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Report of the Bilateral Conversation between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Lutheran World Federation

Cartigny, Switzerland, May 15, 1998

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Adventists and Lutherans in Conversation 1994-1998

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Introduction

While the *Seventh-day Adventist Church* (SDA) with its 10 million members is a comparatively strong Christian denomination, it is extraordinary in its worldwide missionary thrust. Rooted in more than 200 countries, the SDA Church is today the most widespread Protestant denomination. The 19th-century origins of the church were marked by the strong expectation of the Second Coming of Christ. The Adventist teachings concerning the Sabbath and the Second Coming have, in spite of their strong Biblical foundations, traditionally created a distance between the SDA and other Christian denominations. Today the SDA, while maintaining its distinctive emphases, welcomes opportunities for fellowship, meeting human needs, and exchange of viewpoints with other Christians.

Born as the first fruits of the 16th-century German Reformation, the *Lutheran Church* is today present on all continents. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a worldwide communion of Lutheran churches, comprises with its 124 member churches and about 57 million members more than 95 percent of today's Lutheranism. In northern Europe Lutheran churches are still regarded as national or "folk" churches. Lutheran concentration is likewise strong in Germany and in some parts of North America. Strong Lutheran churches are also found in many parts of Africa and, to a lesser extent, in Asia and South America. For the most part Lutherans have been active in the ecumenical movement.

During the last decades, the officers of the LWF and the SDA have met regularly in meetings of the secretaries of the Christian World Communions. As a result of these contacts and also because Adventists recognize their Reformation heritage, the idea arose of a joint theological consultation in order to achieve a better mutual understanding. This proposal was approved in 1993 by leaders of the General Conference of SDA and the LWF Council.

The consultation was held 1-5 November 1994 in Darmstadt, Germany. It defined the following as its goals:

- achieve better mutual understanding,
- break down false stereotypes,

- discover the bases of belief,
- discover points of real and imaginary friction.

The discussions in Darmstadt were open, frank and friendly. It quickly became clear that the strong appreciation among the SDA theologians for the work of Martin Luther formed a natural starting point for the interchange. The experience of worshipping together also led to a sense of deep spiritual fellowship. By the end of the consultation participants felt that an excellent beginning had been made on all of the goals set for the gathering. Both Lutheran and SDA representatives were in agreement that further discussion, building on this beginning, would be a very positive step for both churches.

To that end the members of the consultation recommended that the SDA and the LWF hold three further consultations between 1996 and 1998. The themes proposed for these three meetings were as follows:

First session: Justification by Faith; the Law; Law and Gospel

Second session:

Ecclesiology and the Understanding of Church Authority

Third session: Eschatology

This proposal was approved by both world communions. The objectives of the conversations were to remain the same as in Darmstadt. The report from the Darmstadt meeting explained the reasons for selecting the three topics:

1. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone is central to both Lutherans and Adventists. A discussion of this central tenet seems a good place to begin theological reflection. In the same way, the understanding of law and gospel is one of the defining doctrines of Lutheranism. Adventists, on the other hand, have often been called legalistic because of the central place they give to law and obedience as the logical result of their stress on justification. A careful discussion of these issues would be a good foundational starting-point for further theological exploration.
2. The SDA has frequently been designated as a "sect." Where they fit in the spectrum of Christian churches needs to be explored. A thorough look at the SDA self-understanding as a church with a view to determining the extent to which they see themselves as part of the worldwide Christian church or a special movement apart from it, is important. To this end a discussion of both SDA and Lutheran understanding of the church and authority is essential. Included should be the understanding of the role of the confessions for Lutherans, and the writings of Ellen G. White for Adventists.
3. In view of the extensive biblical witness to eschatology and the current interest in the topic, it is necessary to explore whether the Lutheran eschatology is too indefinite or the Adventist eschatology too definite. The SDA fundamental belief concerning the "remnant" and the theological terms such as "Babylon" and "mark of the beast" shall be included in this study. Furthermore, the SDA views of the heavenly sanctuary and the pre-advent judgment need to be discussed in the wider context of the once-for-all atonement at the cross and Christ's high-priestly activity.

The issues of the *first thematic session* were discussed in a consultation held 17-21 June 1996 in Mississauga near Toronto, Canada. On the basis of several background papers and extensive discussions a common statement (ch. I below) was drafted and approved. Delegations had been appointed by the respective world communions. The Lutheran delegation was chaired by Faith Rohrbough (USA and Canada), and the Adventist delegation by Bert B. Beach (USA).

The same style of work was continued in the *next meeting* held 1-6 June 1997 in Jongny, Switzerland, in which the second thematic part was drafted, discussed and approved (ch. II below). Furthermore, a small drafting group was appointed which met at Silver Spring, USA, 29-30 October 1997, in order to prepare for the last consultation and the resulting publication.

