

***Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church:  
A Lutheran Reflection***

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In 2010, at the Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, the churches of the LWF asked the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) for forgiveness over the way in which their Lutheran ancestors had treated the Mennonites' Anabaptist forebears. This "one, small step" bore fruit almost immediately with the establishment of a trilateral dialogue with Mennonites and Roman Catholics, who had earlier concluded similar talks between the MWC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) over responsibility for persecution. Though not quite the same as landing on the moon, the results of those trilateral meetings mark an important step forward in Christian rapprochement and indicate where important theological work still needs to be done. As a member of the original LWF/MWC conversations and the follow-up committee for the LWF, I am pleased to offer some reflections on this new report.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

In a rather unassuming sentence in the preface of the report, we read: "It should be noted that a trilateral dialogue is rare." Readers should highlight this sentence precisely because it represents a pioneering way forward in ecumenical conversations. Multilateral conversations often are stymied over the sheer breadth of theological and practical differences; bilateral dialogues may help individual churches but are not guaranteed to have broader significance. To be sure, there are exceptions, such as the multilateral production of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* from the international Commission on Faith and Order or the much wider impact of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* initially made between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, to have three important voices within the "church catholic" sitting down together to discuss one of the most important church-dividing issues, baptism, may bode well for

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future conversations—not simply among Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Mennonites but among other groups as well. The discipline needed to produce meaningful statements, which characterizes *Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church*, points the way forward in other venues as well.

A second general trait of this dialogue, also referred to in the preface, is its reliance on two previous bilateral dialogues between the PCPCU and the MWC (*Called Together to Be Peacemakers*) and between the LWF and the MWC (*Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*). Of course, other dialogues within the ecumenical movement often refer to previous studies for support. In this case, however, the previous dialogues, by focusing on a kind of “lifting of the condemnations” among the parties, cleared the way for meaningful dialogue on the divisions that remain. Without the former work the present work would have little meaning. For example, given that the central Lutheran confessional document, the *Augsburg Confession*, stated (in the Latin version of article IX): “[Our teachers] condemn the Anabaptists who disapprove of the baptism of children. . . ,” no meaningful conversations on baptism could take place without first dealing with the nature of that condemnation and its use by Lutherans in persecuting Anabaptists, the Mennonites’ spiritual forebears. These “preliminary” conversations turned out to provide the embryo out of which the present dialogue could grow. Moreover, both bilateral dialogues called for the very conversation that then took place.

#### LISTENING TO THE ROMAN CATHOLIC AND MENNONITE CONTRIBUTIONS

One of the chief sins in ecumenical conversations occurs when a participant in a dialogue tries to tell the other side what they believe or think. Contrariwise, the chief virtue in ecumenical work is the ability to listen to what others say about their own communion. In light of this general principle, the following comments elucidate some crucial contributions in method and substance by Mennonites and Roman Catholics to this dialogue, as heard through the ears of a Lutheran theologian.

##### *The Roman Catholic Appropriation of Its Tradition*

The Roman Catholic explanation of the relation of baptism to sin and grace (§8-21) demonstrates how an integrated approach to their tradition aids ecumenical discussions. Thus, in addition to rehearsing the valuable decrees at the Council of Trent, the Catholic position also reflects current reassessments offered by Pope John Paul II (§9 and §20, quoting *Redemptor hominis*, and §15, n. 22 on Rom. 5:12), by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

(§9, emphasizing the Christological contextualizing of original sin), and by Pope Francis (§16, on the reassessment of Luther). Even more importantly, *Baptism and Incorporation* uses the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ), first introduced in a description of the Council of Trent (§15, n. 24). These references are not superfluous but represent an important advancement in Roman Catholic ecumenical theology, expanding the original impetus toward dialogue championed in Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Only when one attempts to place conciliar decrees or papal declarations outside the realm of interpretation and reinterpretation is the ecumenicity of the Catholic tradition placed in jeopardy. Such a rarified approach to the tradition is absent here.

#### *The Mennonite Openness to "Pan-Baptism"*

The absence of words like "pedo-baptism" or "believer's baptism" in *Baptism and Incorporation* marks a welcome change in descriptions of churches that baptize people of all ages and those that insist on the priority of a confession of faith by the baptized. Neither Roman Catholics nor Lutherans have ever denied the baptism of adult believers, so that the label "pedo-baptism" only distorts their views. Moreover, both churches have, as the Mennonites have learned (§122), an important place for the role of faith and Christian living in their theologies of baptism, so that the term "believer's baptism" describes all three communions. Perhaps even more remarkable, however, is the Mennonite appeal to their own churches (§133) for "receiving members from infant baptism churches . . . without repeating the water rite" and for "asking all members . . . to respect those churches which practice baptism . . . differently as brothers and sister in the one body of Christ." This implies recognition of the dialogue partners as *baptized* members of Christ's body, a crucial step forward in conversations with Mennonites. Many Mennonite congregations have practiced this kind of baptismal hospitality for some time; its inclusion here allows for new avenues of conversation and cooperation among the churches and invites members of the MWC to accept more fully the ecumenical invitation found already in the Faith and Order document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF *BAPTISM AND INCORPORATION*

