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AUGSBURG CONFESSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CONFESSING THE FAITH ONCE FOR ALL DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS

BRINGING THE REFORMATION AS BRINGING CHRIST

by Alexey Streltsov

THE OVERALL THEME OF THE 2015 INTERNATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL (ILC) conference has been designated as “Bringing the Reformation to the World.” In this time of globalization in the 21st century, the world seems to be a smaller place than in the previous centuries, resembling at times the spirit of the ancient Roman Empire. While the local contexts and concerns of the conference participants may be of somewhat varying natures, nevertheless the processes that transpire in the countries with a historic Lutheran presence affecting the Lutheran Church there will impact in one way or another Christianity and Lutheranism in all other areas as well.

There is a temptation to view this task of bringing the Reformation to the world as a quasi-academic exercise, or simply put, as a demonstration of Lutheranism as yet another strange and rare animal in the global religious zoo.

The original Reformation of the 16th century as a movement was intended for the Church as the Bride of Christ, who was impeccable in the eyes of God because of the purifying blood of the Lamb, yet on her surface had obvious stains that had to be taken care of. So it was an enterprise that took place within the Church. In other words, the Reformation did not begin a new Church; our Church was not born on Oct. 31, 1517, or June 25, 1530, for that matter. Johann Gerhard specifically made this point while confronting accusations of his Roman Catholic opponent Bellarmine about Lutherans not being the Catholic Church:

No matter what happens, the Church will survive. The Holy Scripture will still be there. Our Lutheran Confessions will still be there. And at least two or three Christians will always stay here or there. That is the promise of Christ.

[Luther] pointed out and repudiated from the Word of God papal errors newly introduced into the church and called us back to the ancient catholic faith. ... Therefore we are named, or rather permit ourselves to be named, after Luther, not a teacher of a new heresy (as Arians formerly were named after Arius, the Nestorians after Nestorius, etc.) nor as the inventor of a new rule (as the Franciscans are named after Francis, Dominicans after Dominic, etc.) but as the asserter of the ancient faith, the overthrower of Papism, and the cleanser of the churches, whom God raised up.¹

The external environment of the Reformation was post-Constantinian Christendom as an established socio-political framework in which people found themselves for centuries. Envisioned reforms were of an internal nature to be applied in the already existing Church with the goal that her calling more closely conform to the apostolic Scriptures. An intrinsically ecumenical piece, the Augsburg Confession specifically relegates articles on abuses to the second, relatively minor part of the document, letting the positive affirmation of the Church's beliefs stand in the main place. The thrust of the Augsburg Confession was to claim that “nothing has been accepted among us, in teaching or ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or the catholic church.”²

¹ Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces, On the Church*, tr. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 160, 295–296.

² Augsburg Confession, Conclusion, 5, Latin text.

Priorities that the Augsburg Confession regards as central for the life of the Church remain the same; they never change: Christology, justification, Church, Sacraments.

However, today we face a markedly different situation from that of the 16th century. In much of Europe and in the Western world in general, there is no longer Christendom in the earlier traditional sense. While in the Reformation debates some crucial things were at stake, nevertheless the opponents agreed on basic theistic and Christian presuppositions such as the existence of God, the Trinity, creation, Christology and the like. In today's Western world, a more typical frame of reference would be something like "The God Delusion" of Richard Dawkins, which moves us several levels behind in terms of suppositions on which we can agree with what seems to the mainstream of our opponents, thus making our task much more challenging.

It has become commonplace to assert that the global move of Christianity to the South would radically change the demographic map of Christianity in the next decades.³ However, much of this rapid growth in the Southern Hemisphere may be claimed by Pentecostal movements of various kinds. Whether or not Pentecostalism in its different facets has become a major expression of modern Christianity may be a matter of debate, but the trend is unmistakable, and as such it presents a certain shift in focus compared to the religious scene of the original Reformation. This is not to say, of course, that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and historic Reformed churches and groups are going into oblivion but rather this is a major new influence that we have to take into account.

