

## COMMENTS ON SOME OF MY THESES

As a result of questions and reactions I have had to the 94 theses I published online on October 31, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what is generally considered to be the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, I would like to share some comments on a number of these theses.

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*Thesis 1. The only true God is the God who loves all people equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly. This is the God proclaimed by Jesus and the writings of the Old and New Testaments. Any who believe in a God who does not love all people equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly believe in a false God. By no means, however, are Christians the only ones who believe in the true God or in Jesus.*

As I say further on in my theses, there are senses in which things are true and not true at the same time. Each of the affirmations in this thesis should be interpreted with that in mind.

When Christians as well as many non-Christians speak of “God,” they tend to assume that we are all talking about the same supreme being. However, there are countless conceptions of God that differ greatly among themselves. Thus, when we speak of God, we need to define or specify to which God or conception of God we are referring. Most of us would agree that there are conceptions of God that we would find not only unacceptable but offensive and pernicious as well, in contrast to other conceptions that we would affirm, sometimes even strongly and ardently. This raises the question: What should serve as the

criterion for determining which conceptions of God are acceptable and which are not?

My answer to that question is that the only acceptable conceptions of God are those that affirm that God loves all people “equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly.” I believe that this is the God we find in Scripture. Any God who loves only some people but not all, for example, or who loves some people more than others, for me is not the true God. Nor is any God whose love is conditional, since I believe that true love is by nature unconditional. Of course, as I state further on in my theses, I understand “love” in terms of seeking the well-being and wholeness of others. So when I say that God loves all people in that way, I mean that God seeks the well-being and wholeness of all people “equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly.” And obviously, if we do not believe in such a God, then we have no basis for affirming that as human beings we also are to love all people in the same way, since God can hardly ask us to do something that God himself does not do.

When I say that Christians are not the only ones who believe in the true God, what I mean is that I am sure that there are many people of other faiths, whether they be Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or of some other faith tradition, who would agree with the statement, “The only true God is the God who loves all people equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly.” Of course, in many ways their concept of that God will be different from my own as a Christian. But if they believe in a God who loves all people in that way, who am I to say that they do not believe in the true

God? Furthermore, if we can agree on this point with people of other faith traditions, then I think we can work together for justice and well-being in this world, whereas I would find it difficult to work with someone of any faith who does not believe in a God who loves all people in this way. In thesis 79, I affirm that, while there is a sense in which people of different faiths can be said to believe in the same God, we must recognize that in another sense we all believe in different Gods.

I would also add that I believe there are many Christians who do *not* believe in a God who loves all people “equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly.” For example, they think that God loves Christians more than non-Christians, or even despises non-Christians or unrepentant sinners. Even among Christians, therefore, we have concepts of God that differ from one person or group to another. But if as Christians we can agree that God loves all people “equally, unconditionally, and unreservedly,” then I think we can say that we believe in the same God, in spite of the different ways in which we conceive of that God.

Finally, I think we would all agree that those who do not identify themselves as Christians do not believe in Jesus in the same way that Christians do. However, there are Jews who believe in Jesus in some sense. Muslims believe in Jesus as a great prophet, and Gandhi used to say he believed in Jesus. Among Christians, in fact, there are many different conceptions of Jesus, and some even conceive of him primarily as a great man, leader, or prophet, as many non-Christians do. Of course, as I state further on in my theses (see for example 30-31), I personally believe in Jesus as both fully human and as the only-

begotten Son of God, in contrast to those who are not Christians. But if one asks many non-Christians if they believe in Jesus, they would respond, “Yes.”

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*Thesis 8. God commands that we obey her for our own sakes.*

A number of people found it strange that throughout the theses, I refer to God at times with feminine pronouns (as a “she”) and at others times with masculine pronouns (as a “he”). I explain the reasons for this in my article on “Inclusive God-Language,” which can be accessed from the right-hand column of the same page as my 94 Theses.

