannot however be played off against the observation that Luther's new way of affirming the fundamental realities of human life has worked and is still working across generations and cultures.[38]

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Culture(s)

Talking about culture(s), we start with this definition: "The term refers to the organic and dynamic whole of human activities and relationships which define the meaning and significance of life of a specific group of people. . . . Institutions within a culture have their own cultures. . . .The church, too, has always existed as a distinct cultural unit within the peoples and lands, the societies and cultures, into which the Holy Spirit has placed it."[39] The Church and its members function as communicators of God's message to all people, not least to those who have not yet been addressed or reached by the biblical message. Nonetheless, they are and will remain the addressees of God's salutary will. "God's communication to those outside the faith does address these human beings as the creatures he fashioned them to be, with intelligible claims and comprehensible offers of God's goodness and mercy. . . . God's way of thinking meets human ways of thinking within the framework of his created order for communication."[40]

It is God's design to reach out for human beings who have turned away from Him, forgotten about Him, and—talking about the situation in post-Christian areas of the world—even have forgotten that they have forgotten about God: "The unchangeable truths of scripture must be proclaimed to specific human beings in their specific environments as the gospel addresses their realities and brings power to change those realities through forgiveness and the promise of new life in Christ. God's word not only describes reality but also creates it."[41]

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In the course of history, particularly in the course of the spreading of Lutheran churches throughout Germany, Europe, and the world, we can see that "Lutherans have both affirmed the created goodness of their cultures, and at the same time, served as sharp critics of what their cultures do in opposition to God's will. . . . The Lutheran mission churches . . . have often lived in conflict with traditional cultural values but have also attempted to affirm and enrich those values."[42]

Challenging Contexts

For Werner Elert in his magnum opus, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Lutheranism is not "a once-configured and concluded variable, but rather one that finds itself living out its history."[43] Interdenominationally, the "confessional dynamis" is in "independent competition with 'extracanonical motifs'" which, "in the course of enlightenment," is threatened by the "loss of the Evangelical approach."[44] He goes on to say that it was only in the nineteenth century that a "Lutheran restoration" occurred, inducing the "Evangelical approach" to "generate entirely new forms of expression," right up to "sociology and ideology."[45] According to Elert, an "indissoluble fusion of the historical form of Lutheranism with German culture" initially occurs, but also "with other nationalities,"[46] as he tries to demonstrate with Hungary, the Slavic and Baltic peoples, Finland and the Scandinavian nations.[47] In this context, even the "development of German Enlightenment towards German Idealism via the German national literature" should be seen as "a phase in the history of Lutheranism. It is the history of its secularization." This point of view culminates in the statement that "Germany's intellectual history is, on the whole, a long-distance effect of Lutheranism."[48]

This proposition may well be questioned. In 1934/36, and in clear contrast to his colleague in Erlangen, Hermann Sasse cautioned against these misconstructions of the Lutheran Reformation: the first that "Lutheranism itself [. . .] does not respond (sc. to

the question: What is Lutheran?). It is unable to give an answer to those who inquire after its essence; it is a mute concept. It is a different matter, however, if we inquire after the Lutheran Church. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church is not an idea, it is a reality. It is not mute, it speaks."[49] Sasse further states that a second heroic misconstruance culminates in hero worship and apotheosis of Luther.[50] The national misconstruance common in the 1930s sees Martin Luther as being the "protest of Nordic man against the piety and the ecclesiastical system of Roman Catholicism" and aims at a German national church, which had arisen during the "Third Reich." To Sasse this is one of "the most dangerous heterodoxies."[51]

Seventy years after Elert and Sasse, Charles Taylor programmatically spoke of a "secular age,"[52] for the northwest parts of the world in our time and day. In the course of the processes beginning around 1500, called "The Work of Reform" by Taylor, there was a progressive "disenchantment" of the world. Ultimately, the concept of the "isolation of immanence" results from this process. In Taylor's grand narrative, however, it has to be taken into account that the process of this development can be expected to be uneven. Even so, Taylor doubts that a return to old beliefs and corresponding religious forms of organization are possible, although the question of identity formation, including collective identity formation must still be posed.[53]

Thus, thorough analyses of the "secular age" are necessary. What needs to be analyzed—just to list some examples from a recently published book on "Church Theory"—includes what is called the "risk society," "individualization," "thrill-seeking society," "media society," "data religion," and theories on "world relation," "generations," and "metamorphosis."[54] All these phenomena in the so-called developed countries, and far beyond these, can be characterized as ambivalent: increasingly welfare is endangered by technical risks, individualization bears the risk of social isolation, internet technologies threaten the subjection of human beings by algorithms.[55] This approach certainly includes the use of empirical, sociological tools in order to describe the reality of the church(es) [in Germany].

