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Report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission on "The Gospel and the Church"

This is the final report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission on "The Gospel and the Church". Interim reports of the previous meetings are to be found in *Lutheran World*, Vol. XVI, No. 4, 1969, pp. 363-379 (1st and 2nd meetings) and *Lutheran World*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 1971, pp. 161-187 (3rd and 4th meetings). The following report was formulated at the fifth and final meeting at Malta, February 1971. Four *Special Statements* are appended at the conclusion. The official version of the document is in German.

Preface

The text which follows is the report of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission appointed by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation. Under the general theme of "The Gospel and the Church" this commission discussed the theological questions which are of essential significance for the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches. The Study Commission formulated and accepted this report as a summary of its work. The general theme was formulated in so broad a way as to make it impossible for certain problems to be treated in detail. The appended *Special Statements* are to be considered as part of the report. They indicate where members of the commission felt they had to abstain or to modify the positions taken.

The report has been submitted to the appropriate church authorities as the outcome of the commission's work. Now it is being offered to the churches with a recommendation for thorough study. It is hoped that the work of the Study Commission will contribute to further clarification and improvement of relationships between the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church. This report has no binding character for the churches.

Rome and Geneva,
February 9, 1972.

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INTRODUCTION

(1) Contact established between the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council led to the formation of a "Lutheran/Roman Catholic Working Group" which met in Strasbourg in August 1965 and April 1966. It was officially authorized by both parties and discussed the question of possible contacts, conversations and forms of cooperation.¹

(2) Both delegations were convinced that the traditionally disputed theological issues between Catholics and Lutherans are still of importance but that these appear in a different light "through the emergence of the modern world" and because of new insights in the natural, social and historical sciences and in biblical theology. In view of these new insights the delegations, therefore, agreed to "engage in serious discussions on theological issues" and thus to "identify and eliminate misunderstandings and causes of irritation".² They agreed that it is not of primary importance to look for quick solutions to practical problems but rather to enter into a comprehensive dialog about the basic problems which both separate and unite the two churches.

(3) For this purpose the appropriate church authorities appointed a study commission of international composition and assigned to it the topic, "The Gospel and the Church". In addition to the regular members, special participants were invited to individual sessions as theological experts on particular themes.

(4) The first session, held November 28-30, 1967 in Zurich, Switzerland, dealt with "Gospel and Tradition". The reason for choosing to start with this biblical-theological question of the gospel and its transmission in the New Testament was that it could be anticipated, on the basis of general experience in interconfessional encounters, especially between Protestant and Catholic theologians, that the chances of agreement would be particularly great in biblical-exegetical discussions. Further, the report of the joint working group had pointed out that the "development of modern biblical scholarship has modified the traditional formulations of the respective positions and opened a new approach to the confessional differences".³ For

its second session held September 15-19, 1968 in Båstad, Sweden, the study commission decided on the theme of "World and Church under the Gospel". In doing so the commission built on the recognition in the first session that in order for the gospel, as saving event, to remain the same in every historical situation, it must always be proclaimed anew. Gospel and church cannot therefore be adequately defined apart from reference to the world. In addition, the study commission hoped that both churches could find a new unity in common service to the world.

(5) After having thus traced and clarified the broad outlines of its assigned topic, the study commission was able to turn to more specifically ecclesiological problems in its next two sessions. Here the outstanding questions between the two confessions are particularly urgent. Under the theme "The Structures of the Church", the third session, meeting May 4-8, 1969 in Nemi, Italy, focused especially on the problem of ecclesiastical office. The fourth session met February 22-26, 1970 in Cartigny, Switzerland and, under the theme "Gospel and Law—Gospel and Christian Freedom" carried further the discussion of the themes raised at Nemi, adverting in this connection also to the questions of papal primacy and intercommunion.

(6) The fifth session held February 21-26, 1971 in San Anton, Malta was chiefly devoted to composing a comprehensive final report. A small subcommittee had met October 27-30, 1970 in Hamburg to prepare a preliminary draft. After a thorough reworking of this draft, the final report was adopted unanimously by the study commission on February 25, 1971. The study commission appointed a small editorial committee which held a meeting in Tübingen, May 28-30, 1971. Its assignment was simply to make necessary editorial changes taking into consideration individual suggestions by members of the study commission.

(7) In evaluating the present report it is important to recognize that it was not the task of the study commission to deal with the theological controversies of the 16th century as such; rather the commission was to examine once again the confessional differences in the light of contemporary biblical theology and church history as well as of perspectives opened up by the Second Vatican Council. For such purposes the concept "gospel" has become a key concept in ecumenical dialog. This fact has also affected the choice of theme. The theme "The Gospel and the Church" was intentionally kept general

¹ See "Joint Report of the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Working Group" in *Lutheran World*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1966, p. 436 ff.

² *ibid.*, p. 437.

³ *ibid.*, p. 437.

in order to make possible the discussion of a variety of controversial points.

(8) By and large, the members of the study commission are convinced that within the framework of their theme they have achieved a noteworthy and far-reaching consensus. This consensus extends not only to the theological understanding of the gospel of its basic and normative importance for the church and of its christological and soteriological center but also to closely related and highly important points of doctrine which until now have been controversial. Undoubtedly some questions require further clarification. Yet we ask ourselves whether the still remaining differences must be viewed as hinderances to church fellowship. Are not the differences cutting across church lines, arising from diverse response to contemporary challenges at least as great as the traditional differences between the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church? These questions concern all of us together even if we approach them from different starting points and they can be answered only through a common effort.

(9) The study commission however is also conscious of the limitations of its work. As the theme assigned to it imposed restrictions on its approach, some of the problems under consideration could not be discussed in a theologically comprehensive way. Other questions, as for example the problem of papal infallibility, were discussed to some extent, but were not included in this report. In part this was due to a lack of time. Among the theologically disputed points which were not expressly considered by the study commission we would like to mention the following: the relationship of church and gospel to the sacraments; the relationship between faith and sacraments; the relationship of nature and grace and of law and gospel; the question of the teaching office; the question of Mariology. Our experience, however, has shown that the common discussion of such questions can lead to solutions which previously could not have been automatically anticipated.

