

Radicalizing Reformation – Provoked by the Bible and Today's Crises

94 Theses

“You shall proclaim liberation throughout the land” (Lev. 25:10).

Martin Luther began his 95 Theses of 1517 with Jesus' call for repentance as a change of mind and direction: “Return, the just world of God has come near!” Five hundred years later is also a time that brings to mind the biblical “Jubilee Year” (Lev 25), calling for repentance and conversion toward a more just society. For us today, this is not in opposition to the Catholic Church and the many liberation movements rooted there, but in opposition to the realities of empire that rule. As we hear the testimony of the cross (1 Cor 1:18) and the groaning of the abused creation (Rom 8:22) and as we actively hear the cries of those victimized by our world (dis-)order driven by hyper-capitalism – only then can we turn this Reformation commemoration into a liberating jubilee. Christian self-righteousness, supporting the dominating system, is in contradiction to faith-righteousness as proclaimed by the Reformation. This must be lived out through just, all-inclusive solidarity.

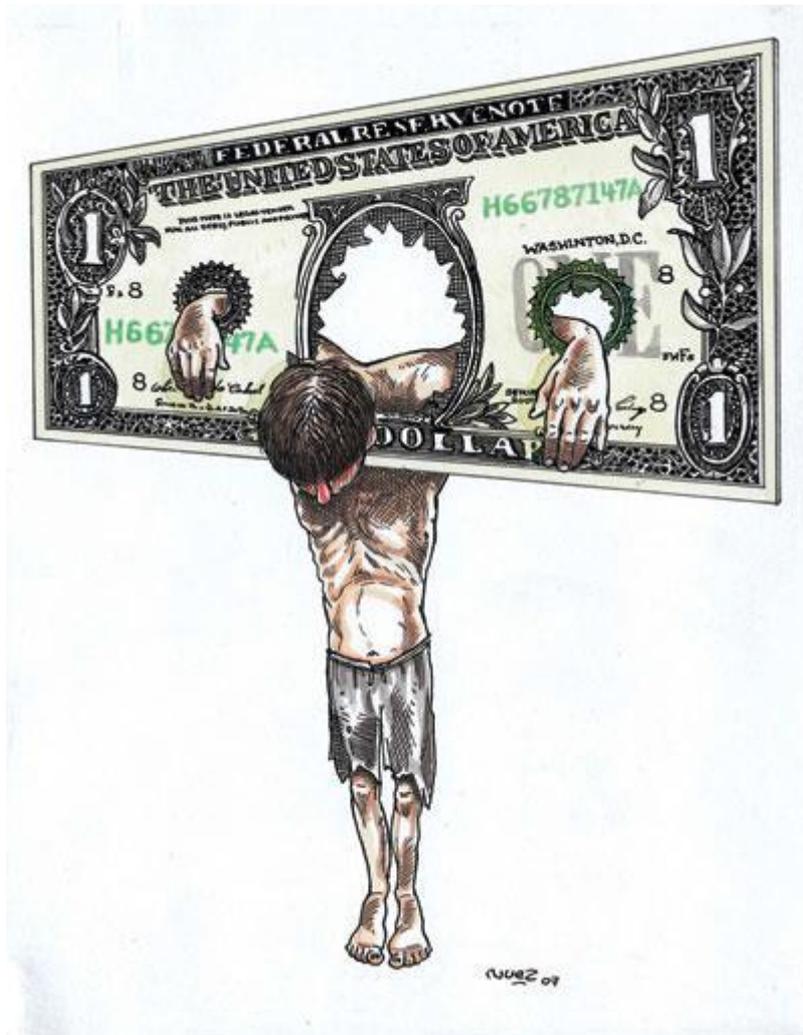
We are theologians – predominantly Lutheran but also Reformed, Methodist, Anglican, and Mennonite – from different parts of the world, who are involved in an ongoing project of reconsidering the biblical roots and contemporary challenges facing Reformation theology today. The rampant destruction of human and non-human life in a world ruled by the totalitarian dictatorship of money and greed, market and exploitation requires a radical re-orientation towards the biblical message, which also marked the beginning of the Reformation. The dominant economic system and its imperial structures and policies have put the earth, human communities, and the future of our children up for sale. Our churches, congregations, and individual Christians have often become complacent and complicit with the established status quo and have lost their critical-prophetic power to protest, resist, and change what is occurring. God's justification by grace has been detached from social justice and thus serves as “useless salt” (Mt 5:13). Because the Reformation legacy has gone astray, we must at the same time return to some of Luther's thought and legacy, as well as standing decidedly against other things he said and did, if this is to become a kairoitic time of transformation today.