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*Thesis 12. Those who deny that human beings have evolved from other species in an evolutionary process that has spanned billions of years deny as well some of the most basic truths of the biblical story of creation. Only a God whose love knows no limits would create us in such a way so as to leave us scratching our heads and wondering, “Why on earth did God wait so long to bring us into existence? And why did he put us in the middle of such a huge playground? And where in the world is all of this going?”*

What are some of the basic truths to which I am referring in this thesis? The author of Genesis 1 wished to stress the immensity, power, and greatness of God, yet he conceived of earth and heaven as relatively small in comparison to the vast and seemingly limitless universe we have now discovered. After all, the author of Genesis believed that the different stars and luminaries were part of a dome that God had placed over the earth (Gen. 1:14-18). The first two chapters of

Genesis also stress the special and unique place of human beings in God's creation, since they were created after everything else in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27) or towards the very beginning of God's activity (Gen. 2:4-7). Yet does not the notion that the process of bringing human beings into existence is the culmination of billions of years of divine activity stress just as strongly how special and unique human beings are for God, if not more so? If God took such a long time and such great care to craft us into the beings we are, was it not because he regarded us as extraordinary, marvelous, and extremely precious?

The Genesis account also speaks of God creating the earth, separating the waters from one another and from the dry earth, and bringing vegetation and then birds, sea creatures, and other living beings into existence during the first six days of creation, before creating human beings. It also stresses repeatedly that all of this was "good" (Gen. 1:1-13). This implies that God delighted in the creation of all of these things and creatures, "rejoicing" in them as expressions of his wisdom, as Prov. 8:22-31 affirms. Yet if it took billions of years for the universe and the earth to be formed, and then the development of living beings on earth has also taken several billion years, was it not because God was taking such enormous delight in all that he had created? Does not God rejoice in and love each one of the multitudes of celestial bodies in the countless galaxies and constellations he has created, the breathtaking geological forms that have appeared on the earth, and the makeup and evolution of living beings stretching from the most simple single-celled organisms and the atoms and molecules that make them up to the most complex creatures

that exist? Even though countless species of living beings that once existed have disappeared at different moments of the earth's history, did it not bring God tremendous joy to see the wonderful new species that were able to come into existence, even when they were made possible by the evolution and extinction of other species that had also brought God great pleasure? If God has taken such a long time to carry out the process that has led to our existence, can it be for any reason other than that he was spending so much time admiring and relishing all of the things that were taking place, and that he loves the rest of creation just as much as he loves human beings? And was not his purpose in taking such a long time also to make a world so elaborate, multiform, magnificent, and sublime that, no longer how much we contemplate and study it—including not only its present state but its past and future as well—, we can never cease to be amazed? Was this not, then, an act of love towards us all that equals or even exceeds the love of God described implicitly in Genesis 1-2?

The biblical creation accounts also wish to stress the variety and complexity of the beings that God created. Has not science shown us that this variety and complexity are far, far greater than those who wrote and told those accounts could ever have imagined? And is it not an expression of God's love towards us as human beings that, the more we try to fathom and understand what God has created and preserves, the more fascinated and enthralled we become with what God has done and the more we are led to stand in awe and marvel at the variety, intricacy, beauty, and complexity of everything that exists? Does this not cause our faith in God to become even deeper and

greater, rather than calling into question or undermining that faith?

God's love of diversity is therefore also expressed throughout the creation accounts. The greater the diversity, the more there is to appreciate, admire, and treasure. Such diversity also enables each being to give to others in ways that are special and unique. The tremendous advances in modern science have allowed us to realize that, as a result of the evolutionary process, this diversity is far greater than those who preserved and wrote the biblical account of creation could ever have imagined. We now know that there are over a million different species of living beings, which means that a single man could never have named all of these species as Adam is said to have done (Gen. 2:19-20). Yet if the biblical idea is that, by naming the different species, Adam brought each one into a special relationship with himself and his descendants, then it is clear once more that the extent of God's love for all living creatures and the human beings who relate to them is even greater than the biblical accounts are able to articulate.