(10) Some themes discussed by us should be treated more comprehensively than was possible for the study commission. That is true above all of the theme "The Gospel and the World". Comprehensive treatment of this problem would have called for a type of expertise not represented in our commission. For an adequate theological consideration of these questions, such disciplines as ethics, sociology and psychology among others

have a more than auxiliary function for theology. Further, a full understanding of the concept of gospel requires greater attention to the Old Testament. To be sure, in the present report this concept is in no way limited to the New Testament gospels nor identified with them. Yet a more intensive study of the witness of the Old Testament would lead to further insight.

(11) Interconfessional conversations have their own peculiar problems. This became apparent in our conversations also. Often the problems were stated in a way derived from the manner of inquiry characteristic of the tradition of only one of the two churches. To be sure, this can be challenging and fruitful to the other partner and lead him to a deeper understanding of his own tradition. Here, however, there often arises the difficulty of finding a verbal formulation acceptable to both sides. Often the dogmatic conceptualizations customary to a tradition must be avoided, even when treating those matters with which these conceptualizations were intended to deal. There is a special difficulty for Lutherans in that it is often hard to give an authoritative characterization of the present Lutheran understanding of the faith. While Catholics can point to recent magisterial statements, especially those of the Second Vatican Council, Lutherans must always refer back to the 16th century confessions. This makes it difficult to present authoritatively the diversity, freedom and strengths of the actual life and witness to the faith in today's Lutheran churches.

(12) The limitations of the work of the study commission can be partially off-set by submitting the present report to as broad as possible a discussion among the churches. The work of international ecumenical commissions should be supplemented by work on regional levels. The results of such work could then be submitted to similar groups in other lands and cultural areas and finally evaluated by an international commission.

(13) The present report presents the convictions and insights of the study commission. These were gradually formed over the course of a four-year dialog. Although the commission had an official assignment, it is nevertheless aware that the result of its work has no binding character for the churches. It submits this report to the appropriate church authorities with the hope that it will contribute to the clarification and improvement of the relations between Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

I. The Gospel and Tradition

A) *The question of the gospel*

(14) The break between Lutherans and Catholics had numerous causes rooted in the peculiar historical situations of the 16th century. Yet ultimately Lutherans and Catholics separated over the issue of the right understanding of the gospel. Although the historical situation has changed extensively, they are even today convinced that their respective traditions contain elements which cannot be abandoned. The unity of the church can be a unity only in the truth of the gospel. Therefore we ask, how can we understand and actualize the gospel today?

(15) In dealing with this decisive question, it became apparent from the very beginning that it is impossible for us to simply repeat the traditional controversial theological positions. Not only have there been changes in the historical situation in which these arose, but also theological methods and ways of stating questions have been profoundly altered by modern biblical and historical research. A new view of the confessional differences has developed. Therefore the question of the gospel must be raised anew from the perspective of contemporary theology and ecclesiology.

B) *Jesus' proclamation and the primitive Christian kerygma*

(16) The point of departure for our deliberations was the question of the relationship of the primitive kerygma to Jesus' proclamation. Here there was agreement that the life and proclamation of Jesus are accessible only through the primitive Christian tradition. Yet the participants differed in their evaluation of the possibility of reconstructing the life and proclamation of Jesus as well as on the question of continuity in the preaching of the gospel. However, there was consensus that the gospel rests fundamentally on the witness to the Easter event. What God has done for the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ is transmitted in the gospel and made present in the Holy Spirit. The gospel as proclamation of God's saving action is therefore itself a salvation event.

(17) From the very beginning, the gospel of Jesus Christ was the subject matter of the tradition.⁴ Out of and in the service of the proclamation of the gospel, certain writings

⁴ Cf. 1 Cor. 15:3; also 1 Cor. 11:2 & 23; Luke 1:2.

were composed which were later designated as the New Testament. This poses the old controversial question regarding the relationship of Scripture and tradition in a new way. The Scripture can no longer be exclusively contrasted with tradition, because the New Testament itself is the product of primitive tradition. Yet as the witness to the fundamental tradition, Scripture has a normative role for the entire later tradition of the church.⁵

C) *Criteria for the church's proclamation*

(18) Since testimony must be given to the gospel in constantly new historical situations, there arises the question of the criteria by means of which one may distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate later developments. This question can not be answered in a purely theoretical manner. Neither the *sola scriptura* nor formal references to the authoritativeness of the magisterial office are sufficient. The primary criterion is the Holy Spirit making the Christ event into a saving action. To be sure, this raises the question of how the power of the Holy Spirit can be concretely identified as criterion. If the continuity of tradition with its original source is to be concretely manifest, then obviously secondary criteria are necessary.

(19) In the Lutheran view the living word of preaching is the normal form of authoritative interpretation of the gospel. The Confessions of the church possess authority as a correct interpretation of Scripture. In special situations (cf. the *Kirchenkampf*) the church as the people of God may be led to confess the gospel afresh and with authority in reference to new questions.

(20) In the Catholic view, the Lord authenticates his word through the reciprocal interaction of official and unofficial charisma, both of which remain under Scripture.⁶ Since the gospel is constantly interpreted in faith and life, the living faith-experiences of Christians constitute a secondary criterion. In this way, the church is kept in fundamental faithfulness to Christ and his truth and is brought to renewal again and again. It receives the liberty to free itself from forms and formulations which are no longer timely, in order that the gospel might be preached in ways appropriate to current situations.

⁵ Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 10 and 24.

⁶ Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 12.

(21) Participants on both sides agreed that the authority of the church can only be service of the word and that it is not master of the word of the Lord. Therefore the church's tradition must remain open to the word and must transmit it in such a way that the word constantly bestows the understanding which comes from faith and freedom for Christian action.

