

Living Word, Living Tradition

LUTHERAN–ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE IN AUSTRALIA

2008 – 2011

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Living Word, Living Tradition

Introduction

1. Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *That They May be One* reviewed thirty years of ecumenical relations, including his visits—the first by any pope—to Canterbury Cathedral and to Lutheran churches in Germany and Sweden.¹ At the time, many welcomed this historic letter's impassioned commitment to the ecumenical task that Christ gave to his church. Equally, many were challenged by John Paul II's call for continuing, patient, courageous efforts in frank dialogue. Among the issues that needed fuller study, he identified 'the relationship between Sacred Scripture, as the highest authority in matters of faith, and Sacred Tradition, as indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God.'²

2. The question of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition has always been a central component of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia from its beginning in 1975, although to date this question has not been the single focus of discussion. Our dialogue has considered the following issues: Baptism, Eucharist, the Ordained Ministry, Ecclesiology, Justification, and Oversight.³ Since 2008 our study and discussion have centred on the nature of the word of God in the life of the church. In this present document we work towards a common affirmation of the Scriptures as the living word of God and we explore the

¹ John Paul II, *Ut unum sint: That They May all be One* (Strathfield: St Pauls, 1995).

² *Ut unum sint*, 78.

³ "Agreed Statement on Baptism", "Sacrament and Sacrifice", "Pastor and Priest" in *Stages on the Way*, ed. Raymond K. Williamson (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1994). "Communion and Mission", "Justification" in *Stages on the Way II*, ed. Raymond K. Williamson (Strathfield: St Pauls, 2007). *The Ministry of Oversight: The Office of Bishop and President in the Church*, Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia 2000-2007 (Australian Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue, 2007).

concepts of tradition that have been functioning in our churches, hoping to reach a common understanding of the word of God transmitted as a living tradition in the church.

3. God's desire to communicate and connect with the entire creation is central to Christian belief and witness. 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world' (Hebrews 1:1-2). Catholics and Lutherans use the term 'word of God' when speaking about the self-communication of God. We do this in three distinct ways.

4. First and foremost, this word of God is not a word about God but a word from God through which God and God's plan of salvation are revealed to us. This Word of God is the second person of the Trinity. As God's ultimate self-disclosure the Word spoken by the Father to humankind is enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ. As the incarnate Son of God, crucified and risen, Jesus Christ brings history and all creation to completion by reconciling the fallen world with God and making all things new.

5. Second, this word of God is a written word. It is God's self-expression by means of the Spirit, who communicates through human writers. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, certain writings were recognised in the early church as the authoritative word of God for worship and witness. The canonical Scripture of the Old and New Testaments reveal Jesus as the bringer of life and salvation. In this document we generally refer to this 'word of God' as 'Scripture' or the 'Bible'.

6. Third, this word of God is a saving word witnessed and received in every generation. In the church this living word of the life, death and resurrection of Christ is communicated and celebrated through word and sacrament. It both creates and sustains Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

7. Our text begins with a common affirmation of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. A major chapter explains the way we each interpret Scripture and identifies both the agreements we share and two major differences between us. Then we take one of these differences and explain our respective understandings of Tradition and traditions. The outcome of the dialogue is a statement of convergence on Tradition and traditions.

I. The Guiding of the Holy Spirit

8. As Roman Catholics and Lutherans, we have a great deal of agreement between us on our understanding of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Both of us hold a strong trinitarian faith, and both hold that the word of God and the Holy Spirit always go together in the life of the church. We find the guidance of the Spirit promised in various New Testament texts, including the explicit words of Jesus in the Supper discourse from John's Gospel:

I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (John 14:25).

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.

For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16: 12-15).

9. We believe that this promise was fulfilled when the risen Christ poured out the Spirit upon the disciples (John 20:22; Acts 2:4) and that it continues to be fulfilled today. The Spirit of God was at work in the assembly of disciples as they 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). It was the same Holy Spirit who inspired the apostles and others to proclaim and teach the word: 'God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers' (1 Corinthians 12:28). In the power of the Spirit, they handed on the Tradition received from Jesus and the

apostolic community by word of mouth: ‘For I handed on to you as of first importance what I myself had received’ (1 Corinthians 15: 3).

10. The human authors of the Scriptures were led by the Spirit: ‘no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human impulse, but persons moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’ (2 Peter 1:21).

11. The Spirit’s guidance of the Christian community came to fruition in a special way in the composition of the books of the New Testament. What is said at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke might be said of all the New Testament books: they faithfully hand on an account of ‘the events fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word’ (Luke 1:1-4).