In Gen. 2:15, God is said to have given to the first man the task of tilling the soil and keeping up the garden in which he had been placed. Does this passage not anticipate and point to all of the different things that human beings would do, make, and form by means of the elements of nature at their disposal and, if so, could the author of this passage ever have imagined how human beings would evolve to the point of being able to invent, design, fashion, construct, and produce the incredible variety of things that exist in our world today?

The creation accounts also imply cycles of life and death among the plants, trees, and

fruits that God created, and probably the same type of cycles among all of the other living beings that God brought into existence as well (Gen. 1:11-12, 20-30). This indicates that from the beginning death was part of a natural process that serves to make new life possible. While in many cases death is painful, does not the fact that over billions of years death has resulted in the appearance of new forms of life suggest that, both by living and by dying, each living thing and being ultimately lives and dies for others? And does this not testify to God's intention that, both in life and death, each living being express its love for the rest of the created order by contributing in many different ways to the preservation and flourishing of that order?

Rather than seeing the relationship among different living beings as one of competition characterized by the "survival of the fittest," that relationship can be understood as one of cooperation and symbiosis, as each being contributes in some way to the proliferation of life. This is true even of those living beings that are killed by others in order to serve as food for them, since their death allows other forms of life to continue. While the biblical creation accounts do not develop this point, they clearly imply that the different forms of life serve to give life to others.

The creation accounts also imply that the future is open and not yet fully defined, and that as we live and evolve in God's good creation, we come to find meaning and purpose in our life. Those accounts never state explicitly what the meaning and purpose of life is. Is not the reason for this that, as we evolve, God wants us to continue to discern and discover meaning and purpose in life and in our world in general, and thus has not

defined this himself for us in a way that would limit us and our future?

The belief that life in general and human beings in particular have evolved over an extremely long period of time leads us to conclude that God intended for us to keep learning and growing in a process that would be gradual and thus cherished extensively. The idea that, out of love for us, God wants us to continuously enjoy and cherish learning, growing, and developing is implied in the biblical account of creation, even though it is not explicitly stated there.

The list of ways in which the evolutionary process that has led up to the present and to human life as we know it underscores and develops even further ideas that can be discerned in the biblical accounts of creation could go on and on. Of course, to believe in such an evolutionary process does not in itself call into question Paul's affirmation that at present the creation has been "subjected to futility" and is "groaning in labor pains," awaiting the day in which it will be "set free from its bondage to decay" in order to "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-23). Yet, viewed from the perspective outlined here, it should be clear that to deny that we are the result of an extremely lengthy evolutionary process involves denying some of the most basic truths that the biblical accounts are intended to affirm, at least in the sense that the denial of such a process minimizes the extent and enormity of God's love.

Finally, it is important to stress that even if we do not regard as true the biblical account of creation in a literal or historical sense, we may still affirm emphatically that, in a figurative sense, that account is indeed true,

because it conveys and reflects faithfully the most important truths about who we are in relation to God and the world, where we come from, and what God desires for us and our world. Above all, the biblical account underscores the conviction that the God in whom we believe is exceedingly loving and good, and that it was that same love that led God to create this world that in essence is likewise "exceedingly good" (Gen. 1:31).

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*Thesis 13. What we call science is not really knowledge but only belief. Scientists say, "We have strong and at times overwhelming evidence that leads us to believe that certain hypotheses that we make are true, and on that basis, there are other things that we believe to be true as well. But because we cannot be absolutely sure, we have to keep on trying out more hypotheses and examining more evidence." In this way, scientists are just like Christians.*

In this thesis, my intention is by no means to call into question the countless discoveries and advances that science has made possible. Rather, my point is that even the knowledge we have come to possess is ultimately based on beliefs—beliefs about things such as the nature of reality, the veracity of our perceptions and experiences, and the "laws" that govern the way the world works. Ultimately, because everything that we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch is communicated to our brain through electrical impulses, we constantly make the assumption that those electrical impulses convey to us what is real. Furthermore, our beliefs, emotions, memories, and state of mind shape the way our brain receives, interprets, and organizes those impulses, so that to some degree our brain not

only *perceives* reality but also *constructs* and even *creates* it by attempting to make sense of what we perceive.

