

Discover what this collection of essays by the Lutheran World Federation says about the Gospel, the sacraments and why its churches believe in “reconciled diversity.”

# A REVIEW AND COMMENT OF *THE SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF THE LUTHERAN COMMUNION*

by Albert B. Collver III

## Introduction / Background

**T**HE ETHIOPIAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH Mekane Yesus (EECMY) in its General Assembly, held from January 28 to February 2, 2013, decided to sever relations with the Church of Sweden (CoS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) over their decisions on same-sex marriage/partnership and ordination of same-sex ministers.<sup>1</sup>

At that meeting, Mekane Yesus elected to become the first and only member of the LWF to date to register its disagreement with the ELCA by severing all existing ties with its American sister church. Mekane Yesus announced it would deny sharing Holy Communion with ELCA leaders and pastors and called on “all Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus departments and institutions (at every level) to implement this decision.” At the same time, Mekane Yesus ended its relationship with the Church of Sweden and any other Lutheran churches “who have openly accepted same-sex marriage.”<sup>2</sup>

The decision of the EECMY threw the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) into a crisis. Since the LWF’s Seventh Assembly held in Budapest in 1984, the LWF

has regarded all the member churches in altar and pulpit fellowship.<sup>3</sup> The action taken by the EECMY in 2013 threatened to undo the communion shared among LWF member churches. News of the EECMY’s decision to sever with the CoS and ELCA spread across the LWF. As a result, the LWF formed committees and began to prepare documents to address the topic of communion, in partic-

The viewpoint presented that each church discerns how to live out the message of the gospel gives the appearance that all churches are equal and that there is no colonialism, or preferred reference point, for interpretation.

ular, about what it means to be in communion with each other. Most recently, the LWF released two documents to explore what “communion” means.

The documents describe the LWF’s self-understanding of communion. The first document is titled, *Understanding the Gift of Communion: The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion — A Reader*.<sup>4</sup> This document is a collection of essays that describes the “reconciled diversity” position of the LWF. The document essentially takes the position that

“like-mindedness” does not serve as the “bond of our

<sup>1</sup> Martin Junge, “Claiming the Gift of Communion in a Fragmented World,” in *Understanding the Gift of Communion: The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 9–15 (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2014), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Dreier, “Disagreements over Homosexuality Divide African Churches and the ELCA,” *Word & World* 34, no. 2 (2014): 189.

<sup>3</sup> The Lutheran World Federation, “Past Assemblies and Themes,” 2016. <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/assembly>. “The Seventh Assembly was held in Budapest, Hungary, 22 July – 5 August 1984. The venue constituted another milestone: the first LWF Assembly and meeting of a major international Christian organization in the ‘Second World,’ the then Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Delegates suspended the membership of two white Southern African churches due to their continued failure to end racial division in their churches. Member churches affirmed pulpit and altar fellowship through a constitutional change. The Assembly resolved to ensure an equal number of female Assembly delegates by the Ninth Assembly.”

<sup>4</sup> *Understanding the Gift of Communion: The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion — A Reader*, ed. Witness, Department for Theology and Public (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2014). The document can be found at [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-Self-Understanding\\_Communion-low.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-Self-Understanding_Communion-low.pdf)

togetherness as a communion of churches,”<sup>5</sup> rather it is the fact that the churches are united via Augsburg Confession VII in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Gospel is defined as excluding the law and ethical questions. Essays in the document also identify the rejection of homosexual love as a new form of colonialism.<sup>6</sup> The second document is titled *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion: A Study Document*.<sup>7</sup> This document is shorter than the other and describes communion as a gift and a task. The LWF has sent it to all members for comment and will present it as a vote before the world assembly in 2017. This document will be the focus of this essay.