The *final consultation* was held 10-16 May 1998 in Cartigny, Switzerland. It completed work on the common statement (ch. I below), and made *recommendations* (after ch. II below) for the future life of our churches. The Cartigny meeting was also visited by the president of the SDA, Dr. Robert S. Folkenberg, and the general secretary of the LWF, Dr. Ishmael Noko. The consultation closed with an Adventist worship service at Collonges, France, on 16 May.

We came together in 1994 as strangers, we parted in 1998 as friends. We came with questions, we parted with mutual appreciation. While significant doctrinal differences remain, we found much in common: a love for the Word of God, a shared heritage from the Reformation, a deep appreciation for the work and teachings of Martin Luther, a concern for religious freedom, and above all, the gospel of justification by grace through faith alone. By spending many hours together listening and seeking to understand, agreeing and disagreeing, eating and especially praying, we experienced the bonding of the Spirit under our one Lord Jesus Christ. Each of us who was given the opportunity to be part of these common conversations feels enriched intellectually and spiritually by this adventure of faith, and we give thanks to our God from whom all blessings flow.

Justification by Faith

Both Lutherans and Adventists teach that justification is the work of God in Christ and comes through faith alone. We are justified by the grace of God and not by our own works. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession (CA, art. IV) holds that “we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith ... “According to the 10th Fundamental Belief (FB) of the Seventh-day Adventists, we “exercise faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ, as Substitute and Example. This faith which receives salvation comes through the divine power of the Word and is the gift of God’s grace. Through Christ we are justified, adopted as God’s sons and daughters, and delivered from the lordship of sin.”

During our conversations it has become obvious that both Lutherans and Adventists unconditionally affirm the interrelated principles of the Reformation: *sola scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia*. Both churches regard themselves as heirs of the Protestant Reformation and as children of Luther. This shared understanding of justification by faith gives us today the possibility to say that both churches teach salvation in an essentially congruent manner. This understanding is founded on the biblical truth: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:28, NRSV). Both Lutherans (CA IV) and Adventists (FB 10) refer to Romans 3:21-26 as foundational for their teaching.

Different confessional emphases concerning salvation do exist, but in the light of this shared understanding they need not be incompatible. Lutherans have traditionally understood the correct teaching on justification by faith as the criterion of all other central issues of belief. Adventists do not speak of a criterion but place the notions of righteousness and justification in the wider context of the experience of salvation. But nevertheless salvation in Christ and justification by faith alone are at the heart of Adventism also.

Further, Adventists teach: “Salvation is all of grace and not of works, but its fruitage is obedience to the Commandments” (FB 18). Lutherans also teach the “new obedience,” i.e., that “faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded” (CA VI). However, as the Augsburg Confession immediately continues, “we should do them for God’s sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God.” Both sides agree in that they do not speak of good works as requirements or merits but as fruits. Adventists call these works “an evidence of our love for the Lord” (FB 18); Lutherans customarily refer to the “new obedience.” A special Adventist emphasis on the commandments can here be found, whereas the Lutherans have a special stress on the freedom of the Christian. But since both churches speak of obedience and fruits instead of requirements and merits, we agree that neither side teaches a justification by works of the law.

Both churches understand justification as God’s gracious declaration of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and at the same time as the free gift of new life in him. Justification in the full sense of the word consists in the fundamental imputation of God’s righteousness for the sake of Jesus Christ and in the indwelling of Christ in the heart of the repentant believer. This “gift of new life” or “indwelling of Christ” can be called sanctification; although it can thus be conceptually distinguished from the fundamental declaration of the forgiveness of sins, these two aspects of justification are inseparable in the believer’s experience.

Both Lutherans and Adventists characterize the new life or the sanctifying aspect of justification as the indwelling of Christ or as new life in the Spirit. Lutherans tend to understand this new life essentially as receiving the Holy Spirit in the Word and Sacraments of the church, thus following Luther’s exposition of the Apostles’ Creed in his *Large Catechism*: “the Holy Spirit effects our sanctification through the following: the communion of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” Adventists describe sanctification in a slightly more immediate manner: “Through the Spirit we are born again and sanctified; the Spirit renews our minds, writes God’s law of love in our hearts, and we become partakers of the divine nature and have the assurance of salvation now and in the judgment” (FB 10).

In spite of these emphases both churches agree that this new life “in Christ” or “in the Spirit” is not something which comes through one’s own strength or effort. The new life is a transforming gift of God; and precisely for this reason it is a life in Christ or in the Spirit, not a life centered around ourselves. As a safeguard against perfectionism, Adventists teach that the new life does not exclude the possibility of sinning, while Lutheran tradition stresses that even as justified the believing person remains a sinner.