(22) In spite of this historical variability of proclamation, Lutherans and Catholics are convinced that the Holy Spirit unceasingly leads and keeps the church in the truth. It is in this context that one must understand the concepts of indefectibility and infallibility which are current in the Catholic tradition. These two predominantly negative concepts are subject to misunderstanding. Although they are of late origin, that to which they refer was known in the ancient church and they are based on an interpretation of New Testament texts.⁷

(23) Infallibility must, first of all, be understood as a gift to the entire church as the people of God. The church's abiding in the truth should not be understood in a static way but as a dynamic event which takes place with the aid of the Holy Spirit in ceaseless battle against error and sin in the church as well as in the world.

D) *The center of the gospel and the hierarchy of truths*

(24) Concern for an abiding truth within the diversity of traditions leads to the question of what is that foundation and center of the gospel in relation to which the manifold witness of the church in various historical situations can be conceived as testimony and development. This foundation and this center cannot be reduced to a theological formula, but rather is constituted by the eschatological saving act of God in Jesus' cross and resurrection. It is this which all proclamation seeks to explicate.

(25) The discussion made evident a certain convergence of the Catholic idea of the hierarchy of truths and the Lutheran understanding of the gospel in terms of the central events to which it witnesses. The concept of the hierarchy of truths⁸ enables Catholic theology instead of viewing all truths of faith as on the same plane, to introduce a consideration of their actual content, and thus makes evident the different levels or degrees

of importance of individual truths of faith. At the same time, all truths of faith, whatever the level to which they are assigned, are given a common reference point in the foundation of the Christian faith. This brings the idea of the hierarchy of truths very close to that of the center of the gospel. To be sure, the obvious closeness does not eliminate differing emphases. While in the case of the idea of the hierarchy of truths, the aspect of completeness and fullness emerges more strongly, there is a stronger critical stress implied by the idea of the center, especially when one considers its use in the history of theology. On the basis of this it suggests that church traditions must ask themselves whether they rightly testify to the gospel.

E) *The problem of the doctrine of justification*

(26) Out of the question about the center of the gospel, arises the question of how the two sides understand justification. At this point the traditional polemical disagreements were especially sharply defined. Today, however, a far-reaching consensus is developing in the interpretation of justification. Catholic theologians also emphasize in reference to justification that God's gift of salvation for the believer is unconditional as far as human accomplishments are concerned. Lutheran theologians emphasize that the event of justification is not limited to individual forgiveness of sins, and they do not see in it a purely external declaration of the justification of the sinner.⁹ Rather the righteousness of God actualized in the Christ event is conveyed to the sinner through the message of justification as an encompassing reality basic to the new life of the believer.¹⁰

(27) In this sense justification can be understood as expressing the totality of the event of salvation. One should, however, not fail to recognize that in Paul's writings the comprehensive witness to God's righteousness is sharpened by his concrete dispute with Jewish legalism. As the message of justification is the foundation of Christian freedom in opposition to legalistic conditions for the reception of salvation, it must be articulated ever anew as an important interpretation of the center of the gospel. But it was also pointed out that the event of salvation to which the gospel testifies can also be expressed comprehensively in other representations derived from the New Testament, such as reconciliation, freedom, redemption, new life and new creation.

⁷ John 16:13, *inter alia*.

⁸ See Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, 11.

⁹ Rom. 1:16; 3:26; 5:17.

¹⁰ Rom. 1:16f; 3:21f; 5:17; 6:7; 1 Cor. 6:11.

(28) Although a far-reaching agreement in the understanding of the doctrine of justification appears possible, other questions arise here. What is the theological importance of this doctrine? Do both sides similarly evaluate its implications for the life and teaching of the church?

(29) According to Lutheran understanding, and on the basis of the confession of justification, all traditions and institutions of the church are subject to the criterion which asks whether they are enablers of the proper proclamation of the gospel and do not obscure the unconditional character of the gift of salvation. It follows that the rites and orders of the church are not to be imposed as conditions for salvation, but are valid only as the free unfolding of the obedience of faith.¹¹

(30) Lutherans and Catholics alike are convinced that the gospel is the foundation of Christian freedom. In the New Testament this freedom is described as freedom from sin, freedom from the power of the law, freedom from death and freedom for service toward God and neighbor. Since, however, Christian freedom is linked to the witness of the gospel, it needs institutional forms for its mediation. The church must therefore understand and actualize itself as institution of freedom. Structures which violate this freedom cannot be legitimate in the church of Christ.

F) *The gospel and church law*

(31) Church orders arise, above all, from that ministry of word and sacrament which is constitutive for the church. That which belongs to the proper proclamation of the gospel and proper administration of the sacraments is indispensable. The concrete shape of orders is presented in the New Testament in various forms. In subsequent history it has undergone many further changes. Greater awareness of the historicity of the church in conjunction with a new understanding of its eschatological nature, requires that in our day the concepts of *ius divinum* and *ius humanum* be thought through anew. In both concepts the word *ius* is employed in a merely analogical sense. *Ius divinum* can never be adequately distinguished from *ius humanum*. We have the *ius divinum* always only as mediated through particular historical forms. These mediating forms must be understood not only as the product of a sociological process of growth but, because of the

pneumatic nature of the church, they can be experienced also as fruit of the spirit.

(32) Church law is not a mere juridical system. The final decisive viewpoint must be that of the salvation of the individual believer. Church law must serve the free development of the religious life of the believer. Church norms can be of help for the formation of conscience. No law, however, may release a member of the church from his direct responsibility to God.¹² Church norms, therefore, can become binding only through the personal conscience. The area of freedom for the work of the Lord must remain open.

(33) The church is permanently bound in its ordering to the gospel which is irrevocably prior to it. It is in respect to this that Catholic tradition speaks of the *ius divinum*. The gospel, however, can be the criterion for a concrete church order only in living relationship with contemporary social realities. Just as there is a legitimate explication of the gospel in dogmas and confessions, so there also exists a historical actualization of law in the church. Therefore, the church must discern the signs of the Holy Spirit in history and in the present, and in faithfulness to the apostolic proclamation must consider the restructuring of its orders.¹³

(34) The Catholic participants, therefore, expect the reform of church law to proceed in such a way that the function of laws and institutions in the church will be to serve the religious life of the believers, protect Christian freedom and the rights of the person and prevent laws and institutions from ever becoming ends in themselves. For the Lutheran participants, it is a hopeful sign that the revision of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* is being carried out at a time of ecumenical rapprochement. They further hope that it will be remembered in making this revision that, although the codification of Catholic church law is of binding character only for the members of the Catholic church, it nevertheless has an indirect effect on all of Christendom. In addition they acknowledge that in many respects the structures of their own Lutheran churches are in need of radical re-ordering so that freedom may be further protected and promoted.