While §4 states the goal of the trilateral conversations as "focusing on foundational matters concerning the understanding and practice of baptism," it also identifies one of the chief "contrasts" among the churches: "the Lutheran and Catholic practice of admitting also infants to baptism." This implies that both theology and practice will play an important part in this report but, specifically on the question of infant

baptism, “the theological rationale” will rightly lead. This prevented the talks from devolving into a discussion of biblical passages for and against the baptism of infants (e.g., does the word “household” in Acts include children?) and allowed the underlying theological principles held by the three communions to take center stage.<sup>1</sup> These concerns allowed the participants to identify three major areas for conversation (§5), which then defined the outline for the report: “1) the relation of baptism to sin and salvation; 2) the celebration of baptism and its relation to faith and to membership in the Christian community; and 3) the living out of baptism in Christian discipleship.”

*Chapter One: Baptism with Respect to Sin and Grace*

§7, the common introduction to this chapter, contains some important steps forward, where the insistence on the goodness of creation is juxtaposed over against the origins of sin, in which “the original design of a loving relationship between God and human beings was overturned.” This crucial aspect of human history—often downplayed in certain theological quarters—implies that all dialogue partners accept one important building block for understanding Lutheran and Roman Catholic approaches to baptism as a remedy for sin. At the same time, by tying the discussion of redemption to the incarnation and to grace, the report provides an important basis for appreciating a sacramental theology grounded in God’s grace.<sup>2</sup>

The Roman Catholic discussion (§8-21) demonstrates that communion’s dynamic approach to the church’s tradition that bodes well for future ecumenical discussions. By placing their discussion within the context of incarnation and Christology, the Catholics, using the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§389), express in §9 one of the central concerns of the Lutheran confessions: “we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 See the brief discussion in §6. This indicates one area for further conversation, in which biblical interpretation becomes a crucial component. The importance of finding common ground between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on biblical interpretation was a crucial step in coming to agreement in the JDDJ.

2 The use of 1 Tim. 2:4 here is particularly poignant for this Melancthon scholar, since it formed the basis of Philip Melancthon’s understanding of such topics as predestination and election, an understanding reflected in Lutherans’ later comments from the *Formula of Concord* (the Epitome, art. XI, §10, no. 9, in *The Book of Concord* [BC], ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000], 518).

3 See the Augsburg Confession [CA], art. XX, §9, in BC 54 (emphasis added): “In the first place, our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace. Instead this happens through faith alone when a person believes that our sins are forgiven *for Christ’s sake, who alone is the mediator to reconcile the Father*. Now all who imagine that they can accomplish this by works

The use first of Chrysostom and then Augustine (bishops important to the Eastern and Western expressions of the Christian faith) point to the importance of catholicity in ecumenical discussions. Even more important is the special role afforded the provincial Council of Orange, which the document described using what Philip Melancthon termed a *particula exclusiva* (§13): “the unconditional initiative of God in bringing about human salvation.”

Differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on original sin first appear in the Catholic section when describing how baptism removes sin completely so that only concupiscence remains, which “is not sin in the proper sense” (§15, describing the Tridentine decrees). At this point, the report cites not only Trent’s decrees but also the JDDJ, §30. It is regrettable that it did not also cite the “Annex” to the JDDJ, par. 2A and 2B, where a more nuanced approach to concupiscence and an acceptance of the Lutheran insistence that we are “at the same time righteous and sinner” (*simul iustus et peccator*) are expressed. Once again, 1 Tim. 2.4 plays an especially important role in underscoring that not just sin but grace, too, is universal.

The Lutheran section begins, as it should, with an important distinction: that original sin is not a moral construct but a theological one, where the wholeness of the person before God means that sin affects not only the will but all aspects of human existence. The solution to this dilemma must be seen from God’s perspective, who uses the law to reveal the depths of the human situation (curved in upon itself [*homo incurvatus in se ipsum*]) and the impossibility that moral acts can remedy this sin and actually contribute to the underlying problem: trust in one’s self and not God. God at the same time declares the person forgiven through the gospel. This twofold action of God against sin and unbelief (mistrust of God) directly impacts the Lutheran understanding of baptism, as expressed in §25: “Because of the radical character of sin, the overcoming of sin requires the dying and rising of the person; this happens in baptism.” But because sin does not magically go away from a person but remains, Luther insists that we return daily to baptism and its promises. This is the heart of the Lutheran insistence that we are at the same time a justified person and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*).