In the light of this mutual understanding we can say that both Lutherans and Adventists can hear a truly biblical witness in each other’s proclamation. Lutherans can say this on the basis of their traditional criterion for accepting other Christians by determining whether they preach the gospel “with a pure understanding of it” (CA VII). Affirming this convergence in the central Christian message of justification by faith alone can be regarded as an important milestone in breaking down false stereotypes between our churches and in building up relations which allow us conscientious co-operation in some areas of Christian witness and service.

We are aware that justification of the sinner is a living reality that should shape our whole Christian experience here and now. This Christian life is a life in the Spirit and by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25). At the same time it is a life of

faith, a life in which Christ's kingdom is hidden under the cross: "... it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20, NRSV).

The Law

Our conversations concerning the law reveal four areas of note. In these Lutherans and SDAs have significant agreement, as well as differing nuances and emphases, and some divergences.

1. Both Lutherans and SDAs categorically affirm that justification rests wholly on the grace of God, so that keeping of the law cannot bring merit or contribute to salvation. Obeying the law must be understood as the result of, and response to, God's free gift of salvation. On this point Lutherans and SDAs are in complete agreement.
2. Lutherans and SDAs recognize the importance of the Ten Commandments, but the connotations of law differ in each communion.

Adventist concern for the law is demonstrated as follows: "The great principles of God's law are embodied in the Ten Commandments and exemplified in the life of Christ. They express God's love, will, and purposes concerning human conduct and relationships and are binding upon all people in every age. These precepts are the basis of God's covenant with His people and the standard in God's judgment. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit they point out sin and awaken a sense of need for a Savior. Salvation is all of grace and not of works, but its fruitage is obedience to the Commandments. This obedience develops Christian character and results in a sense of well-being. It is an evidence of our love for the Lord and our concern for our fellow men. The obedience of faith demonstrates the power of Christ to transform lives, and therefore strengthens Christian witness" (FB 18).

Lutherans' appreciation for the Ten Commandments is shown by Luther's exposition of them in both of his catechisms. In Lutheran families, congregations and schools they have always been an essential ingredient of religious instruction. In this larger context of instruction Lutherans see the Commandments as providing valuable principles for Christian life.

The connotations of law, however, differ significantly between Lutherans and Seventh-day Adventists. For Lutherans "law" has a wider reference than the Decalogue and can be a negative term, contrasting with grace. Lutherans tend to be careful about the so-called didactic use of the law, i.e., law as a guide for the Christian life. While affirming the validity of the content of the Ten Commandments and the necessity of the "new obedience" for Christians, Lutherans at the same time also want to affirm Christian freedom. Lutherans consistently see the law in the context of law and gospel, with the overriding concern to protect justification as *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. In this emphasis Lutherans reflect the Apostle Paul's concerns in Romans and Galatians, and also the roots of their communion in the Reformation.

Adventists, however, see the law in a more positive context. They tend to view the law in terms of God's revealed will focused in the giving of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament and the ongoing role of law in the New Testament. By this emphasis Adventists reflect their concern to show the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments and obedience to them as the fruit of sanctification.

3. Lutherans and Adventists agree that the life of the justified person will be demonstrated by deeds of faith. The Holy Spirit brings forth "fruit" to God's glory (Gal. 5:22, NRSV) in a spontaneous manner that cannot be reduced to a written code.

Adventist concern for deeds of faith is shown in FB 18 (quoted above). Lutheran concern for deeds of faith is reflected, for example, in CA XX: "Our teachers have been falsely accused of forbidding good works. Their writings on the Ten Commandments, and other writings as well, show that they have given good and profitable accounts and instructions concerning true Christian estates and works ... It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify him. It is always faith alone that apprehends grace and forgiveness of sin. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works."

SDAs see the Ten Commandments as playing a greater role in deeds of faith. Adventists understand the new life in Christ, sanctification, to be a spiritual, lived expression of the principles of the law (Rom. 8: 1-3), in which love to God and love to fellow humans is the ruling motivation. For Adventists, the law provides a framework for the life of love.

Both communions teach the doctrine of the final judgment (Lutherans: CA XVII; SDAs: FB 10, 23), although SDAs place more emphasis on this belief.

While both Lutherans and SDAs agree that the Christian's works come under review in the judgment (cf. Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10), both parties hold that it is the Christian's standing in Christ Justification that alone gives hope.

4. Both communions take seriously the Third/Fourth Commandment. However, the practical conclusions drawn from this Commandment diverge:

Lutherans keep, following the traditional practice of the Christian Church, the holy day on the day of resurrection, the first day of the week. In Lutheran proclamation and piety Sunday has always been understood as a day of rest and

worship. In fact Sunday has for Lutherans appropriated much of the function of Sabbath (see Luther's *Large* and *Small Catechisms*).

