“How did Luther's teaching become a doctrine?”

Public Lecture to be presented at Marquette University, Thursday, September 1, 2009 at 3:30 PM Weasler Auditorium

1. Introduction

What makes the articulation of my faith valid? What binds my faith to that of my neighbor? Is Protestantism constituted by the variety of different and sometimes even contradicting positions, many of which hardly can be described? What creates and rules community? What is the basis of communion?

Let me start with an anecdote from one of my seminars in Frankfurt on the understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist: After a presentation on Calvin’s understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, an ongoing debate started about the limits of ecclesiastical communion. A student from Kazakhstan, a very pious though conservative Lutheran, found my estimation of Melanchthon provoking and started to attack that position. His arguments ended with the conclusion that Luther and Melanchthon should not have shared Eucharist. Referring to the historical fact that they did, the young man said, “Neither the historical fact nor the teaching of Luther makes it. What counts is the doctrine of the confessions.” While I responded by discussing the 10th article of the Augsburg Confession, he found better ground for his position in certain passages of the formula of concord. However, these differences were not enough in his eyes. The student
explained that because of my “liberal” position neither I nor any student who might follow my position could share communion with him or any follower of Melanchthon.

Such an example exhibits how *intra*-faith discord can further lead to confusion in *inter*-faith or ecumenical dialogue. For instance, the Chair of our department for Theology, Dr. Susan Wood, once articulated some questions about details in the understanding of the Sacraments in general and specifically Baptism. While I answered on the basis of my interpretation of Luther’s teaching, she obviously had run into trouble with some Lutheran representatives who referred primarily to the Book of Concord as the ultimate explanation of the evangelical faith. She - and other Catholic friends - finally asked me: Fine, we don’t have a problem with your position, Markus; however, what exactly counts in the Protestant Church(es)? Beside the question as to who represents the Lutheran Churches, ecumenical dialogue lacks a clear answer to a greater problem: What is the overall binding doctrine of the Evangelical Churches? Do they have someone or something that controls a consensus?

Not only for Catholics has this become a growing problem for understanding the Evangelical doctrine. Lutherans themselves continue to voice important concerns. On what basis can an evangelical minister be critiqued? What and where are the limits of his preaching and teaching? To give an example: Is it possible to change the formulation of the Creed in the worship? What happens if the majority of a congregation disagrees fundamentally with its pastor? How does one decide whether the disagreement is fundamental or less essential?
These questions are neither new nor answered. Over the last 479 years or even longer Protestants have discussed these questions with growing intensity and great personal engagement. Before explaining my position I would like to give a short historical overview on the developments from Worms to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. In a second survey I will illustrate the systematic contradiction or, less provokingly, the difference between Luther and Lutheranism. The lecture will conclude with a brief ecumenical outlook and my vision of further exchanges over Christian doctrine.

2. **Historical survey: from the Edict of Worms to the Book of Concord**

**Edict of Worms**

The first and public confession of evangelical faith in the wake of the Reformation took place in Worms. After the Roman curia had summoned Luther, Frederick III, called the Wise, intervened so that he would be granted safe passage to the diet of Worms. This diet had been assembled to greet the newly elected emperor Charles V and to discuss the most urgent problems of the Old Empire. These problems included fiscal matters, the war against the Osmanic Empire (i.e., the Turks) and the Unity of the Empire as represented in a highly complicated balance between the Emperor, the electoral princes and church representatives.

When Luther was questioned as to whether he was willing to revoke his theological statements as represented in a pile of books, he answered with the very famous sequence:
Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.¹

Luther is sometimes also quoted as saying: "Here I stand. I can do no other". Recent scholars consider the evidence for these words to be unreliable, since they were inserted before "May God help me" only in later versions of the speech and not recorded in witness accounts of the proceedings. Nevertheless, this was a new kind of confession. This is - as far as I know – the first instance in which one did not confess to an ordained confessor what he had experienced as a sin to be reconciled with God. Now someone confessed his faith and with that took no further advice for a correction.

Some interpret this moment as the birth pang of modernity. Luther is caught by his conscience. The last authority is his conscience. Conscience rises over God himself. Conscience rules any other authority and, consequently, leads to the negation of all other authorities with which the individual does not agree. In fact, did not Luther, in a very self-confident way, place himself above the Emperor, the Pope and Holy Mother Church?