Contextual Spotlights (without Any Claim to Be Complete)

Africa

In the first ILC World Seminaries Conference taking place in Canoas, RS, Brazil, in 2001, Radikobo Ntsimane, speaking about South Africa, differentiated between the "dominant culture," the "resistant culture," and the "obedient culture." This "obedient culture" includes "understanding the text," "understanding the context," and, finally showing "obedience to the text."[56] He comes to the conclusion that "This interpretation of God's Word that has Christ in the center serves to challenge and transform all cultures of all times to conform to the love of Christ the way, the truth and the life, in their relationship to 'superior' or 'inferior' cultures."[57] In his response, Nelson Unwene highlighted the principle that Scripture has to "be understood in its native

sense, according to grammar, context, and linguistic usage of the time." In addition, he remarked that we

> are also to interpret that inerrant Scriptures to different cultures in ways that the Scriptures be understood by the different cultures, as best as possible, in their native sense, according to grammar, context, and linguistic usage of this time (Acts 2:11b). It is faithful exegesis that introduces us to the study of the context, and consequently the culture of the society that forms the context. These exercises (analysis/exegesis of language and cultural context of both the Scriptures and the receptors) are very important to the interpreter and the interpretation of God's Word.[58]

David Tswaedi, former bishop of our sister church, the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, once made the following statement:

> I firmly believe that acknowledgement of the diversity of human settings calls for communicating the gospel, teaching, preaching and worshipping, in a form that would not be a photocopy of the sending church way of doing things. The failure or the denial of Africans to sing and worship God like Africans would suggest a fear of not being able to garb the message in an African culture without changing the message.[59] It will further evince the inability of the African church to distinguish between the northern hemisphere culture and the pith of the gospel. That failure to continue disputing the cultural incarnation of the Gospel will bolster the perennial excuse of defining the church and all it stands for as a foreign institution or in the worst as a colonial repository.
>
> There is a general concern in some quarters that if African Lutherans would worship and sing like Africans they are in danger of syncretistic, feeling-driven, or Pentecostal tendencies.[60]

Brazil

German language and German culture were the bond beyond the theological and denominational differences in the camp of the German immigrants to Brazil. Lutheranism and Germanness became (nearly) identical. In the twentieth century, alignments with the National Socialism ideology are to be found as well as sympathy for the "Confessing Church" in its struggle against the "German Christians." After Brazil entered World War II, a nationalistic attitude led to prosecution and imprisonment of German pastors.

In the South American perspective, those who are poor and exploited, are able to identify with the humble Jesus of Nazareth who in the end triumphs over the evil powers. Liberation, however, is liberation that leads to serving the neighbor. The church, in the first place, exists as (local) congregation. It reminds the governmental

authorities of the duty to fight injustice and exploitation. Thus the doctrine of the two realms becomes relevant in the Latin American context.[61]

Germany

According to the latest statistics in Germany (for the year 2018), the two mainstream churches have lost 216,000 members (Roman Catholic) and 220,000 members (Protestant). These are greater losses compared to 2017 of approximately 30 percent (Roman Catholic) and 12 percent (Protestant). Many a reason might be named for these developments, not least the child abuse scandals in the churches. This is obviously a larger societal problem; but it is shameful that the churches, even in this regard, are not much different from our post-Christian, secular society. The church(es) as (an) institution(s) in central Europe are facing huge challenges. One of these is the so-called "social media" where it is necessary to be "relevant." Therefore "attentiveness" has to be generated, because otherwise, communication could not be carried out successfully.[62] The communication of the Gospel, however, is the core of the Christian religion.[63]

