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Christ Frees and Unites

EDITORIAL NOTE: The third Lutheran World Federation assembly did not adopt these theses as a new Lutheran creed or confession, but received them for further prayerful study and careful consideration. The editorial staff of the *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY* herewith makes them available to its readers for that purpose. Pastors may welcome them for conference discussions. A great deal of thought has gone into their formulation. If they serve as an inducement to see whether these things are so according to Scripture (Acts 17:11), they will surely be a blessing and should lead to a new understanding of the riches of the Christian faith and a deeper loyalty to our Lord. The way to freedom and unity in Christ is found in Scripture.

Theses Received by The Third Lutheran World Federation Assembly

FOREWORD

By BISHOP HANNS LILJE

THE third assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, held in Minneapolis, August 15—25, 1957, sends Christian greetings to all Lutheran congregations in the world. Our hearts are filled with gratitude and joy. We are grateful to God for the rich blessings which He granted us throughout these days. It is with joy and affection that we think of the fellowship with so many brethren and sisters from all over the world.

We have been meeting in a time of perplexities and hidden fears. We have realized the alarming signs of a new catastrophe which, if it would happen, would be far more destructive than anything mankind has ever seen before. We have tried to face the intellectual problems and the spiritual needs of men today. We have recognized in all humility that the church, too, has been affected by the growing uncertainty, by lack of faith and love. Even in those countries which owe their best spiritual heritage to the Christian faith, materialism and moral disintegration have become an acute danger.

In the face of this world situation we desire to reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ, who frees us and unites us. We state our conviction that the solution of the grave problems of our day is not to be found in social, scientific, or political programs only, but in the promises which God has given to His people in Jesus Christ. They

are valid not only for the life to come but also for the life in this world.

We have given our thoughts and prayers to the task of reconsidering our faith in view of this situation. Twenty discussion groups have engaged in this process of thinking together. The result of this work is summarized in the following theses.

We hand them over to all Lutheran congregations in the world, to their pastors, teachers, and members. We thank you for your prayers, which have been with us throughout all these days. We ask you to give these theses your prayerful study and careful consideration. It is our hope that they may inspire Christians all over the world and that they may lead them to a new understanding of the riches of our faith and to a deeper loyalty to our Lord.

I

THE FREEDOM WE HAVE IN CHRIST

1. We praise God the Creator, the Fountain of all life, who made man in His own image and who in Jesus Christ has come to set us free.

2. The magnificence of the Creator's endowment of His creature imparts richness and fullness to man's search for freedom and unity. Man's culture is the form his productive vitality takes as he variously unfolds this endowment. But every achievement of man within his creaturely existence is both perverted and ambiguous; for the freedom and unity bestowed by the Creator is corrupted by man's fractured God-relationship. In the Scriptures God reveals the name and truth of this situation to be sin. Guilt, captivity by demonic powers, death are the results of it.

3. This means that human freedom and unity, as envisioned and achieved by man, is both restless and full of pathos: restless because the creature is not abandoned by the Creator; pathetic because every achievement denies the original endowment. Unless, therefore, the right God-relationship is restored, men can be neither free nor united. Fear, anxiety, wretchedness are the marks of man's existence. Man is formed by God for freedom and unity; and he is bound within the limitations of his broken humanity.

4. Man is not able to restore his life in relation to God. Because

he cannot do so, he cannot achieve true order, lasting peace, or fulfillment in any other relationship. His effort to do so but confirms the desperate nature of his plight. The very forms in which he struggles toward earthly freedom and unity become occasions for the demonic: social solidarity tempts to idolatry, power tempts to tyranny, mastery tempts to pride. Man in this predicament needs the Deliverer who is more powerful than everything that is wrong; and deliverance needs to take place where wrongness reigns. God alone can free, and God alone can unite; and He unites by freeing.

5. This deliverance is accomplished because God in Christ invaded man's predicament. He became *what* man is *where* man is. For our sake He, who knew no sin, was made sin for us so that we might become righteous before God. The Son of God stood in the place where guilty man stands. He confronted the onslaught of the demonic powers and overcame them. He died our death, and He conquered death.