All of this has important implications for our faith. Our beliefs and convictions regarding God, ourselves, and the world affect the way we see and understand reality and give meaning to our lives. At the same time, however, those beliefs and convictions are based on and derived from our experiences in life. We may be convinced that we truly have experienced God in many different ways and through many different people and events in our life, and consequently we may regard these experiences as “evidence” that supports our core beliefs about who we are, what our life is about, and the way we should and actually do relate to God, others, and the world around us. In this sense, Christians are just like scientists in that their beliefs about reality are based on what they regard as “evidence” that confirms and corroborates those beliefs. Yet, like scientists, throughout their life Christians must continue to examine and analyze the evidence for their beliefs, and as they do so they constantly refine, redefine, reconsider, rethink, and reshape those beliefs. As a result, their faith is always a “work in progress” and remains dynamic, active, inquisitive, and life-giving. When this process ceases to take place in them, their faith becomes stale, stagnant, and sedentary, and it may even wither and die.

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*On thesis 19, which alludes to taking up one's cross to follow Jesus, and thesis 27, which mentions the willingness of Paul and Luther to die*

*for their faith, see my online article, “Dying to be Lutheran,” available at my website 94t.mx.*

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*On theses 20-24, see my book, “Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought” (forthcoming).*

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*Thesis 33. In order to understand why the Old and New Testament writings affirm that at times God makes or lets people suffer for their own good, we must remember that the authors of those writings took as a starting-point their conviction that God is pure, unconditional love and then tried to figure out why God had caused or allowed certain bad things to happen. Every person is entitled to try to make sense of her own suffering by resorting to such explanations, but it is cruel and monstrous to use those explanations to interpret the suffering of others.*

Throughout the Bible, God is said to make or allow people to suffer for the purpose of leading them to recognize their sin and repent of it, testing and strengthening their faith, disciplining them for sins they have committed, correcting their sinful behavior, preventing the propagation of the same kind of behavior among others, and demonstrating to them and others the harmful consequences of that behavior. Because all of these objectives can be regarded as being motivated by love, these explanations allowed those who experienced suffering to reconcile that suffering with their belief in a God of love who always acted out of concern for their own well-being. According to this way of thinking, God ultimately has a loving purpose when God makes or allows people to suffer.

Thus, for example, when the people of Israel endured death, destruction, and exile at

the hands of foreign nations, rather than concluding that the God YHWH in whom they believed had abandoned them, did not exist, or perhaps was not as powerful as the gods of the other nations, many of the people saw this suffering as God's response to their sinfulness. The same was true when the people as a whole or certain groups or individuals experienced illness, famine, or other hardships: the only reason the good, loving, and all-powerful God in whom they believed would allow such things was because God was seeking either their good or that of others in some way.

Any believer is free to resort to explanations of this type in order interpret his or her own suffering or ascribe some meaning and purpose to it. When Christians look back to times in their life when they experienced hardships and suffering, they often are convinced that God used those painful and difficult experiences to transform them in some way for the better or to accomplish some loving purpose in their lives, and thus may even regard what they suffered as a "blessing in disguise" from God. Of course, at other times, they will not see the suffering or loss they have experienced as positive in any way and will instead struggle to reconcile what has happened with their belief in a God of love.

To make use of those types of explanations to interpret the suffering of others, however, is cruel and monstrous because it involves affirming that their suffering is God's response to some sin they have committed, thus making them responsible for their own suffering, or claiming that their suffering is actually something *good*, since God has some loving purpose in making or allowing them to suffer.