The following theses grow out of different traditions and understandings among the reforming movements, as well as from different geographical and political contexts. We have developed these theses from research, published in five volumes. We may not agree on every point, but out of this very diversity and pluriformity, we together call for serious debate on what is asserted here – and we also call for “turning around” and repentance (metanoia). The present moment of crisis that we currently face across the globe on all levels is a time to recognize the predatory and destructive forces inherent in what is dominating our world today, in order to re-orient ourselves in hope towards a new culture of life.

“For liberation the Messiah has liberated us” (Gal 5:1)

- 1 From the perspective of the Bible, liberation is first and foremost the act of God. The messianic liberation in the New Testament also is shaped according to the model of the Exodus. In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul maintains that Christ brings liberation from the “terrorizing domination of sin” in the context of the Roman Empire (Rom 5:12-8:2). By contrast, when justification is not understood according to the pattern of the Exodus but reduced only to individual guilt and forgiveness (as in Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury), it is seriously cut off from the wide social and political richness of the biblical context.
- 2 Paul analyzes the domination of sin, which, in the Roman Empire of his time, holds all people captive. The central passages about sin (hamartia) have a common denominator: they are to be understood in terms of relationships of domination, only very seldom in categories of individual guilt and sins. When Paul speaks about sin, he is referring especially to its all-embracing terrorizing domination. His overall idea is that sin rules over all human beings as a master over slaves and thus makes them collaborators in the imperial system and laws.
- 3 Paul speaks about the beginning of an all-encompassing change of rule. He directs his hope towards God's final intervention, which for him has already begun with Jesus' resurrection. Although Paul has no direct political goals, his faith in Christ's rule and the hope for a final change of rule has deep political implications. He believes that Christ alone is Lord (Kyrios) and that liberation in Christ affects the whole creation, all people and peoples, and the whole human being.
- 4 Faith leads the faithful to live as liberated people, both in their faith community and in their common life with others. This is the beginning of a new life. This claim for liberation from totalitarian reality, such as under the Roman Empire, is more trenchant and empowering for all who live today under the domination of financial and violent markets than are traditional generalizations about sin.

“You cannot serve both God and Mammon” (Mt 6:24)



- 5 At least two billion people exist in extreme poverty under the present rule of money. The rule of capital is today's expression of Mammon, and thus the central challenge of faith. Today, money is not simply issued by the central banks or cash in your pocket, but commercial banks have the right to create money through unlimited loans that create debt with high interest. Already in the 16th century Luther called Mammon "the most common god on earth" (*Large Catechism*, Explanation of the First Commandment).
- 6 This rule of money together with theological opposition to it developed historically with the expansion of an economy based on money and private ownership – from the monetization of the economy in the time of the Prophets; through the early capitalism of Luther's time, based on trade and usury; to modern forms of industrial and financial capitalism. Since the time of the Reformation, the contemporary globalized capitalism of modernity has been manifest in European exploitation, colonization, and genocide in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.
- 7 "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but migrant laborers and tenants" (Lev 25:23). In Scripture, property is intended for the furthering of life for all (use value). By contrast, capitalism makes private property absolute and encloses common land and resources. This continues today in widespread land grabs (for example, in Africa and Latin America), in the privatization of the genetic commons of humanity (through patents), and through the privatization of land, water, air, and so forth.
- 8 Both ancient and modern individualism begins with the infiltration of money and private property into daily life. For most people in the globalized capitalist world, individualism is self-evident. For Luther, by contrast, there is no such thing as a neutral, observing, and calculating individual. Either people are determined by God – in which case they live compassionately and righteously in relation to others, above all toward those considered the "least" (Mt 5:31ff.) – or they allow themselves to be determined by the power of sin, living distorted, self-centered lives that destroy other creatures.
- 9 The capitalist economy drives unlimited growth which endangers all life on our planet. Human beings are created by God with the mission "to serve (abab) and keep the garden" (Gen 2:15). Luther begins the *95 Theses* by quoting Jesus' call to repentance: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (*95 Theses*,

1). Today this means that, personally and collectively, we seek to break free from the destructive rule of money. By trusting instead in the liberating righteousness of God, we are empowered to live in compassion and solidarity with other humans and the rest of creation.

10 According to Scripture, human beings form one body with many members, who serve one another (1 Cor 12). But according to the logic and practice of advanced capitalism, we are driven by competition. According to Luther, we are created, sustained, and empowered to work with God and others for the sake of justice and peace in the economy, in the political order, and in the church (*On the Bondage of the Will*). Here Luther follows the Waldensians, Wycliffe, and Hus.

11 Economic individualization is reflected in the religious individualization of salvation. By contrast, both the Bible and Luther speak of free persons in just relationships. From the Middle Ages on, there have been spiritualizing tendencies that are still strong in our churches. Reading and preaching on biblical texts individualistically implicitly or explicitly supports capitalist-based assumptions today.