¹
I disagree completely with these accusations. This would be an interpretation which is fueled by enlightenment and post-enlightened ideas. I think Luther’s confession was a very honest and deeply pious expression of his personal faith, and it was this faith that brought him into a public situation before the Empire and the Church. He articulated his faith as gift from God which – and in fact, who – had forced him to stand there. He could not do otherwise since he had no authority to reject God’s call and and power, both of which, Luther believed, had brought him to Worms. “Here I stand – I can do no other” refers to a very humble understanding of what it means to obey God’s vocation. Luther said what he had to say and saw no way out, much like Jonah inside the Whale.

Interestingly enough, the Emperor closed the final session of the Diet of Worms with a similar confession. He also referred to his position with a kind of “here I stand”. He was put into the position of the Protector of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. He also was in charge of defending Christian unity against any disturbance, turmoil or distraction. Whatever he thought personally - although this is a very modern way of putting it – did not count. He was the Emperor. And for that it was his duty to force Luther back to where he came. So – here he stood likewise and could do no other.

Again, one should keep in mind that this is not just a matter of comparison or subtle difference in meaning. Both individuals felt the burdensome duty to represent the truth – only the truth and nothing else. Both ways of doing so contradicted one another completely.
It is little wonder, then, that Luther was excommunicated. Vice versa, Luther polemically saw the Emperor as representing and helping out the mighty powers of the Antichrist. Modern research – including some very intense working groups performing what they call an ecumenical dialogue for or of convergence – tried to reconcile these positions on some higher level of understanding.

Let us review the course of history.

**Great and Small Catechism**

Since 1521 Luther preached to proclaim the Gospel in a – as he would put it - simple and handy format. He wanted to express the very essentials of the Christian faith in a way that simply repeated – in modern language and without the nuts and bolts - what Scripture and the Old Christian Symbols articulated. He did this to teach clergy and leading officials of his country. This was to ensure and enforce their evangelical, that is, scriptural preaching and teaching. Out of these sermons arose a handbook. It was certainly not designed for the simple folk but for leading academics and trained elites in Electoral Saxony. It turned out that this handbook was a great challenge for most of its readers and thus had very little impact on daily piety and expressions of faith. Consequently, Luther decided to produce a simpler version which the house father, the principal of a family, could use. Luther designed this “small catechism” in such a way that it could be used for an oration or short meditation at the daily table at home. An example of its legacy is my own pastoral training: we had to learn the small catechism by heart and recite it during oral exams.
The poor education and the lack of essential knowledge of Christian belief were the reason for Luther to sum it up in a very handy format to train clergy and the simple folks.

The Small and, in some parts, the Great Catechisms of Luther became a confession since they were used for the training and abbreviated formulation of the basic knowledge a Christian should have about the Faith of the Church and its foundation in Scripture.

**Augsburg Diet 1530**

The Augsburg Diet became an important landmark in the history of Germany in the 16th century since it was called in to solve the essential questions of the unity of religion with the unity of the Holy Roman Empire. In preparation, the electoral prince of Saxony, John Frederic, called Luther, Melanchthon, other theologians from Wittenberg and his counselors to formulate the Saxon position. Melanchthon served as a kind of secretary to formulate the conclusion of the negotiations and designed a collection of articles that was to show how much the Wittenberg teaching matched the tradition of the Church and its essential doctrine. In 21 articles Melanchthon summed up the consensus, containing major topics like justification, the sacraments, Holy Eucharist, ministry, and others. Only seven articles where left over for further discussion containing topics such as the lay chalice, the marriage of priests, the ordination of bishops, and the final authority in the Church. Melanchthon – heavily backed up by Luther – and his colleagues thought that it could easily lead to a consensus that could be formulated and approved at the diet of Augsburg. With that the open questions from previous diets could be solved and the edict of Worms could be abandoned.
When the German version of the document was presented to the Emperor on a hot summer day the windows stood wide open. Although Charles himself did not speak any German, many of the townfolk gathered around the building and listened to the chancellor of Saxony give the summary of Christian faith in German as formulated by the leading theologians of the Saxon university. As one might imagine, this was a major offense to the Emperor. Melanchthon’s document became as much a formula of consensus as a pamphlet representing critical opposition to the Emperor. It is thus little wonder that he rejected it.

Hence the Augsburg Confession, originally designed as a handout expressing the Saxon position, became the symbol for all those who for whatever reason disagreed with the Emperor’s regime. A new understanding of confession arose: the Augsburg Confession became the only valid description of the position of those who did not follow the Emperor. Anti-Imperial, anti-papal, anti-clerical, and many other trends were attached to a document that had nothing to say about these questions.