II. The Gospel and the World

¹¹ Cf. Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom, 2:10-12.

¹² Cf. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 43.

¹¹ Augsburg Confession, VII.

A) *The importance of the world for the understanding of the gospel*

(35) It is in the world and for the sake of the world that Christ lived, died and rose again. Likewise, it is in the world and for the sake of the world that the church witnesses to these saving acts of God. The world is both the *locus* and the goal of the proclamation of the gospel. These realities are so intimately interrelated that what the world is and how we understand it, inevitably influences the formulation of the gospel and the life and structures of the church.

(36) In discussing this theme we realize anew that many doctrinal disagreements, which in the past have separated our churches, are beginning to disappear. Those controversies arose in a world very different from the present. Consequently it has become to a large extent impossible to make use of a past understanding of the world in the context of our present proclamation. Thus many of our traditional doctrinal disagreements are losing importance.

(37) This does not mean, however, that we now possess a new and uniform "theology of earthly realities". There are far too many new problems. It is very difficult to even arrive at a clear-cut definition of the concept "world". Special attention needs to be called to such meanings of the concept of world as cosmos, as the network of social and cultural relationships, as *locus* and object of human activity—individually and corporately—and, finally, as the created, fallen and divinely-redeemed order.

(38) The similarities and differences of opinion in this area, perhaps more than anywhere else, cut across confessional lines. Roman Catholics and Lutherans are here confronted with the same fundamental questions and have similar difficulties in trying to answer them.

B) *The importance of the gospel for the world*

(39) We came to the agreement that the world must be viewed from the center of the gospel, that is, from the perspective of God's eschatological, saving act in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The gospel aims for the reconciliation of all men. Two important conclusions can be drawn from this.

(40) First, God's redemptive act in Christ takes place on and through the cross. There is here no room for the triumphalism and

theocratic tendencies to which Christians have so often fallen victim. The church must ever remember that Christ's victory in and over the world continues to be a hidden one and that it must witness to Christ's work of reconciliation in such a way as to share in his sufferings by struggling against the powers of evil in this age which is passing away. It must witness to God's saving acts not only through word and sacrament, not only through the verbal proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, but also by following Christ in bearing the weaknesses of the weak and identifying with the needy and oppressed. For the gospel is more than a message. It reveals the power of the eschaton already at work in our world under the form of the cross.¹⁴

(41) Secondly, the gospel applies to all domains of being and to all aspects of human life. Christ's victory through his death and resurrection encourages believers to live by his promise and to perform works of love. We are thereby warned against all dualistic patterns of piety and thought. The gospel cannot be confined to a purely spiritual, private or inward sphere which has no consequences for bodily or public life. Contrary to a certain Catholic tradition, "nature" cannot be conceived as the self-sufficient presupposition for supernatural grace. At the same time we must reject the notion, corresponding to a widespread Lutheran way of thinking, of a "worldly kingdom" which has no relationship to the gospel.

C) *The historicity of the gospel*

(42) In our day all reality is seen as an open-ended process and, in reference to mankind, as history. Here is our confession of faith: in his love for the world God enters into history and makes it part of his saving act. This has always been part of the belief in the incarnation. Today, however, it becomes necessary to conceive of this historicity of the gospel more clearly.

(43) Although the gospel cannot be derived from the world, it must nevertheless be recognized that it is concretized only in specific and ever-changing circumstances. It becomes the *viva vox evangelii* only when it is formulated and expressed through the power of the Holy Spirit in reference to the ever new questions raised by men of today.¹⁵ Only when the gospel is proclaimed for such spe-

¹⁴ Cf. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 37 & 38.

¹⁵ Cf. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 44.

cific situations do we grasp its saving character. Thus the world not only provides opportunities for the communication of the gospel, but it also has a hermeneutical function. It is this very world which to a certain extent enriches us with a deeper understanding of the fullness of the gospel.

(44) From this it also follows that the structures and formulations in which the gospel is concretized share in the historical conditionedness of the world in its social and cultural transformations. Since the gospel is directed toward the eschatological fulfilment, these structures and formulations are simultaneously transitory and anticipatory. Their role is to open up the future and not be closed to it. Thus the continuity of the gospel—a gift of the Holy Spirit—is to be seen, not only in fixed structures and formulations, but also in its ability to make itself known in ever new forms by constant reflections on Holy Scripture and on its interpretation in the church's history. This insight also frees ecumenical dialog from an unquestioning attachment to the fixed positions and dominant problems of the past.

(45) There is a further reason why special attention must be given to the relationship of the world to the gospel. We view this world as a global environment in which all factors influence each other. The church stands in the midst of this complex of reciprocal interrelations which, albeit unconsciously, often shape the communication of the gospel, just as this communication of the gospel also shapes and influences the world. This also frequently happens in ways of which neither the world nor the church is aware. At times the church's indirect communication through its style of life and organization is more powerful than its direct witness through word, sacrament and social action. At other times, this indirect message contradicts the gospel which the church intends to proclaim. Conversely, however, it can also happen that certain aspects of the gospel may be conveyed even where there is no awareness or intention of doing so. When reflecting on the proclamation of the gospel it is, therefore, imperative also to consider the actual social, psychological and political function of the churches in our society. In a secularized world the churches have been increasingly forced into the private sphere of things. Consequently they play an increasingly less effective, less central role in public life, whereas the gospel they proclaim concerns itself with life in its totality. At least one of the reasons for this failure is that the churches' are burdened with life styles and organizational patterns which may have been

appropriate in the 'folk church' era, but which in our increasingly de-Christianized society have become useless, if not harmful. A vast transformation is needed for our churches to become communities which provide the appropriate institutional and spiritual conditions for the concrete actualization of true freedom, human dignity and unity among their members. In divesting all ideologies and forms of political, social and economic life of their claims to absoluteness, the church is enabled to contribute more effectively toward an opening of the world to the future. The entire life of the church, and not only its pronouncements and programs, must become a protest against the inhuman aspects of society.