12 According to Jesus, that person is just who forgives debts for the sake of those indebted, rather than abiding by rules of debt repayment (Mt 6:12). According to Paul the power of sin (as embodied in Roman law, a greed economy, and imperial rule) makes the law into an instrument of death. He proposes building alternative communities of Jews and Greeks who live in solidarity in the spirit of the Messiah who was crucified by the Empire. Those whom Rome had made enemies of each other are reconciled with God and with each other.

13 The Church Fathers interpreted the death of Jesus on the Cross in terms of a ransom theory. The devil, who never forgives debts, demands ransom for the liberation of humankind. Christ exposes this and thus frees us. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) turns this upside down in his satisfaction theory. According to him the law of debt-repayment stands higher than God. This is why God *must* sacrifice his son in order to establish a storehouse of merits, which people can draw on in order to pay off their debts. This not only lays the ground for the medieval penitential system, which Luther rejects, but also for capitalism's law of debt repayment.

14 Luther returns to the biblical truth that God forgives with no exceptions, and out of this forgiveness grows the trust that grounds solidarity with the neighbor. Thus, if someone is in need, Christians respond with interest-free lending and giving. It follows that the government should also intervene in the market when public welfare is endangered. Today, however, capitalism makes the market absolute and favors government intervention only for the interest of capital accumulation. Drawing inspiration from Scripture and the Reformation, faith communities must resist!

15 The Spirit of God affirms cultural and linguistic diversity in the story of Pentecost (Acts 2). From the fourth century until the Reformation, the Bible was read only in Latin. Wycliffe and the later Reformers opened up diversity again by allowing people to hear Scripture in their own language. This diversity is once again challenged by the homogenizing force of the global market, which turns all humans into consuming individuals, agriculture into agribusiness, regional selling of goods into transnational chains, and local and regional products into export-driven monocultures.

16 The Bible establishes a political economy of "enough for all" based on the sharing of what is given for the common good of all (Exodus 16). The reformers were unanimous in believing that the economy should serve the common good and the specific needs of the neighbor. In our time, we are not calling for a return to the historical forms of socialism that have had some effects as destructive as capitalism, but instead call for forms of economic life that build on God's gifts, protect the commons, and produce and distribute goods and services in ways that are both democratic and ecologically sensitive.

17 Scripture affirms that all human beings, female and male, are created in the image of God and thus equal in worth (Gen 1:26-28). In the book of Judges, as well as in Torah texts, this affirmation led to the formation of communities of solidarity. This tradition was taken up in early Christianity (Acts 2 and 4). Voices in the radical Reformation appealed to these texts and sought to establish not only political but also economic democracy.

18 Luther's teaching on justification by grace through faith in Christ alone (Rom 5:1) is a legitimate and liberating interpretation of Scripture within the oppressions of late medieval piety and against emergent money lending-for-interest economy. Forgiveness of sins by grace, deliverance from the power of the devil, and the promise of eternal life in this context meant not only spiritual freedom but freedom for reconciliation with and ethical responsibility to the neighbor (*Freedom of a Christian*).

19 While for Luther, justification by grace alone expressed this understanding of equality, the Reformation failed to make this concrete socially and economically. In fact, later Lutheranism even turned social and economic inequality into a hierarchical God-given order! This culminated in asserting the autonomy of the market and/or the state, which both Scripture and Luther explicitly critique.

20 According to Scripture, people are justified by grace and not by their performance (Mt 20). The performance myth, according to which people are judged by their merit, or by getting what they deserve, must be set over against the principle of need, which is the equivalent of the righteousness

of faith. The social and ethical consequences that follow from this constitute a critique of today's work world, which is dominated by this performance ideology and the negative effects that result.

21 While Luther's teaching about the two kingdoms has been used to justify political quietism and passive obedience to the state (Rom 13:1), this teaching needs to be reinterpreted as a call to political vigilance and activism by Christians to live out their public responsibility to the neighbor in advocating for peace, justice, and the integrity of the creation.

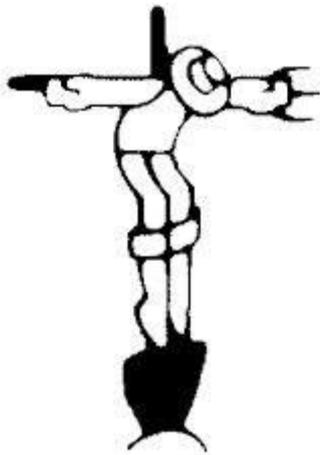
22 "Do not be conformed to the structures of this world order but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Rom 12:2). Because of their effect on the common people of his day, Luther said a clear "No!" to the structure and practices of the bank and trading companies of his time: "Nothing good can come of them. If the companies are to survive, justice and honesty must perish. If justice and honesty are to survive, the companies must perish" (WA 15, 312). Today the forces of economic growth, monetary expansion, and privatization threaten planetary death. In this regard, tinkering with the social system will not help. A long-term alternative to the neoliberal capitalist system is needed. Many examples show that a new monetary and property order, oriented towards the common good and publicly responsible, is not only necessary but possible.