Along with that, as we rapidly approach the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation, a certain question is raised en masse among many members of the Lutheran churches that pay attention to developments of recent times: Is there anything still to celebrate? Do the people designating themselves as Lutherans really stand in the tradition of the Church of the Reformation as she is expressed in *Confessio Augustana*? The general sentiment is inescapable that we cannot help but deplore the current state of affairs in the Lutheran Church worldwide. And those of us who at times become boastful about our strength and perseverance in some areas of doctrine and

practice prefer to ignore those areas where we would not come out as strong (e.g., sanctity of marriage, internal practical struggles in the churches and way of their resolution, etc.).

Thus "bringing the Reformation to the world in the 21st century" assumes a threefold task. This task is to evangelize (in some cases re-evangelize) the world outside the Church. It is to continue to testify of the truth of the original Reformation to the other Christian confessions. And it is to correct errors that we may find in our own midst.

While this activity may seem to be different in form, in its essence it is the same, as it has to do with "confessing the faith once for all delivered to the saints."⁴ The author of the Augsburg Confession is Philip Melanchthon, yet from the very outset this production was not intended as his personal document. In the words of one of Melanchthon's biographers, "he was for the time the common consciousness, the surrogate of his party. His

object was ... to state ... what was held and taught in the churches of the subscribing princes and cities."⁵

We must be clear that bringing Reformation to the world is not equal to forcing on the world some peculiar system or ideology. Rather, in every case and every context we are to bring Christ to the world — a task that is best expressed by St Paul: "We preach Christ crucified ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."⁶ Likewise Martin Luther asserts that "the entire gospel that we preach depends on the proper understanding of this article" (LC II, 33).

The task is thus to bring Christ who makes Himself present solely in the Church through the rightly preached Word of the Gospel and correct administration of the Sacraments. All of our churches are to do this in those places where God has put us, in all the different contexts where we happen to be. If this task is properly understood, then the notion and admission that Christianity is a relatively insignificant part of the world now (at least in some former traditionally Christian areas), and Lutheranism is

What matters is that the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments stay in the center of what the Church is doing.

³ See especially Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Jude 3.

⁵ James William Richard, *Philip Melanchthon: The Protestant Preceptor of Germany 1497–1560* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1898), 206.

⁶ 1 Cor. 1:23–24.

a relatively minor statistical part of modern Christianity, while still disconcerting, will at the same time be viewed as secondary. What matters is the ongoing reality of the presence of Christ with His faithful, which Christ Himself has promised: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”⁷

Salvation and its prerequisites

While our treatment of the Augsburg Confession at this conference properly begins from Article 4, a word must be said concerning the first 3 articles, given the very coherent presentation of the doctrine by our fathers. After all, we cannot speak about justification without understanding why, from what and by whom we must be justified.

Thus, Article 1 speaks about God, which is an entirely appropriate theme to begin the treatment of doctrine. Without the notion of God, we may not speak about anything else. Here the Reformers firmly establish themselves as descendants of the ancient Church of the Nicene Council. At the May 2015 International Conference on Confessional Leadership in Wittenberg, Germany, Dr. Paul Kofi Fynn, the president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana, exclaimed, referring to the degradation of Western Christianity in the last decades: “What has gone wrong?” Article 2 of the Augsburg Confession provides an answer: the fall into sin. This is what has gone wrong! Once it got so wrong, it kept on getting wrong in all subsequent human history, including, alas, the history of the modern church. Disagreements on the doctrine of justification can usually be traced back to different perceptions of the extent and pervasiveness of the original sin. Finally, Article 3 already speaks of justification, as it speaks of Christ, and we know no other justification than the one where Christ is active and which subsists of Christ. The language of the article itself provides intimate connection with Article 4 by way of its claim that Christ died “that he might reconcile the Father to us and be a sacrifice not only for the original guilt but also for all actual sins of human beings” (AC 3, 3). Indeed, one of the largest problems in appropriation of Article 4 results from its treatment in isolation from original sin and Christology. Then the Gospel risks becoming “any good news for any particular bad situation.”

People tend to think that saying the “justification through faith” cliché by itself signifies faithful adherence to Reformation heritage, as though this phrase were some

kind of magic. Do not get fooled. Watch the hands carefully; this game may be not a clean one. Last summer one episode in particular gave me a shock when one of the Lutheran World Federation higher-ups actually used the language of “justification through faith,” including all the routine niceties like “the article by which church stands or falls” and so forth, against people who opposed gay marriages. He called them “legalists,” implying that they were the ones who did not fully grasp the teaching on justification!