6. The liberation which God once for all accomplished in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ, He bestows and makes effective even now and forever.

7. What God did in the desolation of the cross is received by faith and in the brokenness of repentance. As man's situation is illumined before the cross, so there, too, his righteousness is judged and God's righteousness is imparted.

8. In the church man is grasped by the Gospel, incorporated into this redemptive action of God in Baptism, and revitalized and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. So crucial is this renewal of life that only the resurrection of the Lord is adequate to create and describe it. "We know that we have passed out of death into life." (1 John 3:14)

9. Faith begins with what God does; it is trust that God will accomplish what He promises; it is man's life in the faithfulness of God. His faithfulness begets man's faith. "If God is for us, who is against us!" (Romans 8:31)

10. Much is against us: the limitations of our broken humanity, the enigmas of history, the pride of our religiousness, death-dealing choices in practical ethics. But what God has done drives into all of this with His action of forgiveness and the restoration of the new

being in Christ. Whoever, in all of this can say, "Abba, Father," has indeed the gift of freedom.

11. The freedom we have in Christ is actual, for it is *given* — "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there *is* freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). This freedom is received and lived out within the limitations of history. But the giver and guarantor of this freedom is God; therefore we wait in hope. "For in this hope we were saved." (Romans 8:24)

II

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IN CHRIST

1. Men reconciled to God are one in Jesus Christ. Charged with the ministry and the message of reconciliation, the church herself is the first fruit of reconciliation: by Baptism we are made a people with a life together, a communion, a body, the body of Christ.

2. Thus her unity is found and founded in Jesus Christ. Neither by ideals nor by enthusiasm, neither by tolerance nor by agreements, are we made one — but by Jesus Christ. In all our attempts to manifest the unity of the church in visible church fellowship, the dimensions should be neither smaller nor greater than the dimensions Christ has given His church.

3. As the communion of reconciliation the church suffers under her dividedness. We may find some consolation but no excuse in referring to an invisible unity of all true believers. We know that the ministry of reconciliation is jeopardized by the lack of manifested unity.

4. In this situation the Lutheran churches are called back to their confession: "To the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments; nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by man, should be everywhere alike." Here the words "it is enough" witness to our freedom: Wherever we hear the Gospel preached in its truth and purity and see the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we may be assured that the one Church of Christ is present. There nothing separates us from our brethren, and both faith and love constrain us to overcome our dividedness.

5. For our Lutheran churches, with a diverse past and different situations and commitments in the present, this "it is enough"

transcends local, national, and synodical traditions and urges us to express our unity at the Lord's table where we partake of the one body.

6. The words "it is enough" give the Lutheran churches a freedom also in relation to other churches. Bound by them, we are led to the Scriptures and so rescued from the pressures of institutional expediency as well as from complacent acceptance of the *status quo*. In an ecumenical study of the Scriptures we find the most hopeful means toward a fuller realization of the unity in Christ and toward a deeper understanding of our faith as found in and behind our confessional statements. On this basis also the questions of intercommunion and the nature of the Sacraments can be brought out of the present deadlock. For our Lutheran churches it is a congenial and timely task to participate in and initiate such ecumenical studies on the highest theological as well as on the parish level.

7. God reconciled the world unto Himself. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman, were made one in Christ; this event has affected social life and customs, legislation and economic life, and has given the world a new zeal for overcoming human divisions. Sometimes the incentive of the Gospel proves effective even when the churches keep silent or resist its implications. We should rejoice in the influence of the Gospel wherever and whenever it appears. Yet, since our unity is deeply rooted in what Christ wrought, it must be nurtured by faith in Him and thus redeemed from becoming re-enslaved under the demonic elements in nationalism, materialism, and secularism.

8. Where the concern for overcoming human divisions in this world meets what appears to be insurmountable difficulties, the church is especially called to her ministry of reconciliation, asking for the power of the Holy Spirit to add the witness of life to the message she has in its Gospel. In so doing the church is not performing a service alien to her essential life; she witnesses by being what she is: the communion of those reconciled.