12. Lutherans and Roman Catholics together affirm a unique guidance of the Holy Spirit in all the writings that the church has accepted as the holy Scriptures. They also recognise the ongoing guidance of the Spirit in the church as the Scriptures are read, heard, interpreted, and proclaimed. ‘The Bible, being inspired by God and committed to writing once for all, communicates the Word of God in an unalterable form, makes the voice of the Holy Spirit sound through the words of the prophets and apostles.’⁴ The Holy Spirit ‘opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word.’⁵

13. This guidance of the Spirit is evident in the gradual establishment of the canon in the life of the early church. We agree that the Holy Spirit was at work in the ecumenical councils of the undivided church and its great trinitarian creeds. Both churches have received the doctrine of these councils and the ecumenical creeds as authoritative and as faithfully encapsulating the apostolic faith. We both see the Holy Spirit as guiding the church in its liturgical life.

⁴ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 21, in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London/Washington: Sheed & Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990), II: 979.

⁵ *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, article 2, in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 526.26. Hereafter cited as *BC*.

Both churches think of the Holy Spirit as continuing to be at work in their own church teachings since the Reformation. For example, Lutherans see this in their confessional writings, and Roman Catholics see this in the work of the Councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II.

14. The Holy Spirit is given to all the baptised: ‘When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our saviour, so that, having been justified by grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life’ (Titus 3:4-7). As the baptised grow in grace they are given specific gifts of the Spirit for building up the body of Christ: ‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses’ (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

15. Both of our churches believe that the Holy Spirit guides the church through the sense of the faith of the whole people of God, and in a particular way through the pastoral leadership of the church, even while we recognise that our church members and our pastoral leaders are humanly limited and subject to sin. We both have structures for authoritative teaching of the apostolic faith. There are recognised differences in the way this teaching is exercised and on some particular issues such as episcopacy, the bishop of Rome, and infallibility.⁶ In this document we address the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.

16. Together we hold in common that the Spirit guides us as we seek to be faithful in our times to the Scriptures and to the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. Together we believe that

⁶ These are important matters that we have taken up or will take up in other places. See *The Ministry of Oversight: The Office of Bishop and President in the Church* (Australian Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue, 2007).

the Spirit of God is guiding our two churches towards deeper mutual understanding and cooperation. Together we place our trust in the words of Jesus: 'He will guide you into all the truth' (John 16:13).

II. Scripture in the Life of the Church

17. The Scriptures have a central place in both the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, and shape their life at all levels. Both churches have always recognised that the Scriptures must be correctly interpreted so that they can teach and nourish the faithful. However, our churches have not always shared a common understanding of what this entails.

A Lutheran Perspective

The Centrality of Scripture

18. Lutherans understand that teaching and practice in the church are formed and evaluated in the light of Scripture. Lutherans in Australia uphold the confession made by their sixteenth century forebears in faith:

We believe, teach and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone.⁷

19. Teaching and practice are evaluated in the light of Scripture because Scripture is the written and inspired word through which God speaks. In Scripture God's plan of salvation for fallen humanity is proclaimed, culminating in the good news of what God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is the Word made flesh, through whom we have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Thus the Scriptures tell us what God requires of us and what is given through Christ, and how God's people are to live and carry out God's mission to the world.

⁷ Formula of Concord, Epitome 1, Rule and Norm, 1 (BC, 464).

20. As people receive this good news through the reading and proclamation of Scripture, the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith in the triune God. The particular Christian teachings of the catechisms and other confessional writings are grounded in foundational biblical texts. Scripture is also the norm by which the presidents/bishops of the church test preaching and teaching, just as Scripture is the basis on which the pastors, and indeed the whole church, judge doctrine.

Receiving the Scriptures

21. The church catholic throughout the centuries has taken seriously the task of teaching ‘sound words’ that build up the church, and also pointing out and rejecting false teaching that threatens the gospel (2 Timothy 1:13-14; 1 Timothy 1:3-5; Titus 2:1). In the Johannine farewell discourse Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will ‘teach you everything’ and ‘guide you into all truth’ (John 14:26; 16:13). In the task of teaching, the church has been guided by the Holy Spirit at work through the Scriptures to re-state, and confess anew, the trinitarian faith in different contexts.

22. The development of the three ecumenical creeds, the writings of the church fathers, and the ecumenical councils have been significant in that process. Lutherans have always recognised the trinitarian and christological teachings of the seven great ecumenical councils of the early church.