Hungary

What is special about the role of the confessions in the historic kingdom of Hungary[64] is not the interdependence of political circumstances and the confessions per se, but the civil and multinational background of the confessions. Three confessions from the free royal cities and royal mining towns testify to the initially outstanding role of the bourgeoisie in asserting the Reformation's aspirations in the kingdom of Hungary. The Hungarian students who studied in Wittenberg came from a bourgeois background. Understandably, German nationality played an important role in the acceptance of the confessions. Nevertheless, in this central European context, the Augsburg Confession is a confession in which three nationalities participated simultaneously: German, Hungarian, and Slovak. The reception of the Confessio Augustana also showed that multinationality and multiculturalism do not constitute an obstacle to the acceptance of a confession.

Japan

One way to explain why the evangelical legacy of Luther is not more prevalent in this country, is the particular Japanese context. Because the dominant religious and cultural forces are so enormously strong, and because the Christian churches are in such a minority, Christians feel a closer bond to one another, not only within various Lutheran church bodies but also across all Christian denominations. Confessional differences among the Christians are viewed as rather trivial compared to the more gigantic common enemies. Many Japanese Christians feel that a divided Christianity can only send a negative message to the non-Christians.[65] Obviously, this is something

which commonly takes place in every foreign mission field.[66] But the unique features of Japan and, similarly, of Asia are the overwhelming diversity of religions and worldviews, the historical deep-seatedness of local cultural traditions, and the emotional character of spirituality that dismisses rationalistic thinking. After all, what the Western societies have come to know as post-modernism, with its accents of ambiguity, healing, taste, progress, and choice, has existed on Japanese soil for centuries. Lutheran churches in Japan struggle. They are a minority of the minority in society. They are surrounded by incredibly strong anti-Christian religious and cultural forces from outside, and by unLutheran doctrinal environment from within. Despite these challenges, Jesus is still the Lord of the Church, also in Japan.[67]

USA

For North America, Robert Kolb has identified the following challenges for Christian witness: pluralism, secularization, especially withdrawal from religion, and individualism with clear tendencies toward narcissism.[68] In addition, he also lists the phenomena of estrangement and the feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness, and last but not least, all this in the face of the reality of death.[69] Kolb claims however, that Luther's thought addresses North American concerns and issues today with its anthropology centered on personal trust and its teaching of the passive and active aspects of human identity or righteousness; with its understanding of the "performative," or actually creative/re-creative nature of God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms; with its concept of daily life in the framework of callings; and with its emphasis on the experience of the personal relationship with God in Christ.

Tentative Approaches to Answers

The confession of a Christian is first to give answer, second to give witness; all the while, however, it is invested in the life-giving power of the Word of God itself, who desires to reach all people.[70] Such a confession will also be inviting, since it builds the bridge between God's Word in the Holy Scriptures and different situations and cultures in which God is awaiting our witness. In this way, the witnesses will not forget that the promise of the Lord of the Church applies to them as the "little flock" (Lk 12:32). This will not hinder anyone from proclaiming the great deeds of God to the people of the earth.[71]

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The transfer into our times—which is the duty of the Church through proclaiming Law and Gospel to this time and world—has already been accomplished and set down

in an exemplary manner in the confessional documents of the Lutheran Reformation contained in the Book of Concord. But precisely in this manner, these confessional statements constitute a guideline for actual confessing, statements that articulate and make possible an understanding of Christian existence and Church life that is at the same time scriptural and contemporary—purely and simply by proclaiming the will of God and by communicating the Gospel.

Three propositions made by Armin Wenz may help us to focus on this task in the way of distinctiveness and demarcation: "Being bound to the confessions helps the church to remain different and distinguishable from the world." "Confessional obligation helps the church avoid false concepts of ecclesial unity."[72] "Confessional obligation protects the church's integrity and the rights of the justified sinner over against any allegedly necessary improvement or depravations of the merely biblical faith in Christ."[73]

What is demanded of us, then, is a theological answer to the challenges we are facing as confessional Lutheran churches, pastors, and scholars in our time and our specific situations and living conditions in our various countries, continents, and climes. By no means are we meant to neglect the so-called "non-theological factors" in the twenty-first century, in which the world under the banner of new technologies, new economic forces, new political arrangements, and new social realities, along with the danger posed by the continuing sinfulness of humanity, creates risks that endanger life and rob us of our humanity. Together with other colleagues and brothers, I am deeply convinced that the Lutheran message of the God-given new identity of human beings and His formation of true human life not only retains its validity but takes on new significance.[74]

By no means are we meant to neglect the so-called "non-theological factors" in the twenty-first century, in which the world under the banner of new technologies, new economic forces, new political arrangements, and new social realities, along with the danger posed by the continuing sinfulness of humanity, creates risks that endanger life and rob us of our humanity.