(46) The ecumenical importance of these considerations is evident. The relationship of the world to the gospel points to the necessity of new structures for our churches. Given the charismatic total structure of the church, it was asked whether the function of the office holders could not be understood and organized in new ways and thereby enhance the importance of the priesthood of all believers. The task over against the world requires opportunities for freedom and public opinion within the church. Such new structures provide possibilities for the removal of major barriers to unity. For with the progressive overcoming of doctrinal disputes, it is now precisely structural problems which are largely responsible for continuing to keep our churches divided. With this comment concerning the relationship of the world to the gospel we now turn our attention to the problem of the office of ministry in the church.

III. The Gospel and the Office of the Ministry in the Church¹⁶

A) *The common point of departure*

(47) The question of the office of the ministry in the church, its origin, its position and correct understanding represents one of the most important open questions between Lutherans and Catholics. It is here that the question of the position of the gospel in and over the church becomes concrete. What, in other words, are the consequences of the doctrine of justification for the understanding of the ministerial office?

¹⁶ The most complete treatment of this theme so far within the context of Catholic-Lutheran conversations has taken place in North America. See *Eucharist and Ministry, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV* (New York: USA National Committee of the LWF; Washington: US Catholic Conference, 1971).

(48) Lutherans and Catholics share the conviction that we owe our salvation exclusively to the saving act of God accomplished once for all in Jesus Christ according to the witness of the gospel. Yet the ministry of reconciliation belongs to the work of reconciliation.¹⁷ In other words the witness of the gospel requires that there be witnesses to the gospel.¹⁸ The church as a whole bears witness to Christ; the church as a whole is the priestly people of God.¹⁹ As *creatura et ministra verbi*, however, it stands under the gospel and has the gospel as its superordinate criterion. Its gospel ministry is to be carried out through the proclamation of the word, through the administration of the sacraments, and, indeed, through its total life.

(49) Since the church as the pilgrim people of God has not yet reached its eschatological goal, it depends during the present interval of time—between the “already” and the “not-yet” on ministries, structures and orders which should serve the realization of the saving act of God in Christ.

(50) The correct determination of the relationship between this ministry assigned to the entire church and a special office in the church is a problem for Lutherans and Catholics alike. Both agree that the office of the ministry stands over against the community as well as within the community. Further they agree that the ministerial office represents Christ and his over-againstness to the community only insofar as it gives expression to the gospel. Both must examine themselves as to how effectively the critical superiority of the gospel is maintained in practice.

B) *The normative position of its origin*

(51) The New Testament testifies to these points in many ways. Especially important and helpful for our present problem is the concept of the apostolic as well as the charismatic structure of the congregations as portrayed especially in Paul's letters.²⁰

(52) According to the New Testament wit-

nesses the apostles were sent by the Lord himself as witnesses of his resurrection.²¹ The apostolate in the strict sense is not transferable. The apostles belong to the time of the original establishment of the church,²² are of fundamental importance for the church,²³ and—together with the Christian prophets—can be designated as the foundation of the church.²⁴ The church is apostolic insofar as it stands on this foundation and abides in the apostolic faith. The church's ministry, doctrine and order are apostolic insofar as they pass on and actualize the apostolic witness.

(53) The commission of the whole church, going back to the apostles, is carried out through a variety of charisms. These are manifestations of the Holy Spirit and make us participants in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.²⁵ Therefore the charisms are not given to only a particular group in the church nor are they limited only to its offices.²⁶ They exhibit their authenticity in that they testify to Christ²⁷ and are for others, thus serving the unity and building-up of the body of Christ.²⁸ Therefore the charisms are of constitutive importance for the order and structure of the church. The gospel can be maintained only in the cooperative and at times also tension-filled interaction of the various charisms and ministries.²⁹

(54) We are told quite early in the New Testament period of special ministries and offices.³⁰ To some extent at least they were viewed as charisms.³¹ The New Testament writings testify to the great differences in congregational functions, ministries and orders in the various areas and periods of the church. These were only partially retained in later church history and they were partially interpreted in new ways (cf. the offices of presbyter, bishop and deacon). Further, these ministries and orders were imbedded in earlier historical (Jewish, Hellenistic, etc.) structures. Thus, although there is a continuity of basic structure, it can be seen that historicity is part of the essential nature of the church's ministerial office and of its congregational

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 5:18.

¹⁸ Rom. 10:14-17.

¹⁹ Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 10-12; Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 2-3; also *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia Edition), “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility”, p. 52 (WA 6, 407); cf. further WA 38, 247.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 12:7-11; 28-30; Rom. 12:6-8; cf. Eph. 4:7-12.

²¹ 1 Cor. 9:1; Acts 1:22.

²² 1 Cor. 15:7.

²³ 1 Cor. 3:10 ff.

²⁴ Eph. 2:20; cf. Rev. 21:14.

²⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-6.

²⁶ Cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-11; Rom. 12:3.

²⁷ Cf. 1 Cor. 12:3.

²⁸ Cf. Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:11-16.

²⁹ Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 12.

³⁰ Cf. 1 Thess. 5:12; Phil. 1:1.

³¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 12:28.

ordering. The gospel as witnessed to by Scripture can be criterion for church order only when it stands in living relationship to the current social realities. Orders in the New Testament are, therefore, to be seen largely as models which are open to ever new actualizations.

C) *Historical development of church structures*

(55) During the course of the church's history, the understanding and shaping of the ministerial office has undergone considerable change and development. Only in recent years have we become fully aware of this in our study of history. It was not until the second century that the three-fold division of the ministerial office into bishop, presbyter and deacon finally came about. The relationship of the local to the universal church, of episcopal collegiality to primacy, shifted significantly between the first and second millennia. To some extent the various churches are differentiated by their development of differing New Testament models.