23. An issue relevant to our discussion is the relationship between Scripture and the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. In the Lutheran understanding, Scripture is understood as the primary authority, the standard by which all other teaching is assessed. The confessions are regarded as a secondary authority in that they are held to be a faithful summary of Christian teaching and therefore possess real but derived authority and are tested

in light of Scripture.⁸ Early Lutherans made precisely that distinction when they said, ‘just as we base our position on the Word of God as the eternal truth, so we introduce and cite these writings as a witness to the truth.’⁹ To put it another way, Scripture is the written prophetic and apostolic tradition, and the Lutheran confessions are regarded as faithfully summarising the church’s understanding in a way that is consistent with the apostolic tradition.

24. This means that the phrase *sola scriptura* also defines the way that Lutherans view the trinitarian creeds, Lutheran and other confessions and other writings, and the relationship between them. All such public reflections of the community of faith are evaluated according to the prophetic and apostolic writings of Scripture. Since the trinitarian creeds have withstood such scrutiny for centuries they have primacy of place in the Lutheran confessions, and thereby give witness to a Lutheran ecumenical conviction.

People of God

25. All the people of the church participate in the interpretation of Scripture. However, they do not read and interpret the Scriptures simply in isolation, but always within the faith of the living community of the church, because each believer is, through baptism, also a member of the body of Christ. The same Spirit of God that inspired the holy writers is given also to those who read and study the Scriptures so that they are able to understand and interpret them.

26. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, there has developed in the life of the church through the ages both a ‘rule of faith’, as expressed in the ecumenical creeds and other confessions, and a ‘sense of faith’ that is ever present among God’s people as they hear, read

⁸ This has been nicely summarised by the US Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue: ‘[Luther] concluded that the tradition in all its aspects must be subordinated to the clear teaching of Scripture: *sola fides, sola gratia, and solus Christus* are protected and warranted by *sola scriptura*.’ *Scripture and Tradition, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IX*, ed. H. Skillrud, J. Stafford, D. Martensen (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), 27.

⁹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 13 (BC 506. 13).

and interpret the Scriptures. The sheep ever hear the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:3),¹⁰ the Spirit continually guides the disciples into all the truth (John 16:13-15), and Christ promises to be with his church until the end of time (Matthew 28:18-20). The Augsburg Confession, article seven, defined the church as ‘the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.’ The subsequent ‘Apology’ went on to state that the church is ‘the community which confesses one gospel, likewise has one confession of Christ, and has one Spirit, who renews, consecrates, and governs their hearts.’¹¹ This conviction about the ongoing work of the Spirit in an interpreting community of faith is evident in the Lutheran commitment to synodality.

Biblical and Theological Scholarship

27. In the church some people, both lay and ordained, have a special gift for studying the Scriptures, interpreting them, and building up the body of Christ through their teaching. All theologians have the fundamental task of interpreting Scripture for the situation of the church today. In particular, Biblical scholars learn Hebrew, Greek and other languages, acquire literary and historical skills, delve into the historical and cultural background, and use every available means to understand the ancient texts in their contexts. Others have the ability to gather and present biblical teaching in ways that are relevant for the people of the church.

Teaching Authority

28. While all Christians are called to read and study the Scriptures and use them to judge teachers and teachings, some are called to the public ministry of word and sacrament in the life of the church. As ‘called and ordained servants of the word’, pastors have the

¹⁰ Cf Smalcald Articles 12.2: ‘The church is...holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd’ (BC, 315).

¹¹ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, 7-8.8 (BC, 169, trans emended).

responsibility faithfully to proclaim the word and uphold the public teaching and practice of the church. They are to interpret the Scriptures, and apply the word of God to the various situations of the people in their care.

29. Among the pastors, those called to the office of oversight (bishop/president) have a special responsibility to safeguard the public teaching and practice of the church by ensuring that the Scriptures are interpreted faithfully and that the people live a godly life according to them. In the Augsburg Confession, the person who has been called to the office of bishop, by divine right, judges teachers and teachings on the basis of the word of God:

According to divine right (*de iure divino*), therefore, it is the office of bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is done not by human power but by God's word alone. On this account parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, 'Whoever hears you hears me.'¹²

30. The Lutheran church does not use the word *magisterium* for its teaching office, but it does have a teaching authority and ways of addressing doctrinal issues that arise because of differences in the interpretation of Scripture. In the Lutheran Church of Australia teaching authority is recognised in the following ways. First, there is recognition of the 'rule of faith' (*regula fidei*) as expressed in the three ecumenical creeds, which are binding. Second, the Lutheran confessions are acknowledged as a correct exposition of the teaching of the holy Scriptures, and are therefore held to be authoritative as *norma normata*.¹³

¹² Augsburg Confession 28.21-22 (*BC*, 84).