23 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:6). The new order can take root in any local area. Church communities can participate in decentralized local energy supplies and connect with social movements with slogans such as: "If we leave it to the politicians, it will be too little too late. If we try and do it ourselves, it will be too little. If we work together, however, it may be just enough, just in time" (Transition Town Movement).

"The message of the cross...is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18)

24 Since the Middle Ages, many churches and theologians have understand Jesus' death as God's "sacrificing his son" in order to save human beings. This interpretation turns God into a sadistic ruler who produces suffering. However, God saves from violence, not through violence.

25 The cross was the Roman Empire's instrument to execute rebels and fugitive slaves. Many innocent people became victims of this public demonstration of power. The picture of the Crucified One with a gas-mask, of a crucified girl or woman, and the painting of a crucified campesino remind us of those many people who in our day continue to be killed by the dominant powers. The crucified Jesus is deeply connected to them.



26 According to biblical tradition, the martyrdom of the just effects forgiveness of the sins for the people (4 Maccabees 17:21) and the innocent death of the servant of God makes the many just (Is 53:11f.), which opens up new meanings of Jesus' death on the cross.

27 The encounter with the risen Christ sheds new light on the cross (Luke 24). God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist (Rom 4:17).

28 In the light of the resurrection, Jesus is written into the lamentations of traumatized people, giving them hope ("My God, why have you forsaken me?" – Ps 22:2; Mk 16:34; "The poor shall eat and be satisfied" – Ps 22:26).

29 Theology of the cross can overcome a previous tainting imagery between the cross and crusade in the colonial time. This refers to a refurbishing of the theology of the cross for the theology of life (resurrection) seen in light of God's solidarity with the minjung, economic justice for all, and integrity of the ecological web of life.

30 So the resurrection proves to be judgment against the powers of violence, the most radical implementation of God's unconditional solidarity with all suffering creatures and an expression of God's faithfulness and justice toward all people and creation.

31 Biblically understood, faith is repentance. Luther declared: “Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward acts of repentance” (95 Theses, 3). On the one side, we are called to a process of truth and reconciliation about the ethical failings of the Reformation. On the other side, accepting God’s justice for us, we allow ourselves to be drawn into this history of liberation by doing justice: “Only the believers obey, and only the obedient believe” (Bonhoeffer).

32 Luther’s theology of justification needs to be extended and renewed in different times and places, especially in light of Luther’s congenial notion of the Gospel as the living voice of God. The Reformation teaching of justification should break through its encapsulation within Western possessive individualism and political quietism, liberating human beings from all the idolatrous assumptions, upon which we base our lives: the privileges of species, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and class. Justification should be reclaimed as a way of expressing God’s deep compassion in the death of Jesus Christ for all, reinforcing our public responsibility for the political realm, economic justice, and recognition of the Other.

“See, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5:17)

33 The Christian gospel is indeed about reconciliation between God and humanity, and about reconciliation between human beings. But if “gospel” does not succeed in reconciling the whole of creation, it is not the gospel (2 Co 5:18).

34 The Reformation’s recognition that we are saved through faith by God’s grace should also be a recognition that God’s gracious presence is in all creation, responding to its cries (Rom 8:18-23).

35 While many gains were achieved in the sixteenth century era when the Reformers criticized the worship of material reality, they went too far when they rejected all notion of the sacramental by stripping away at material culture in a surge of iconoclasm. Here they failed to recognize that all of life is divinely infused and that the whole world is a sacramental reality.

36 The Reformation’s recognition that by grace we are saved through faith should also affirm that God’s gracious presence is in all of creation. God’s communion with the world in Jesus Christ means that as followers of Christ we too are called into communion with the world – a this-worldly faith that is made real when we join in God’s mission for the renewal of all creation.

37 Mother Earth is being crucified and has to experience resurrection (Rom 8:22). This is very important for our life as human beings, animals, plants, air, water, and earth. We are human beings not because we consume, but because we need to live connected to creation, caring for her and for our life.

38 "The Gospel of all creatures" (Mark 16:15, according to Luther's translation), the good news of God to the entire creation (Psalm 119), is interrupted, if human beings, made in God's image, destroy this order by exercising injustice (Rom 1:18-20).