They are thus in essence told that they are themselves to blame for their suffering or that they should accept their suffering with gladness, gratitude, and resignation rather than seeking healing or relief from that suffering, which would be contrary to God's will. They are also thereby told that they must consider a God who willfully inflicts pain and suffering on them as good, kind, and gracious, as if hurting people were an act of love.

Therefore, rather than attempting to explain, interpret, or justify the suffering of others on the basis of explanations such as those mentioned above that appear in Scripture, we should simply accompany and care for those who suffer and do what we can to allow them to experience God's love through us in the midst of that suffering and in spite of it. The reason why God allows suffering will always remain a mystery to us in this life.

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*Thesis 46. As Luther noted, even the best things we do are tainted with sin. Everything good that we do, then, is in some way bad as well.*

I understand Luther's affirmation that even the best things we do are tainted with sin, not in the sense that we sin by attempting to "earn" our salvation and justification through good works, but in the sense that all of us, including believers in Christ, remain sinners throughout our life because of the sinful human nature which we all share. As St. Paul writes in Rom. 7:15-23, the sin—that is, the *power* of sin—that dwells in us constantly leads us to do sinful things that we do *not* want to do and at the same time inhibits us from doing the good things that we *do* want to do. With the help of Christ and God's Spirit,

of course, we are able to overcome this tendency to some extent, but not completely.

However, the sinful nature that is common to all of us also leads us to construct and propagate sinful systems and structures that harm us all. These systems and structures pervade the world as a whole, leaving us no choice but to live under them and within them in societies that are inevitably corrupt and dominated by sin. Thus, even when we do things that are good, the sin that is within us and all around us affects what we do as well as the consequences of our actions.

Sin therefore “taints” all the good that we seek to do in many different ways: it may lead us to attempt to do what we consider to be good for the wrong reasons, corrupt our good intentions, bring us to be motivated in part by self-interest rather than love for others, make it impossible for our actions to have consequences that are entirely good, and lead us to do things that not only help others but also end up hurting either them or someone else in some way. That sin may blind us to what is truly good or truly needed, leave us with no choice but to do certain things that are *not* good in order to accomplish the good we desire, prevent us from accomplishing that good fully, inhibit us from following through with all that we should continue to do, or force us to do things that we do not want to do when we are trying only to do good. The good we do often contributes as well in some way to the preservation and proliferation of the same sinful and oppressive systems and structures that we seek to see weakened or destroyed, keeping them firmly in place rather than diminishing their domination over us. In short, because we are sinful people and live in a sinful world, sin is always present in some

way in everything we do, no matter how good our actions may be.

For all of these reasons, we can affirm that everything good we do is in some way bad as well. To say that something is *bad*, however, is not necessarily to say that it is *wrong*. Rather, the idea is that, because we live in a fallen, sinful world, nothing in this world can be purely and entirely good. To help someone in need inevitably involves neglecting others who also have needs, and often even neglecting oneself or one’s loved ones, which is not good. Because our time, energy, and resources are always limited, we can never do all the good we would like to do or ought to do. We can never care for everyone, and thus to care for some requires that we not care for others. To love people always involves paying a price or sacrificing something in our own life or the life of others, which can never be entirely good for us or them. In addition, because we all depend on resources that can only come from our natural environment, we can’t help but do some type of damage to that environment as we seek to preserve and enrich our lives and those of others.

Why is it important to point these things out? Precisely because God calls and commands all of us to do what is good, right, and just. As we strive to do what God commands of us, we must constantly be aware of the fact that our actions will always be tainted by sin and never be entirely good. This awareness leads us not only to seek constantly God’s help and forgiveness, but also to analyze and evaluate carefully what we do in order to avoid as much as possible doing things that are wrong or bad for us or others as we seek to do good.