Schmalkald Articles
The Schmalkald Articles are a summary of Lutheran teaching, written by Martin Luther in 1537, for a meeting of the Schmalkaldic League in preparation for an intended ecumenical Council of the Church. Once again, a combination of political reasoning and an overall strategic impulse initiated the text. Luther's patron, Elector John Frederick of Saxony, asked him to prepare these articles for the League's meeting in 1537, held again in a nice little town in Thuringia, Schmalkalden. The League had been organized in 1531 as a union of various Lutheran territories and cities to provide a united military and political front of defense against Roman
Catholic politicians and armies, led by Emperor Charles V. When the Schmalkaldic League met, Luther became ill with a severe case of kidney stones and was thus unable to attend the meeting. The league ultimately determined not to adopt the articles Luther had written. Philipp Melanchthon, concerned that some would regard Luther’s writing as divisive, influenced the league not to adopt the Smalcald Articles. Melanchthon was asked to write a clear statement on the Papacy and this he did, a document that was adopted at the meeting as the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. The Smalcald Articles were highly prized by John Frederick who ordered that they be made a part of his last will and testament. And though they were not adopted at the meeting of the Schmalkaldic League in 1537, they were widely used and were incorporated into the Book of Concord in 1580 as one of the Lutheran confessions of the faith.

Luther summarized what he regarded to be the most important teaching in Christianity:

_The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 3:24–25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23–25). This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us..._
Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls (Mark 13:31)

Although the intended Council was never held, the Schmalkald Articles were seen as a supplement to the other articulations of Lutheran faith.

It seems to me of greatest importance that Luther’s articulation of faith was of no political or strategic use. Luther had naively formulated what he thought was essential in that particular situation. He neither looked for an eternal, everlasting formulation, nor did he take any notice of political or strategic negotiations. He saw his situation as that of a confessor who in the final battle between Christ and the Anti-Christ had to take sides without reservations or backdoors, fall back positions or further visions of a peaceful future. To him it was essential to confess that he belonged to Christ. How much these convictions were caused by his health and other distracting experiences remains open for discussion.

I should add that Melanchthon did not disagree with Luther. He just looked at the situation differently and produced a text that was designed for political use. One has to see this not as an alternative but as a complementary version. Thus we neither can take the Schmalkald Articles nor the Treatise on the power of the Papacy as an ultimate articulation of Christian faith according to Luther. Rather, they were contemporary articulations of faith and historical interpretations of the situation in the light of an apocalyptic understanding of the Gospel and the final return of Christ.
Territorial Confessions

A new problem arose when Luther died in February 1546. The authentic voice was missing. Now several articulations of evangelical faith appeared and found support and opposition in the various books, treatises, letters and publications of Luther. Who would be able to judge the right “Lutheran” teaching? What is “Lutheran”? What means “Evangelical”? Are they not “Protestants”?

Many questions and even more answers. Since the Reformation was no longer a development of an individual faith or a constitutional power for a small group of believers, the articulation of faith depended on many factors. The Reformation had become a major political movement that was fueled by anti-imperial, anti-ecclesiastical, anti-papal, territorial economic, political, social, and cultural initiatives. No longer did the Reformation mean the dispute about Holy Scripture and its proper interpretation. The Reformation now meant a merger of many different propositions. Its implications include:

- The goal to establish a modern, effective and flexible government.
- An attempt to work out models for social discipline and an homogeneous culture to express the unity of a social and political entity.
- The overall leading principles had to be formulated in a binding confession of faith as the leading principle of government and loyalty. These principles would be promoted through propaganda especially using the new techniques of mass communication.
- Thus methods such as censorship, persecution, and forceful obedience to the legal authorities arose.
• Dissenters, non-conformists and radicals were persecuted, expelled or even executed. The witch-hunt became one of the expressions of confessional fear for the dissolving of cultural, political and social unity or conformity.

• Centers for education and the training of leading elites had to be established.

Confession became the articulation of a particular, territorial, and politically demanded loyalty. The question was not whether someone had an individual task to follow a confession. The crucial question was just whether he wanted to survive in a specific context. Confession became a kind of confessional passport which clearly showed to where and to whom someone belonged.

Consequently, more and more territories became engaged in their individual expression of confessional identity. The look beyond became somewhat secondary. It was much more important to give a handy formatted confession to the folk in the territory than to look abroad. With that the look for the original formulation especially of Luther, Melanchthon or one or the other heirs of Wittenberg became even more minor. The leading figure in the territory might have had a personal relationship with Luther and Wittenberg. However, since this was part of his personal history the overall formulation depended on the actual setting.