However, Christianity is and remains under an obligation to be critical of its own contemporaneity. The Church and its members can, after all, not escape contemporaneity, neither can it be denied that its members are influenced and imperceptibly governed by "trends" and tendencies of a world and society that is not only "all around them," but in which they live themselves and which consequently has an effect on their being. And even in the rejection of contemporary developments where the Church or its individual members, based on their Christian responsibility,

are of the opinion that they ought to be met with disapproval, such positioning proves itself to be contemporary in nature.

Christians and the Church, claimed by their Lord, have nothing to sugarcoat, nothing to gloss over, and nothing to conceal concerning the predicament of men and our contemporary society. They will boldly carry out their task, irrespective of power, richness, or influence of men. They will not cower before the powerful, and not buckle before those in charge of the state, society, or economy—I say this because the history of the Church is also a history of failure in this responsibility. The history of alliances between throne and altar, Christianity and power, church and dictator, demonstrates these failures all too clearly. If the Church desires to do justice to her mission, it will not give in to majority-trends and "mainstream" public and popular opinion.

Therefore, it remains the task of the Church to proclaim this very "righteous, unchanging will of God"[75] for His world and its population, in a manner that is relevant for today. The Church is thus obligated to be critical of her contemporary setting. Contemporary life also affects the Church and her members. One cannot deny that the Church is influenced and affected by worldly societal "trends" and tendencies. These movements do not only find expression outside and around the Church but also creep into the Church. Yet the Church demonstrates that it is contemporary when she resists current developments of which she cannot approve.

One cannot deny that the Church is influenced and affected by worldly societal "trends" and tendencies. . . . The Church should critically deal with contemporary issues.

Therefore, the Church should critically deal with contemporary issues. When it does so, this demonstrates that she is aware that she is inevitably connected with her context. If our message is to be credible, the Church will speak first to ourselves what we have to say to the world outside of our doors. The Church, along with each of her members, must also admit and confess, personally and corporately, the misdeeds and failures which stand against the divine standards. This will not invalidate the credibility of the Church's message, but strengthen it, so long as we speak out of humility which derives from a recognition of her own failures, rather than with an attitude of arrogance.

When the Church does this, she will then be able to speak to those issues in our nations and times where the divine standards of God's will have been abandoned, despised, or wantonly rejected. We will then have to proclaim that God in His holiness will not allow such offenses and revolt to be tolerated or passed over. At the same time, though, we will speak even more clearly that God Himself, in His Son, Jesus Christ, has already overcome this evil, so that our contemporary hearers are not thrown

into arrogance or despair.[76] We will proclaim—in conformity with our task and mission—that God, who is visible in Jesus Christ, took it upon Himself to repair the broken fellowship between Him and mankind, in order to free the totality of humankind and each individual human being from the injurious bonds in which we are ensnared.

Confessional and Ecumenical Perspectives

The implications that global changes have for our identity as Lutherans and our confessional witness need rethinking within our ranks. In this regard, we have to remember, that "the Church recognizes the fact that her proclamation does not take place in a vacuum. Mission happens in a given context. In that context, mission engages in some form of dialogue, whatever the situation may be. The Church must learn to listen in order to respond to the cries and the crises in our times. That presents a daunting and challenging task indeed."[77]

It is rather likely that, at least in Europe, Christianity—rather the Church—will take a shape similar to the one it had throughout the first three centuries, being a minority, despised, mocked, marginalized, suspected, neglected, displaced, persecuted, and even killed. I do not see the Lord promising His Church to be a culturally, politically, morally influential and even a predominant factor or institution in this world. That seductive dream belongs most intimately to the imperial ideology and ecclesiastical enthusiasm of the Constantinian era, which I agree is hard to leave behind. But I do believe the Lord who promises "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18).