This is not to claim that the doctrine of justification has lost any of its significance or actuality. Whether or not the question “How can I find merciful God?” is still fashionable in the 21st century does not nullify the fact that now, just as 500 years ago, people are still sinners in need of forgiveness. This is an objective reality that we get to know through divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures, and it does not depend on it being a “felt need” or not. Modern commercials have excelled in making people believe they need some goods or services even if they are totally irrelevant. On the contrary, it is possible to abide in illusion in this life of being “content” and “healthy,” have one’s felt needs resolved and then still go to hell as “content” and “healthy.”

Articles 5, “On Ecclesiastical Ministry,” and Article 6, “On New Obedience,” are basically ramifications and implications of Article 4 and so must be interpreted through the lens of justification. Even the sentence structure used therein does not allow us to treat them independently: “So that we may obtain *this faith*, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted” (AC 5, 1), “*this faith is bound to yield good fruits*” (AC 6, 1).

Article 5 repudiates all modern popular trends that pretend to be able to grasp authentic divine things directly, immediately, in the realm of pure spirit. “Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external Word” — amazingly these words have not lost their significance over the course of centuries. All acclaimed positive and ecumenical thrust of the Augsburg Confession stops short of encompassing this immediate engagement with the Holy Spirit, the one that happens “without the external Word.”

Article 6 demonstrates intimate connection between faith and works as good fruits of the saving faith. In the matter of good works, Lutherans may not allow themselves to lose any ground. In a country where I come

⁷ Matt. 18:20.

from, the popular propaganda of the predominant confession sometimes describes Lutherans as those who “do not want to do good works because they think they are saved through faith alone.” Thus, Dr. Alexey Osipov, professor of the Moscow Spiritual Academy of the Russian Orthodox Church, in his critical discussions of Lutheran soteriology, makes the observation that Lutherans are the ones who refuse to climb the ladder of spiritual ascent and instead want to get everything at once by getting in the spiritual elevator that immediately takes them to the top floor. How easy and convenient, sarcastically comments Osipov.⁸

It bears a very profound misunderstanding of key issues of soteriology. First of all, we don’t climb to heaven in this life. The apostle Paul may have been to the third heaven in his lifetime, but his would not be a typical experience. Rather, Christ has come down to earth and He brought heaven right here where He meets us on our level. Second, good works do matter. Using Osipov’s analogy, it is much more fruitful to quickly use the service of the elevator in order to further dedicate all efforts to the works of love and mercy done for other people rather than concentrate on personal spiritual climbing all the time. Fortunately, while dealing with people it is not very difficult to demonstrate that historically, Lutherans have been very active in doing good works. In fact, they were pioneers in the matter of opening public hospitals, shelters and schools in Russia and many other places. Doing good works is not optional. The works of mercy, both on the institutional and personal level, continue to be yet another important way of bringing the Reformation to the world.

The place of salvation

The logic of the Augsburg Confession follows the traditional maxim of St Cyprian of Carthage: “Outside the church there is no salvation.”⁹ The saving faith of Article 4 is delivered to people through the public ministry of Article 5, and that happens precisely in the Church as the locus of this activity of God. That said, in the Augsburg Confession, the Church is not viewed through the lens of the hierarchy of the bishop of Rome, but rather as the congregation of people who hear the Word and receive

the Sacraments: “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (AC 7, 1).

This classical definition is met with approval in modernist Lutheran ecumenical circles, although it may get butchered, being effectively reduced to just an activity of preaching some type of Gospel and administering some kind of sacraments.¹⁰ However, St. Paul markedly disagrees with this approach when he says, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”¹¹

The Augsburg Confession further delineates the boundaries of the Church, or rather, the proper forms that the Church takes in Article 14 with its careful wording that “no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called.” The efficaciousness of the Sacraments, however, does not depend on the personal moral qualities of the priests, as Article 8 boldly proclaims to eliminate the Donatist option.

Another liberating assertion of Article 7 that was a breath of fresh air in time of the Reformation was its allowance for the usage of various ceremonies in the church. Numerous cultural changes that have taken place in the church since the Reformation with regard to the uniformity and multiplicity of the ceremonies, as well as the shifts within ceremonies themselves, would require a separate lecture to give them full credit.