Thus a large amount of territorial confessions arose. However, some territorial leaders in search of support and allies looked for a consensus beyond their territorial boundaries. The Schmalkald League was one such territorial federation. Nevertheless, its purpose was political and in fact military: Philipp of Hesse and other authorities had come together to protect themselves against a military ad-
vance of the Emperor and his allies. With the double marriage of Philipp, more or less supported by Luther and Melanchthon, his leadership became impossible. No one was able to take his position. More than 10 years later it was Moritz of Saxony who had fought at side of the Emperor in the Schmalkald war but then changed his alliance and became the leader of a group of princes to defeat the Emperor in his politics regarding Germany.

Moritz found in Melanchthon his theological advisor. Since Moritz was a power-oriented politician, Melanchthon came into his shadow and his loyalty to Luther was more and more questioned. After the “armored diet” of Augsburg in 1548 an interim document had been passed on May 15, which reestablished a formal unity of the catholic faith with regard to rites and ceremonies. The question of an ultimate consensus in doctrine was postponed and expected to be worked out in inter-confessional dialogue over the next years.

Conflict arose in the parish not only over the extent of the reestablishment of previous and abandoned customs; conflict also arose about which essentials could be and could not be given up: How much does the elevation of the host signify the complete agreement to the theory of the sacrifice in the Mass? Is it necessary to reformulate the evangelical prayer – especially during Eucharist? How much attention has to be given to incense, vestments, songs, and rites? While Melanchthon focused on the teaching and preaching which had not been regulated by the Interim, other theologians like Nikolaus of Amsdorf, and Matthias Flacius Illyricus viewed even the so called “Adiaphora” – the intermediate things – as essential. No half inch should be given to the ursurpatory Catholics. The group of conservative opponents to the politically initiated peace called back on Luther
and his writings – especially those that clearly addressed Luther’s opposite views. On the contrary, the group aligned with Melanchthon referred to previous writings of Luther and the structure of his thought. While the first group in inter-confessional polemics became labeled as “Gnesio Lutheran” – originally, genetically related to the true and only Luther, the other group was labeled as “Philippists or Melanchthonists” and later on even as “Krypto Calvinists.”

The main topics of the dispute were

- *adiaphora*, i.e. rites, ceremonies, vestments, etc.
- the amount of free choice within the human act
- questions of law and gospel and the need for penance
- justification and sanctification, the effects of justification by faith
- questions surrounding original sin, predestination and perseverance, and
- Christ’s presence in the Eucharist.

The opponents supported their arguments by quoting Luther length or appealing to personal experiences of his teaching and preaching, his letters and pastoral care. Luther and his original sayings became often much more important than Scripture and the ecclesiastical tradition. Even the witness of the *auctoritas partum* became subordinated to Luther’s sayings. A large number of editions were published and theologians searched for ultimate principles for solving the theological controversies.

Although an interim solution was achieved in Augsburg 1555 by approving two confessionally related denominations of the Christian faith – the relatives of the Augsburg Confession and the followers of Rome – theological strife arose even
more vehemently. Now the Calvinists had to find their spot within the political regulations after Augsburg. However, the Catholics too needed some kind of normative formulation. This was finally passed at the Council of Trent with the *Confessio fidei tridentina* – a binding summary for all members of the Church that understood itself as the holy catholic, i.e. evangelical, apostolic and universal church.

For Lutherans the Augsburg Confession was still valid. However, Melanchthon had edited it many times and so the question became very urgent to decide which version of the Augsburg Confession could be held as the general proclamation of evangelical faith. Conflict arose especially with regard to article 10 – on the Eucharist – and the understanding of most articles related to the questions of justification, sanctification, good works, original sin, and penance. Many individual and territorial confessions, understood as specifications of the original document, were published and fueled further conflict.

The reformed tradition likewise had to find a conclusion to the differences between the Zurich and the Genevean Reformers and their reception in the upper German lands and lower countries of the Habsburg Empire. A catechism worked out in Heidelberg became the German version, while the *Confessio Helvetica posterior* succeeded the *Confessio Tetrapolitana* as a summary of confessions from Zurich, Geneva, Basel and Bern.

Most of these confessions were rooted in the need for political unity and a federation of Protestants against the majority of imperial alliances. As such, they arti-
culated faith in the perspective of political action, cultural need and social homogeneity.