¹³ At ordination the candidates are asked: 'Do you acknowledge and accept as true expositions of the word of God and as your own confession of faith all the symbolical writings of the evangelical Lutheran church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580?' *Church Rites*, prepared by the Commission on Worship,

31. Furthermore, pastors promise in their ordination vow ‘to uphold the public teaching and practice of the Lutheran Church of Australia and to accept the pastoral and doctrinal oversight of [their] president.’¹⁴ This public teaching is shaped by interpretation of the Scriptures and by the Lutheran confessions, and is expressed in a number of ways: the doctrinal oversight exercised by the President of the Church, the District Presidents, and all of them together as the College of Presidents; the doctrinal advice given to the Synod by the General Pastors Conference; the doctrinal decisions and agreements adopted by the Synod; and the doctrinal advice given by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations. There are different levels of teaching authority inherent in such a process, and none of them is binding in the same way as the Scriptures and confessions.

A Roman Catholic Perspective

The Centrality of Scripture

32. The Roman Catholic Church understands itself as living at the service of the word of God revealed in the Scriptures. In the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* the Second Vatican Council placed the Scriptures at the centre of the life of the church. Its conviction about the centrality of the Scriptures impelled the Council to call for renewal in the work of biblical scholars and theologians, in the education of the clergy, the ministry of bishops, and the celebration of the liturgy, so that the Scriptures would nourish and rule the church’s whole life.¹⁵ The Scriptures have such authority in the church because God speaks to humanity through them. They are the inspired word of God.

Lutheran Church of Australia, ed. David Schubert (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1994), 140. A similar question is asked of all the people, lay and clergy, at every synod of the church.

¹⁴ *Church Rites*, 140.

¹⁵ Cf. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 21.

33. The Council explains that the Scriptures are due no less reverence than Christ's eucharistic presence since 'the Bible, being inspired by God and committed to writing once for all, communicates the word of God in an unalterable form, [and] makes the voice of the Holy Spirit sound through the words of the prophets and the apostles.'¹⁶ Through the covenants with Abraham and Moses God called together a people to live in the divine love. God revealed God's self to this people in word and event. 'This plan and pattern of salvation' the Council says 'is there to be read, as the true word of God, in the books of the Old Testament.'¹⁷ God has spoken definitively to humanity in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Word made flesh. The New Testament stands as a 'perpetual and divine testimony'¹⁸ to him. Yet it is not simply a record but the place of a living encounter: we meet Christ in the word of Scripture. The New Testament embodies the faith of the apostolic church, forms the constitution of the very life of the church, and is the classical expression of the community's faith.

Living Tradition

34. Catholics understand that the word of God is handed on through preaching as well as the whole life and practice of the church. Therefore, they see an intimate relationship between Scripture and the process of Tradition, which the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* sums up in this way:

Sacred tradition and scripture are bound together in a close and reciprocal relationship. They both flow from the same divine wellspring, merge together to some extent, and are on course towards the same end. Scripture is the utterance of God as it is set down in writing under the guidance of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. 14.

¹⁸ Ibid. 17.

God's Spirit; tradition preserves the word of God as it was entrusted to the apostles by Christ our Lord and the Holy Spirit, and transmits it to their successors, so that these in turn, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, may faithfully preserve, expound and disseminate the word by their preaching.¹⁹

This leads the Council to speak of Scripture and Tradition together as a 'single sacred deposit of the word of God.'²⁰

35. In this understanding of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, Catholics give priority to Scripture. The Council regards the process of Tradition, or faithfully handing on the word of God from generation to generation, as necessary for a sufficient grasp of the word of God: 'the church's certainty about all that is revealed is not drawn from holy scripture alone; both Scripture and Tradition are to be accepted and honoured with like devotion and reverence'²¹ because they are both the word of God.

People of God

36. As it is handed on from generation to generation, the word of God takes root and comes to life within the faith of the believing community. God's word certainly finds expression in the church's formulas of faith but just as importantly it finds expression in the whole life of the community as it seeks to grasp in each particular age the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This capacity to receive the word of God is itself God's gift. In John's account of the farewell discourse, as we have already read, Jesus promises to send the Spirit to his disciples to remind them of what he has said and to teach them everything (John 14:26). The Spirit enables the disciples to understand what Jesus had taught them.