It is rather likely that, at least in Europe, Christianity—rather the Church—will take a shape similar to the one it had throughout the first three centuries, being a minority, despised, mocked, marginalized, suspected, neglected, displaced, persecuted, and even killed.

Living in a post-Christian environment, it will be most necessary for the mission of the Lutheran churches in Europe to cling faithfully to its biblical and confessional roots, to remain dedicated to the task of translating and transferring the biblical-Lutheran heritage into a language understood by contemporary people, supported by authentic ways of living and working together. At least this is the historical experience of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK): God can use small circles of true Christians, witnessing deliberately and faithfully to the Gospel, as blessed bases for His mission.

All the confessional Lutheran churches in the ILC are committed to determining our decisions solely on the basis of the Word of God, and not on social, cultural, or

practical considerations. This goal, however, is much easier said than done. The prerequisite for this task is, of course, that we continually recall the words of the Old and New Testaments, which are our foundation, set our standards, and are our steadfast aim even in these ecumenical times. Our confession as well must repeatedly be called to mind: it is bound to proclaim God's Word and is therefore a constant and binding challenge for the church in its liturgy, teaching, government, and self-expression. In this way we become part of the twin movement of the Church towards unity: being gathered and being sent.

In preaching, teaching, adult education, mission work, social involvement, the position in the social milieu (as seen by the Church and by outsiders) there will be differences in the understanding and description of responsibilities and of the realistic possibilities in any given context. Changes in the kind of Christianity that is emerging, especially in the "Global South" cannot be neglected. It may seem as though the process of secularization, as it has taken place in the "western(ized)" world, at least, is irreversible—which, on the other hand, is not yet decided.

In any case, it has to be considered seriously that the roots and requirements of the Lutheran Church are basically ecumenical. The preface to and the Augsburg Confession in Articles I and VII, Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the creed, the first part of the Smalcald Articles, and the Binding Summary of the Formula of Concord, just to name a few of the relevant basic texts, are a fundamental witness to this. The Church Fathers at the beginning of the Lutheran confessional churches in Germany, in the first half of the nineteenth century, were aware of this truly ecumenical responsibility. In this sense it was quite logical for Wilhelm Löhe to describe the Lutheran Church as the "reconciling center of the confessions."

Therefore—just reiterating a claim, I have been making for twenty years—we should deliberate under what conditions, in which form, with which resources, and with what consequences we could also strive for a global fellowship between confessional Lutherans through the International Lutheran Council. It would certainly be foolish to underestimate the geographical, historical, organizational, and financial problems accompanying such a project on the world level. But all these things should not be real obstacles on the way to a global confessional Lutheran Church if we want to take our heritage and our responsibilities seriously.

We should deliberate under what conditions, in which form, with which resources, and with what consequences we could also strive for a global fellowship between confessional Lutherans through the International Lutheran Council.

The ILC could then be and become more and more an appropriate counterbalance to an increasingly non-confessional Lutheranism, and could provide a well-founded, profiled corrective to theological and church-political developments and objectives that diminish, abandon, or (by trend) annihilate the theological heritage and the confessional stance of the Lutheran Church, as it is circumscribed and defined in the Lutheran Confessions.