Nevertheless, the notion of an overall unity of evangelical faith and its proper articulation became more and more urgent. When Melanchthon died in February 1560 one of the last genuine originators of the Wittenberg Reformation lost his voice. The number of interpreters raised and the need for unity became even greater.

**Formula of Concord**

In 1568 a Wuerttemberg theologian and chancellor of the university in Tuebingen, Jakob Andreae, was called to Braunschweig-Wolfenbuettel, a small principality in Northern Germany, to help establishing the Reformation. He did this by using a new method. Instead of just explaining the original text of the Augsburg Confession he wrote a summary of what he thought would be an adequate articulation of evangelical faith for Braunschweig. This was intensively debated, even though a convention of theologians gathered in 1576 in Torgau referred to this text and agreed on a conclusive explanation of those topics which had not been clarified by the Augsburg confession. This document became entitled: “Thorough, pure, correct and final repetition and explanation of many articles of the Augsburg Confession out of which between many theologians has arisen conflict, following the Word of God and a concise summary of our Christian doctrine added and compared”. The baroque title became abbreviated as the Formula of Concord. It understood itself not as a new confession but as a commentary on the Augsburg Confession. There is one major article in the beginning and 12 more dealing with doctrines of sin and free will, justification and sanctification (good works, Law and
Gospel, penance, third use of the law), Christology and Eucharist, predestination, ceremonies and rites. Each article formulated a compromise between the two most battling groups: Philippists and Gnesio-Lutherans. This consensus was followed by articulations of differences. However, they were counted as finally not splitting the unity. Instead, they could be accepted under the presupposition of the larger amount of binding powers of the common evangelical faith. Although compromise stood at the center, a decisive interpretation of Scripture or the words of Luther was not articulated.

While the Formula of Concord expressed a final consensus, the Book of Concord, published 3 years later, collected the essential and ground laying works of the evangelical faith: the three symbols (Athanasian, Apostolic, and Nicean Creeds), the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and its Apology, the Schmalkald Articles from 1537, the treatise on the power and primacy of the Pope, the Small and the Greater Catechisms, the Formula of Concord and an appendix which contained quotations from the auctoritas patrum on Christ and his work.

Even though this book did not completely extinguish the flames of conflict and disagreement, for the first time it collected the major expressions of the evangelical faith and allowed an identification beyond the individual writings of Luther and Melanchthon.

Let us sum up our brief historical survey:

1. Evangelical Confession arose from conflict: either an outward enemy or inner controversy made it necessary to give an ultimate binding articulation
of what had to be believed and to articulate adequately the consensus of at least one denomination within the larger Christianity.

2. At no time did the confessions understand themselves to be the ultimate, everlasting articulation of Christian truth. Their authors were aware of the fact that they had to find formulations here and now in order to avoid further division.

3. Since all of these confessions originated in the wake of consensus and with the intention to overcome conflict, they contain hermeneutically a large amount of tolerance. The Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord reformulate the anathemas of the Early Church but do not add newer ones to them. The confessions as formulated in the 16th century were aware of their particularity and allowed diversity.

4. Even though they had been initially launched to extinguish the flames of conflict, they did not succeed in this attempt. Even larger conflict and more diversity developed in the following decennia and centuries. Diversity, pluriformity, and even contradicting positions became the birthmark of the evangelical faith and its public performance.

3. Bible, Luther, and the Lutherans

This leads us to a major problem of how to understand Protestantism and its inner unity. Luther articulated his interpretation of Bible and his life’s orientation out of a conflict: His formulations refer to some major tribulations which had been caused, as he put it, misinterpretations of Scripture. Even though this critique was harsh – and sometimes exaggerated if not over the top – he never intended to invent a new religion, found a new church, or even to break away from
Rome. I have spoken on this subject extensively here and will thus recall just a few elements of Luther’s theology.

Luther wanted to correct and reform the Catholic Church because of the biblical expression of faith and pious conviction. Since his major concern was that the ecclesiastical teaching did not match his needs, he developed a theology of relations; he did not go into details of doctrine. He looked for the “pro me”, the “for me” of a saying. He did not ask, what God is, whether he exists, what species he belongs to. Luther asked how God would act graciously, merciful toward him – the little, unfaithful, tempted and afflicted monk in Wittenberg. Luther did not ask how the two natures of Christ could be understood. He asked, what did Christ do for me? We could prolong the list of questions forever.