One predominant secular idea that permeates the fabric of today’s politically correct thought is the implied equality of cultures. That rather naïve perception cannot be historically substantiated. Some cultures are outright evil and the world will only do better without them. Take, for example, the culture of women’s circumcision; how will modern Europe handle it when it is increasingly practiced in the cities by the people for whom it remains just a part of their culture? Hardly anybody would claim that the culture of the so called Islamic State, promoting torture, live executions of prisoners and human trade and slavery has the same validity as any other culture. And if it is too exotic for some of us, how about some of our own cultures that condemn unborn babies to die without giving them any chance to defend themselves?

G. K. Chesterton made the point that God destroyed

⁸ «Проф. А.И. Осипов. «Лютеранство», Lecture course on “Western confessions” at the Moscow Ecclesiastical Academy, 2005–2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra4H2zT86eA>, accessed on Sept. 13, 2015.

⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter LXXII, Ad Jubajanum de haereticis baptizandis*.

¹⁰ Institute for Ecumenical Research, *Lutheran Identity* (Strasbourg: Institute for Ecumenical Research, 1977). Omission of words “purely” and “rightly” changes the whole meaning of definition of the church in AC 7.1.

¹¹ Gal. 1:8.

Phoenicians on purpose as an evil culture immersed in child-sacrifices: “For Carthage fell because she was faithful to her own philosophy and had followed out to its logical conclusion her own vision of the universe. Moloch had eaten his own children.”¹²

What will happen to the Church that succumbs to the culture? The answer is obvious. The language of different ceremonies in Article 7 was not meant to imply the cases of religious syncretism, doctrinal irresponsibility or liturgical absurdity.

People in today’s world are in search of tradition and beauty, which the Church can readily supply to them! Rather than trying to chase the culture train that moves with an ever-increasing speed, its fashion changing every year, the Church would do better to remember her heritage and adorn her worship with the ceremonies that are pious and readily understood by the people after succinct explanation. And, yes, particular features should not be the same everywhere, and they can’t be! What matters is that the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments stay in the center of what the Church is doing.

The means of salvation

The Church is a place of salvation, and as such she a living organism, which lives and acts. The Church speaks through the mouth of her bishop or pastor who is called to do just that. The Church gives birth to her children and washes them in the unique washing that retains its everlasting, purifying character. It is to this washing that the Church returns her children when they become dirty and filthy. It is the selfsame water that cleanses every time, as it is purified by the blood of Christ. Finally, being a careful and nourishing mother, the Church feeds.

Unlike numerous subsequent textbooks,¹³ the Augsburg Confession does not begin with a formal definition of the Sacrament. Instead are we simply presented

with what goes on in the Church according to dominical institution: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Confession. Attention is given to the individual Sacraments rather than to the general notion of the Sacraments. To be sure, Article 13 will pick up the topic of the relation of faith to the sacraments,¹⁴ and in the Apology Melancthon further elaborates this theme in his discussion of the essence and number of sacraments, but all this is done in response to the Roman notion of *ex opere operato*, which the Lutheran party wholeheartedly rejected. That is, such rhetoric was caused by external factors. Rejection of *ex opere operato* did not imply rejection of the external forms; Holsten Fagerberg is undeniably correct in his claim that Lutherans also viewed the Sacraments as “the external means whereby God carries out His work of salvation”¹⁵ and that the antithesis between the

Roman and the Lutheran parties is rather “based upon different opinions concerning grace and justification.”¹⁶ Still, it is the positive teaching concerning the Sacraments as a description of those specific works of God in His beloved Church that occupies the main attention of the Augustana.

The question to ask is whether we correspond in our doctrine and practice to the high stan-

dard provided in the Augsburg Confession. Do we let the sacramental gifts stand in the center of our worship? How is it reflected in our preaching? What about private Confession and Absolution in our churches? And if (as is the usual case) few if any people come to the private Confession in our churches, do we preach about its value and do we encourage people to use this benefit of Christ for their good?