§26 blends Luther’s theology (reflected in the Lutheran confessions), which used words sometimes translated “sanctification” to denote the entire work of the Holy Spirit in the believer, and later Lutheran categories, which narrowed sanctification to the Spirit’s work “after” justification. This unfortunately results in making the Christian the subject

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and can merit grace *despise Christ* and seek their own way to God contrary to the gospel.” See also Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles*, part II, art. i, §1-5, in BC 300-301.

of the theological sentence (e.g., “the faithful are able” or “Christians can actually do”), when in fact it is always God who works in the Christian, as in the Pauline “It is no longer I who live” (Gal. 2:20) or “For we are what God has made us” (Eph. 2:10).

In a similar way, §27 waters down Luther’s truly paradoxical understanding of the sacraments (especially baptism) and the relation of faith and God’s promise. At the same time, the Lutheran section skips the opportunity to use the Apology, article thirteen, to discuss the meaning of the term sacrament. The unclearness regarding authorities continues in §28, where the Lutheran participants forgo the opportunity to use Luther in the far more authoritative *Large Catechism* to point out how Lutherans insist that baptism and its promises are central to the entire Christian life. §29, which emphasizes the importance of God’s self-giving in baptism, could well have been linked to the incarnation (as in the Roman Catholic section), in order to emphasize how Christ continues to come down to us “in the flesh” through the means of grace (Word and Sacraments), as Luther emphasizes in the *Large Catechism*.

The Mennonite/Anabaptist discussion of original sin (§30-34) may come as a pleasant surprise for many outside those churches, who often caricature Anabaptists as insisting that infants and children are not sinners in the strict sense and thus only need baptism as adults. While denying the charge of Pelagianism, the Mennonite collocutors insist that God’s image (§35) “though broken remained in each human being” as a hedge against fatalism. This allows them to view salvation as a restoration of God’s image. Similar to Roman Catholic language about concupiscence, they speak (§36) of an “inborn tendency to sin” and emphasize that “the Christian has been set free to obey God.” This means that for Anabaptists, “by grace, transformation is possible” (§37). Thus, justification (§38) involves both a change in “a person’s standing before God in a forensic sense” but also “a metamorphosis of the person in a moral sense.” Because of an insistence on the continuation of God’s image after sin, baptism has two components: God’s action of redemption and (§40) “the action of the one who is baptized.” This means that baptism is less a means of grace than an outward sign of inward transformation: “an outward and public testimony to the inward baptism of the Spirit.” Similarly (§41), children are included in Christ’s atoning work without baptism. And yet (§42), when discussing the saving necessity of baptism, the Mennonite tradition is more nuanced: “In the presence of grace and faith, inward and outward reality cannot be separated. Thus, water baptism is both the testimony of the believer that God’s grace has come to her and the testimony of the Spirit through the church to the candidate that she belongs to Christ and his body.”

The section of chapter one labeled “Common Perspectives and Differences,” reveals several important steps forward in this trilateral conversation. First (§43-46), the collocutors set aside the notion of hereditary sin as derived from Romans 5:12 once and for all, demonstrating (on the Roman Catholic side) the centrality of the Second Vatican Council and its decree, *Dei Verbum*, to allow for careful interpretation of the Greek text. Second, whatever appearance of uncertainty in the Mennonite discussion of the role of the human being in baptism, the centrality of God’s grace comes to expression (§46): “sin can only be overcome by grace, by the divine initiative, by the Holy Spirit. On their own, human beings do not have the ability to leave behind the hopelessness of life under the power of sin.” The remaining differences (especially on the question of human cooperation) are settled with a reference to the JDDJ. On the question of the means of grace (§47) important differences on the Mennonite side remain over the internal action of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, “they emphasize that the Holy Spirit uses the external proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of baptism. . . .” On the question of the baptism of infants, the Trilateral Report indicates less progress. However, even here Lutherans and Roman Catholics state that they do not limit salvation to the baptized and “entrust the unbaptized to the mercy of God.” The Mennonites would seem to be left with a curious tension in that while admitting that “baptism actualizes the salvation intended by God,” they insist that God uses other ways to bring infants to salvation. In one area (§50-54), Mennonites and Catholics agree that a deep change occurs through regeneration so that only a tendency to sin remains. Lutherans, however, emphasize not sinful actions but instead insist that for the justified sin remains in the heart. Again, the JDDJ provides helpful language to navigate this important theological difference by insisting on a “lifelong struggle with sin,” while adding that it also implies a “lifelong striving for holiness.”

### *Chapter Two: Baptism: Communicating Grace and Faith*

In this chapter, the collocutors no longer divide their discussion according to individual communions, as in the previous chapter, but rather discuss several neuralgic points in common, as they relate to the celebration of baptism. This approach, which looks at both the lifelong process of Christian life and the practice of baptism, may be more fruitful in the long run but could only succeed because of the discussion in chapter one.