Adventists see the Sabbath as an essential part of the divine design in Creation. The Third/Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue returns human beings to this truth, leading them to treat Sabbath observance as a vital element in the expression of loving obedience to God as Creator and Redeemer. For Adventists Sabbath keeping is neither a meritorious work nor something that makes them alone God's people; rather it is a grateful acceptance of a divine gift. Adventists do not claim that only Sabbath-keepers can be saved. They acknowledge that Lutherans in their observation of Sunday will appeal to biblical arguments as well as to ancient Christian tradition; however, they hold firm to their conviction that the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, call us to observe the seventh day as the Sabbath. Nevertheless, Adventists recognize that great servants of God have sincerely kept Sunday in honor of their Lord's resurrection throughout the Christian era.

For Lutherans, their practice is based on the Apostle Paul's teaching of the role of law in the life of Gentile Christians. In Christ, Christians are not under the law in the same manner as the Jews, and the law is seen from the perspective of Christian freedom. Paul opposes all attempts to impose the Jewish law on the Gentile Christians. These Pauline guidelines have shaped the understanding of the Third/Fourth Commandment from the early church to the Reformation. Today, Christ's resurrection on the one hand shapes the Lutheran view of Sunday. On the other hand, Paul's acceptance of the Jewish Christians who keep the law also calls Lutherans to respect the Adventist view.

II

Scripture and Authority in the Church

Both Lutherans and Adventists look to Scripture as the foundation of church authority. The Reformation principle of sola scriptura lies at the heart of both communions, with Scripture as the basis for their respective proclamation.

Lutherans have an organic concept of authority, as authority is exercised through the ministry of word and sacrament. In this organic understanding, the gospel is the essence of authority, Scripture its documented basis, the sacraments its external signs, synods, other ecclesial bodies and the ordained ministers its public bearers, and the Spirit its acting agent. For Adventists, the authority Christ delegates to his church is diffused through the whole body. All teachings, practices, and decisions are accountable to the Word of God. The article on the Holy Scriptures appears as the first in the Fundamental Beliefs of the church and reads in part:

The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His [God's] will. They are the standard of His character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God's acts in history.

In both confessions, Christ alone is the head of the church. All aspects of ministry are derived from him, including the priesthood of all believers and the delegated authority of ordained ministers. The authority structures of the church differ from Lutherans to Adventists: Lutheran church structures are more diverse, corresponding to the history and cultural contexts of the churches; the Adventist church, although present in many countries, has an essentially unified structure.

While both Lutherans and Adventists affirm Scripture as the foundation of all authority, their respective approaches to Scripture differ in significant aspects. For Lutherans, the gospel understood as unmerited justification, is the organic center of Scripture; it is the hermeneutical key to the study and interpretation of Scripture. Adventists look to the totality of Scripture, seeking to find Christ as the center and the New Testament as the summit of Scripture. Further, in their study Adventists tend to seek explicit biblical proofs, whereas Lutherans leave more room for what is not explicitly stated (e.g. Sunday observance). Thus, Adventists, while alert to the historical background of the biblical writings, apply Scripture more directly to life today. Lutherans tend to relate specific passages to the total message of Scripture and also give particular attention to the changed conditions of today's world.

Both Lutherans and Adventists hold to the Bible as the decisive norm—*norma normans*—but both assign authority to other documents as the derived norm—*norma normata*. The churches of the Lutheran Reformation adhere to five creedal or confessional documents—the ancient creeds (Apostolicum, Nicaenum, Athanasium), the Augsburg Confession, and Luther's *Small Catechism*. The Apostolic and Nicene Creeds have a natural place in the liturgy of the Lutheran churches, Luther's *Small Catechism* is used in general Christian education, and the Augsburg Confession has its primary role in theological training and orientation.

Adventists affirm the biblical content of the ancient creeds. Furthermore, their Fundamental Beliefs explicitly confess belief in the Trinity (FB 2-5).

Although Adventists do not look to confessional documents, they place high value on the writings of Ellen G. White, in whom they believe the biblical gift of prophecy was manifested. Her work consisted principally in counseling

the church and providing spiritual nurture. Adventists regard her writings as “a continuing and authoritative source of truth, which provide for the church comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction” (FB 17). Ellen G. White’s authority is a derived authority: she firmly endorsed the *sola scriptura* principle, and Adventists test her writings by the Scripture.

Thus, Lutherans and Adventists differ widely in their approach to Scripture, authority structures of the church and authoritative documents outside of Scripture. However, both communions have the same essential source of authority at the core- the Holy Scriptures.

