

### Historical Scholarship and Ecumenical Dialogue

I am honored to participate in this theological roundtable on the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. I do so as a lay Lutheran church historian. In spite of the editors' "prompts," the topic reminds me of that apocryphal final exam question: "Give a history of the universe with a couple of examples." "What do we think are the possibilities for individual and ecclesial ecumenism between Protestants and Catholics? What are the possibilities for common prayer, shared worship, preaching the gospel, church union, and dialogue with those who are religiously unaffiliated? Why should we commemorate or celebrate this anniversary?" Each "prompt" warrants a few bookshelves of response. The "Protestant Reformation" itself is multivalent. The term "Protestant" derives from the 1529 Diet of Speyer where the evangelical estates responded to the imperial mandate to enforce the Edict of Worms outlawing them. Their response, *Protestatio*, "testified" or "witnessed to" (*pro testari*) the evangelical estates' commitment to the gospel in the face of political coercion (see Acts 5:29). It was not a protest against the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrine. Unfortunately, "Protestant" quickly became a pejorative name and then facilitated an elastic "enemies list."<sup>43</sup> "Reformation," traditionally associated with Luther's "Ninety-Five Theses" (1517, hence the five-hundredth anniversary), also encompasses many historical and theological interpretations.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the Roundtable title reflects the effort in *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (2013) to distinguish Luther's reformational concern from the long historical Reformation (Protestantism), so that this anniversary may be both "celebrated" and self-critically "commemorated."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, "Die Geburtsstunde des Protestantismus: Die Protestation von Speyer (1529)," in Bornkamm, *Das Jahrhundert der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 112–25.

<sup>44</sup> See my *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xii–xiii, 1–22.

<sup>45</sup> On this "double-edged way" of "joyous celebration" and "self-critical commemoration," see Dorothea Sattler and Volker Leppin, eds., *Reformation 1517–2017: Ökumenische Perspektiven* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 111–13.

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Although some view “celebrate” as politically incorrect, I think it is appropriate because it recalls Luther’s proclamation that God forgives and accepts us with no strings attached.<sup>46</sup> “This is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.”<sup>47</sup> If this is not clear enough, Luther commented on Hebrews 9:17 that God names us in his will and dies to make it effective: “You would have to spend a long time polishing your shoes, preening and primping to attain an inheritance, if you had no letter and seal with which to prove your right to it. But if you have a letter and seal, and believe, desire, and seek it, it must be given to you, even though you were scaly, scabby, stinking, and most filthy.”<sup>48</sup> In less colorful language the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* speaks of this promise.

Thus with the Roman Catholic Luther scholar Peter Manns, I celebrate “Luther as our father in the faith” (see 1 Cor 4:15). Indeed, the Roman Catholic ecumenical theologian Bernd Hilberath finds no problem with naming Luther a “teacher [*Lehrer*] of the Church.” I also agree with Manns that ecumenism must not be at the expense of Luther, nor, I would add, further divisions within the churches.<sup>49</sup> The yearning for church unity is palpable among those engaged in the ecumenical marathon of the last fifty years. Yet theological dissent and questions remain, especially regarding Eucharist and ministry, not to mention the firestorm of German professors of theology over the *Joint Declaration on Justification*.<sup>50</sup> What is a historian to make of *From Conflict to Communion* and *Declaration on the Way: Church*,

<sup>46</sup> See Berndt Hamm, “Martin Luther’s Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift without Reciprocation,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2015): 125–61.

<sup>47</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1–4*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 387.

<sup>48</sup> Luther, *Word and Sacrament 1*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 88.

<sup>49</sup> See Peter Manns et al., *Luther’s Ecumenical Significance* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); and Otto Hermann Pesch, “‘Ketzerfürst’ und ‘Vater im Glauben’: Die seltsamen Wege katholischer ‘Lutherrezeption,’” in Hans F. Geisser et al., *Weder Ketzer noch Heiliger: Luthers Bedeutung für den ökumenischen Dialog* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1982), 123–74; Bernd Hilberath, “Martin Luther—Ein katholischer Theologe ohne päpstliche Lehrerlaubnis?,” *Luther: Zeitschrift der Luther-Gesellschaft* 2 (2009): 99–117, at 117.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Gerhard Forde, “The Critical Response of German Theological Professors to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*,” *Dialog* 38, no. 1 (1999): 71–72. A calmer position was advanced by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, available in an English translation: “Ecumenism according to the Evangelical-Lutheran Understanding,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2005): 185–98.

*Ministry, and Eucharist* (2015)—that conciliar anathemas, such as Trent, no longer apply; that history does not change, but it can be told differently; that we now recognize different thought patterns in the Reformation caused misunderstandings? The glossing of history and theology may serve an enthusiastic ecumenical agenda, but the records remain inconvenient.

A few examples. The Council of Constance executed Jan Hus in spite of the promise of safe conduct to and from the Council. The papacy was no more interested in dialogue with Luther than with Hus (nor with councils for that matter). As the papal theologian Prierias made plain in 1518 to Luther: “He who does not hold to the teaching of the Roman Church and the pope as an infallible rule of faith, from which even Holy Scripture draws its power and authority, he is a heretic.”<sup>51</sup> The initial issue from the standpoint of the establishment was not so much Luther’s theology but his perceived challenge of church authority. The critiques of Luther regarding peasants and Jews also gloss history. The Peasants’ War, rooted in many decades of rebellions against injustice, began in response to oppression under Catholic monastic estates in southern Germany. Luther supported justice based on law and reason but not crusades—whether papal or peasant—under the aegis of Christian faith. Recall that one of the peasant leaders, Thomas Müntzer, consistently preached that “the godless have no right to live.”<sup>52</sup> Christian antagonism toward Jews began already in the early church (“His blood be on us and on our children,” Matt 27:25) and continued scapegoating Jews not only for the crucifixion of Jesus but also for the plague and all number of hysterias, as well as for economic reasons, while Marian piety prompted the destruction of synagogues to build pilgrimage sites to Mary. The antecedent of modern racial anti-Semitism may well be the “pure blood laws” of the Spanish Inquisition, which maintained Jewish blood was impervious to baptism. The list could go on—none of which excuses Luther’s own late vicious anti-Semitism—but the point is that we all have “dirty hands.” Ecumenism is not helped by “telling the past in a new way” that glosses history.

