



ICCI Bonn Conference 2017

Reforming, Rereading, Renewing:
Martin Luther and 500 Years of Tradition and Reform in Judaism and Christianity

Reformieren, interpretieren, revidieren:
Martin Luther und 500 Jahre Tradition und Reform in Judentum und Christentum

PLENARY SESSION

MONDAY, JULY 3, 2017 - "GUSTAV STRESEMANN INSTITUT", BONN

Tradition and Reform: A Protestant Perspective

By Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

It is an honor to be with you today, and to sit on this panel with my friend, His Eminence Cardinal Reinhard Marx. Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on tradition and reform, from my perspective as a Palestinian Lutheran, as a local bishop, and as a leader of the global Lutheran church.

In this 500th Anniversary year of the Reformation, Lutherans across the world have been engaged in reflection on the events of the 16th Century in Germany, and what they mean for the worldwide church of Jesus Christ today. In my May 2017 address as President of the Lutheran World Federation to the General Assembly in Windhoek, Namibia, I have encouraged churches to think of Reformation as an ongoing movement and a continuing action of the Holy Spirit. We do not believe it was a one-time event that ended when Luther announced, "Here I stand" and the church was divided. In fact, the questions you have provided for this panel discussion are precisely what we hope Lutherans are considering across the globe, specifically: "How do Lutherans relate to tradition and to reform?"

I will focus on three important concepts which impact how Lutherans relate to tradition.

First, reformers from the 16th century until today have insisted that our faith and tradition be based on "sola scriptura", or Scripture Alone. One could argue that this is really the most significant aspect of Lutheranism and the Protestant movement overall—and yet it can also be dangerous. During the Reformation period, the people gained the opportunity to read the Word of God in the vernacular, and this was very liberating. No longer did they need to blindly accept the interpretations of religious authorities. Now they could pray, and read, and understand the Gospel in the same language used in commerce and conversation.

At the same time, this new freedom has led to new problems. Now the liberating Gospel can be twisted and bound up by literalism, Biblicalism, fundamentalism, and allegorism.

I will share two examples of how the freedoms gained during the Reformation can be misinterpreted and misapplied.

As a first example, I remember hearing the story of a man whose devotional reading consisted of cracking his Bible at random and reading the first verse his finger touched. One morning this was his verse for the day: "And Judas went out and hanged himself."

"That can't be it," he thought. So, he tried again. "Go and do likewise" was the second verse he saw.

Now feeling disturbed, he thought, "The third time is a charm!" But it wasn't. The third verse he read was, "Do quickly what you are going to do."

This form of Biblicalism and literalism can seem like a joke, and yet such false readings of the Bible can also lead to greater tragedies. In my country, we have really suffered from those who have twisted the Word of God to fit their vision of politics or of the end times. Interpreting the Bible as a roadmap to the apocalypse, and seeking to identify modern day political leaders and states in the biblical text, has real implications for real people today.

As another example, this year we are also remembering the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War. I was a young boy of seventeen in 1967. Shortly after the war ended, an American pastor from the Alliance Church on Prophet's Street (on the west side), who was known to my parents prior to 1948, came to call on us. He told us, "You must believe the Bible. You must read Daniel chapter 7, which says the small horn will win over the other three horns. The small horn is Israel, and the big horns are Syria, Jordan, and Egypt." Of course, as a young believer, if a pastor told me something, I believed it! I thought this must be God's will.

But, at the same time, in my heart I was questioning whether God really desired the occupation of another people. I thought to myself, "No, I must not be an apostate! I am a believer! I must not even question this!" This was a spiritual crisis for me.

As I started my theological studies in Finland, I made a point to study the real intent of the Biblical story, and I understood that this pastor was promoting a wrong understanding of sola scriptura. The Word of God must not be mocked. It must not be twisted to serve our own purposes. Isn't this abuse of "sola scriptura" a cause of the fundamentalism and extremism in our modern world?

Luther himself said that when we read the Bible, we must remember that the Bible interprets itself. And what does this mean? It means that when we seek answers in Scripture, we must check if our interpretation is found elsewhere in Scripture. Is this image of God reflected in other texts? If not, then it most likely comes from my own mind, not the mind of God.

To this same point, there are some who would say that the Old Testament has nothing to offer Christians today. And yet, we know that we cannot understand the New Testament without the Hebrew Scriptures. As Christians, to read one without the other makes us Marcionists, and this can lead us down other false paths (even anti-Semitism.)