Ecclesiology

Both Adventists and Lutherans understand the church as community of believers. The church exists in historical continuity from biblical times to our days.

Adventists hold that:

The church is the community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In continuity with the people of God in Old Testament times, we are called out from the world (FB 11).

Lutheran Confessions state that

. . . one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel (CA 7).

Even though Lutherans nowadays seldom speak of the church in the Old Testament, this way of speaking also belongs to the tradition of Lutheran Confessions (e.g., Apol. VII, 14-19; XXVII, 98). The roots of the Christian Church are found in Old Testament times and the Christian Church manifests God’s new covenant with God’s people. The principle of continuity within this community of believers is thus for both churches of great importance.

As CA 7 points out, Lutherans identify the Christian Church through the so called marks of the church which are the gospel and the two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Adventists also regard parallel marks as important for the life of the church:

. . . we join together for worship, for fellowship, for instruction in the Word, for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, for service to all mankind, and for the world-wide proclamation of the gospel (FB 11).

Both communions affirm that the proclamation of the gospel, worship life, personal prayer, participation at the Lord’s Supper and service for the world are central elements of each Christian’s life in the church. These features also make the church a living Christian communion, a community of believers.

Together we affirm the biblical descriptions of the church as people of God, as body of Christ and as temple of Holy Spirit. The Christian church is neither a static entity nor a merely external organization: it is an assembly of believers, a spiritual community, God’s holy people who expect the coming of their Lord Christ. In the church Christians confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, look forward to his coming kingdom and proclaim the gospel message to all the world. Recognition of this mission is essential for the self-understanding of the church.

We thus share a basic understanding of the church in biblical terms. We agree that the Word of God, the gospel message of Jesus Christ, should always beat the center of our understanding of the essence and tasks of the church.

An important aspect of how Adventists and Lutherans evaluate each other as churches concerns our views regarding baptism and Lord’s Supper. For Lutherans, it is sufficient for the true unity of the church to agree about the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (CA 7). These two sacraments are thus for Lutherans of decisive significance in the identification of the church. For Adventists, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are important, but do not have the same relative significance in ecclesiology as they do for Lutherans .

This does not mean, however, that the Adventists would downplay the role of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as such. In their Fundamental Beliefs the articles on these two ordinances (FB 14-15) immediately follow the articles (FB 11-13) on the church. As a part of Protestant Christianity, Adventists reflect many aspects of Reformation theology concerning baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

We can together affirm that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are at the heart of the New Testament expression of Christian faith. They are closely connected with salvation and newness of life in Christ.

In both churches we baptize in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We agree that God’s initiative is essential for every Christian understanding of baptism. God offers the gift of salvation.

Whereas Lutherans follow the practice of the majority of the churches in baptizing infants, Adventists have consistently adhered to believers’ baptism by immersion. Our theological disagreements in regard to baptism are basically similar to the larger interconfessional debates about the differences between these two Christian baptismal traditions (see *Baptists and Lutherans in Conversation*, Geneva: LWF, 1990). Today we realize that both infant baptism and believers’ baptism have long roots and are received traditions within major Christian churches. Lutherans admit

that there is no clear reference to the baptism of infants in the New Testament. While Adventists do not accept infant baptism, they acknowledge it as an early and widespread practice among Christians.

We agree that baptism can never be separated from faith. Although we adhere to different practices, we both affirm that baptism must be accompanied by faith. Lutherans may claim that baptism is “valid, even though faith be lacking” (Luther, *Large Catechism*, IV,53); nevertheless, baptism must lead into faith in order to be effective. Adventists teach that faith must precede baptism.

Lutheran confessional writings condemn diverse “anabaptist” practices. For reasons stated in other dialogues involving Lutherans (See *Baptists and Lutherans in Conversation*), most of these condemnations do not apply to today’s Christian churches which practice believers’ baptism. CA 9 formally applies to these churches; even there, however, Lutherans recognize today that in a secular world believers’ baptism reminds traditional Christian churches of their obligation to connect personal faith with baptism.

Concerning the Lord’s Supper, both Adventists and Lutherans speak of the presence of Christ at the communion table. Whereas Lutherans stress the real and corporeal presence, Adventists speak in terms of spiritual presence and spiritual experience, thus approaching to some extent the Calvinist terminology. We both agree that the Lord’s Supper contains a strong spiritual dimension which Lutherans refer to as visible word and mystery.

Adventists teach that “preparation for the Supper includes self-examination, repentance and confession” (FB 15). Lutherans fully agree in regard to the necessity and usefulness of these preparations. For Adventists, the Lord’s Supper is preceded by the service of foot washing which expresses this preparation. In the Lutheran church the Lord’s Supper is in a parallel manner most often preceded by a confession of sins and absolution.