I think it is essential to understand Luther’s theology in a relative manner. Luther articulated expressions of how God is related to man and vice versa. While the first relation can be labeled grace, the latter must be labeled sin. Going through the various relations in which man exists we might be able to label all these with traditional theological terms. However, this labeling is anything but stable and continuous. Luther distinguished between the perspective of man and the perspective of God. Thus what man might call righteous and just appears in the perspective of God as sin and bad work. Luther denies that man ever could take an overall perspective that would allow him to distinguish “good and evil” in God’s perspective. Your association is right: that was the gift the serpent put out for Adam and Eve. And actually the desire to become like God, to take his perspective, to judge good and evil – exactly that separates us from God and thus becomes labeled sin.
Up this background we now may understand why Luther rejected any casuistic understanding of theology: if a than b has to be done away with. If you do b it is good, if you do anything else it is bad. Circumstances, environment, context, intentions, good will and bad outcome – that all shapes an action. The ultimate question, however, is whether an action brings me nearer to God or performs my own capacity and vain interest. This question cannot be answered and decided by man – it needs the perspective of God.

Thus Luther never wanted to be taken as one who decides, as the one judge who decides cases. On the contrary, probably the greatest offense ever happened to Luther when his former colleague and later opponent Andreas Karlstadt addressed him as the “Pope in Wittenberg” because Luther became something like a final authority to any kind of question within the evangelical movement. Luther was so offended because he saw that Karlstadt was right: since Luther had to argue about everything, his decisions became a model for proper evangelical living and thus Lutherans had made him some kind of Pope. Luther knew all too well that this was exactly what defines the Antichrist.

To conclude: making Luther’s teaching a doctrine perverts his initial understanding of theology. Any of the major characteristics of his theology contains the description of a relation:

- Law and Gospel
- God and Man
- Sin and Grace
- Paradox Theology
• And much more ....

If we make the powerful exchange a static entity, we crucify the proclamation of the gospel, the word of God, with nails made out of laws and correct doctrine. The liveliness and vitality of Luther’s theology arose out of his personal relation to God. That’s why he never wanted to become a leading figure or a model of faith. Luther could, as we all know, argue with rigor and self-confidence. Nevertheless the intention of his preaching, teaching, and pastoral care was to turn the sinner’s eyes to the crucified that had already redeemed him. This perspective has to be taken quite individually. Probably no case matches the other.

4. Ecumenical Outlook
Bearing in mind Luther’s own theology, it is actually is anachronistic, contra-productive and against Luther’s original intention to call someone a Lutheran, or even worse, a specific church Lutheran. If one takes Luther’s position serious one should look for a proper expression of evangelical faith based on Scripture and performed in the love of God.

Academic theology has to reflect on these expressions. Its task is certainly not to decide whether a saying or hypothesis is right or wrong, but to see whether it make sense in the overall meaning of a merciful God and his everlasting love to man.

Nevertheless – beside this pious and enthusiastic spiritualism, the questions has to be answered: What rules the Church? What rules Christianity?
a) Bluntly spoken: the word of God that has to be proclaimed every day anew.

b) A subtle and thorough investigation of the nuts and bolts of an expression of faith beyond its original context. Theologians have to answer the question whether a personal expression of faith can be taken out of its context and made a general, binding formula.

c) Two thousand years of lively expressions of faith have accumulated much insight that helps one understand whether an individual saying can be accepted or not. Yes – you are right – I opt for tradition. I opt for the historical understanding of articulations of faith. Future needs roots. History reveals the roots of our faith, our piety. That’s why Augustine could say that his faith contains nothing which he had not received from Holy Mother Church.

d) However, tradition can err and mislead. We need the correction through the word of God. This was always believed in the ancient church and in the Middle Ages. Nothing else did Luther have in mind. Tradition should not overcome the proclamation of the Gospel.

e) Thus, the evangelical tradition, which is rooted deeply in controversy and conflict, never should overcome a vital expression of faith here and today.

Ecumenical dialogue is a wonderful opportunity to converse about the variety of worldwide Christianity and its expression of faith. None of us might say that his view goes beyond and can overthrow the perspective of others. Ecumenical dialogue hopefully comes back to the mutual respect of the 60s and 70s out of which
community and consensus might grow. This community likewise includes Augustine, Thomas, Luther and other more modern theologians from Ignatius to John Paul II, from Bartholomaeus de las Casas to Dom Helder Camara, from John Calvin to Karl Barth. Luther is – probably because he never wanted to articulate a binding formulation of eternal truth – an extremely valid witness of biblically grounded faith.

Thank you!