*Thesis 62. Because God created sex and God is good, we must not condemn it when two mature, single adults decide to establish a healthy sexual relationship that is characterized by mutual love, full and unpressured consent, and a commitment to be faithful to one another, even when these two persons are of the same gender. On the contrary, we should be elated and rejoice with God when s/he provides a person with such a partner. If they can be married publicly, we should encourage them to consider doing so for their own sake, since to make a life-long commitment to one's partner enables both to dig together a well that keeps getting deeper and deeper. In that way, they can constantly satisfy their thirst with water that is always fresh.*

People often criticize relationships that are sexual in nature between two single and mature adults, even when those relationships are healthy and are characterized by a deep and sincere love for one another. There are many different reasons for this. These may have to do with age differences, racial questions, social and economic considerations, the fact that the two have not formally been married, or the fact that they are of the same gender. Many biblical scholars have written extensively on this last question, demonstrating convincingly that the biblical texts that appear to condemn sexual relationships between two persons of the same gender were actually addressing practices and situations that were very different from those that exist today when two persons who are of the same gender truly love and care for each other, and live in a healthy relationship marked by a commitment to be faithful to one another and share their lives with one another.

Furthermore, according to the British historian and scholar Diarmaid MacCulloch, it was not until the late medieval period that the Roman Catholic Church "relabelled marriage

as one of seven sacraments, and then battled to convince the laity to accept a central implication of this: a sacrament necessarily needed to be administered within the framework of the Church's liturgy, so marriages ought to take place in church and cohabitation should not begin before that had happened. In this the medieval Western Church failed. The laity clung to the conviction (accepted officially in earlier centuries of the Church's life) that although marriage might be a gift of God, an act of marriage consisted of an act of consent between the man and the woman concerned. Sexual relations started from that point, and a wedding in church, if it happened at all, was an optional extra. All that changed in the sixteenth century. Protestants and Catholics, regardless of their different attitudes to the sacramental status of marriage, both relabelled as fornication sexual activities which had been popularly seen as the first stage of marriage, and then re-educated populations to see this activity as sinful" (*Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*; London: Allen Lane, 2003, p. 634). Thus concepts regarding marriage have varied greatly among Christians over the centuries, and neither the Old or New Testament prescribe any type of ceremony or rite to be performed in order for two people to be married.

From my own experience, however, I have learned that what leads many Christians to accept sexual relationships of the type described above that have traditionally been deemed as sinful or illegitimate is not any type of argument based on reinterpretations of Scripture, but becoming acquainted with couples in such relationships who love and serve God with a sincere heart and care deeply and genuinely for one another in a

healthy and wholesome manner. When people get to know such couples, they generally realize that they can no longer condemn and censure the relationship that those couples enjoy, but can only see it as something that is wonderful and pleasing to God and rejoice that God has given to each of them a partner with whom they can share their life.

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*Thesis 66. To say that a wife should submit to her husband because he is male or that women should submit to men because of their gender is inhumane, sadistic, and contrary to Scripture.*

Many Christians would point to passages such as 1 Cor. 11:3-16, 14:33-35, Eph. 5:22-24, Col. 3:18, and 1 Tim. 2:11-15 as clear evidence that what this thesis affirms is false. Others, however, have argued convincingly that the traditional readings of passages such as these are based on assumptions that do not reflect or represent faithfully the thought behind them. (See, for example, many of the articles found on the website [juniaproject.com](http://juniaproject.com) )

In any case, none of the passages just mentioned affirm explicitly that a wife should submit to her husband *because he is male* or that women should submit to men *because of their gender*. Instead, they must be viewed in their original context, where social norms generally dictated that men and women assume different roles in their daily life. For example, women usually did not have access to the same levels of education or the same labor opportunities that many men did. As in many regions of the world today, the situation of women in society was often a precarious one. Women who ventured unaccompanied out of their homes faced certain dangers and

ran certain risks that men who went out on their own did not.