## Analysis

The document begins with a “Preface” by Dr. Martin Junge, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. The Preface states that the members of the LWF are a communion of churches. A goal of the LWF for the 2017 Reformation celebration is to show the world “what it means to be an ecclesial communion from a Lutheran perspective.”<sup>8</sup> Junge next states that a hallmark of Lutheran ecclesiology is “unity in reconciled diversity.” The next sentence explains what “reconciled diversity” means.

**At all times and in every place, churches discern how faithfully to live out the message of the gospel in their contexts.**

**As part of this process, they are called to review and examine cultural and socio-ethical paradigms in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>**

There are several significant points in this statement.

First, “churches” discern how to live out the message of the gospel. Note that the Scriptures do not inform or

instruct the churches, but rather the churches decide how to live out the gospel in their own contexts. Each church interprets for themselves what the Scripture means for them. It appears that the Scriptures are subordinate to human interpretation. One wonders if such a view can still claim “sola Scriptura” as its confession. The viewpoint presented that each church discerns how to live out the message of the gospel gives the appearance that all churches are equal and that there is no colonialism, or preferred reference point, for interpretation. The CoS and the ELCA can discern that living out the message of the gospel means the acceptance of homosexual love in their context, while the EECMY can decide that living out the message of the gospel does not accept homosexual love in their own context.

Second, the hermeneutical move the document asks the member churches to make is to examine “cultural and socio-ethical paradigms in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” The LWF will maintain that homosexuality is a “cultural and socio-ethical paradigm” and not something forbidden by the Holy Scriptures. The law of God is subsumed by the gospel. Natural Law is simply a cultural and socio-ethical paradigm that can be dismissed by churches today, much as the Christian church dismissed the Jewish ceremonial law in the first century.

The document begins by discussing autonomy and accountability. Although in the past, the LWF regarded church bodies as “autonomous,” this understanding does not fit well with the current understanding that the LWF is a communion rather than a federation of independent, autonomous church bodies. Presently, the LWF is putting forth the idea that autonomy needs to be balanced with accountability to the other members. In light of the current disruption within the LWF’s communion, there are two possible readings: 1) The EECMY was wrong to break communion with the CoS and the ELCA as this was an autonomous act; 2) The CoS and the ELCA did not sufficiently take into account the “socio-cultural contexts” of other churches when they decided to accept homosexual love. Although there are two possible readings, the sense of the document indicates more displeasure with the EECMY for breaking fellowship, than it does with the CoS and the ELCA for not taking “socio-cultural” contexts into account. This is made clear when the document explains the role of church law.

How is the  
gospel defined  
and what is  
included in that  
definition?

<sup>5</sup> *Understanding the Gift of Communion*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Understanding the Gift of Communion*, 96. “The failure of the church and Christians to accept homosexual love given in the framework of faithful and conjugal relationships reverts into a condemnation of homosexuality that is a reenactment of exclusionary categories inherited from a colonial and patriarchal past.”

<sup>7</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion: A Study Document*, ed. Department for Theological and Public Witness (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2015). The document can be downloaded from [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit\\_9.2\\_The\\_Self-Understanding\\_of\\_the\\_Lutheran\\_Communion.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit_9.2_The_Self-Understanding_of_the_Lutheran_Communion.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Church law governs various aspects of the life of an individual church, such as who is eligible to receive communion or to be ordained to the ministry. The various principles expressed in church law reflect both a theological understanding of the church and local conditions. Both of these are culturally mediated.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the decision of a church body to ordain or not ordain a person is tied to the local culture. There is not a clear Scriptural word regarding the qualifications for ordination, but it is culturally determined. Therefore, both the CoS and ELCA can decide that their local culture allows for the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the EECMY can say that their culture does not allow it, but this difference in culture is not divisive of the communion or fellowship in the LWF; it is part of the reconciled diversity.