9. While the kingdom of God in its fullness is yet to come when all things are united in Christ, we are called to pray and act according to the words of our Lord: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

III

THE FREEDOM TO REFORM THE CHURCH

1. Through all ages there is one holy catholic and apostolic church, whose head is Jesus Christ. In Him the Father was revealed, and to Him the Holy Spirit bears witness guiding us into all the truth.

2. The church as the pilgrim people of God is being led toward the full realization of the kingdom of God. In her life on the way she has her promise and her temptation. The promise is that the Lord will abide with her even to the end of the age, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her. The temptation is to betray her only Lord.

3. This temptation manifests itself in many ways. On the one hand, the church is tempted to glorify herself as the kingdom of God which is to come, to equate her own words with the Word of God, her theological statements about Christ with the living Lord Himself, the repetition of venerable confessions with living confession. On the other hand, the church is tempted to distort the proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord as her only Savior and King into political and economic ideologies, religious syncretism, self-sufficient moralism, or individual sentimentalities in order to make her message acceptable to man.

4. From the very beginning the church was called to be the herald of the truth, receiving and delivering the apostolic message of the mighty deeds of God in the history of salvation, supremely the life and earthly ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and calling men to repentance and faith. This apostolic tradition, in which the living Lord Himself reigns and acts, remains sovereign and unchangeable throughout all ages. In every generation the church must be confronted and judged by this apostolic message. This is her ongoing reformation.

5. Reformation, therefore, is not creation of a new church but recovery of the true church. Reformation is not a revolt against the authentic tradition but a protest against human traditions in the church which pervert the Gospel of Christ. Reformation is not itching eagerness for novelty but a penitent and obedient subjection to the renewing Spirit.

6. The Lutheran church declares her witness to be continuous

with the ecumenical creeds and affirms in faith and joyful thanksgiving the recovery of the true marks of the church by the Reformation.

7. The Lutheran Confessions claim our allegiance because they not only proclaimed the Gospel in a crucial age of the church's life in accordance with the Scriptures, but they continue to direct us in our understanding of the Scriptures consistent with apostolic tradition.

8. Listening obediently to the Scriptures, abiding in the apostolic tradition, and free to respond to the demands of our time, the church trusts the Holy Spirit to guide her to confess her faith rightly and relevantly in continuity with her historic witness.

9. Churches in Asia and Africa face an urgent challenge to relate the Christian message to the needs of a world of resurgent non-Christian religions and to develop an indigenous form of church life. In performing this task, they are free and obliged, in the same obedience and continuity, to assume the burden of responsible confession in their own time and place.

10. The church is called to enter into the life of each age, to penetrate its thinking, to feel with it in its excitements and torments, and thus to administer God's healing power with precision and compassion. For her obedience to be effective the church must boldly face the massive revolutionary facts of our time. Among these are anti-Christian ideologies, political turmoil, social rootlessness, ethical relativism, the issues raised by scientific methodology, and the worldwide resurgence of non-Christian or pseudo-Christian religiosity.

11. In this situation the church cannot be content with timid lamentations. She must pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit that she may be empowered with humility, wisdom, and courage. This is her promised renewal.

IV

FREE FOR SERVICE IN THE WORLD

1. Christ came to the world as a servant. Justified by Him through faith, we are made free to serve one another by love, and he to whom much is forgiven loves much. Christian faith is active in love. "Our Lord put off the form of God and took on the form

of a servant, that He might draw down our love for Him and fasten it on our neighbor." (Luther)

2. As God's commandments are grounded in His loving concern for mankind, so there can be no genuine law and social justice without love — and true love for our fellow men leads to a concern for social, political, and economic justice.

3. In her concern for love and justice the church may not identify herself with any one political, social, or economic system. She calls men and nations under whatever system to act responsibly before God and His Law.

4. Thus we are called to translate love and compassion into the structures of justice. In matters of civil liberties and racial integration, of concern for the uprooted and for people in areas of rapid social change, and of care for the mentally and physically disabled, our love fails if it does not materialize in recognition of human rights.

5. Where justice falls short in the complexities and the brokenness of our human endeavors, there especially the Christian finds his calling to follow his Lord in service and suffering. Freed by Christ and quickened by the Holy Spirit, he exercises the inventiveness of love.