Luther also cautioned Christians reading the Bible to look to "Was Christum treibet", or "What promotes Christ." He famously wrote,

For it is the duty of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and Resurrection and work of Christ, and thus lay the foundation of faith, as He Himself says, in John 15, "You shall bear witness of me." All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and inculcate [treiben] Him. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they inculcate [treiben] Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ, and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ. What does not teach Christ is

not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod preached it.”¹

Based on this principle, Luther’s conclusion was that the Book of James should not be included in the canon, as it does not promote Christ and the freedom of the Gospel! Many others have disagreed with Luther on this point, of course, but still we hold to this principle, “was Christum treibet.” We ask ourselves: Does my interpretation of this text promote Christ? Does this sermon promote Christ? Does the Church promote Christ? Does my tradition promote Christ? If not, then I must re-consider my position. I have freedom to read and to interpret Scripture. I do not have the freedom to pervert the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I certainly do not have the freedom to turn the liberating Good News into a new kind of prison—for myself, or for others.

Luther did not, as is obvious, in any sense advocate an absolute Biblicalism. As Paul Althaus says: “Luther did not absolutize the Bible in opposition to tradition. He limits neither Christian dogma nor the ethical implications of the Gospel to what is expressly stated in Scripture. He does not demand that the truth of Christianity be reduced to biblical doctrine.”² The Holy Spirit led not only the apostles but also Christendom since the time of the apostles. Luther, however, strongly emphasized the difference between the two cases. This establishes the right and validity of the Christian tradition. It is to be tested only as to whether or not it contradicts the truth of the Gospel clearly contained in Scripture. Whatever passes this test should be preserved. Luther’s ultimate authority was not the books of the Bible or the canon as such, but the Word which interprets itself and criticizes itself from its own center: from Christ and from the radically understood Gospel. For Luther, the authority of the Scripture is strictly Gospel centered. He taught us to find the Gospel of the Lord in the whole of the Scriptures.

A second important source of tradition for Lutherans, alongside Sola scriptura, is Sola fide, or “Faith Alone.” Many Lutherans grew up learning this doctrine of justification by faith through the phrase: “For we hold that we are saved by grace through faith, apart from works.”

Lutherans call this doctrine of justification by faith the doctrine by which the church stands and falls. This is for us not only the core of the Reformation, but our core understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Christ died on the cross and in doing so has gifted me with his righteousness. His blood was poured out for me as a free gift, and there is nothing I could ever do to deserve it. For us, this doctrine sets the boundary, beyond which a church may not cross and still call itself Lutheran.

It is important at this juncture to mention that in 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church published a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). For centuries, Catholics and Lutherans had held that our understanding of the mechanics of salvation was wholly opposed to one another. Sadly, both churches had issued condemnations of the other at various points in history. This caused much suffering, particularly for families which included both Lutherans and Catholics.

Luther and other reformers understood the doctrine of justification of sinners as the “first and chief article of faith” and the “guide and judge over all parts of Christian doctrine.” This is why division on this point was so grave and became a matter of highest priority for Catholic-Lutheran relations.³

In 2013, the good work towards unity continued with the publication of the document “From Conflict to Communion.” This document states that the Joint Declaration “offers a differentiating consensus comprised of common statements along with different emphases of each side, with the claim that these

¹ Trans. C.M. Jacobs, in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 1932) 478.

² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress, 1988), 335.

³ Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, *From Conflict to Communion* (Bonifatius, 2016) 49.

differences do not invalidate the commonalities. It is thus a consensus that does not eliminate differences, but rather explicitly includes them.”

“Together Catholics and Lutherans confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts equipping and calling us to good works.”⁴

*When Lutherans insist that a person can only receive justification, they mean, however, thereby to exclude any possibility of contributing to one’s own justification, but do not deny that believers are fully involved personally in their faith, which is effected by God’s Word.*⁵

*When Catholics speak of preparation for grace in terms of cooperation, they mean thereby a personal consent of the human being that is itself an effect of grace, not an action arising from innate human abilities.*⁶

*Thus, they do not invalidate the common expression that sinners are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities. Justification takes place solely by God’s grace.*⁷

Since faith is understood only as affirmative knowledge, but also as the trust of the heart that bases itself on the Word of God, it can further be said jointly: Justification takes place by grace alone,⁸ by faith alone; the person is justified apart from works.⁹

*What was often torn apart and attributed to one or the other confession but not to both is now understood in an organic coherence: When persons come by faith to share in Christ, God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love. These two aspects of God’s gracious action are not to be separated.*¹⁰

This Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) and the 2013 document “From Conflict to Communion” are historic, as they have explained the Reformation and its developments from both a Lutheran and Catholic point of view. They have pointed us to what we share, rather than what divides us. These agreements in themselves have become an important part of our ecumenical tradition, which by the power of the Holy Spirit lead us to unity in Christ.