As a result of the broken communion between the EECMY, the CoS, and the ELCA, the document notes, “the churches have started to ask themselves how to engage with disagreements in the communion in a critical but constructive way.”<sup>11</sup> The document acknowledges that “the churches of the communion face questions regarding family, marriage and sexuality. While some churches have taken official positions on these issues, others have not. And then there are those that are in the process of discerning how to engage with these questions.”<sup>12</sup> The document acknowledges that marriage and sexuality are issues facing the LWF. The document does not state that this essentially is a divide between the old colonial powers (Europe and the United States) and the global South. The document states correctly that it is a question of “being true to the gospel.”<sup>13</sup> Left unsaid is that the churches supporting homosexuality and those who oppose it do not share the same gospel.

The LWF describes the situation as follows:

Considering current controversies, such as the ordination of people with homosexual orientation and the blessing of relationships between people

of the same sex, some approach these issues under the rubric of the pastoral imperative to be inclusive, while others assert that entertaining such a decision can undermine the integrity of the communion. For this reason, we should not qualify these issues as “socio-ethical” alone but also as issues of church order and discipline that play a role in the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>14</sup>

The LWF would like to present the issue as being about the proclamation of the gospel. Some churches, like the CoS and ELCA, believe that “the ordination of people with homosexual orientation and the blessing” of same-sex relationships is a matter of the gospel. At the same time, other churches (the majority of churches within the LWF) believe approving such things is against the gospel. Note that the LWF does not recognize that this is a doctrinal issue. It is socio-ethical and a matter of church order, which the document previously said was culturally mediated.<sup>15</sup> The document next suggests that these differences might be related to the Reformation “concept of *adiaphora*, involving “matters pertaining to human

Is the Holy Scripture the word of God? Or do the Holy Scriptures merely contain the word of God?

traditions, rites and ceremonies and so marked a space for acceptable differences.”<sup>16</sup> The LWF’s *Self-Understanding of Communion*, at the very least, suggests that the controversies within the LWF over “the ordination of people with homosexual orientation and the blessing of relationships between people of the same sex” might be regarded as *adiaphora*. Understanding this matter as an *adiaphoron* would allow some churches to ordain homosexuals and bless same-sex relationships and would allow other churches to refrain from the same without dividing the LWF communion. It is akin to saying that sexuality and marriage issues are no more church divisive than whether a church in Africa uses drums during worship while a church in Germany or North America uses the pipe organ for worship.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 14. “Church law governs various aspects of the life of an individual church, such as who is eligible to receive communion or to be ordained to the ministry. The various principles expressed in church law reflect both a theological understanding of the church and local conditions. Both of these are culturally mediated.”

<sup>16</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 15–16.

<sup>13</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 16.

The next section of the document provides “resources for accountable decision making.” The format of this section contains four theses statements followed by a subsection under each thesis titled, “Our conviction” and “Need for discussion.” The goal of the “resources” is to “orient the communion in the task of discerning how to live together in the midst of diversity.”<sup>17</sup> A brief examination of the theses/resources follows.

Thesis or Resource 1: “The gospel is the core of our life in communion.”<sup>18</sup> The “Our Conviction” sub-section begins,

The unifying core of our Christian faith and of our Lutheran confessions is our salvation in Jesus Christ by grace through faith, witnessed in Scripture that reveals God’s unconditional love for us (EPH 2:8)... The conviction shared by all churches of our communion is that the reality and gift of God’s justifying grace is the foundation of Christian belief and life, and that Christian practice and “good works” follow from faith, which looks to grace for unity (GAL 3:25-29). This unity is established by the Word that constitutes the church as the visible body of Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the center of fellowship and communion. This prompts two significant questions: How is the gospel defined and what is included in that definition? Generally speaking, the LWF defines “gospel” very narrowly to mean “God’s justifying grace.” Historically, in connection with communion, that is, altar and pulpit fellowship, Lutherans have not defined agreement in the “gospel” in a narrow sense, but in a broader sense to include agreement in doctrine, including teachings both of law and gospel. Different Christian denominations, who have very different teachings and understandings on a variety of doctrines, can agree with one another that the gospel is narrowly defined as the justification of the sinner. Yet, such agreement that Christ justifies the sinner has not been seen historically as sufficient to permit communion or fellowship between Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, and so forth. Historically, agreement in doctrine and teaching also was required.