All three communions agree (§56) that baptism is not an isolated event but the basis of the entire life of a Christian. They also recognize (§57) the primacy “of God’s grace in this process.” This means that baptism “begins

a lifelong process of daily appropriation” of baptismal grace through repentance, living a holy life, and participating the Church’s life. For a Lutheran, this echoes Luther’s *Small Catechism*, where Luther moves from the drowning and rising of baptism and its connection to Jesus’ death and resurrection to daily repentance and new life.

Despite obvious differences over the baptism of infants (§61), all three churches (§62) “embrace the teaching of the New Testament that human beings are sinners” in need of redemption. “Through grace by faith in the saving action of Jesus Christ,” human beings move from sinfulness to being “children of the Father.” In this connection “all three communities forcefully affirm the gratuity and primacy of God’s grace” and “the necessity of a human response of faith, made possible by grace, to this divine initiative.” The difference over infant baptism is summarized in two sentences: “Mennonites are convinced that, according to Scripture, a personal response is a precondition for the reception of baptism.” Lutherans and Catholics “believe that the practice of infant baptism is in no way excluded by the words of Scripture and even that the absolute gratuity of God’s saving action in Christ and the Spirit is more clearly expressed by baptism of those who are too young to speak for themselves.” The collocutors claim that by agreeing that “Christian discipleship is a lifelong process” in which baptism is “one of the important events” the traditional controversy is at least placed in a new framework. Here one wonders whether a more explicit examination of differences in biblical interpretation—mentioned by all sides—might not have helped in understanding this “new framework” and might have brought the conversation even further along.

Turning to the specific celebrations of baptism (§63-67), perhaps one of the most helpful aspects of this report is the description of the rites each communion uses. It is unfortunate, however, that space did not permit describing (in the case of Lutherans) the wide variety of practices and the changes over the years. Here, the document incorrectly implies that Luther’s *Flood Prayer* was added “over time,” when in fact it was immediately included in both the first and second editions of the *Taufbüchlein* from the 1520s. Moreover, not just the renunciation of evil but specific exorcisms were part of Luther’s original versions and were included in the *Small Catechism*. By 1580, and under the influence of a certain Reformed theology of baptism, some Lutheran churches had eliminated the exorcisms and, as a result, some versions of the *Book of Concord* also did not include the baptismal service in their printings of the *Small Catechism*. Under the influence of pietism and the Enlightenment, other aspects of the liturgy also fell away, only to be reinserted in some Lutheran liturgies under the influence of the wider Christian liturgical movement in the twentieth century and of the Luther Renaissance of the



same period. The citation of Luther's comments from his 1520 tract, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, may give the mistaken impression that he and other Lutherans did not associate baptism with justification, when in fact there are other places where Luther stresses the connection between the promises in and with the water and the declaration of God's promise to which faith clings. It would have been better to explain that for Lutherans justification was always understood relationally not ontologically, that is, as a proclamation of God's unconditional mercy in Christ, which also occurs in baptism. Faith then hears and believes that very promise "for me" (*pro me*), which is first applied personally in baptism.

§68 deals with the problem of "rebaptism." Although the Lutheran insistence that "to 'rebaptize' would amount to distrust in God's promise," it may have been helpful in this context also to cite Luther's comment in the *Large Catechism* that no matter how many times water is applied to a person, there is in truth only one baptism. This may have reduced the harshness of the claim about distrust. Nevertheless, a true "breakthrough" occurs when the text states, "This dialogue has helped Mennonites understand the profound reality that is at stake for Catholics and Lutherans when Mennonites and other credo-baptists baptize someone already baptized by the other churches." The next step would be to see if Mennonites are willing to agree that the Catholics and Lutherans who remain in those communities are also *baptized* Christians.

§69-71 address the question of the effect of baptism. All churches agree that "something happens" and that there are three actors in baptism (God, the individual, and the community). Lutherans emphasize the role of God's promise. Mennonites also insist that "the individual and the community of faith undergo effectual change" but "only if and when it is verified in the faith and life of the individual ... and of the ... community." It is this caveat about verification that prevents full agreement concerning the "objective" occurrence in baptism. It is curious that a quotation from the Catholic/Mennonite conversation (*Called Together to Be Peacemakers*) includes no response from the Lutheran side. What is clear is that Lutherans and Catholics emphasize the "instrumental nature" of the sacrament baptism (§71), whereas Mennonites insist that the ordinance of baptism "expresses the change which occurs in the person who has come to repentance." Nevertheless, all three agree that a change does take place through the entry of a person into the church, the body of Christ.