The centrality of the Sacraments in the life of the Church means that the Sacraments are not to be thought of as outward forms pointing to some higher ethereal realities or containers of some elevated spiritual philosophical truths that we are to attain along with participation in

Once the Church has returned to the purity of the Gospel as it was proclaimed in the Augsburg Confession, then the task becomes preserving this confession and not letting the Church fall away from it.

¹² G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100311.txt>, accessed on Sept. 15, 2015.

¹³ E.g., in the classical “Christian Dogmatics” of F. Pieper, 117 pages are dedicated to the “Means of Grace” and 37 pages to “Holy Baptism.” This is just one example.

¹⁴ “The sacraments are instituted ... also as signs and testimonies of God’s will toward us in order thereby to awaken and strengthen our faith. That is why they also require faith and are rightly used when received in faith for the strengthening of the faith,” CA 13.1-2, German version.

¹⁵ Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confession 1529–1537*, 170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

the sacramental acts.¹⁷ On the contrary, the Sacraments are vital precisely as they are. No Zwingli-like parallelism or dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual is appropriate when dealing with Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Confession and Absolution. Sacraments are of Christ; they proclaim Christ and they give Christ precisely through physical means.

As we partake of the Lord's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, our inner psychological feeling, that is, how we rationalize what is going on or how intensely we think of our "spirituality" at the moment is really of secondary nature. What is important is that Christ comes to us right there, that His body and blood are orally consumed by the partakers of the Sacrament. Stanley Hauerwas once observed that "one of the great enemies of the gospel is sentimentality,"¹⁸ which is not meant to prohibit any feelings but rather indicate that must not be the basis of our doctrine. The Gospel is a concrete external reality, which is made available through those specific acts that Christ Himself has instituted.

And this is the objective message that we are to bring to the world: that salvation is *extra nos* (outside of us), that Baptism "is necessary for salvation," that "the grace of God is offered through baptism," that "the body and blood of Christ are truly present and are distributed to those who eat the Lord's Supper" and that the Holy Absolution is a great treasure that "should be retained in the churches."

There is a sense of irony in the fact that an article on Baptism, designed to be irenic in tone so as to not alienate the Roman party beyond measure, now stands in stark contrast to the current trends of contemporary popular evangelical culture. Yet bringing the Reformation to the world includes also subscription to and insistence upon the *damnant anabaptistas* statement. And even if we agree with concession of Wilhelm Maurer that the Augsburg Confession uses "guarded expressions" and "pastoral terms" such as *improbare* (disapprove), in 10.2 in relation to some parties of the time like the one of Zwinglians, nevertheless it unrestrainedly condemns Anabaptists as heretics.¹⁹ Indeed, people who take the grace of God away from little children and do not allow them to become

Christians through being born again of water and the Spirit are in danger of denying the core of the Christian faith, replacing it instead with some rationalistic and moral system based on obedience to the rules and prescriptions of the outside authority.

The 21st-century world is global and so is the Augsburg Confession.

The globalization that we increasingly experience in different spheres of modern life gives a new perspective to the words of St Paul: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."²⁰ What goes on in one part of *una sancta*, is echoed in one way or another in the other parts of the Church.

And in this large and strange world there all kinds of mixed situations: large churches once healthy, with the Gospel now stifled, small and dying churches, which were not able to retain their young, quickly-growing churches, which may struggle to establish or preserve their confessional identity. One cannot claim that the situation is reversed compared to how it appeared 150 years ago, but on the whole the picture has become much more fuzzy. Some smaller or poorer churches can be helpful to the larger and wealthier churches in teaching them about the radicalism of Christian commitment. Some younger churches can call upon the older churches to come back to their roots from which they have long since departed. The churches of the ILC share one crucial feature in common: They all claim to adhere to the Lutheran Confessions as "a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine ... from which and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated" (FC SD, The Summary Formulation, 10). So let us learn from each other at this conference and at similar occasions where we get together.

As Lutherans we do not quite feel comfortable with the Reformed concept of *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. Large-scale reforms are needed when things have gone wrong. Once the Church has returned to the purity of the Gospel as it was proclaimed in the Augsburg Confession, then the task becomes preserving this confession and not letting the Church fall away from it. No change is required for the sake of change. The focus of the apostolic admonition is to confess the faith once for all delivered to the saints, that is, to preserve this faith in its integrity and pass it on.