(56) These insights into the historicity of the church, combined with a new understanding of the eschatological nature of the church, have led also to changes in the theological understanding of the office of the ministry in the church. Although the ministerial office belongs constitutively to the church and has a continuing basic structure, still it is possible for concrete forms of office, which were necessary and important at a specific time for the proper carrying out of the church's mission, to be of no or little value in other situations. This enables us today also to undertake restructuring in order to adapt to new situations. In so doing, old structures, as for example, the office of deacon, can be renewed and new structures can emerge. Especially is there great need today to consider the prophetic function of the church towards the world and the structural consequences of this for the church. The exercise of the prophetic function demands an area of freedom and of public opinion within the church.

D) *The understanding of apostolic succession*

(57) The basic intention of the doctrine of apostolic succession is to indicate that, throughout all historical changes in its proclamation and structures, the church is at all times referred back to its apostolic origin. The details of this doctrine seem to us today to be more complicated than before. In the New Testament and the early fathers, the emphasis was obviously placed more on the

substance of apostolicity, i.e., on succession in apostolic teaching. In this sense the entire church as the *ecclesia apostolica* stands in the apostolic succession. Within this general sense of succession, there is a more specific meaning: the succession of the uninterrupted line of the transmission of office. In the early church, primarily in connection with defence against heresies, it was a sign of the unimpaired transmission of the gospel and a sign of unity in the faith. It is in these terms that Catholics today are trying once again to develop a deeper understanding of apostolic succession in the ministerial office. Lutherans on their side can grant the importance of a special succession if the preeminence of succession in teaching is recognized and if the uninterrupted line of transmission of office is not viewed as an *ipso facto* certain guarantee of the continuity of the right proclamation of the gospel.

(58) It can also be of ecumenical importance to indicate that the Catholic tradition knows of individual instances of the ordination of priests by priests which were recognized as valid. It still needs to be clarified to what extent this leaves open the possibility of a presbyterial succession.³²

E) *Toward a new interpretation of the traditional teaching on the ministerial office*

(59) Today it is possible for us to have a better understanding of various traditional elements in the doctrine of the office of the ministry as this has developed on both sides. We see more clearly than before that the question of whether ordination is a sacrament is chiefly a matter of terminology. Catholics view ordination as a sacrament which graciously equips the office bearer for ministry to others. Lutherans customarily limit usage of the word "sacrament" to baptism and the Lord's Supper (at times also absolution.)³³ In practice, however, transmission of office proceeds in both churches in a similar manner, that is, through the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit for his gifts for the proper exercise of min-

³² Cf. C. Baisi, *Il Ministro straordinario degli ordini sacramentali* (Rome: 1935); Y. Congar, *Heilige Kirche* (Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1966), pp. 285-316; P. Fransen, in *Sacramentum Mundi*, IV, 1969, col. 1270f; W. Kasper, "Zur Frage der Anerkennung der Ämter in den lutherischen Kirchen", in *Theol. Quartalschrift* (Tübingen), Vol. 151, 1971, pp. 97-109.

³³ Cf. Augsburg Confession, XIII, and Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XIII.

istry. In spite of all still remaining differences, there is here a substantial convergence.

(60) A certain rapprochement can be noticed also because of a change in the Catholic understanding of "priestly character". According to the original Augustinian understanding, this had to do with the outward call and ordination to public office in the church. Later, however, there was a shift to understanding this "character" as an inner qualification of the person, and it was in this sense that it was rejected by the Reformers. In defence against a onesided metaphysical understanding, many Catholic theologians today emphasize a more strongly functional conception which is more acceptable to Lutherans. Furthermore, Lutherans in practice have the equivalent of the Catholic doctrine of the "priestly character" to the extent that they do not repeat ordination. In both churches, to be sure, there is also the problem of how the preeminence of the gospel can be made effective within the historically developed official structures.

(61) The Second Vatican Council has emphasized in a new way that the basic task of priests is the proclamation of the gospel. Further, it is stressed in the administration of the sacraments that these are sacraments of the faith which are born from the word and nourished by the word.³⁴ According to the Lutheran Confessions, it is the task of the ministerial office to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments in accordance with the gospel, so that in this way faith is awakened and strengthened.³⁵ Over against an earlier onesided emphasis on proclamation, the sacraments in the Lutheran churches are currently coming to have a more important place in the spiritual life of the congregations.

(62) On the basis of these findings it seems necessary to examine whether the still remaining differences on these and related questions must necessarily be viewed as church-dividing differences in faith, or whether they can be understood as the expression of different ways of thinking. While Lutherans emphasize more the "event" character of God's saving acts, Catholic tradition is more concerned about the metaphysical implications of statements about salvation. These two ways of thinking are not mutually exclusive insofar as they do not become self-contained and orientate themselves in terms of the critical norm of the gospel.

³⁴ See Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 4.

³⁵ Cf. Augsburg Confession V; VII.

F) *The possibility of a mutual recognition of the ministerial office*

(63) The Catholic participants are convinced in view of recent biblical and historical insights as well as on the basis of the ecumenical experience of the working of the Holy Spirit in other churches, that the traditional rejection of the validity of the Lutheran ministerial office must be rethought. The recognition of the ecclesial character of other church communities, as expressed by Vatican II,³⁶ can be, theologically speaking, interpreted as a first step toward the recognition of the ministerial offices of these churches. Also worthy of note is the point that the ministerial office arose in Lutheran churches through a spiritual break-through in an emergency situation. Reconsideration of the doctrine of apostolic succession and reflection on ministries of charismatic origin as well as on presbyterial succession seem to permit a correction of the traditional point of view. Therefore, the Catholic members request the appropriate authorities in the Roman Catholic Church to consider whether the ecumenical urgency flowing from Christ's will for unity does not demand that the Roman Catholic Church examine seriously the question of recognition of the Lutheran ministerial office.