39 The Gospel challenges us to preserve the creation as God's garden through a righteous personal stance and through new economic, social, and ecological politics for the welfare of the entire creation and all peoples of the world.

40 “Life in fullness” (John 10:10) breaks with previous concepts of economic development: it focuses on our inextricable relation to creation, to which the human community must be oriented. Life in fullness does not aim at “having more,” as in accumulation and growth, but in living toward balance in all relationships.

41 All human beings and the whole of nature have a right to and a need for “bread and roses.” Human beings and nature have a hunger for bread and beauty. An unfinished task of Reformation theology is to fight for and proclaim the right for life in fullness for the whole creation.

42 The Earth gives life to all creatures (Gen 1:24). What nature brings forth is a gift from God, of which we should take good care as an expression of our gratitude and calling as disciples (Ps 104).

43 Life in fullness does not mean consumerism but being connected to the whole of nature. Human beings and human industry are not the final purpose of creation: God’s final act in creation is to bring us to Sabbath rest in worship and in relationships (Gen 2:2).

44 The gospel challenges us to preserve and renew creation as God’s garden (Gen 2:15; Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13) by adopting a modest personal lifestyle and collaborating with people of different cultures and religions in the world to implement life-affirming economic, social, and environmental policies.

45 The question of creation is closely related to the life of future generations. Theology has consistently been informed by adult personhood and not by childhood. Instead human beings are to be understood as determined by God’s story with them. This is particularly true for children and must be taken seriously by theology in view of their endangered future.

46 Children’s rights necessitate protecting children against violations, oppression, and exploitation. It is, however, equally important to appreciate children in all their capabilities and weaknesses, in their unique characteristics and their imperfections as with any adult human being. For theology children

must be liberated from objectification and become subjects for the sake of their own future.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9)

47 Hear the cries of those who have suffered violence, especially those made victims by followers of the Reformation – such as peasants, Anabaptists (Mennonites), Jews, Muslims! Hear the cries of those suffering violence today – whether through domestic abuse, economic exploitation, violations of human rights, injustice against creation, state imperialism, and ongoing wars!

48 We call for conversion to the praxis of peacemaking (Isaiah 2:2-4). The way of peacemaking, as embodied by Jesus, joins God's nonviolent praxis with the cause of all those who practice nonviolence. Nonviolent praxis is a sign of God's reign of shalom (Isaiah 11:6-9).



Illustration of Jan Luykenin “Märtyrerspiegel”:
Dirk Willems rescues his persecutor, who had handed him over to the a

49 The phenomenon of violence becomes evident wherever there is resistance to the practice of peacemaking, especially in social, political, economic, or state violence where many victims cry out to heaven for God's help.

50 Violence is widespread and present in many forms – structural violence, technological violence, military violence, physical and psychological violence of every kind. The universality of violence becomes evident in the endemic practice of identifying others as “enemies,” especially in making others into scapegoats (Acts 7:54-60).

51 Although reasons and analyses of the cause of violence can be given, all violence is in reaction to previous forms of violence.

52 It is not possible to justify or legitimize violence; it is always illegitimate. There is no “measured” violence, no “just” war,” no “justifiable” war. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin only tolerated limited violence for minimizing greater violence. However, even this logic is anachronistic in face of modern weapons of mass destruction. Violence can never serve as a means for attaining any goal, for God has reconciled all things to Godself (Colossians 1:19-20).

53 Enforcing the law cannot rest upon violence. Wherever humans suffer violence, they are to be protected by practices of peacemaking. In the time of the Reformation the exercise of violence began exclusively as warfare and police violence on the part of the “authorities,” determined exclusively as a protection of the neighbor from violence. This radical limitation has been largely suppressed. This extremely limited use of violence, where it must be employed, is never to be understood as a matter of course but always as a warning sign of our broken world.

54 Legal systems are established on the basis of violence, a kind of foundational violence. This violence, however, legitimizes no further violence but rather calls for righteous action (Mt 5:38-42). Legal systems must be judged against the yardstick of bringing peace through justice.

55 Practicing peace means living, speaking, and acting without violence. Practicing peace means doing that which promotes peace – doing justice, listening, forgiving, sharing, giving, healing, being merciful, helping – all of these as works of resistance to violence (Mt 5:3-11). All of this is worship (Rom 12:1-2); worship is practicing peace.

56 Practicing peace also entails how one speaks, exercising no rhetorical violence (Mt 5:33-37). The gospel is inherently nonviolent – promising, inviting, witnessing – never forcing.