¹⁹ Ibid. 9.

²⁰ Ibid. 10.

²¹ Ibid. 9.

37. Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* uses the term *sensus fidei*—the sense of the faith of the whole people of God—to speak of the believing community's capacity to receive faithfully the word of God. Reflecting John's understanding of the Spirit at work among the believing community, the Council teaches that this sense of the faith is 'aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth.'²² When the people of God, guided by the magisterium, allow the word of God to shape their common life, it is not merely human words that they receive; it is truly the word of God.²³ The *sensus fidei* ensures infallibility in belief: 'The universal body of the faithful who have received the anointing of the holy one (see 1 John 2:20, 27), cannot be mistaken in belief. It displays this particular quality through a supernatural sense of the faith in the whole people when "from the bishops to the last of the faithful laity," it expresses the consent of all in matters of faith and morals.'²⁴

Biblical and Theological Scholarship

38. While the interpretation of Scripture is a duty of the whole church, some members have specialised tasks. Exegetes seek to understand biblical texts in their historical and cultural contexts, while taking into account their literary genres, so that the reader might more easily discern the meaning of those texts. By bringing greater clarity to the meaning of a text, exegetes aim to lead the believing community to a more mature faith. Theologians help the reader to understand the text as the living word of God, with power to speak to the life situation of the contemporary church. With this view of the theological task in mind, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* speaks of the study of the Scriptures as 'the very soul of theology.'²⁵

²² *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* 12.

²³ Cf. *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 24.

Authoritative Teaching

39. The Council sees the word of God drawing all believers together into a ‘unique harmony.’²⁶ Within the unity of the people of God, the magisterium or teaching authority has the special role of authoritatively interpreting God’s word, both as Scripture and Tradition. This role is exercised by the bishops as successors of the apostles. In the face of the challenges of each generation, the teaching authority’s task is one of both enabling the believing community to interpret faithfully God’s word and of adhering to it. Vatican II underscored the importance of the authoritative teaching or ‘ordinary magisterium’ of the bishops united throughout the world. This teaching can take a range of forms having different status and authority, for example that of an ecumenical council or a pastoral letter of a local bishop. Both Vatican I and Vatican II teach that in certain precise circumstances, the Bishop of Rome teaches with the charism of infallibility (‘extraordinary magisterium’). In their exercise of both ordinary and extraordinary magisterium, bishops teach in unity with the whole people of God.

40. Vatican II insists on the ‘servant’ nature of the role of the magisterium: ‘This teaching function is not above the word of God but stands at its service, teaching nothing but what is handed down, according as it devotedly listens, reverently preserves and faithfully transmits the word of God.’²⁷ Furthermore, this teaching function is exercised as a service to the communion of the whole church and would normally involve consultation with expert exegetes, theologians, and the whole people of God.

Agreements and Differences

41. We acknowledge the following agreements between us:

²⁶ Ibid. 10.

²⁷ Ibid.

- 1) We agree that Scripture is the inspired word of God through which God speaks God's word to us.
- 2) We agree that in Scripture God's saving plan is revealed, and that this is centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.
- 3) We agree that in the reading and proclamation of the Scripture, it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to hear and receive the word of God and to put it into practice.
- 4) We agree that the Scripture is at the centre of the life of the church, nourishing and ruling its preaching, liturgy, practice, prayer, ministry, authoritative teaching and theology.
- 5) Together we rely on the promise proclaimed in Scripture, when Jesus tells his community that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, 'will teach you everything, and will remind you of all that I have said to you' (John 14:26), and that the Holy Spirit 'will guide you into all the truth' (John 16:12).
- 6) Lutherans and Catholics agree on the centrality of the handing on of the apostolic faith in the life, teaching and worship of the church. While Catholics use the word 'Tradition,' Lutherans have not commonly used it; for them, the nearest equivalent is their use of the word 'confession' when speaking of handing on the apostolic faith.
- 7) We agree that God's people are called to read and listen to the Scripture, in the power of the Spirit. When gathered in the community of faith, or alone with God, they receive and interpret Scripture as members of Christ's church.
- 8) Together we recognise the ecclesial role of biblical scholars and theologians in enabling the church better to understand biblical texts and to interpret the word of God in new contexts.

9) We agree that God has given teaching authority in the life of the church to assist the church rightly to interpret the word of God. We both agree that teaching authority is not above the word of God, but stands at its service.

10) We agree on the importance of the pastoral role of the bishop or president in oversight of the interpretation, proclamation and teaching of the word.