Adventist self-understanding has a broad base. It includes four main elements: Adventists’ relation to the Reformation, the concept of a cosmic conflict between good and evil, mission, and their view of the “remnant.” Adventists have a high appreciation for the Reformation. They see themselves as heirs of Luther and other Reformers, especially in their adherence to the great principles of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solo Christo*. Teachings which others may view as distinctive of Adventists are seen by them as the continuation of the Reformation’s recovery of biblical truth.

Adventists also see themselves as part of an ongoing struggle between good and evil. They derive this apocalyptic world-view from Scripture. In this view Christ as victor at Calvary and Lord of the Church assures the ultimate triumph of good and the end of evil. Christ uses various agencies on behalf of the good, and Adventists understand themselves as one of these agencies, but not the only one.

A third critical element in Adventists’ self-understanding is the importance that they give to mission, including evangelism. They are impelled by the vision of Rev. 14 in which the everlasting gospel is to be given “to every nation, kindred, tongue and people” prior to the second coming of Christ. For this reason Adventists tend to think in global terms and give mission priority.

Adventists’ self-understanding also expresses itself in the concept of the remnant. This term with deep biblical roots designates a group who survived a crisis (historical remnant), as well as those who are faithful to the Lord (faithful remnant). Adventists focus on the use of this term in the Apocalypse. They see themselves as instruments of God in gathering the faithful remnant. Adventists recognize that God’s faithful remnant whose identity is known only to God includes Christians in many churches throughout the world. They understand that in the final crisis before the return of Jesus, God’s faithful remnant will be clearly identified as those who are committed to Christ as Savior and Lord, and who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

Although the concept of remnant is not current in Lutheranism, the Lutheran tradition has often seen the Christian church in strongly eschatological terms. In Lutheran Pietism it was, and to some extent still is, believed that only a small flock of true believers will be faithful to Christ in the last times.

Lutherans appreciate the Adventist attempts to differentiate in their use of the remnant concept. A possible point of comparison is offered in CA VIII in which a distinction is made between the theological understanding of the Christian church as assembly of believers and saints, and the situation “in this life” in which “many false Christians ... remain among the godly.”

Both for Adventists and Lutherans the historical church is thus not identical with the true church as “assembly of believers and saints” or “faithful remnant.” Moreover, faithful Christians can be found in other churches. Affirming this state of affairs can open possibilities for inter-church relations. For Lutherans, this affirmation also means that the Adventist view is not to be counted among such false ecclesial self-understandings which identify an external church body with the assembly of all true believers (cf. CA VIII). At the same time our churches attempt to make manifest the gospel and the people of God. Although the borders of the true church are in the final analysis invisible, the Christian church in its mission to the world should not remain invisible. The church ought to be visible and present as the light of the world (Matt. 5:14), since it proclaims Christ who is the true light, which enlightens everyone (John 1 :9).

III

Eschatology

Both Lutherans and Adventists affirm that Jesus Christ is the center of eschatology. He is the Lord of time and space, and his atoning death on the cross has won the decisive battle over the forces of evil and ensured the ultimate restoration of all things. "For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:19, 20).

For the believer in Jesus, eschatology has both a present and a future dimension. The person who is justified by grace alone through faith alone has already passed from death to life (Col. 3:3) and already sits with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). One who is so justified is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), a citizen of the divine commonwealth (Eph. 2:19), and a child of God (1 John 3:1,2), no longer living in terror or uncertainty before God.

Nevertheless, the Christian lives between the times, already in the "last days" (Heb. 1:2) that began with the first coming of Jesus, and yet still awaiting the consummation of all things when Christ shall be all in all. Thus Adventists and Lutherans affirm not only the present reality of justification but also the hope of the second coming of Jesus in glory. This "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) is reflected in the very name "Adventist," and is shared by Lutherans who live in expectation of "the dear last day" (Luther, WA Br 9, 175).

In many respects the two communions have similar understandings of salvation history. Lutherans and Adventists affirm that history is not cyclical but linear, not random but moving toward its *telos* (goal) in a cosmic restoration. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22).

As regards eschatology on the individual level, both Lutherans and Adventists affirm that the witness of Scripture points to the resurrection of the body rather than the immortality of the soul.

Lutherans and Adventists likewise attest that Scripture teaches the Judgment in association with the second coming of Christ (2 Tim. 4:1), even as the ancient creed declares: "[Christ] comes to judge the living and the dead." The "rewards" or "inheritance" that God's people receive at that time is given to them wholly by the merits of Christ and is in no manner the result of their own good works. The reception of faith in Christ, the fundamental basis of eternal life, is itself a divine gift and mystery. Lutherans affirm that the individual person cannot make a choice on a free basis for or against Christ, but is already here totally dependent on God, the Holy Spirit (cf. Luther, *Small Catechism*, 11,6.).