Additionally, in order to agree on the justifying grace of God, one must also agree on what God is justifying or saving us from. In the context of the conflict among LWF members, some member churches regard the practice of homosexuality to be a sin that is in need of Christ’s forgiveness, while other member churches in the LWF do not regard the practice of homosexuality, particularly when it occurs in a faithful and conjugal relationship, to be a sin. On the one hand, the LWF members that regard the practice of homosexuality as a sin would understand the gospel of Jesus to offer forgiveness to those people who repent of homosexuality. On the other hand, the LWF member churches who do not regard the practice of homosexuality, particularly which occurs in faithful and conjugal relationship, to be a sin (CoS and ELCA) would not understand a reason to repent or receive forgiveness for that activity — hence the gospel of Jesus does not provide forgiveness for that lifestyle simply because it is not required or needed. This example demonstrates that there is not an agreement on the gospel of Jesus in the narrow sense, since one party regards it as a sin in need of forgiveness and the other does not. So it seems that the LWF defines the gospel in an even more narrow sense, one that simply acknowledges “God’s justifying grace” without any agreement or acknowledgement of sin. This is not to say there must be agreement about the enumeration of sins, but rather agreement in the basic categories described by the Ten Commandments (Decalogue). The topic of what is intended by agreement in the gospel will be addressed further when the next thesis/resource is addressed.

Next the LWF document references but does not quote or explain in detail Dr. Martin Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian”<sup>20</sup> as a significant work that helps us understand “the new relationship that God establishes.” The document states that a distinction must be made between hearing God’s voice “as a will demanding conformity to external moral laws” or “as a promise to renew our whole existence by granting us a new identity in Christ.”<sup>21</sup> These statements could be interpreted in a few ways, one of which is that “socio-ethical” issues (such as marriage and sexuality) involve a conformity to external moral laws, rather than living within the promise. The document gives the impression that Luther’s “The Freedom of a

<sup>17</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Luther’s Works*, edited by Harold J. Grimm and Hartmut Lehmann, trans. W.A. Lambert, 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 327–377. Hereafter referred to as AE for the American Edition.

<sup>21</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 17.



Christian” supports the position that is presented in this document. Indeed, Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian” divides the Scriptures into two basic categories: command and promise.<sup>22</sup> Luther’s view does not nullify the law or Natural Law. Luther writes, “The law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned without hope.”<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther would not see his writings as undoing the Scriptural prohibition against homosexual practice. Luther certainly would affirm forgiveness for those who sought it, but he would not say that the law and command of God was nullified. Luther did not practice the gospel reductionism advocated in this paper. The practice of gospel reductionism allows for one to say that a literal interpretation of the creation account as found in Genesis, or rejecting that God actually stopped the sun for Joshua, is not problematic since such rejection does not affect the gospel principle of justifying faith. In a similar manner, gospel reductionism is used to dismiss “socio-ethical” matters such as homosexuality as not affecting the gospel principle of justifying faith.<sup>24</sup> The LWF in this document has adopted a gospel reduction argument to allow the acceptance of homosexual love.

Under this section’s “Need for Discussion” subsection, the document states that although fellowship/communion is an action of God, individual member churches can take actions that “make it more difficult for us to experience communion and so ‘grieve the Holy Spirit of God’ (Eph. 4:30).”<sup>25</sup> What “decisions” that grieved the Holy Spirit and made it more difficult to experience communion are not clear. Is the document speaking about the decisions made by the CoS and ELCA regarding homosexuality? Or is the document speaking about the decision made by the EECMY to break fellowship? Both? At this point the document is unclear. The following context seems to imply that the “decisions” refer to the actions taken by the CoS and the ELCA. “Nevertheless, contextual demands require churches continually to discern law and gospel