Our ongoing journey toward greater unity was made visible and tangible at last year’s historic joint prayer service in Lund, Sweden. This event and common prayer was co-hosted by Pope Francis, myself as President of the LWF, and the General Secretary of the LWF, Rev. Martin Junge. The statement signed by the Pope and myself at this event states clearly that what unites us is much greater than what divides us. I feel that this prayer in Lund and in Malmø has created a new energy in the ecumenical movement. It has given us renewed strength, and I dare to say that we are in the midst of an Ecumenical Spring now.

I pray for the Holy Spirit to continue this good work in and through us, for indeed the One who unites us is much greater than anything that divides us.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, 21.

⁶ JDDJ, 20.

⁷ JDDJ, 19.

⁸ JDDJ, 15, 16.

⁹ JDDJ, 25.

¹⁰ JDDJ, 22.

Now the third principle which forms the foundation of Lutheran tradition is “Ecclesia semper reformanda est”, or “the church is always reforming.”

Contrary to popular belief, this motto was not actually spoken of or written about during the Reformation period. It was first popularized by the theologian Karl Barth around 1947. However, what Barth did was put into words the belief of the great reformers that the church must always be examining its traditions and its practices in order maintain purity of faith. If the church is not always reforming, then we are not following Christ, as Christ’s life and ministry were about transformation, change, and reform. The Acts of the Apostles did not stop in Acts chapter 28—by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church today is still changing, still moving, still reforming.

However, it must be said that Lutherans do not ignore tradition per se. Reform and tradition are not in opposition to one another. We welcome tradition, insofar as it is guided and framed by Christ crucified and risen! Tradition must always carry the freedom and liberation of the cross and the empty tomb. The tradition that is beneficial is the one that makes Christ incarnate in us and in the church.

Theologian Rostislav Tkachenko has written very well on the interplay of Scripture and tradition in Luther’s thinking. He writes:

“Whereas Martin Luther’s acceptance of the Scripture....is complete, his acceptance/denial of the tradition is more nuanced.”¹¹ According to Tkachenko, while Luther asserted that all theology must be based on Scripture and on Christ, he did not discount tradition off-hand. He preferred to differentiate between different aspects of tradition. “Specifically, he refused to automatically accept any theological truths which could not be justified by the Bible.”

Of course, being a human being himself, Luther did not always adhere to his own principle. He was quite ready to accept decisions and teachings of the church fathers, as long as they stood in accord with the truths and principles of the Bible. For example, he accepted the decisions of the first four ecumenical councils and the doctrines of some ancient doctors of the church (for example, Augustine, Athanasius, Gregory the Great, Jerome, and others). Among the traditions he accepted, which are not found in the Bible but are inherited from the church fathers and from historic practice, are his theories about the real presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, and even the eternal chastity of the Virgin Mary.

And what does this all mean? Was bedeutet das? This means that as Lutherans, we hold to certain principles to guide our relationship to tradition and to reform. At the same time, we recognize that even our principles, as they are human inventions, may at times be subject to reform. In the end, we must always ask ourselves one thing: How does the Spirit of God reveal to us the Glory of God the Father, the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit? How do God’s truths guide our lives, and create love in our hearts?

This principle of “ecclesia semper reformanda est” is inseparable from “sola scriptura” and “sola fide.” If the tradition of the church is against the Word, or if it is against the freedom of a Christian, then the church is in need of reform. When the scales fall from our eyes, and our sisters have shown us that gender justice is needed, then the church must reform. When our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers have been hurt by the words of Martin Luther himself, and by the historic actions of our

¹¹ Rostislav Tkachenko, “(Not) Scripture Alone: An Examination of Martin Luther’s Theology of the ‘Scripture-Tradition’ Correlation in the Context of the Historical Development of the Western Christian Tradition,” *Filosofs’ka dumka/Sententiae* 4 (2013): 154-180.



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church, then the church must reform. When even our liturgy, our prayer, or our cultural church traditions have become a prison and do not reflect the liberating work of the Gospel, then the church must reform.

If Luther were alive today, I believe he would be an ecumenist. I believe he would not care at all if the church he attended had his name on it. He would be seeking the community and the tradition which best reveals Christ, and him crucified. And I believe he would recognize this faithfulness in all of our churches. He would recognize the ways that Catholics and Lutherans, Reformed, Orthodox and Evangelicals, and all the myriad other traditions promote Christ in their own ways. And he would ask each of us the same questions: "Is this tradition pointing us to Christ crucified? Is this reform leading us closer to Christ crucified?" If the answers are yes, then we are in right relationship to tradition, to reform, and to God.

May the principle of "ecclesia semper reformanda est" always lead us, and humble us, to together explore God's reforming presence in our lives, in our traditions, and in our communities.