6. Made free to serve in the world, we are also redeemed from the pressures of conformity. God's Word often questions what our environment takes for granted; the Spirit gives us the courage to stand alone. Through the church He gives us the means to join in spirit and action where the individual could accomplish little. In worship as well as in united efforts to meet man's need, all lives are given meaning and purpose.

7. In and through our calling we serve God. The process by which a believer applies the Word of God to his everyday work should be recognized as a painstaking task. If it is not so considered, we accept the *status quo* without question and allow the social and political development to proceed independent of the Word of God. The more complex or the more meaningless our work appears, the greater is the duty of the church to help its members to a mature faith and a realistic insight into the facts and structures of this world. This requires instruction as well as

imagination. Imagination requires freedom; this freedom Christ gives when He frees us to serve our fellow men.

8. Jesus Christ healed the sick and restored joy to the despised. This was but a prelude to, and a token of, His great service when He gave His life a ransom for many. With this Gospel, the church serves the world in its basic need and plight. Such service, having its origin in Christ, cannot rest until the Word of salvation has been received. Yet our service of love does not depend on a response, nor is it motivated by strategic considerations. It is a love which does not ask for results.

V

FREE AND UNITED IN HOPE

1. The church lives by faith in Jesus Christ. Her hope is centered in Him, the risen Lord. She knows Him as the One who came and established His kingdom. She knows Him as her Lord here and now who rules the world with sovereign power. She knows Him as the King who will come in glory as Judge and Savior.

2. The church lives by the salvation Christ wrought; not in nostalgic retrospection toward a golden past—neither that of Jesus' earthly ministry nor that of any great period of church history—but, with her eyes open toward the future, in joyful anticipation of the coming of Christ and His kingdom.

3. When the church speaks about hope, she does not witness to the truth of human optimism or assess its value, nor does she endorse human pessimism as more true to fact. She does not engage in dreams about a "Christianized world." The Christian hope is not a religiously strengthened cheerfulness but takes hold of the promises of God, rejoices in their fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and looks forward to their consummation.

4. The Christian hope is more than hopefulness. It is anticipation of the Kingdom, which has drawn near with the gift of the Spirit, the "down payment" of our inheritance. Thus the Spirit is not merely a guarantee for the future but a power for the present.

5. This power and this hope manifest themselves most clearly in the essential activities of the church: worship, mission, and service to our fellow men. Each of them is a token of victory.

6. In the Sacrament of Baptism we are brought under the

power of His resurrection and are born anew to a living hope, waiting for the redemption of our bodies. In His Word God acts here and now as our Judge and Savior. The Sacrament of the Altar, where Christ is really present, is the anticipation of the heavenly banquet. He who comes to us in bread and wine is the same Christ who is to come in glory.

7. The mission of the church as a work in the power of the Holy Spirit is independent of human hopefulness and disillusionment. Whenever the witness to the Gospel invades the domain of demonic powers, idolatry, and militant or creeping atheism, the ultimate victory of the Lord is foreshadowed.

8. Serving our fellow men, *διακονία*, is hope engaged in its proper business, especially needed where human hopes are running low. Such service is not a second thought following our devotion to Christ. It is a manifestation of His kingdom and a token of His victory over all powers of destruction.

9. In all these matters the power is that of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who was glorified through a cross. Because of His cross we look forward to the Day of the Lord with victorious joy and penitent trembling. Through the cross the church recognizes the judgment of her human hopes and receives the power and hope of the Holy Spirit.

10. Hope is a glorious must for a church under pressure and persecution. The hope of the church is most alive when it suffers most. The church which enjoys the good will of its surroundings is often threatened in its spiritual integrity. The dimension of hope is the dimension of the Spirit.

11. Therefore the church has to be cleansed from all that would transform the manifestations of the Kingdom into human activities of a society for the preservation and promotion of Christianity as a philosophy, an ideology, or a way of living. It is only in the dimension of hope and with the power of the Spirit that the church can be true to herself and her Lord.

12. In Christ we are free and one. The Holy Spirit quickens our imagination, arouses our courage, sobers our wishfulness, strengthens our patience. When God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about the consummation of His kingdom, He calls us to make manifest the freedom and the unity we have in Christ.