In awaiting the consummation of all things, Lutherans and Adventists seek to avoid the extremes of a complacent attitude on the one hand, and overheated expectation of the Second Coming on the other. Both communions have had to deal with over-zealous members who resorted to setting dates and propounding various calculations that were not helpful in building up the body of Christ. Rather than such behavior, Lutherans and Adventists advocate a life of active Christian service to the world. While both emphasize daily readiness, Adventists stress the nearness of the return of the Lord. Both communions seek to take seriously the scriptural admonitions to be faithful, to take a critical stand toward the prevailing culture, and they call both clergy and laity to proclaim and teach the coming of the kingdom as a source of hope and joy.

As Lutherans and Adventists seek to understand scriptural prophecy, they agree on several principles of interpretation. First, that scripture must be permitted to interpret itself; second, that we should exercise due humility in claiming to know the future, and third, that prophecy is only clearly understood after it has been fulfilled. "I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe" (John 14:29).

Adventists and Lutherans share certain convictions about biblical apocalyptic literature. They regard such literature as important for study, proclamation, and instruction for Christian living; they recognize that such literature, as indeed all biblical literature, is rooted in a historical setting and that it not only addresses the context out of which it emerged but also carries an important message for generations still to come. Concerning the Apocalypse, they agree that Christ is the center of this book and that it portrays the conflict between good and evil in the format of a cosmic drama.

In spite of the considerable convergence between Lutherans and Adventists in their respective understandings of eschatology, significant areas of divergence have become apparent in our discussions. These differences emerge sharply in the respective understandings and exposition of biblical apocalyptic literature.

While both communions believe that history is moving toward a climax and that Scripture prepares Christians for events yet to come, Adventists give stronger emphasis to these matters. Five articles of their 27 Fundamental Beliefs focus on eschatology (FB 23 - The Ministry of Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary; FB 24 - The Second Coming of Christ; FB 25 - Death and Resurrection; FB 26 - The Millennium and the End of Sin; and FB 27 - The New Earth), 'whereas the confessional statements of Lutheranism say little beyond that which is affirmed in the ancient creeds. For Adventists the question of the historical accuracy of Scripture is crucial and, while they agree that prophecy can only be fully understood as such after it has been fulfilled, they do not accept the notion of prophecy written *ex eventu* (after the event).

Lutherans have traditionally been rather cautious in their interpretation of apocalyptic literature. Rather than

reading the Book of Revelation as a prediction of specific historical events which were to happen after the book was written, they tend to see in it references to events which were of critical significance to the early church.

Adventists, however, view biblical apocalyptic literature as having a significant predictive element. The Books of Daniel and Revelation have played, and continue to play, a major role in their self-understanding. Beyond the spiritual and ethical values of these books, Adventists look to them as given by divine intent so that God's people may gain a grasp of the broad outlines of history moving relentlessly toward the *eschaton*. This knowledge is not for the purpose of satisfying idle curiosity, but to confirm faith in Christ as Lord of history.

Thus, Adventists understand the Book of Daniel to have been written, as it claims, in the sixth century B.C. They read its stories as instructive history, not as court tales. And, in keeping with a long line of interpreters of the book from the early church to the 19th century, they do not understand the "little horn" in chapters 7 and 8 to indicate events in the second century B.C.

Adventists hold that the symbols, numbers and beasts of Daniel and the Apocalypse give—in the broad sense, not in detail—the course of human history. This they do by letting Scripture interpret itself and considering the historical setting of each document. At times, some Adventists have erred in claiming to understand details rather than the broad sweep, and have made misguided statements about the future which only God can know. Adventists seek to avoid such excesses; nevertheless, they are convinced that their historicist approach to interpretation remains valid.

Adventists' interest in apocalyptic has led to a distinctive eschatological teaching— the pre-Advent judgment (FB 23 – The Ministry of Christ in the Heavenly Sanctuary). The thrust of this teaching is to view the judgment as beginning at a particular time in history (1844), arrived at on the basis of studies in Daniel, Hebrews and other Scriptures.

While Lutherans affirm the Christology which portrays Jesus as high priest (Heb. 7-9), they find no biblical basis for a doctrine which intimates that this high priest began a new phase of his ministry at a specific time in recent history. However, they acknowledge that Adventists appeal to biblical and theological evidence.

Adventists maintain that this teaching does not threaten the gospel, since the judgment in the heavenly sanctuary identifies those whose assurance rests on justification by grace alone. Christ does not cease to be intercessor when he enters upon the work of judgment. And the heavenly sanctuary itself is to be understood in terms of function more than form.