57 Practicing peace means being dedicated to the common life of all in a political community that is uniquely characterized by peaceful practices. Practicing peace means following the consequences of this conviction, being realistic with regard to one's own responsibility, because only by doing so will peace prevail in the world (Mt 5:43-48).

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the Torah of Christ” (Gal 6:2)

- 58 The Reformation originates with Luther’s rediscovery of God’s justice as creative and renewing power, as spelled out in the letters of Paul. In his doctrine of justification, Luther interprets this justice as God’s merciful care even for the ungodly (*sola gratia*), and as trust in the faithfulness of God (*sola fide*) in Christ (*solus Christus*).
- 59 For Paul, the justice of God implies the visionary insight, that “in Christ” the polarities and hierarchies of this “present evil world order” (Gal 1:4) have been overcome. “We” are not what segregates us from the “others” but what interconnects us with them. The human divisions of nation, religion, gender, and class, which constitute the “self” as enemy and rival of the “other,” are removed in baptism “like old garments.” A new praxis of becoming “one” through mutuality and solidarity creates a new form of being human – and a new world (Gal 6:2.15). “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in the Messiah Jesus” (Gal 3:28). God’s justice, the justification of the human being, and human justice are all inseparably connected.
- 60 One of the most troublesome and non-Pauline aspects of justification theology (as it was framed by the Reformation and subsequently interpreted by Protestantism) is the concept of “law.” Luther regularly juxtaposes “justice/righteousness through the law” with “justice/righteousness through faith” and understands this antithesis as the irreconcilable polarity of Judaism against Christianity.
- 61 This fateful polarization emerges from Luther’s interpretation of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Luther falsely identifies the law that Paul criticizes with the Jewish Torah. The core controversy of Galatians about the non-necessity of the Jewish ritual of circumcision for the Christ believers is thus understood as a rejection of Judaism as such. As recent scholarship has shown, however, the primary target in Paul’s struggle with his Galatian opponents was not Jewish Torah, but the law and order of the Roman Empire. It prescribed certain rules of conformity for both Jews and Gentiles. The Pauline community model of solidarity between Jews and Non-Jews “in Christ” clashes in the first place with these imperial settings and social norms, not the least within the framework of Roman emperor religion.
- 62 The Reformation furthermore identified Judaism with Roman Catholicism, labeling both as “legalistic religions” that achieve “justice/righteousness through works of the law.” The polarity of “works versus grace/faith” and “gospel versus law,” applied to concrete people, has had a disastrous impact throughout the history of interpretation. It was not only read in an anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic manner but also turned against “enthusiasts”, Anabaptists, Muslims, and other “heretics”, often with deadly consequences.
- 63 Up to this day liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and social movements are often accused of “work righteousness” or “legalism” and thus denied legitimacy as expressions of proper faith. Justification theology and this-worldly justice are played off against each other.
- 64 Against this backdrop, the Protestant tradition at its core is compromised by defining its identity against the “other” – the one who acts, believes, lives, or thinks differently – rather than in line with Paul’s radical solidarity with one another across boundaries and segregations. In light of the present world crisis, it is an urgent imperative that Protestant justification theology re-think the justice of God and return to its biblical roots.
- 65 The negative classification of Judaism and law also has become a major factor in the fundamental downgrading of the whole Old Testament. The trinitarian formula of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as common witness of all Christian churches testifies to the indissoluble bond between the two parts of the scriptural canon. Regaining the unity of both Testaments is an essential task for doing theology in the legacy of the Reformation today.
- 66 The Messiah Jesus of Nazareth is the invitation to all peoples to participate in the future that has been promised to Israel: a just and equal society inspired by the Torah. The Christian church is not the replacement of Israel. Israel is the root of the church: “You do not support the root, the root supports you” (Rom 11:18).
- 67 The Messiah Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, God’s just world, coming near (Mt 4:17). In the horizon of this hope, Jesus interprets the Torah of Israel in the context of his time (Mt 5-7). The criteria of his interpretation are the exclusive worship of God and the love of the neighbor, especially to the poor and the disinherited (Mk 12:28-34). The situation of “the least” (Mt 25:31-46) determines how the Torah has to be interpreted. So the Torah, of which not the tiniest commandment is canceled, becomes the orientation for the messianic communities (Mt 5:17-20; 28:19-20; see also Rom 3:31). Jesus’ call to his disciples to orient themselves according to his interpretation of the Torah aims at continuously reinterpreting and revitalizing the Torah in the hope of God’s coming kingdom.
- 68 In Paul’s letter to the Romans, we hear the cry of people who find themselves caught in the imperial system that makes it impossible to live according to the norms of Torah. Sin is not just an abstract human condition but materializes in concrete social circumstances. For Paul, imperial power