(64) The question of recognition of the ministry is viewed differently by Lutherans because they never denied the existence of the office of the ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. According to the Lutheran confessional position, the church exists wherever the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are rightly administered.³⁷ Lutheran confessional writings leave no doubt that the one church has never ceased to exist, and they also emphasize the churchly character of the Roman Catholic communion. Also, changes in the understanding and practice of the Roman Catholic ministerial office, especially the stronger emphasis on the *ministerium verbi*, has largely removed the reasons for the reformers' criticism. The awareness of a common responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel in the world should impel the Lutheran churches also to examine seriously the question of the explicit recognition of the Roman Catholic ministerial office. Because of the already noted similarities in the understanding of the gospel, which has decisive effects on proclamation, administration of the sacraments and liturgical practice, the Lutherans feel that even now exchange

³⁶ Cf. Decree on Ecumenism, 3f; 19.

³⁷ Cf. Augsburg Confession, VII.

of pulpits and common eucharistic celebrations can on occasion be recommended.³⁸

IV. The Gospel and the Unity of the Church

(65) The commission was unable to deal with the problem of the unity of the church in a comprehensive way. It limited itself to a few aspects which appeared important in the context of its theme.

A) *The question of papal primacy*

(66) In this connection the question of papal primacy emerges as a special problem for the relationship between Lutherans and Catholics. Catholics pointed to the beginning of this doctrine in the biblical witness concerning the special position of Peter and also to the differences in the understanding of primacy in the first and second millenia. By its doctrine of episcopal collegiality, the Second Vatican Council placed the primacy in a new interpretive framework and thereby avoided a widespread onesided and isolated way of understanding it. The primacy of jurisdiction must be understood as ministerial service to the community and as bond of the unity of the church. This service of unity is, above all, a service of unity in faith. The office of the papacy also includes the task of caring for legitimate diversity among local churches. The concrete shape of this office may vary greatly in accordance with changing historical conditions. It was recognized on the Lutheran side that no local church should exist in isolation since it is a manifestation of the universal church. In this sense the importance of a ministerial service of the communion of churches was acknowledged and at the same time reference was made to the problem raised for Lutherans by their lack of such an effective service of unity. The office of the papacy as a visible sign of the unity of the churches was therefore not excluded insofar as it is subordinated to the primacy of the gospel by theological reinterpretation and practical restructuring.³⁹

(67) The question, however, which remains controversial between Catholics and Lutherans is whether the primacy of the pope is necessary for the church, or whether it represents only a fundamentally possible function. It was nevertheless agreed that the question of altar fellowship and of a mutual recognition of ministerial offices should not be un-

conditionally dependent on a consensus on the question of primacy.⁴⁰

B) *Intercommunion*

(68) Fellowship in eucharistic celebration is an essential sign of church unity.⁴¹

Therefore, striving for altar fellowship is central for all those who seek the unity of the church.

(69) In our day the problem of altar fellowship or intercommunion presents itself in a new way. Mutual recognition has progressed among the churches and they have become much more strongly aware of their common mission in the world. In some places members of our churches have met together at the Lord's table and are convinced that they have thereby rediscovered fellowship in the Lord. It is clear to us that at times unthinking and spiritually irresponsible actions are a hindrance to a final solution. On the other hand, the various experiments in common celebration of the Lord's Supper are also signs of the seriousness of the question and make urgent additional theological and canonical clarification. In this situation church leaders have a manifold responsibility. They must consider that the celebration of the Lord's Supper cannot be separated from confessing Christ and his eucharistic presence nor from the fellowship of the church; but they must also take care lest they hinder the work of the Spirit. They should by their helpful instructions lead the community of believers in hope for the reunion of all separated Christians.

(70) It is apparent to us that the questions raised here and the attempts at solution which have been offered call for still more thorough investigation. Nevertheless, at least some directions which lead to answers to these questions can be indicated. There was agreement that our common baptism is an important starting point in this matter of eucharistic fellowship.⁴² To be sure, this is not the only prerequisite for complete altar fellowship, but it should force us to examine the question of whether the former exclusion of certain communities of baptized Christians can be rightfully continued today.

(71) Although there are considerable differences of opinion on this matter in the Catholic Church it is pointed out on the Catholic side that there is no exclusive identity between the one church of Christ and the Ro-

³⁸ Cf. nos. 68-74 of this report.

³⁹ See the signatures to the Smalcald Articles, Melancthon's intervention.

⁴⁰ Cf. Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, 3.

⁴¹ See 1 Cor. 10:17.

⁴² Cf. Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism 3.

man Catholic Church.⁴³ This one church of Christ is actualized in an analogous manner also in other churches. That also means that the unity of the Roman Catholic Church is not perfect but that it strives toward the perfect unity of the church. In this sense the eucharistic celebration in the Catholic church also suffers from imperfection. It will become the perfect sign of the unity of the church only when all those who through baptism have been invited in principle to the table of the Lord and are able in reality to partake.

(72) The Lutherans emphasized that the communion practices of the separated churches must receive their orientation from that which is demanded of the church by the ministry of reconciliation among men. For the Lord's Supper is given to men by the crucified and risen Lord so that they might be received into his fellowship and saved through it. A celebration of the Lord's Supper in which baptized believers may not participate suffers from an inner contradiction and from the start, therefore, does not fulfil the purpose for which the Lord established it. For the Lord's Supper is the reconciling acceptance of men through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

(73) Practical consequences emerge from these considerations for Lutherans and for Roman Catholics. All steps taken by the churches must be shaped by serious efforts to further the unity of the churches. Because of the anomalies of present church divisions, this unity will not be suddenly established. A process of gradual rapprochement is necessary in which various stages are possible. At present it should already be recommended that the church authorities, on the basis of what is already shared in faith and sacrament and as sign and anticipation of the promised and hoped for unity, make possible occasional acts of intercommunion as, for example, during ecumenical events or in the pastoral care of those involved in mixed marriages. Uncertainty concerning a common doctrine of the ministerial office still makes for difficulties in reciprocal intercommunion agreements. However, the realization of eucharistic fellowship should not depend exclusively on full recognition of the offices of the ministry.