The question of faith's relation to baptism rests on varied interpretations of Mark 16:16. Once again, biblical interpretation of this text, which is not found in the earliest manuscripts of Mark, is missing from the discussion. Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics understand that nothing excludes infants, baptized within the faith of the church and

the power of the Holy Spirit, from having at very least an inchoate faith, the beginning of new life. In this regard, the Mennonites insist (as they had in earlier conversations with Roman Catholics) that “the practice of making a profession of faith on behalf of a person being baptized who does not at the moment of baptism realize the basic meaning and implications of his or her baptism, is not acceptable.” Despite this fundamental difference, all three communions understand the individual’s faith as a participation in the faith of the whole Church.

Baptism also relates to the church. For Mennonites, baptism following confession of faith allows baptism to be voluntary and thus safeguards the freedom of individual consciences. Nevertheless (§76), this insistence is not meant “to obscure the primacy of the divine activity in the work of salvation” nor the centrality of communion in the Church. Lutherans and especially Roman Catholics emphasize baptized believers’ communion with God and with one another, so much so that baptism becomes a bond of unity for all divided Christian communities. Thus (§77), Lutherans and Catholics express this connection in their joint statement, *Church and Justification* (citing §68): “Baptism is calling and election by God and makes us God’s possession: thus also creating the community of those who are called and chosen. . . .” This highlights one of the chief dividing issues (§78): “The concern of Lutherans and Catholics about the primacy of God’s grace and the call to a lifelong response and participation in the life of the Christian community has prompted them to affirm not only the possibility but the appropriateness of baptizing infants.” This leads the document to pose two questions to the churches. “Might not Lutherans and Catholics acknowledge the decision of parents to foster a mature faith in their children prior to the request for baptism?” on the one side, and “Might not Mennonites acknowledge that, given an assurance of familial and congregational commitment to provide formation in faith and discipleship, the choice of parents to request baptism for their young children . . . is an authentic approach to Christian initiation?” These crucial questions indicate an important step forward in the conversation, in which the three churches, without abandoning their own theological and ecclesial principles but sharing certain fundamental commitments, might finally acknowledge the motivations and practices of the other churches.

What to do about these tensions and divergences is the theme of the last portion of chapter two (§79-83). On the basis of an agreed upon importance of repentance, faith, and discipleship, the collocutors pointed to the increasing importance among Roman Catholics (§79) of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* and (§80) “the cogency of the Mennonite practice of baptizing only those capable of making a personal profession of faith.” Questions arise whether this cogency also coheres with New Testament teaching about the relation of baptism and salvation and the

authenticity of the baptism “a vast number of Christians have received as infants. . . .” As a result, some Mennonite congregations do not always baptize individuals who were baptized as infants elsewhere. Moreover, not just those communions practicing infant baptism but Mennonites, too, have experience with baptized people who no longer practice the faith.

This section also discusses the practical problem facing Lutherans and Catholics around the sincerity of the parents’ request to have their child baptized and the community’s reliability in assisting the parents and sponsors. This is particularly a problem where (§81) “baptism of infants is part of the cultural tradition.” But (§82) this problem of linking baptism and Christian living is a significant problem for all three communions. The chapter ends with a plea (§83), asking “whether our differences in the practice of baptism could be an acceptable diversity that does not, in and of itself, constitute an insuperable obstacle to greater unity. . . .”

### *Chapter Three: Living out Baptism in Discipleship*

This chapter begins (§84) by announcing a “substantial agreement” in that “all three of our communions wholeheartedly agree that baptism is intended not as an isolated, self-enclosed event, but as an important moment that is to be lived out throughout the course of one’s life.” This chapter hints at a change in methodology, in which the biblical witness to such discipleship (§85-88) now plays a central role. This even includes (§88) a reading of Romans 7 viewed as describing the Christian experience (and *not*, as imagined by the so-called “new perspective on Paul,” Paul’s reminiscence of his life apart from faith in Christ)—an interpretation consonant with Augustine, Luther, and Philip Melancthon, and the biblical arguments supporting the *JDDJ*. In sum, all three communions insist that (§89) “the life-long living out of the gift of faith which is celebrated in baptism has not only personal but also ecclesial and public dimensions.” These three categories shape the remainder of the chapter.

On the personal front (§90-94), the three churches insist upon the continued regeneration and the power of the Holy Spirit for the baptized. Roman Catholics emphasize already here the ecclesial side of such growth in faith, especially marked by participation in the other sacraments of the church. Mennonites, too, stress the importance of “walking in newness of life” not only individually but also in relation to Christian brothers and sisters. Discipleship for them involves both doctrine and ethics and is a call to discipleship even in the face of persecution. Lutherans also do not separate the individual from the communal but stress that since baptism is the promise of God’s grace alone, living out one’s baptism means living into the Word and sacraments. Whereas already at the time of the Reformation Lutherans were accused of neglecting good works, it would

be more accurate to say that the baptized now follow God's law as a fruit of faith not as coercion. Commands become gracious invitations to live in faith.

