

CLOSING REMARKS ILC WORLD SEMINARIES CONFERENCE

by Albert B. Collver

“**T**ODAY THE THEOLOGIANS OF OUR CHURCH lament to the very depths of their souls the apostasy from pure doctrine for which we all take responsibility. The theologians of those churches lament what they call the sin of division. For us true repentance in the church means becoming serious again about the confession of our church.”—Hermann Sasse, “The Confessions and the Unity of the Church, 1937”¹

The International Lutheran Council’s World Seminaries’ Conference 2016 had the theme: “Shaping Confessional Lutheranism for the 21st Century: The Impact of the Lutheran Reformation on Mission, Worship, and Worldview.”

The Lutheran Reformation has had a profound effect on the entire world. No matter how a person regards the Reformation, or how they regard Martin Luther, it is impossible to deny the impact it has had both on the church and the world, from the realigning of geo-political boundaries, to greatly expanding the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, to clarifying the distinction of Law and Gospel, to giving birth to many Protestant church bodies, to prompting the Counter-Reformation and the reforms introduced by the Council of Trent, and perhaps most importantly, to expanding the proclamation of the clear Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. Depending upon one’s point of view, not all of these effects are seen as positive, but there is no denying the

huge impact. Some 500 years later, the Christian Church is wrestling with how to regard the Reformation.

Many people have responded to the Reformation by seeking to bring about the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer that the Church may be one. Indeed, all Christians confess they believe in “one, holy Christian and apostolic church.” Yet on this earth, as Saint Paul wrote, “there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 COR. 11:19). Here Saint Paul is not speaking about unnecessary divisions and separations based upon sinful pride or upon desires for power. Saint Paul describes divisions that are necessary to preserve the pure proclamation of Jesus Christ and His Gospel of forgiveness. The Lutheran worldview can be seen as divisive as it has an impact on the Church and world in the areas of mission and worship. This fact presents a difficult challenge for the Lutheran churches who find their beginning or re-birth connected to the events of the Prussian Union in 1817. Most of the churches in the International Lutheran Council (ILC) began either in reaction against the Prussian Union, or were formed subsequently by those churches which came out of the Prussian Union seeking to preserve the Old Lutheran understanding of the Gospel, fellowship, and worship.

The beginnings of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) can be traced to the 1952 Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Assembly in Hanover, Germany. Prior to this assembly, there was the possibility that the LWF would remain a “federation” of churches instead of a communion of churches who practice altar fellowship without

¹ Hermann Sasse, *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol. 1, trans. Matthew C. Harrison, et al. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 359.

agreement in all areas of doctrine. After the communion service at the Marktkirche in Hanover, representatives from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and representatives from some of the free churches met in Uelzen in 1952. This marked the beginning of the International Lutheran Conference, which became the International Lutheran Council in 1993 at its meeting in Antigua, Guatemala. The ILC was not founded to compete with the LWF, but rather to provide a clear Lutheran confession for world Lutheranism. The ILC represents the voice of the Old Lutherans / Exclusive Lutherans, while the LWF represents the voice of Progressive Lutherans / Inclusive Lutherans. The difference comes down to the understanding of the Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, dividing world Lutheranism into two types or families. The churches of the ILC hold that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired and inerrant word of God. The churches of the ILC unreservedly accept the Lutheran Confessions as found in the Book of Concord. In contrast, the churches of the LWF, particularly the Western (North American and European) churches, do believe that the Holy Scriptures contain the word of God and that the Scriptures are a source for doctrine but not necessarily life. In some sense, the Western churches of the LWF contextualize the Holy Scriptures through the present context. The Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Augsburg Confession, are seen as a mark of Lutheran identity, more of a historical document than a living document. Differentiating these two positions is not intended to criticize as much as to show the distinction between the two groups, and to provide space or a rationale for the existence of the ILC. Though churches of the ILC are in the minority compared to the LWF, both in terms of numbers and funding, the ILC represents a voice and tradition in world Lutheranism that is not readily found within the LWF.

Our task in the world for the twenty-first century is to present, in a winsome way, the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel of Jesus speaks compassionately to a world which has lost its moral compass, a world that has not only forsaken traditional Judeo-Christian values and morals, but also to a world that is actively seeking to suppress that message. We have the challenge of providing a clear confession to the world and to the Lutheran churches in the world. We have the challenge of encouraging Lutheran Christians in their confession and identity, and to remain faithful not only in the face of false teaching but also in the face of governments and religions that oppose the cross of Jesus. We have the challenge of

presenting historic Christian values in the face of worldwide progressive values, which seek to marginalize, if not eliminate, viewpoints that oppose its views on marriage and sexuality. We face the challenge of remaining Lutheran Christians in this world, and bearing witness to the truths of the Holy Scriptures. Left to ourselves, this task would be impossible. We are not left to remain faithful alone. Our Lord Jesus has given His Holy Spirit to keep us in the one true faith. Our Lord Jesus has promised to never leave us or forsake us. Our Lord Jesus has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. We bear witness not alone, but with our Lord Jesus.

This means for the churches of the ILC, each challenge is a new opportunity in Jesus. As the world becomes more hostile to the truth, as churches move away from the historic faith in favor of a progressive agenda, the Lord's sheep hear His voice and seek the places they hear Him speak. Particularly because of the position some Western Lutheran churches have taken on same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals, a number of churches in the Global South are eager to hear the witness provided by the churches of the ILC. This ILC World Seminaries Conference, and the 2015 ILC World Conference had in attendance church leaders who represented over twenty million Lutherans around the world. This is a significant increase since the ILC's humble beginnings in 1952. The ILC currently has 38 members and a number of new membership requests for consideration at the ILC's 2018 World Conference. The ILC is working to revise its bylaws to enable the organization to be more effective and viable in the twenty-first century. The ILC continues to provide encouragement to its member churches through conferences and publications, and is now seeking to develop programs to enhance Lutheran identity among member churches. The ILC has more new opportunities than it has resources to meet. In short, the ILC has great potential. The ILC's Seminaries' Conference on Shaping Confessional Lutheranism for the 21st Century: The Impact of the Lutheran Reformation on Mission, Worship, and Worldview sought to celebrate the 500 year history of the Lutheran church, while looking forward to how the churches of the ILC can continue to impact the world.

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