For Adventists this teaching is important for their self-understanding. It conveys hope because of the prospect of the near return of Jesus; it assures that heaven and earth are linked, and that their Savior is also their intercessor; and it comforts because God is about to bring to a close the long conflict between good and evil.

Two other Adventist teachings concern the symbols of Babylon and the mark of the beast. Adventists believe that Babylon as used in Revelation represents an apostasy manifested during the Christian era that will culminate in an eschatological apostasy in the Christian world. Then a political and religious alliance will form resulting in the great persecution (Rev. 13: 15-17).

Adventists have historically identified the mark of the beast with the future, worldwide, oppressive government enforcement of Sunday observance at the end of time. They do not believe that Sunday observance today constitutes the mark of the beast or that those who observe Sunday have the mark of the beast (see ch. I, "The Law").

Because of time constraints, the consultation did not address some other topics related to eschatology, such as the millennium.

Despite differences in emphasis and understanding of eschatology, Lutherans and Adventists affirm their common faith in Jesus as Savior, Justifier, and Lord of history. They await the full realization of Christ's prayer for oneness among his people (John 17:23) when "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11: 15).

Recommendations

In our conversations we have achieved significant convergences in our understanding of the Christian faith. We do not want to conceal the existing doctrinal differences, but we nevertheless think that the following recommendations can be made to our churches:

1. We recommend that Adventists and Lutherans mutually recognize the basic Christian commitment of the others' faith communions. This general recognition is specified as follows:

- a. We recommend that Lutherans in their national and regional church contexts do not treat the Seventh-day Adventist church as a sect but as a free church and a Christian world communion. This recommendation is based both on the Adventist understanding of water baptism in the name of the Triune God, an understanding which for Lutherans means that baptism is valid, and further on the joint conviction that "faithful Christians can be found in other churches" (see ch. II, "Ecclesiology"), a view which is compatible with CA VIII.
- b. We also recommend that Adventists in their relationship with other Christian churches seek to have this conviction consistently affirmed. This recommendation can be seen as an expression of the SDA *General*

Conference's Working Policy 1996/1997 §O 75 which unequivocally speaks of "other Christian churches" and recognizes those agencies that lift up Christ before men as a part of the divine plan for evangelization of the world." Furthermore, according to the Adventist understanding of the Lord's Supper, Lutherans as believing Christians" (FB 15) are welcome to participate in the Adventist communion service.

2. In our discussions we have reached a comprehensive consensus on Scripture as the sole foundation of church authority and on Christ as the head of the church. The creedal and confessional documents are for Lutherans derived norms of faith (*norma normata*). In an analogous manner the writings of Ellen G. White represent for Adventists an authority which is derived from Scripture and which is to be tested by the Scripture.

On the basis of this consensus we urge Adventists and Lutherans in their public teaching and theological education to present the other faith communion's view of church authority truthfully and unpolemically and in a manner which corresponds to their self-understanding.

We reaffirm the importance of giving Scripture priority in preaching and daily life. We consider personal Bible study to be a fundamental part of Christian life and encourage members of our churches to engage in joint study of the Bible.

3. While each faith communion will continue to maintain its identity and convictions, we recommend that Lutherans and Adventists encourage and nurture consultative linkage for the good of the total Christian community, understanding, and the betterment of humanity. Several areas of cooperation for a joint witness suggest themselves, such as in:

- a. Alleviating the suffering of humanity
- b. Religious liberty endeavors
- c. Ministerial associations / pastoral gatherings
- d. Joint prayer events
- e. Bible Society work

4. As a sequel to the already concluded conversations, we recommend that Lutherans and Adventists meet in occasional bilateral consultations to explore topics of mutual interest. We further recommend that a first such consultation should deal with the theological foundations and the spiritual dimension of our observance of the day of rest and worship, with particular reference to modern society. Such a consultation should include a cross section of theologians, pastors, church leaders, and lay people from the two churches with the possibility of other guests.

5. We recommend that both the Lutheran World Federation and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists develop plans for the dissemination and study of this report among their churches so that members of both communions may acquire a better understanding of each other's views and spiritual concerns.

Cartigny/Switzerland, 15 May 1998

The text may be found in

GROS, JEFFREY, HARDING MEYER, WILLIAM G. RUSCH. Edd. *Growth in Agreement II. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*. Faith and Order Paper 187. (Geneva/Grand Rapids, MI: WCC Publications/William B: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000) 295-309.

and

Lutherans and Adventists in Conversation: Report and Papers Presented 1994-1998. (Silver Spring, MD/Geneva: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists/The Lutheran World Federation, 2000) 5-23.