11) We agree about the importance of synods and councils in receiving the word of God and testing its proper interpretation in the life of the church.

42. We have identified the following differences in our interpretation of Scripture:

1) There are differences in the instruments of teaching authority in our churches. In particular, there is a difference over the role of the Petrine office in authoritative teaching. We hope to explore this issue in a later dialogue.

2) An important historical difference between us has been that while Lutherans see Scripture as ‘the only rule and guiding principle’ according to which teaching is to be judged, Catholics have seen Tradition as necessary for a sufficient understanding of the word of God and have given an important place to authoritative teaching in this process. Our list of agreements indicates that there may be room for further convergence on this issue, and this is addressed in the following section.

III. Explaining Tradition and traditions

43. At the time of the Reformation our two churches differed in their understanding of the place of traditions in the life of the church and their role in expressing true belief. On the Lutheran side there was a suspicion of the many observances within the church that obscured the gospel. On the Catholic side, there was a suspicion of the *sola scriptura* principle, because it seemed to ignore Tradition and the role of ecclesial authority. Importantly, both our churches wished to preserve the purity of the gospel.

In the Lutheran Church

44. In the context of the sixteenth century movement for reform, the Lutheran confessions used the word ‘traditions’ (German: *Traditionen*; Latin: *traditiones*) primarily in a negative sense, to refer to observances instituted by human beings in order to gain God’s grace. Article 15 of the Augsburg Confession gives a clear summation of this attitude: ‘Moreover it is taught among us that all ordinances and traditions instituted by human beings for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel and teaching about faith in Christ.’²⁸ Examples of such ‘traditions’ in Article 15 include monastic vows, and the distinctions of foods and days. A non-polemical use of the term ‘traditions’ in the Augsburg Confession occurs in Article 26, yet even here ‘traditions’ is used in a carefully qualified way:

We on our part also retain many ceremonies and traditions (such as the liturgy of the mass and various canticles, festivals, and the like) which serve to preserve order in the church. At the same time, however, the people are

²⁸ Augsburg Confession, 15.3-4 (*BC*, 36-37).

instructed that such outward forms of service do not make us righteous before God and that they are to be observed without burdening consciences, which is to say that it is not a sin to omit them if this is done without causing a scandal.²⁹

The understanding of traditions among early Lutherans is summarised thus: ‘We gladly keep the old traditions (*traditiones veteres*) set up in the church because they are useful and promote tranquility, and we interpret them in an evangelical way, excluding the opinion which holds that they justify.’³⁰

45. The Lutheran confessions do not even use the term ‘traditions’ in the wholly positive sense that Scripture does in two key passages: ‘I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you’ (1 Corinthians 11:12); ‘So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter’ (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Nor do the Lutheran confessions use the term ‘traditions’ to refer to such things as Holy Communion and Baptism, although ‘tradition’ language is used in Scripture of the Lord’s Supper, ‘For I received from the Lord what I also handed on [*paredoka* = ‘traditioned’]to you...’ (1 Corinthians 11:23), and of Baptism, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore...’ (Matthew 28:18).

46. To find a more nuanced use of the term ‘traditions’ in the Lutheran church, one must go to the writings of theologians such as Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), who details eight kinds of ‘traditions’ in the life of the church, including ‘those things which Christ and the Apostles orally delivered and which were afterwards committed to writing by the Evangelists and

²⁹ Augsburg Confession, 26.40-41 (*BC*, 69-70).

³⁰ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, 15.38 (*BC*, 220).

Apostles.’³¹ Similarly, Johann Gerhard (1582-1673), while acknowledging that tradition can be used to refer to any teaching that is taught, including what is taught in Scripture, states that the basic question at issue is, ‘whether some necessary parts of doctrine pertaining to faith and life were not written down but have been handed down only orally.’³²

47. Even in these more nuanced treatments by prominent Lutheran theologians, the emphasis, like that of the Lutheran confessions, was on the content of traditions—especially as this content relates to sacred Scripture. What is not so clear is an understanding of Tradition as involving the process of handing on the gospel, and the relationship of this process to authoritative teaching in the church.

48. In recent theological discourse a clear and helpful distinction has been made between ‘Tradition’ and ‘traditions’. Lutherans and Catholics in dialogue in the United States in the 1990s explicated this distinction as follows:

Tradition involves a process in a community; in this case, it refers to the Word of God precisely as it is handed on in the church: *verbum Dei traditum*. Tradition also denotes the content of what is handed on, namely, the totality of the gracious presence of Christ passed on in history through the power of the Spirit, in the life, teaching, and worship of the church Traditions (*traditiones*) are particular ideas, formulations, and practices handed down in this process.³³

³¹ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. F. Kramer (St Louis: Concordia, 1971), 223ff.

³² Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and Scripture*, Theological Commonplaces, trans R. J. Dinda (St Louis: Concordia, 2006), 363. For an historical overview of the development of doctrine among Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic theologians on the relationship between Scripture and tradition(s) from Trent onward, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol 4: *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Pres, 1984), 330-350.

³³ *Scripture and Tradition*, 36.

49. 'Tradition' defined in this way is acceptable to a Lutheran understanding, and it corresponds closely to what Lutherans have long meant in their use of the word 'confession'. In the Augsburg Confession early Lutherans insisted that the confession they were making was not a new teaching, but that they were handing on the true teaching that agrees with the word of God and has always been taught in the church. They concluded the twenty-one articles of faith and doctrine by saying:

This is about the sum of our teaching. As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church or the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers.³⁴
... nor should we wish to bequeath to our children and posterity any other teaching than that which agrees with the pure Word of God and Christian truth. ... this teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures and is not contrary or opposed to that of the universal Christian church.³⁵

50. Generally speaking, Lutherans in Australia today, while steadfast and conscientious in their confession of 'the faith once delivered to the saints', exercise considerable freedom in regard to their traditions while adhering to the abiding principle of the doctrine of justification that whatever is done should promote the gospel and not unnecessarily burden consciences.

In the Roman Catholic Church

51. The work of the Second Vatican Council, without repudiating Trent, represents a richer understanding of Tradition and its relationship to Scripture. Two important differences between these Councils are to be noted. First, where the Tridentine approach was predominantly legal and canonical, the approach at Vatican II was more historical and

³⁴ Augsburg Confession, end of Part I, trans from the Latin text (*BC*, 47).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, trans. from the German.

sacramental. Scripture and Tradition were understood in the broader context of salvation history and the communication of God's saving word and action. The apostles handed on what they received from Christ, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the message of salvation was committed to writing. In this way the revelation of God is preserved and handed on in the church. We can rightly speak of Tradition as a dialogue of salvation. Second, where Trent had always used the plural, *traditions*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, on all but one occasion, used the singular, *Tradition*.³⁶ This shift represents a change of emphasis from individual observances or practices in the church to a concern for the integral transmission of the apostolic faith.

52. The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* states that 'Tradition and Scripture together form a single sacred deposit of the word of God, entrusted to the church.'³⁷ This statement helps us understand that to speak of Tradition as a 'deposit' is to refer to its relationship to the word of God. Tradition will be found in various forms, for example: creeds; the liturgical tradition of worship; the decisions of councils of the church, especially ecumenical councils; other teaching acts by the magisterium of the church; and the piety of the faithful. As a 'deposit', Tradition is an expression of the word of God in the life of the church; it is an interpretation of that word in response to the needs of a particular time. Certain traditions will become binding and therefore become part of the Tradition, if they are judged to be an authentic and enduring interpretation or expression of the word of God.

53. The statement from the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* about a single deposit also tells us that we cannot think of Tradition as a separate content of faith, isolated from Scripture. The language of 'deposit' is more easily applied to Scripture, which is 'the

³⁶ The exception is n.8, 'The apostles, handing on what they received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they had learned, either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Th 2:15).'

³⁷ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 10.

utterance of God as it is set down in writing under the guidance of God's Spirit.'³⁸ However, it is inadequate to speak as though there are two contents; there is only 'a single sacred deposit.' Scripture and Tradition 'both flow from the same divine wellspring, merge together to some extent, and are on course towards the same end.'³⁹ Hence, Scripture and Tradition mutually inform each other. Tradition aids us in the correct interpretation of Scripture and facilitates its reception as the living word of God.

54. By stating that Scripture and Tradition both flow from the same divine wellspring, Vatican II effectively rejected a theological opinion that saw Scripture and Tradition as two sources of revelation. Rather than thinking of Tradition as a set of propositions or as something that supplements Scripture, the Council had a more dynamic understanding and described Tradition using a series of verbs: Tradition 'preserves', 'transmits', 'expounds' and 'disseminates' the word of God.⁴⁰ The reciprocal relationship between Scripture and Tradition as a single deposit of the word of God thus becomes clearer, as is evident in the following sentence: 'by Tradition comes the church's knowledge of the full canon of biblical books; by this too, the Scripture itself comes to be more profoundly understood and to realise its power in the church.'⁴¹ Tradition is thus at work in the formation of the Scriptures and in their faithful transmission and interpretation.