Already the ecclesial nature of personal discipleship came up in the previous section. But the specific discussion of the ecclesial dimensions (§95-101) also indicates underlying agreements, as believers find solace in the Word and sacraments/ordinances and in the community of love. §95: "Active and committed participation in the life of the community is the *ambience* in which discipleship can grow and flourish." For Anabaptists and Mennonites (§97) this means "there is no private salvation; it happens in the fellowship of believers." For Lutherans, this includes the centrality of catechesis and confirmation (which became an important part of Lutheran communities already in the sixteenth century and not, as the document states, in the eighteenth). For as enculturated as confirmation can become, Lutherans point to two twentieth-century examples where confirmation marked a decisive break with the contemporary political situation (*Hitler-Jugend* and the German Democratic Republic's *Jugendweihe*). Roman Catholics, too, emphasize participation in the worldwide church with Peter's successor as its head. Here the Eucharist, the role of liturgy and the liturgical calendar, and local formation reinforce this sense of belonging. Especially as a result of the Vatican II council, Roman Catholic ecclesiology has reemphasized the *sensus fidei* and the role of all the faithful in the church. Lutherans traditionally emphasized the priesthood of all believers and the three estates of society in which the baptized are called. The aftermath of World War II shaped Lutheran witness toward advocacy and diaconal work on the world stage. In §105-106 there is a helpful summary of the Lutheran teaching about the "two realms" (better labeled as God's two hands) and its limitations. Roman Catholics look especially to *Gaudium et spes* (Vatican II's decree on the church in the modern world) for a clear expression of its commitment to the poor. Their understanding of "subsidiarity" allows Roman Catholics to foster local participation and solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In the words of Pope Francis, the church is less an institution of power and more a "field hospital" in its care for God's wounded creation. Mennonites, too, have emphasized the important social role the church plays, especially in peacemaking.

This does not mean that the three churches agree fully on all aspects of authentic discipleship (§109-112). Part of the difference stems from differing views of the individual conscience and its relation to the wider church, especially in matters of social and political importance. This is particularly problematic on such issues as serving in the armed forces (and providing ministers as chaplains) and whether the Christian community must embrace pacifism completely. At the same time, the document insists

that some positions are complementary without pointing to specific examples.

Regarding the public dimensions (§102-108), the document summarizes the overarching agreement in these terms (§102): “baptism impels one to participate in the mission of reconciliation, justice, and peace inaugurated by Jesus, inviting our contemporaries to come to know Jesus Christ and experience the joy of faith in him and his message.” This includes humanitarian work, work in the world, and the protection of God’s creation, but also a kind of “ecumenism of the martyrs,” where persecution of Christians for their faith and works unites all three still divided churches.

### *Conclusion*

The rather lengthy conclusion (§113-159), prefaced by a common introduction (§113-115), includes parallel comments from each church divided into “Convictions Held,” “Gifts Received,” “Challenges Accepted,” and “For Consideration.” A summary of these comments will demonstrate some of the insights and challenges this document is offering the churches. They help validate the importance of this dialogue.

The Mennonite convictions describe relational communities that interpret God’s Word in relation to one another, practicing baptism on confession of faith as a biblical norm and using the Sermon on the Mount as a guide. Among the gifts received were a lifting of misunderstandings about the other communions, the centrality of faith and discipleship in those communions, and (§123) “the larger process of initiation into Christ” that is important for them. Among the accepted challenges Mennonites are prepared to acknowledge that Mennonite practice of baptizing believers from other communions may seem to invalidate their baptisms as infants, that infant baptism was not a result of the rise of the “state church,” and that sinful tendencies continue in the baptized and divine initiative is part of every aspect of salvation. In the final section “For Consideration” (§133), the Mennonite collocutors urge their own churches to consider receiving members from other church without repeating the “water rite” and to respect churches whose baptismal practices differ from theirs as brothers and sisters in the one body of Christ. Providing occasions for members to “remember their baptism” would allow Mennonites to reimagine baptism as a lifelong experience rather than a one-time event. The quest to reconcile purity and unity should be a concern of all three communions.

Lutheran convictions center upon God’s promise and work in Baptism through the Word, define faith as (§135) “a situation of eye-opening” (cf. Luke 24), and understand human cooperation as a further work of the

Holy Spirit in the reborn believer. They mention among the gifts received these: the process of reconciliation with Mennonites begun at the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Augsburg Confession* in 1980, and the joint commemoration of the Reformation in 2017 with Roman Catholics. They also have received the Mennonite emphasis on community and the Catholic stress on the family's role in baptism. Lutherans are challenged to reflect on the salvation of unbaptized children in the light of article nine of the *Augsburg Confession* (Latin version), to consider the disconnect between baptism of infants and faith; to institute regular commemorations of baptism (already a practice among Lutherans in North America); and to consider the universal nature of the church for the baptized.