in response to pastoral needs and political realities, and may cause churches to take decisions that other churches might not understand.” The context implies that “decisions” refer to the actions taken by the CoS and the ELCA, and that their decision about homosexuality was the result of their discernment of law and gospel and pastoral care concerns. “Political realities” also are mentioned. This implies that governmental pressure and/or shifting public opinion may have influenced the decision taken by these two churches bodies to embrace homosexuality. The last line is rather “colonialistic” and “paternalistic” to say some “churches might not understand.”<sup>26</sup> The churches of the global South understand but believe the decision of the CoS and the ELCA to embrace homosexuality is against the word of God. It seems if the interpretation is reversed and that decision refers to the EECMY’s action to sever fellowship with the CoS and ELCA then it would also apply. Their decision was based upon a discernment of law and gospel and pastoral care concerns for the souls of people. Finally, the CoS and ELCA do not accept the action of the EECMY to sever fellowship. The reality is that the dispute in the LWF is not a matter of understanding, but rather a fundamental disagreement over the word of God.

The document next states, “Members of the communion should be able to disagree with each other’s decision without necessarily threatening the unity of the communion. This is true on condition that such a decision is not deemed to compromise the common affirmation of justifying faith.”<sup>27</sup> These statements make the assumption that the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex relationships is an adiaphoron, a matter of indifference, and not a doctrinally divisive matter. Such a statement neglects the fact that the issue is about a disagreement over what the Holy Scriptures teach, not an adiaphoron such as whether or not African churches can use drums in worship while European and North American churches use a pipe organ. The LWF document states that the decision of accepting homosexuality “is not deemed to compromise the common affirmation of justifying faith.” As indicated earlier, there is no agreement on justifying faith without an agreement on Natural Law and the Decalogue. Without agreement that sin condemns and what those sins are, such as the Sixth Commandment that forbids any sexual activity outside of marriage

<sup>22</sup> AE 31, 348. “Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Edward H. Schroeder, “Law-Gospel Reductionism in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43, no. 4 (April 1972): 233. “Thus, for example, according to critics the Law/Gospel reductionists can argue that cosmological or mythic aspects in Joshua and Genesis are to be interpreted as such inasmuch as this interpretation does not affect the Gospel.”

<sup>25</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

between a man and a woman, there is no agreement on the gospel which forgives such sins.

The second thesis/resource is “Word and sacraments are events of communion.”<sup>28</sup> This next section picks up the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, as the definition of the church.

The church is identified as evident in those places where the gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are rightly administered. According to CA VII, it is enough (*satis est*) for the true church and its unity that we preach the gospel and celebrate the sacraments properly. God promises that this church will last forever.<sup>29</sup>

The position of the LWF in regards to communion/fellowship is that “It is enough (*satis est*)” if a church preaches the gospel and celebrates the sacraments. Again, in this case, the gospel is narrowly defined to be teaching that God justifies and forgives. Although this “narrow” definition of the gospel has allowed the LWF to form its communion, this same narrow definition is demonstrating a significant weakness by revealing the disunity of various LWF member churches regarding how the Scripture should be interpreted. When member churches share a basic definition of natural law and the Decalogue, the limitations of such a narrow definition of the gospel are not as immediately apparent. However, now that Natural Law and the Decalogue are rejected by some member churches, the disunity between them is more apparent. The LWF perhaps is incapable of recovering Natural Law and the Decalogue so it must now resort to hermeneutical tricks and narrow definitions of the gospel in order to maintain unity and their communion.