Endnotes

[1] The article is based on a presentation at the 7th International Lutheran Council World Seminaries Conference in Baguio City, Philippines, in October 2019. An earlier version was published in *Igreja Lutherana, Revista de Teologia do Seminario Concordia* 81(2020). *LMM* thanks Concordia Seminary, São Paulo, and the editor of the journal, Rev. Dr. Anselmo Graff, for sharing the article.
[2] Cf. His deliberations on the translation of "*communio sanctorum*" in the Large Catechism, LC, The Creed, The Third Article, 47–50, in *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of The Evangelical Lutheran Church.* Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 436f.
[3] LC, The Creed, The Third Article, 52f., 62; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 438f.
[4] *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche: Vollständige Neuedition* (Goettingen:Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 42.
[5] AC VII, 1, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 42.
[6] Notably, it was Nikolaus Selnecker, who, in the first edition of the Book of Concord, labeled the early Christian creeds included in it: "Tria Symbola Oecumenica—The Three Ecumenical Creeds," cf. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 19.
[7] Cf. Werner Klän, *Einführung zum Symposium "Lutherische Identität in kirchlicher Verbindlichkeit*," in Werner Klän (ed.), *Lutherische Identität in kirchlicher Verbindlichkeit. Erwägungen zum Weg lutherischer Kirchen in Europa nach der Milleniumswende* (Oberurseler Hefter, Ergänzungsband 4), (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2007), 15–28. See the *Thesen zur Kirchengemeinschaft. Entschließung der Teilnehmer der* European Regional ILC Conference (Antwerpen, Belgien 11–14. June 2004) *an ihre Kirchen*, 28f.; for the northern American context, cf. Samuel H. Nafzger, "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship and its Practice with Ecclesiastical Accountability: A Missouri Synod Perspective," 61–89; Robert Rosin, "The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Europe," 112–115.
[8] Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530–1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 22f.
[9] Cf. Apology IV 50, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 128.
[10] Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 21.
[11] Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 17.
[12] "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," LW 37, 372.
[13] AC VII, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 42.
[14] Notger Slenczka, "*Die Bedeutung des Bekenntnisses für das Verständnis der Kirche und die Konstitution der Kirche in lutherischer Sicht*," in Grünwaldt, Klaus and Hahn, Udo: *Profil—Bekenntnis—Identität. Was lutherische Kirchen prägt* (Hannover: 2003), 9–34.

[15] Robert Rosin, "Seeking the Center," in Christoph Barnbrock and Gilberto da Silva, eds, *Die einigende Mitte. Theologie in konfessioneller und ökumenischer Verantwortung, Festschrift für Werner Klän* (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2018), 229.
[16] Rosin, "Seeking the Center," 221.
[17] Rosin, "Seeking the Center," 221.
[18] Werner Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb. On the occasion of the awarding of the Hermann-Sasse-Prize," *Concordia Journal* 41 (2015): 49–56.
[19] Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *Lutheran Confessions*: *History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 281.
[20] Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, *Lutheran Confessions*, xiv-xix. Cf. Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 225.
[21] This quote translated here is from Robert Kolb, "*Deus revelatus—Homo revelatus:* Luthers theologia crucis für das 21. Jahrhundert," in Robert Kolb and Christian Neddens, *Gottes Wort vom Kreuz. Lutherische Theologie als kritische Theologie, mit einer Einführung von Volker Stolle und einem Ausblick von Werner Klän* (Oberurseler Hefte 40), (Oberursel, Taunus: Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, 2010), 14–15.
[22] Kolb, *Deus revelatus*, 20.
[23] Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb," 2015.
[24] Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 222; Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb," 2015.
[25] Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 220–229.
[26] Kolb, *Deus Revelatus*, 34; Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb," 2015.
[27] Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb," 2015.
[28] Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, *Lutheran Confessions*, viii.
[29] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 2008.
[30] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 2008.
[31] Robert Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 13; Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 19.
[32] Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 131–151; Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 175–203.
[33] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 12.
[34] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 20.
[35] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 20.
[36] Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 272.
[37] Robert Kolb, *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture:* 1550–1675 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 6.
[38] Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb," 2015.
[39] Robert Kolb, Ed., *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2010), 7.
[40] Kolb, *The American Mind*, 7–8.
[41] Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 13.
[42] Kolb, *The American Mind*, 10.
[43] Notger Slenczka, *Selbstkonstitution und Gotteserfahrung. W. Elerts Deutung der neuzeitlichen Subjektivität im Kontext der Erlanger Theologie. Studien zur Erlanger Theologie II* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 148.
[44] Slenczka, *Selbstkonstitution und Gotteserfahrung*, 149.
[45] Slenczka apud Elert, *Selbstkonstitution und Gotteserfahrung*, 150.