Towards Convergence on Tradition and traditions

55. Differences over tradition have contributed to the ongoing division between our two churches. Through dialogue we have come to a deeper and clearer understanding of each

³⁸ Ibid. 9.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. 8.

others' present positions on tradition, and this has enabled us to come to a new level of convergence.

56. Lutherans welcome the clarification made by the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council that Scripture and Tradition form one single deposit of the word of God. They welcome, as well, the distinction made in recent ecumenical theology between three meanings of the word tradition:

- 1) Tradition as the process of transmitting divine revelation;
- 2) Tradition as the Spirit-guided interpretation of the apostolic faith in the life of the church in, for example, its liturgical life, the creeds, and the great ecumenical councils;
- 3) traditions as human traditions that are not integral to the apostolic faith, but that have grown up in the life of the church.

57. Lutherans can see that when Roman Catholics use Tradition in the first two senses they are referring to what Lutherans mean when they speak of confessions of faith and of passing on (confessing) the apostolic faith. Although Lutherans have not normally used the word Tradition in this way, they recognise that it is biblical (1 Corinthians 15:3). Furthermore, Lutherans are in strong agreement with Roman Catholics that the guidance of the Spirit, in both the handing on of the apostolic faith and its expression in the life of the church, is indispensable to the proclamation of the Gospel.

58. Roman Catholics have come to a clearer understanding of the way, at the time of the Reformation, human church traditions obscured the good news that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ as a free gift of God's grace. Some of these church traditions laid heavy burdens on the consciences of the faithful. This remains an ongoing issue in the life of the church. With Lutherans, Roman Catholics can see that some human traditions serve the good of the faithful, and enable the proclamation of the gospel, while others can burden the faithful

and obscure the Gospel. Roman Catholics therefore agree with Lutherans that there is a need to test human traditions, that this testing is done by the sense of the faith of the whole people of God, and ultimately by the teaching authority of the church. Moreover they agree with Lutherans that these human traditions must always be tested against the good news of Jesus Christ found in the biblical word of God.

59. We believe that these positions represent an important convergence on the complex issue of tradition in the life of the church. Of course, we do not yet claim full agreement, recognising that there are remaining differences, not only of language, but also concerning important unresolved issues, such as the way in which authoritative decisions are made in the life of the church, and the role of the Bishop of Rome. But we submit to our churches our conviction that there is a real level of convergence over the issue of tradition in itself.

IV. Conclusion

60. We believe that the level of agreement reached in this dialogue is significant for both our churches and for the relationship between us. Since the time of the Reformation, differences in our respective understanding of Scripture and Tradition have been church divisive. Joint study of these issues, taking account of developments since the sixteenth century, especially the impact of the Second Vatican Council and its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, has enabled us to see beyond the original disputed questions and to understand each other in a new light. It has given us a richer, less controversial and more dynamic understanding of the word of God in the church. We have affirmed together that Scripture is the inspired word of God through which God speaks to us. We have also discovered a great deal of agreement between a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theology of Tradition and the Lutheran concept of handing on the confession of the apostolic faith. Such affirmation and agreement attests to a common faith concerning the revelation of God and its transmission through the ages. We believe that recognition of a common faith will assist our engagement in the mission of God, so that the good news of salvation may continue to be received in our day.

61. In a spirit of gratitude and humility we submit this text to our respective churches and encourage them to begin the process of reception by studying its contents. We hope that this will be an opportunity for the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church to see each other in a new light, that it will bring about further reconciliation between us, and that it will lead to deeper contact and cooperation between the two churches. We further hope that this text will find its way into the life and thinking of Lutherans and Catholics and provide an

appropriate way of expressing what we believe about the word of God in the church and the world.

Members of the Dialogue

Lutheran members

The Rev Stephen Haar
The Rev John Henderson (from August 2010)
Mrs Margaret Hunt
The Rev Fraser Pearce
The Rev Andrew Pfeiffer
The Rev Lance Steicke (until March 2010)
Mr Mervyn Wagner
The Rev Roger Whittall
The Rev Dean Zweck (co-chair)

Roman Catholic members

Sr Mary Cresp RSJ
The Rev Denis Edwards (co-chair until August 2009)
The Rev Gerard Kelly (co-chair from October 2009)
Ms Josephine Laffin
The Rev James McEvoy
The Rev Laurence McNamara CM
The Most Rev Gregory O'Kelly SJ, bishop of Port Pirie (until October 2010)
Ms Marie Turner
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