Priorities that the Augsburg Confession regards

¹⁷ For these emphases the author is indebted to the observation of Dr. Pavel Butakov, expressed at his presentation, "Problem of the universals in theological context," delivered at the Reformation Conference of Theological Seminary of SELC in Novosibirsk on Nov. 23–24, 2012.

¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 35.

¹⁹ Wilhelm Maurer, trans. H. George Anderson, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 50.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 12:26.

as central for the life of the Church remain the same. They never change: Christology, justification, church, Sacraments. When failing to reflect such priorities in our Christian communities, in our liturgy and our mission work, we also fail to bring the authentic Reformation experience to the world. Some Lutherans are convinced that for the Church to advance we must look for popular cultural trends, catch where the wind is blowing and be right there with the flow.

To be sure, some cultural changes are inescapable. In many countries, if today's preacher delivers sermon in the same style and with the same length as it were customary 150 years ago, today's younger generation would probably find it at least mildly bewildering. However, if we depend on surrounding culture to look for "trends" in order to move forward and if we overemphasize cultural relevance at the expense of things that are to retain their central character, then what would be the point of coming to church, just to find there all the same things that the world offers anyway in perhaps a better package?

The beauty of the Scriptures is that Christians can be recreated time and again from those divine words. The beauty of the Lutheran Confessions is that this correct doctrine may be resumed even in those places where it was once abandoned. The life of the Lutheran Church is in the Holy Scriptures as they are interpreted and explained by the Confessions. And so faith can be rekindled through the mouths of faithful ministers of the Gospel who do not fail to publicly teach and confess the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

The bishop of the church I represent, at the time of Soviet spiritual barrenness, traveled for thousands of miles to be catechized and baptized. If something like this could happen locally in a Communist environment, it can happen in other regions and other contexts as well. Well, who knows, maybe decades from now we will need to specify that it can happen even in the West, as strange as this sounds, with so many churches still worshipping, seminaries operating and books being published.

Fyodor Dostoevsky said prophetically over 140 years ago:

It very well may be that ... the purposes of all the modern guides of progressive thought are philanthropic and grand. But one thing seems certain to me: if these modern high-class teachers gain an opportunity to destroy the old society and build a new one, then it will result in such darkness, in such chaos, something so crude, blind, and inhuman,

that the whole building would fall down under the curses of humankind before it is completed. Once the human mind rejects Christ, it can reach astounding results. This is an axiom.²¹

No matter what happens, the Church will survive. The Holy Scripture will still be there. Our Lutheran Confessions will still be there. And at least two or three Christians will always stay here or there. That is the promise of Christ.

So, how does one bring the Reformation to the world? To the world, which is broken, our Christian message remains a message of hope, of the life to come, life that is revealed even now in the Church, through the preaching of the Gospel, through the life-giving cross. The modern world may have thought to overcome pain; nevertheless, the suffering in this life is inescapable, and so understanding of the purpose of suffering may by itself bring relief to the suffering individual, as Umberto Eco observed recently in his public lecture at the Science Academy of Palliative Medicine in Bologna.²² Well, our Lutheran theology of the cross provides a way out for the secular mindset that desperately attempts to arrange autonomous life on this earth that would be free of pain and suffering.

The Early Church, which had known suffering, persecution, chaos and even betrayal and apostasy made much use of the ancient legend of the Phoenix as the symbol of resurrection.²³ Decay and decomposition of this world will surely be followed by regeneration. And this is also how we may think of the Church. She will survive all attacks from the inside and outside. The church buildings may lie in ruins or be converted to vegetable storage places, swimming pools, movie theaters or, to bring it to more contemporary scenario, mosques, but this is not the end. The end has already come on the cross, it has reached us in Baptism and this end for us at the same time has marked the new beginning that will remain ours in this life and in the life to come. And it is this end — and the new beginning that it presupposes — that we are to share with the world as we acquaint it with the Reformation.

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²¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Writer's Diary* 1873.

²² Umberto Eco, *Riflessioni sul dolore* (Bologna: Asmera Edizioni, 2014), 40, 47.

²³ 1 Clement 25–26 contains the first Christian reference of this type (ca. 95 A.D.). Other writers including Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Ambrose of Milan followed suit.