[46] Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums* (Munich: H.Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932), 131.
[47] Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, 169–250.
[48] Slenczka apud Elert, *Selbstkonstitution und Gotteserfahrung*, 227.
[49] Hermann Sasse, *Was heißt lutherisch?* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1934), 12.
[50] Sasse, *Was heißt lutherisch?*, 31–36.
[51] Sasse, *Was heißt lutherisch?*, 49.
[52] Charles Taylor, German: *Ein säkulares Zeitalter* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 51. English: *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007)
[53] Charles Taylor, *Die Formen des Religiösen in der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), 63. English: *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited (Institute for Human Sciences Vienna Lecture Series* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). At the same time Taylor notes for North Atlantic societies that people are, on the one hand, alienated from the church/churches, but, on the other hand, are taken over into a "fractionated culture" or "fragmented world," Taylor, *Die Formen des Religiösen in der Gegenwart*, 95.
[54] Christian Grethlein, *Kirchentheorie. Kommunikation des Evangeliums im Kontext.* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2018), 210.
[55] Grethlein *Kirchentheorie*, 227.
[56] Radikobo Ntsimane, "Interpreting God's Word in Different Cultures," in Paulo Moisés Nerbas, Ed., *Preparing Lutheran Pastors for Today* (Canoas: Editora da ULBRA, 2006), 52–67.
[57] Ntsimane, "Interpreting God's Word in Different Cultures," 69.
[58] Nelson Unwene, "Interpreting God's Word in Different Cultures, Response," in Paulo Moisés Nebras, Ed., *Preparing Lutheran Pastors for Today* (Canoas: Editora da ULBRA, 2006), 90.
[59] Within this quote, Tswaedi adds a note that a narrative of the two powerful horsemen, one from the North and one from the South, Naaman and the Ethiopian Eunuch could be used as another point in this discussion. One, though hearing the message from the prophet, compared the stream he was instructed to wash in with the wide rivers back home. The other having gotten the explanation from an evangelist, was ahead of the teacher when seeing the water. He didn't wish to be baptized in Jerusalem but in the roadside stagnant waters! David Tswaedi, "Martin Luther—One Confession, Multicultural—An African Perspective," in Werner Klän and Gilberto Da Silva (eds.), *The Global Luther. Confessional Perspectives on Martin Luther's Continued Influence Through 5000 Years and on Five Continents* (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2021), 20.
[60] Tswaedi, "Martin Luther," 20. Tswaedi adds note here: African musical instruments such as cow-skin drums were discouraged as linked with ancestor worship. Today the singing and swaying is characterized as unLutheran because the worship is more doing something for God and not the converse. The dancing and clapping of hands is decried as "*schwaemerisch*," etc.
[61] Roberto da Silva, "Martin Luther's Reteption in Lateinamerica und Brasilien," in Klän and da Silva, *The Global Luther*, 40–61.
[62] Grethlein, *Kirchentheorie*, 14.
[63] Werner Klän, "Lutheran Identity in a Post-Christian Context. A European Case Study," *LTR* 31 (2019), 46–67.
[64] L'ubomir Batka, "*Die Bedeutung der reformatorischen Bekenntnisse für die Unikonfessionalität und Multikulturalität*," in Klän and da Silva, *The Global Luther*, 95–110.

[65] Yoshiro Ishida, "Asia," in *Church in Fellowship*, vol. II: *Pulpit and Altar Fellowship among Lutheran Minority and Younger Churches*, Paul E. Hoffmann and Harding Meyer, Eds., (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), 40.
[66] E. J. Bergt, "Inter-Lutheran Seminaries," in *All-Asia Conference on Theological Training*, Herman H. Koppelmann, Ed., (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1964), 71.
[67] Naomichi Masaki, "The Impact of Martin Luther on Christianity in Japan," in Klän and da Silva *The Global Luther*, 66–76.
[68] Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today*, 11, 32, 182.
[69] Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today*, 86–96.
[70] Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 132.
[71] Kolb, *The Christian Faith*, 272, 274, 298.
[72] Armin Wenz, "*Quia–Quatenus:* Scripture and Confession," in Tapani Simojoki, Ed., *Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets: Sola Scriptura in Context.* Westfield House International Symposium,15–18 August 2012 (Cambridge, UK: Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, 2017), 83, 84.
[73] Wenz, "*Quia–Quatenus*," 83–85.
[74] Klän, "In praise of Prof. Dr. Robert Kolb," 2015.
[75] SD V 17, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 584.
[76] SD V 18f, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 584f.
[77] Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross, The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 301.