- structures embody the power of sin that inevitably turns people into transgressors of the life-giving laws of Torah and makes them complicit with the forces of death and self-destruction (Rom 7:24).
- 69 Paul's justification by grace through faith thus implies a two-fold liberation of both human beings and of Torah from the power of sin. The messianic communities establish a space where Jews and non-Jews "in Christ" can fulfill the Torah as law of life through love of one another – even of enemies (Rom 8:2; 12:1-21; 13:8-10).
- 70 The critical stance against the law in Paul and the Reformation is not directed against the legal order of societies as such (*usus civilis legis*). Legal rules and law are necessary in order to sustain human societies. The critique is directed exclusively against abusing the law on behalf of the strong against the weak, a practice already critiqued by the Prophets. The law is made for the people, not the people for the law, as both Jesus and the rabbis maintained (Mk 2:27; Babylonian Talmud, Trakt. Eruvin 41b). Human legislation must always be examined critically and continuously adjusted in order to defend justice for the victims instead of "legally" covering up the injustice of the dominant order.
- 71 Luther's reference to the Ten Commandments simply as "natural law" (Moses as "the Jews' *Sachenspiegel*") poses a specific challenge. It eclipses the specificity of Torah as an alternative law that at decisive points moves away from the exploitative legislation of its environment – such as with regard to Sabbath laws, forgiveness of debt, or the prohibition against accumulation through greed (Tenth Commandment). This critical edge vanishes as Torah is simply identified with existing legal codes, like the Roman law, that absolutize private property.
- 72 Above all, in his Small Catechism Luther dropped the politically concrete preamble of the Decalogue: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6). Luther also extended the command to honor one's parents to honor authorities as such. These two symptomatic changes of the scriptural base in Luther's most influential catechism are indicative for how Lutheranism became prone to obedience and subservience towards any established order, including severely unjust ones, instead of being faithful to the God of liberation (*sola fide*) and standing in solidarity with the downtrodden.
- 73 When the established order lacks righteous action and remains indifferent to the concerns of the common people, especially to the least (Mt 25:31-40), revealing its idolatries and imposing an unacceptable way of life, Christians should not only disobey but also resist such evil authorities.
- 74 Within imperial structures, the liberating biblical instructions orient us to resist the death-bound logic and laws of violent, enslaving powers. This requires regaining an in-depth appreciation of the liberating traditions of both the Old and New Testaments. As in the time of the Reformation, we need a new "revival" of cutting-edge Bible study in our congregations that engages not only individuals but also the current social and economic problems in critical and liberating ways. For example, forgiveness of debt and God's forgiveness of guilt belong inseparably together biblically (Mt 6:12). Christians today should be empowered to get to know specifically the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, as a rich treasure for daily life and ethical judgements.
- 75 Disciples of Jesus Christ advocate a desire to understand the mystery of God in community with the sacred texts of divine revelation also in other religions and joy in strengthening the dialogue in their common efforts of constructing a better world together with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and every other religion and culture from Africa, North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East and Europe (Isaiah 49:6). The Gospel contradicts every form of cultural, religious, and military invasion.
- 76 A postcolonial reading of Reformation theology advances a project of enculturation, in order to underpin inter-religious dialogue as prophetic dialogue, adopting a new departure in the critique of colonization by Reformation theology or misuse of its scholarship in the service of the powerful.
- "The Spirit blows where it wills" (John 3:8)**
- 77 In the spirit of the church that emerged out of the Reformation, it is crucial that we listen today to the cries of people around the world, who feel that the church does not see but overlooks and excludes their suffering, oppression, and cultural realities today (Mt 25:31ff.). Our ignorance and avoidance deepen rather than heal the divisions in church and society.
- 78 The Reformation movements understood the church not so much as an institution, but as the baptized people of God gathered in local communities. The church as community in the discipleship of Jesus is the holy space in which the universal Word of God is listened to and the sacraments celebrated in many different voices, traditions, and confessions for the sake of the mending of the world (*tikkun olam*).
- 79 The priesthood of all believers was a radical cry for democratizing the most powerful institution of that day, the Roman Church. Today it must be translated as a revolutionary call for universal citizenship and equitable distribution of the products of human labor.
- 80 In the 16th century the church was reformed, but it soon became enmeshed again with structures and practices that are patriarchal, hierarchical, and captive to powerful economic and political

interests. Its persecution of Jews, Anabaptists, and Muslims was deplorable! In addition to repenting for such, the Spirit of God impels movement away from such Constantinian expressions of church into more participatory, boundary-crossing embodiments of church that are truly catholic, inclusive of all, and collaborative across boundaries of religion, ethnicity, geography, and self-interest.