Thus the New Testament passages that affirm that wives should submit to their husbands or seem to suggest that women in general should not assume certain roles generally assigned to men can and should be read as reflecting certain norms and social conditions of the day. It was not the fact that men are male in gender and women are female that lay behind such affirmations, then, but rather the fact that in the contexts in which those epistles were written, gender roles were defined in different ways due to the social realities that prevailed, and it seemed best to the authors of those epistles that at least some of those roles be retained within the church at that time.

Nevertheless, because in our present-day contexts social conditions and gender differences are no longer the same as they were in New Testament times, the passages mentioned above must not be applied directly to relations between husbands and wives and men and women today. To do so contributes to gender inequity and has often led women abused by their husbands or by other men to feel obliged to accept such abuse passively, as if this type of response were pleasing to God. In fact, at times such abuse has even been justified as an “act of love” on the basis of passages such as those considered above, since supposedly it is for the woman’s good. This is inhumane, sadistic, and contrary to Scripture (see also theses 51 and 90).

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*Thesis 80. There are so many wonderful and incomparable things in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism that are lacking in Christianity. Likewise, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses possess many treasures that Lutherans can only envy.*

Obviously, there are many beliefs and practices in other faith traditions that are incompatible with the Christian faith. However, anyone who spends time among people of faith traditions such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among others, or enters into dialogue with people of those faith traditions, soon discovers that there are many wonderful and incomparable things in those traditions that bring those people joy, promote their well-being and wholeness, and give meaning to their lives. As Christians, we should see this as something good, rather than merely rejecting and condemning everything found in those faith traditions.

Of course, just as there are many things that Christians find unacceptable in those traditions, Christians must also realize that there is much in Christianity that is unacceptable for people of other traditions, in large part because Christians so often fail to live and act in accordance with what their own faith tradition teaches. The same is true of people of other faith traditions, who often fail to live out and act in accordance with their own tradition. For this reason, we must not condemn as a whole other faith traditions simply because some of those who belong to such traditions do bad things in the name of their faith—things that even others who belong to the same faith tradition regard as contrary to that tradition.

Similarly, there are many teachings and practices in other Christian traditions that Lutheran Christians disagree with and find unacceptable, just as there are teachings and practices that some Lutherans affirm in contrast to others who do not. At the same time, Lutheran Christians must acknowledge that in other Christian traditions one can find many good things that Lutheran Christians lack. One can point to many aspects of Roman Catholic and Pentecostal spirituality, for example, that are admirable, uplifting, edifying, comforting, and transformative for believers who belong to those traditions, yet do not form part of the Lutheran tradition. Believers of these traditions also have perspectives on faith, life, and the world that other Christians, such as Lutherans, can learn a great deal from. Each Christian tradition and confession has a unique history and emphasizes different aspects of Christian faith and practice that sets it apart from other Christian traditions and confessions. Of course, each Christian tradition and confession—including Lutheranism in its different forms—also contains elements that many other Christians disagree with and thus do not accept or adopt.

Most Christians maintain that, because of their distinct beliefs and teachings, Jehovah's Witnesses should not be considered Christian. Christians also find objectionable many other aspects of the faith and practice of Jehovah's Witnesses, including their inflexibility with regard to their interpretations of Scripture and their inability to dialogue about their beliefs with an open mind from a critical perspective. Nevertheless, among Jehovah's Witnesses there are some things that can be regarded as admirable, such as their sense of community and unity, their zeal for sharing beliefs that

they consider beneficial for others, and the sense of joy, peace, and hope that their faith produces in many of them. Rather than making Jehovah's Witnesses and people who belong to similar groups that we may regard as pseudo-Christian the object of scorn, ridicule, and contempt, as many Christians do, we must respect them and show them our love, just as we must show love to people in general rather than disparaging or disrespecting them.

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*On thesis 81, see the end of my article, "Dying to be Lutheran," available on this website.*

*David A. Brondos  
December 6, 2017*