(74) In this connection it should be considered that the pastoral responsibility of the church leadership can obligate it to proceed in such a way on this question of intercom-

munion as not to confuse the faithful. But pastoral responsibility also demands taking into account the situation of those faithful who suffer in special ways under the necessities of separation or who because of their convictions think that they must seek fellowship in Christ in joint celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Both sides point out that a solution to the question of intercommunion between Catholics and Lutherans must not neglect concern for fellowship with other churches.

(75) At the conclusion of their work the members of the commission look back in joyful gratitude on the experience of this truly brotherly encounter. Even the discussion of opposing convictions and opinions led us to sense even more deeply our profound community and joint responsibility for our common Christian heritage. Of course, the participants also became aware of the difficulties on the road towards complete church unity. This road will be discovered only if both churches pursue in all humility and honesty the question of the truth of the one gospel of Jesus Christ. The encounter with the Lord who encourages us ever anew by his gospel is more than a rational process. Joint theological efforts, therefore, will have to become part of a spiritual life process. This process of spiritual encounter should, so far as possible, become an increasingly united one. For the Lord strengthens us with his word in the spirit and makes it effective wherever "two or three" are "gathered in his name"⁴⁴ and "agree about anything they ask".⁴⁵

The report is signed by the following members of the Study Commission:

Catholic participants:

Professor J. A. Fitzmyer, USA

Professor W. Kasper, Germany (Chairman—Catholics)

Bishop H. L. Martensen, Denmark (Special Statement)

Prof. E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., Holland

Professor H. Schürmann, Germany (Special Statement)

Professor A. Vögtle, Germany (Special Statement)

Professor J. L. Witte, S.J., Rome (Special Statement)

⁴³ See Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 8.

⁴⁴ Cf. Matt. 18:20.

⁴⁵ Cf. Matt. 18:19.

Lutheran participants:

Professor D. H. Conzelmann, Germany (Special Statement)

Professor G. Lindbeck, USA

Professor W. Lohff, Germany

Professor E. Molland, Norway (Chairman-Lutherans)

Professor P.-E. Persson, Sweden

Professor K. Stendahl, USA

Professor G. Strecker, Germany.

Special Statement by Bishop H. L. Martenson and subscribed to by Professor A. Vögtle:

According to the Catholic understanding of the faith, eucharist and ministry can simply not be separated. Even in exceptional cases it is not possible to celebrate the eucharist without the office of the ministry. Similarly there can be no eucharist without it being community-related.

Although the realization of eucharistic fellowship, as it is called in no. 73, can not *exclusively* be made dependent of the recognition of the ministerial office, such a recognition is essential and necessary for a eucharistic celebration and should never be lacking if it is to be recognized by the Catholic church.

Catholic authorities, therefore, would be well advised, independent of the question of recognition of the office of the ministry, not to permit Catholics to receive the Lord's Supper on special occasions at non-Catholic worship services.

Special Statement by Professor H. Schürmann

I did not attend the third session of the study commission, May 4-8 in Nemi, concerning the "Structures of the Church" (cf. no. 5), nor the fifth session, February 21-26, 1971 in San Anton, Malta and the consultations at that meeting as well as the voting on the final report (cf. no. 6). Therefore I wish to explain my understanding of the "request" in no. 63 and the "recommendation" in no. 73 so as to give specific meaning to my signature.

In view of the realities of the Lutheran churches today or of the Lutheran World Federation, it hardly seems possible to speak of a uniform understanding and assessment of "the Lutheran ministry" (cf. final sentence no. 11). Therefore the "request . . . (to) ex-

amine seriously the question of recognition of the Lutheran ministerial office" (no. 68) seems to include the desire to achieve a more binding common understanding within the Lutheran churches on the doctrine of the ministry as for instance is expressed in this report.

In view of the "unclearly concerning a common doctrine of the ministerial office" in no. 73 and the emphasis on "the pastoral responsibility of the church leadership" in no. 74, I can only conceive of the "recommendation" in no. 73 addressed to the church authorities in the sense of limited admission to the respective eucharistic celebrations in the cases specified.

Special Statement by Professor J. L. Witte, S.J.

I agree with the report of the Joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic Study Commission on "The Gospel and the Church". However, I have the following reservations concerning no. 73, concerns already expressed by me at the final session at Malta.

In view of the "unclearly concerning a common doctrine of the ministerial office", the recommendation that "church authorities . . . make possible occasional acts of intercommunion" (in the sense of "reciprocal admission"), seems to me to be, theologically and pastorally, a premature recommendation from the Catholic point of view (citations are from no. 73). From the Catholic perspective I am convinced that in the present situation the commission should not have done more than recommend that church authorities, on the basis of what is already shared in faith and sacrament and as sign and anticipation of the promised and hoped for unity, make possible *occasional acts of limited admission to the respective eucharistic celebrations*, as for example at ecumenical occasions and in the case of mixed marriages.

Special Statement by Professor D. H. Conzelmann

When after thorough reflection I sign my name to the report of the Commission, I do so because I consider its work to be good, useful and worthy of continuation. My signature does not imply that I identify myself with the theological views which appear in the "Lutheran parts" of the report.

1. At several points a unified Lutheran position is lacking, as for example on the nature and importance of church law, of the apos-

toxic office and, beyond that, of the ministry in general, or ordination, etc.

2. Contemporary movements both among church people and also particularly among the younger generation of theologians should in my view receive more consideration, as for example, the demand for making infant baptism optional or even abolishing it.

3. For theological reasons I am forced to take direct issue with several statements, as for example the historical relativization of the question of truth (no. 24; no. 27; no. 63) and the statements in the second sentence of no. 29.

I consider it my duty to inform the commission of these reservations. For in the debates which will follow the publication of this report I can and shall stand solidly behind the work of the commission, but for purposes of theological argumentation, I must retain my freedom in relation to the Lutheran theses as well as in reference to the criticism of the Catholic positions. It would be very helpful for these discussions if also the documentation on which the report is based were made available to the public.

Translated from the German by Dr. Gustav Kopka, Grand Forks, North Dakota; revised by Professor George A. Lindbeck, New Haven, Connecticut.