The interpretation of Augsburg Confession, Article VII, is rather significant to the concept of fellowship/communion.<sup>30</sup> As Dr. Roland Ziegler identifies, there are four basic interpretations of AC VII.<sup>31</sup> The first, as advocated by Albrecht Ritschl, emphasizes the gospel over doctrine.<sup>32</sup> This view argues, “The foundation of the church as church, that is, the preached gospel and the

administered sacraments, and the foundation of the unity of the church are the same. This implies that differences in doctrine are no longer church dividing.”<sup>33</sup> The second view is most famously articulated by theologians of the Prussian Union and by the Leuenberg Agreement (1973).<sup>34</sup> This view, unlike the first view, advocates for more than consensus in preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, but requires a doctrinal agreement in the gospel. This agreement in the gospel is defined in a narrow sense. The LWF’s view appears to be a conflation of the first and second interpretations of Augsburg Confession, Article VII. The third interpretation of AC VII holds that consensus consists in

recognizing that the Holy Scriptures as the norm and standard of teaching and in regarding the Lutheran Confessions as the correct exposition of the Scriptures — that and not much more. This means that other questions that are not addressed in the confession should not be divisive.<sup>35</sup>

As a result, topics not explicitly mentioned by the Lutheran Confessions do not require agreement. The fourth interpretation of the AC VII holds that “the consensus necessary for the unity of the church consists in everything that the Scriptures teach.”<sup>36</sup> This is the position taken by the member churches of the International Lutheran Council (ILC).<sup>37</sup> In contrast to the position of the ILC, which calls for agreement in everything that the Scriptures teach for fellowship/communion, the LWF does not require agreement in the Scriptures but instead bases fellowship/communion on the agreement that the gospel (narrowly defined) needs to be preached and the sacraments need to be administered. This minimal approach taken by the LWF demonstrates its weakness in the current controversy by holding the position that some members can regard homosexuality as a sin while others

<sup>28</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> See Albert B. Collver, “Augustana VII: The Church and Fellowship,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 2, no. 5 (2015): 38–44.

<sup>31</sup> Roland F. Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 3–4 (2014): 59–79.

<sup>32</sup> Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity,” 61. “Ritschl wants to emphasize doctrina evangelii, not doctrina evangelii.”

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity,” 63. “The second school of thought on the meaning of AC VII sees the necessity of a doctrinal consensus, not just an agreement in the preaching of the gospel, but restricts it to a consensus on what the gospel (in the narrow sense) and the sacraments are. This is the interpretation and the ecumenical model that was first proposed by some theologians of the Prussian union and much later by the Leuenberg Agreement (1973), by which the churches that subscribed to it entered into full church fellowship.”

<sup>35</sup> Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity,” 64–65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> The International Lutheran Council’s website can be found at <http://www.ilc-online.org>.

can regard it as part of a God-pleasing life and remain in fellowship/communion.

This section also makes statements about the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The document views the Lord's Supper as an act which "creates" fellowship rather than as an expression of the fellowship/communion that exists because of a common confession of faith.

The sacred meal is the means by which the church is constituted as body, and a body is only a body insofar as it is diverse... We are diverse, but diversity is a part of the mystery of our salvation (ROM 12:3-8). We have been justified and our justification does not only validate diversity; it produces it.<sup>38</sup>

The interpretation taken by the LWF's document hangs on the understanding of the body of Christ as found in 1 Corinthians 11. When 1 Corinthians 11 speaks of discerning the body, the first and primary sense is the discernment or recognition that Christ gives his true body and blood in the Lord's Supper. There is a secondary sense in which 1 Corinthians 11 speaks of discerning the church as the body of Christ. Yet this is secondary to the discernment and recognition of Christ's true body and blood, given to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. When Saint Paul speaks about sinning against the body of Christ, he is first and foremost speaking about denying that Christ gives his body and blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper, and only in a secondary way speaks of acknowledging other Christians who are part of the body of Christ.

The incorporation into the body of Christ is found in baptism. In baptism, a person is incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection (ROM 6:1-13). Historically, not all those who were baptized were admitted to the Lord's Supper for a variety of reasons, ranging from a lack of instruction, to differences in the confession of faith, to unrepentant sin. Connected to baptism was the confession of the Creeds. It is not the celebration of the Lord's Supper that constitutes the church as the body, but rather the administration of baptism that incorporates a Christian into the body of Christ. The Lord's Supper is practiced among Christians who share the confession of faith and it reflects their unity and incorporation into the body of Christ. The LWF document is certainly correct when it says, "when we are unable to celebrate together,

our communion is damaged."<sup>39</sup> The EECMY currently will not celebrate the Lord's Supper with the CoS or the ELCA.