That said, ecumenism on the local level continues, perhaps more through sociology than theology: Catholic-Lutheran marriages, ecumenical services and retreats, neighborhoods where friends attend churches for family events such as weddings and funerals and in the process commune together. Such intercommunion is frequently not by a “wink” or ignorance of the “rules,” but through recognition by laity, pastors, and priests that, after all, the Eucharist is the *Lord’s Supper*. While these experiences are not

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 73.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 146.

regularized, folks learn by experience what the ecumenical dialogues labor to affirm: the gospel is not denominationally specific. We've all heard Catholics preach grace alone and Lutherans preach works. Perhaps these experiences contribute to a certain lay *déjà vu*: the pope at a worship service with Lutherans is euphoric for professional ecumenists, but many Christians as well as "nones" wonder what the fuss is about. This is not to say that "ecumenism from below" is fostering a kind of nondenominationalism, but rather that some of the old controversial theological issues appear as unnecessary baggage or even may no longer be "visible" on the local level. What is visible as a result of the modern liturgical movement is the striking similarity of Lutheran and Catholic services. Perhaps the old *lex orandi, lex credendi* is more effective than ecumenical documents unfamiliar to most laity. This development, however, has also led to some sharp Lutheran critiques.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, controversial issues involving a complex of piety and doctrine remain. Here I speak as a Lutheran who—usually grudgingly—recognizes it is easier to see the speck in Catholic eyes than the beam in my own. Indulgences, relics, and papal authority have not disappeared or been ecumenically resolved. Indeed, modern technology has markedly improved the relic trade since the Middle Ages: relics are available on eBay (technically the relic itself is not bought and sold, only its container).<sup>54</sup> A recent story in the *Boston Globe* (September 22, 2016) covered the Boston area tour of Saint Padre Pio's dried-out heart, brought here at the request of Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston. A picture shows schoolchildren kissing the reliquary containing the dried-out heart of Saint Padre Pio.<sup>55</sup> The rest of Pio's corpse remains in Rome, where it was brought by Pope Francis as an exemplar in the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Further stumbling blocks to unity include issues such as birth control, abortion, LGBTQ rights including marriage, clerical celibacy, and ordination of women, which intertwine Roman Catholic hermeneutics and a theology of authority. The most notorious expression of this in our time is the worldwide sexual exploitation of children by priests abetted by the church hierarchy.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Oliver K. Olson, *Reclaiming the Lutheran Liturgical Heritage* (Minneapolis: Bronze Bow, 2007); and Dorothea Wendebourg, "'Den falschen Weg Roms zu Ende Gegangen?' Auseinandersetzung mit Meiner Kritikern," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 99, no. 4 (2002): 400-440; Wendebourg, *Essen zum Gedächtnis: Der Gedächtnisbefehl in den Abendmahlstheologien der Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Mary Rezac, "Sale of Saint Relics on eBay Sparks Catholic Outcry," *Catholic News Agency*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/sale-of-saint-relics-on-ebay-sparks-catholic-outcry-38519/>. I'd like to thank the editors for locating this source.

<sup>55</sup> Lisa Wangsness, "Hundreds Flock to Lowell Church to Venerate Heart of a Saint," *Boston Globe*, September 21, 2016.

When exposed for years of shielding such exploitation by over eighty priests, Cardinal Bernard Law, Archbishop of Boston, was named by Pope John Paul II as archpriest of the papal basilica, Santa Maria Maggiore, conveniently removing him from Boston to Rome (see the movie *Spotlight* and Matt 18:6–7; Luke 17:1–2). Church authority appears to trump both ethical responsibility and civil law, and erodes the credibility that ecumenical dialogues posit for church unity. The credibility of the church hinges, I would argue, not on visible unity (yet to be defined) but on its faithful proclamation of the promise of God. Luther addressed people whose everyday anxieties and fears were exacerbated by a piety of achievement. The modern world is no less entwined in a nexus of achievement, albeit secular, than the world of Luther's time. The same gospel as then—salvation is received not achieved—is the promise that God accepts us not because of what we accomplish but by God's free grace alone.

In concluding these brief reflections, I turn to another favorite Roman Catholic theologian, Otto Hermann Pesch. Pesch began his career as an ecumenical Dominican theologian with a huge tome relating Aquinas and Luther on justification. He later left the order and married. Toward the end of his life, he wrote a little book titled *What Big Ears You Have! The Theologians' Red Riding Hood*. Pesch projected a future in which Little Red Riding Hood, shaped by the pieties of her Lutheran mother and Catholic father, had a grandson (Pesch refers to him as his own future great-grandson!) who would write a major dissertation in 2050 tracing the process of church reunion. "Little Red Riding Hood never studied theology but, recalling her youth, she struggled through the ponderous tome. All the while she was reading it she was thinking: 'We already knew all that in 1999!'"<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Otto Hermann Pesch, *What Big Ears You Have! The Theologians' Red Riding Hood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 56.