81 Discipleship in Christ requires a stance of contemplation, spiritual cleansing, enlightenment, and surrender to the will of God. If we hear the voice of God with the fear of Rahab (Joshua 2) or the fear of Mary and Elisabeth (Luke 1), and allow the flood of God's Spirit into the depths of our being, thereby we undertake the path of discipleship in Christ. The women in the Bible and the women of the Radical Reformation demonstrate for us the way of discipleship, mysticism, witness, and martyrdom.

82 The Spirit of God acts freely, blowing when and where the Spirit so desires, continually renewing the Church. It cannot be a property of anyone, nor kept captive by institutional interests or doctrinal definitions.

83 The Spirit brings about renewal and change both in church and society. In addition to transforming individual persons, the Spirit also enables believers to struggle alongside those of other religions, ideologies, and social movements, and to endure suffering caused by this commitment to love, solidarity, and justice.

84 When Luther called the cross a mark or sign of the church, he was establishing a criterion: to be the church, the church needs to become vulnerable by being with and for the poor and to risk its social or political status by publicly protesting against unjust structures and policies.

85 Rather than only being focused on individuals, the church must venture a critical communal ecclesial focus for resistance and transformation. Otherwise, injustices continue to have free reign, distorting our most basic relationships to God, ourselves, one another, and the whole of creation. Through practices such as preaching, teaching, celebrating, caring, community-formation, and organizing with others, the church can help counter the sin, bondage, and blindness that enable domination by the many facets of empire to prevail.

86 Through the power of the indwelling and connecting Spirit, those who are most different from one another are transformed into one body or a "new creation" (1 Cor 12:12; 2 Cor 5:17). While fostering renewal and change, the Spirit also draws people together into the unity of the body of Christ, which cannot be used to justify further church divisions. A reforming church must be reconciled with itself and endeavor to overcome divisions between East and West, between Catholics and Protestants, and between the various Reformation churches, in order that all may come to celebrate at the Lord's Table together.

87 A reforming church continually is being transformed by what it receives from other theological traditions and cultures. In emphasizing how the Spirit is linked to the Word, Luther was criticizing anyone claiming to have received special revelations by the Spirit apart from what is revealed in Scripture. This must not be misinterpreted as limiting the Spirit's free work in people, including those of other traditions or religions, as well as in the rest of creation (Rom 8:22-23).

88 Luther's critique of the enthusiasts cannot be transferred to our times as a generalized critique of Pentecostalism. While "theologies of prosperity" must be criticized on the basis of a theology of the cross, we must be attentive to the work of the Spirit within Pentecostal movements for building up community, rescuing people from marginalization, and restoring the dignity of people who suffer under poverty, disease, addictions, and unemployment.

89 The rediscovery and re-reading of biblical traditions from the perspective of the marginalized on the basis of social analysis, the contextual and intercultural reading of the Bible in many different contexts throughout the world, is an important sign of hope that the liberating hermeneutics of the Reformation traditions are active in many churches today.

90 At the heart of the Reformation was universal access to education, together with a critical re-reading of the Bible in relation to contextual situations of the day. As churches rooted in the Reformation have spread throughout the world, this approach to the Bible often does not prevail. Instead, individualistic spiritualities and religious fundamentalisms, which collude with powerful interests and which perpetuate illusions, are on the increase.

91 Recovering the crucial role of biblical theology and critical theological education (together with education in general) is key to the ongoing reformation and renewal needed within global Christianity in the 21st century.

92 Blessed are those who do not fit into the systems of this world, but who stand in protest of God's continued crucifixion in the schemes of this world (Rom 12: 2) and who cooperate with others in building a new world with justice and peace in human communities!

93 We are in need of a "New Reformation!" Now as then, people can easily be pious. However, they find inadequate forms of expression in the churches, because the churches are alienated from the realities of the actual world in which people live. As with Martin Luther, we need a renewal of language and a return to the liberating message of the Gospel.

94 Bonhoeffer's proposal of a worldly engaged Christianity, which would discover a new language for the old Gospel, must be translated as: "Prayer and action of the righteous among people". All church talk "must be born anew from this prayer and this action" and be taken up in liberation theology's insistence on the inseparableness of orthopraxis and orthodoxy.

"Radicalizing Reformation – Provoked by the Bible and Today's Crises" is not an option but an imperative for church and theology today. Luther himself made Scripture the criterion for all tradition. Contextual interpretations of the Bible have sharpened this hermeneutic critically and prophetically. Living at the onset of modern capitalism, Luther engaged in systemic critique. Living at the end of this murderous and suicidal period of human history, we must listen anew to the sources of our faith and join others in "putting a spoke in the wheel of the car, when the driver is drunk." Let us continue together with others on that pilgrimage of justice and peace!

Halle, 7 August 2014

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