The LWF document tried to acknowledge that baptism is one of the gifts given to the church that incorporates people into the body of Christ. The document, however, allows for the possibility of unbaptized believers, that is, those who profess faith but remain unbaptized.

In certain regions of the LWF there are people who desire Baptism but can only do so at considerable expense to themselves or their loved ones. There is need for the communion to acknowledge their faithfulness, even though they are unable to experience Baptism.<sup>40</sup>

This statement takes up the topic of the so-called "non-baptized believers" who claim to believe in Jesus but who refrain from being baptized for socio-cultural or political reasons.<sup>41</sup> There is a distinction between people who hear the gospel, believe, and are not able to be baptized and those who choose to not be baptized so that they do not cause divisions within their household, or so they can get married, or so that they do not lose a job, etc.<sup>42</sup> Jesus himself said, "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (MATT 10:38). At some point, deciding that pleasing father or mother, or seeking a spouse, or retaining a job instead of being baptized is in fact a de facto rejection of baptism.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Sam Thompson, "Reaching Out to the Non-Baptized Believers: Missiological Implications from a Lutheran Perspective," *Missio Apostolica* 2 (2014): 248. "However the 'non-baptized believers' we are concerned with in this discussion are those who are genuine in their faith affirmation and do not necessarily reject or despise Baptism. They are convinced that Jesus is the only God, the Way and the Truth, and that His life and work on the cross is sufficient for the forgiveness of their sin and for their salvation. However, due to various socio-cultural and political reasons and/or because of the failure of the church to effectively minister to them, they still remain as unbaptized believers. These believers could be the fruits of missionary efforts of some institutionalized churches or para-church organizations."

<sup>42</sup> Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2001), 24. "All of the women speak of their desire to be baptized. No children are baptized, except in Christian families. The boys attend Sunday School for a while, but soon the father takes them with him into work at the business. The girls are not baptized because it would affect the chances of their marriage arrangements, so each non-baptized believing girl must try to work it out with her husband later on."

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 10:34-39: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. 37 Whoever loves father

<sup>38</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 20.

The next significant thesis/resource says, “The Word of God creates and affirms both unity and diversity.”<sup>44</sup> The “Conviction” or belief of the LWF is “The Word of God, mediated through the Holy Scriptures, is the source of ecclesial communion, and of the church’s life, hope, and belief.”<sup>45</sup> The significant challenge with this statement is that the LWF regards the word of God to be mediated through the Holy Scriptures, this is to say that the Holy Scriptures are not necessarily the word of God nor are they equated with the word of God. The LWF does not affirm that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God. In contrast to the LWF position, the churches of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) hold that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God. Dr. J.A.O. Preus in *It is Written* explains, “To Jesus, Scripture is truly and properly the Word of God, God speaking to us. In Mark 7:13 He speaks of the Law of Moses as ‘the Word of God’ and compares it with the tradition of the Jews which He puts far beneath the Law.”<sup>46</sup> This is a major point of difference. Is the Holy Scripture the word of God? Or do the Holy Scriptures merely contain the word of God? The LWF’s position understands that the word of God is mediated through the Holy Scripture, which is to say the Holy Scripture merely contains the word of God but is not the word of God. This view allows for portions of the Scripture to be ignored or excised, particularly if it is not convenient for a position one desires to take, such as the affirmation of the ordination of homosexuals or the blessing of same-sex marriages.