The Roman Catholics hold the conviction that baptism is the "universal sacrament of salvation" (§144, citing *Lumen Gentium*), that it relates to the catholicity of the church, and thus that baptizing infants, "one of the most ancient traditions of the church," implies confidence in parents providing a Christian upbringing. At the same time, they firmly believe in "the unconditional love of God" (§146) and thus in the hope of salvation for the unbaptized. Among the gifts, Catholic collocutors mention their experience of unity, the willingness of Mennonites to consider the reasons for baptizing small children, the importance for Lutherans of the power of sin in the believer, and the common challenges that seem more urgent in today's world than barriers from the past. The challenges for Catholics include inviting more churches to share in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, increasing pastoral programs for appreciation of baptism, and closing the gap between the theology of baptism and discipleship and the lack of commitment by believers. They urge consideration of the link between baptism and the creedal profession of faith; the need for pastoral assistance for the baptized in their daily life; exploration of link between baptism and such terms as baptism in the Holy Spirit, baptism of desire, or baptism of blood; and exploring the links between baptism and confirmation (especially as practiced among Lutherans).

A common concluding section (§160-164: "In Thanksgiving for Our One Baptism") is more a recitation of the scope of the discussions and possible future dialogue on ethical topics, the saving mission of Jesus for the whole world, and Eucharistic sharing. In that regard, perhaps the suggestion of a joint prayer service giving thanks for our "one baptism" into "one body" (cf. Ephesians 4:5) is a step in the right direction.

### CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Having already pointed out the benefits that this dialogue offers, it is important to consider what improvement might be made for future

conversations. The most obvious lacuna is unclarity about the methods being used. For as central as the biblical witness is to all three communions, it was not at all clear that they approached the Scripture in the same way. Moreover, some sections skipped over any discussion of the Scripture passages being used (especially Mark 16:16, where the textual authority is unclear at best). The breakthrough found in the *Joint Declaration* rested upon careful, common biblical work. One finds little indication of that work here, with the exception of the relation of Romans 5:12 to original sin and the introductory material in chapter three.

The historical record is also important (indeed, authoritative) for all three communions and yet again its use was not very clearly laid out—if at all. The surprising reference to Constantinian Christianity and the “state church” (an anachronism in any case) in later remarks by Mennonites begs the question about how they came to this remarkable conclusion that decouples infant baptism from the shift to the Roman Empire’s acceptance of the church. (Incidentally, this decoupling would also have profound repercussions for Mennonite ecclesiology.) The Roman Catholic sections also assume the authority of popes and councils but neglect to introduce their role in forming the church’s doctrine. This might have helped to clarify curious comments in the conclusion about Scripture’s use among Mennonites and Lutherans.

The sixteenth-century forebears of these three communions often used the ancient church’s heresies to label their opponents’ positions. Ecumenical conversations today give the participants leave to label themselves: “When we hold position X, we are in danger of....” These conversations could have been enhanced through such honesty, although it is often implied. For example, by tying original sin to a lack of knowledge, one’s position could revert to a form of Gnosticism, where specific *gnosis* can enlighten the mind and grant salvation. By emphasizing that original sin is a (mere) hindrance, the specter of a kind of Pelagian approach to salvation remains. Insistence on God’s grace alone and the will’s bondage could foster a kind of fatalism (often labeled in the Reformation Manicheanism). These are implicit dangers that may even have explicitly arisen at various times in the history of our churches.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of authority is perhaps most obviously a problem for the Lutheran contributions. Unlike *Healing Memories*, which concentrated on the *Augsburg Confession*, here we find confessionally authoritative documents mixed with statements by Martin Luther but without any attempt to clarify why such comments might be authoritative. The role of

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4. Already the articles of condemnation at Trent actually express not only rejection of certain Protestant or Evangelical (Lutheran) positions but also of scholastic positions influential within the medieval church.

Luther's works has become more of a problem with the rise of the "Luther Renaissance" in the late nineteenth century, which tended to downplay the authority of the Lutheran Confessions. As much as Luther is an authority for Lutherans, the authors of the *Formula of Concord* insisted that he, too, stands under the Word of God.<sup>5</sup> In several instances, the Lutheran collocutors could have cited Luther's works within the *Book of Concord*. In other cases, they use Luther's writings without respecting their historical context, which could lead to the impression that Luther *qua* Luther has some kind of disembodied authority. Lutherans need to consider this question, already addressed to some degree in *Healing Memories*.