The LWF document next asserts “The testimony of the Holy Scriptures is not a monotone but a choir of many different voices. Diversity, then, is sanctioned in Scripture (GAL 2:7–10).”<sup>47</sup> What is meant is not entirely clear. What does it mean that the Holy Scripture is not monotone? Does it mean that the Lord employed various authors, who wrote in different styles and literary genres? Does it refer to a higher critical view of interpretation of the Holy Scriptures that some LWF member churches teach? Nor is it clear how the next statement logically follows

that “Diversity, then, is sanctioned in Scripture.” What is diversity? Galatians 2:7–10 is cited, which speaks of the gospel going to the Jews and to the Gentiles. If by diversity it is meant that the gospel is for all people of every nation, tribe, race, and language, then the Scripture does sanction diversity. However, in contemporary English, diversity has different political connotations.

Within the context of the document, “diversity” seems to speak to how hermeneutics should be done.

Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the range of scriptural utterances contained in the Bible rather than to focus on a narrower selection of texts. This diversity is reconciled through the shared core of the Scriptures: all Lutheran churches affirm the basic authority of Scripture interpreted through the hermeneutical key of the gospel of the liberating grace given in Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup>

First, this section of the document seems to say that a “diversity” of texts rather than a narrow selection should be used to understand issues in a biblical way. In light of the controversy within the LWF over homosexuality, it appears that the proposed hermeneutical key seeks to dismiss the few or narrow passages that speak clearly about homosexuality (GEN 19; LEV 18:22–23, 20:13; ROM 1:24–27; 1 COR 6:9–10; 1 TIM 1:10). Instead of these six passages from both the Old and New Testament that speak clearly on the topic of homosexuality, the document encourages “the range of scriptural utterances” understood through the “hermeneutical key of the gospel.” This argument refers back to the earlier discussion about the definition of the gospel, either narrowly defined as justification by grace or broadly defined to include all the teachings of Scripture.

The final thesis/resource says, “The gospel entails freedom, respect and bearing with one another.”<sup>49</sup> This thesis/resource seems to intend to limit the freedom and autonomy of self-governing, independent church bodies. Yet, the statement seems more directed against the EECMY than it is against the CoS and the ELCA. “Sometimes, the neighbor makes decisions that we do not feel free to make. In such situations, the churches may be called to bear with one another, respecting differing choices as expressions of their own freedom.”<sup>50</sup> In this case, it seems that the church bodies who do not agree with the decisions of the

---

or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

<sup>44</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Jacob A.O. Preus, *It Is Written* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 15.

<sup>47</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> footnote goes here—it wasn’t on the document

<sup>49</sup> *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



CoS and the ELCA are told to bear with another and to respect that decision. Churches are supposed to recognize that they will have different opinions but these differing opinions, even if some believe they are against the word of God, are to be respected and ultimately accepted.

### **Conclusion**

The LWF's *The Self-Understanding of Communion* is a significant document because it attempts to pacify or restore unity which has been broken within the communion. The LWF member churches will vote on this document to determine if it will be how they interact with each other going forward. The document makes the attempt to bridge differences between views held by the global North and the global South. The confession and hermeneutical presuppositions of the LWF collectively is less than that of some of the member churches. For instance, collectively the LWF cannot say that the Holy Scriptures are the word of God, yet some of the members of the LWF do in fact confess and believe this. The document confesses AC VII in a lesser form by reducing the *satis est* ("it is enough") to mean simply the proclamation of justification by grace, rather than the more complete form that gospel refers to doctrine in all its articles. Finally, the document takes a gospel reductionist approach to the Scriptures, in particular, to natural law and the Decalogue. The end result of such an approach effectively concludes that the LWF as a communion should accept the ordination of homosexual clergy and the blessing of same-sex relationships. Although the document does not explicitly say this, it is hard to envision any other conclusion. It is hard to imagine that this approach will create lasting peace within the LWF communion. It would be far better if the LWF members discussed the actual difference in biblical interpretation and the different views toward the Scriptures. Perhaps with the expression of honest disagreement in document, the LWF actually could find a greater unity.

---

*The Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver III is LCMS director of Church Relations and assistant to LCMS President Matthew C. Harrison.*