Beyond these methodological questions of authority, there are also two central terms, used throughout the document, that demand far more precise definition.<sup>6</sup> The first is grace. Here some historical background may help. When Erasmus of Rotterdam, the premier Greek scholar and Renaissance thinker north of the Alps, published his Greek New Testament in 1516, he included a separate book of annotations, where he raised questions about the standard Latin translation. One particularly important annotation involved the translation of the Greek word *charis* as *gratia*. By Erasmus's day, the word *gratia* had become thoroughly embedded in late-medieval, scholastic theology and had taken on several meanings, the most important of which was the *gratia gratum faciens*, the grace that makes one acceptable [to God]. This ontological definition, by which the soul of the penitent was infused with a habit, or disposition, of grace, had nothing to do with the way *charis* was used in the New Testament text. Erasmus proposed that it should better be translated *favor Dei*, God's favor. After some initial debate, both Martin Luther and his colleague Philip Melancthon (himself a renown Greek scholar) took up this suggestion, often speaking of grace as God's favor or God's mercy but not as anything infused into the soul. This definition of grace remains central to Lutheran theology down to this day.

A careful analysis of this document reveals, in this Lutheran's opinion, a confusion of grace as a power or force with the notion of grace as God's mercy. When Lutherans especially insist upon baptism as a "means of grace," they intend to say that it embodies God's promise of mercy to the person. We continue to baptize young children precisely because baptism conveys God's mercy personally. It also implies that this promise of mercy never fails a person—even though they may neglect or even forget it. Here

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5. "He [Luther] expressly made the distinction that God's Word alone ought to be and remain the only guiding principle [in judging his works]. . . ." — *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*, "Binding Summary," §8, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 528.

6. For the historical material that follows, see Heiko A. Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 3rd ed. (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1983), especially the glossary on pp. 459-476.



Martin Luther's description in the *Large Catechism* (included in the *Book of Concord*) of such falling away is particularly helpful.<sup>7</sup>

A second term deserving far more careful definition and discussion is faith. Here not only Lutherans but already Christian theologians in the early church (to say nothing of the Middle Ages) distinguished between *fides quae* and *fides qua*, that is, the faith which the person (or the church) believes and confesses about God and the faith by which the person believes in God. Medieval theologians, using Aristotelian distinctions between matter and form, also distinguished between *fides informata* and *fides formata*, where the former was the unformed "matter" of faith (the basics of the church's faith to which a person in a state of sin could know and intellectually assent) and the latter was faith "formed" by love, that is by the infused habit of love. When contemporaries of Martin Luther heard him claim salvation by faith alone, they often attacked him by assuming that he was talking about unformed faith. This led the reformers to distinguish between historical faith and assurance or trust (*fiducia*).<sup>8</sup>

When Lutherans link faith and baptism, they are speaking of trust in God's promise of mercy and not simply in a confession of the church's faith using the Apostles' Creed. Thus, when Lutherans claim that young children have faith, they are not talking about an intellectual process but precisely the kind of assurance that arises from God's unconditional promises. This also means that the sign of faith is not so much outward confession of faith as the actual comfort that God's promises afford the dying sinner. Once true faith is decoupled from the will's action, not only does grace (God's promise of mercy) take on a central role but also the images for believing—while still very much part and parcel of the human creature—must change from the language of decision to the language of love. Trust for a parent arises in an infant out of the mother's or father's faithfulness and trustworthiness—long before children can express what they are experiencing. *That* is a far more fruitful way to approach what occurs in baptism, where the "mothering God" (to use a phrase from Julian of Norwich) embraces the child or adult and surrounds the person with the faithful promise of divine mercy.

Besides more attention to method and more precise definition of terms, there is one other thing lacking in this report, something that the Lutheran collocutors could well have offered from their theological tradition. That is the theology of the cross. One of the truly astounding aspects of Luther's theology—first widely published in his *Explanations to the 95 Theses* in 1518

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7. *The Large Catechism*, "Baptism," §77-82, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Kolb and Wengert, 466.

8. See, for example, article twenty of the *Augsburg Confession*, §23-26, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Kolb and Wengert, 56-57.

and often used in his explanations of baptism and the Lord's Supper—is his theology of the cross.<sup>9</sup> Not a theory about the atonement, Luther's theology of the cross insists upon the revelation of God under the appearance of the opposite—God in the last place we would reasonably look. That perfectly describes baptism—not as a “water rite” or as a teaching or practice of the church, but as foolishness (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25). God comes using means that are patently foolish to human reason, overturning our trust in ourselves with a promise arising out of Christ's death and resurrection and applied to a dying sinner. The very weakness of baptizing such unworthy people (including young children) lies at the heart of baptism's true power. This aspect of Christian theology (that one finds not simply in Luther but also in Bernard, Augustine, Johannes Tauler, and a host of others) might help clarify Lutheran insistence on grace and faith in baptism and on the deep connection to Christ's death and resurrection—“the foolishness that we preach.”

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9. For an introduction to its practical implications, see Timothy J. Wengert, “Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross’: Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering,” *Theology Today* 59 (2002), 190-205, and the literature cited there.