



Dying to be
Lutheran

DYING TO BE LUTHERAN

What does it mean to be Lutheran? Can one rightly call oneself Lutheran if one does not fully identify with the Northern European culture in which Lutheranism originally arose, or is Lutheranism by nature inseparable from that culture? Why are the numbers of Lutherans in Europe and North America declining, while the Lutheran churches in African countries such as Ethiopia and Tanzania are growing exponentially?

Recently, I participated in the annual Convocation of ELCA Teaching Theologians held at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where questions such as these were addressed. The title of the Convocation, held from July 31-August 2, 2017, was "Global Lutheranism: Vitality and Challenges." The questions addressed are ones that I have thought about for many years from the Mexican context where I live and serve. Here I would like to share the results of that reflection.

In his presentation titled "Mekane Yesus: A Motif for Contextualizing the Reformation," John Nunes, President of Concordia College in Bronxville, New York, shared with the Convocation participants part of a conversation he had had in Adidas Ababa, Ethiopia with Iteffa Gobena, President of the Evangelical Ethiopian Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY)—a church that identifies itself as Lutheran, despite the fact that this designation does not appear in its name. Dr. Nunes cited statistics outlining the exponential growth of that church: from 65,000 members when it was organized in 1959, to over 5 million members in 2010, to around 7 million in 2017. According to Dr. Nunes, President Gobena gave four reasons for that growth, the first three of which were the equipping and ministry of the laity, the church's "revivalism," and their understanding of mission as directed to the whole person. It was the fourth of the

reasons he gave, however, that especially caught my attention: the members of the church were prepared to die for their faith. Many had in fact been killed on account of their faith, and in many places the persecution, violence, and killing are ongoing.

As Walther von Loewenich indicates in his 1982 biography of Martin Luther,¹ when to his total surprise Luther's 95 *Theses* went "viral" in the weeks after he posted them on October 31, 1517, it was not long before Luther had to face the possibility that he might not only be punished but even put to death for what he had written. Many within the Church were incensed over the *Theses*. When the Dominican John Tetzel, the preacher of indulgences who was the primary object of Luther's condemnation, read the *Theses*, he responded: "I'll have the heretic burned within three weeks and send his ashes to heaven in a bathing cap [his ashes would be put into a bathing cap and tossed into the water]" (117). In late January of 1518, at a meeting of the Saxon chapter of the Dominican order at the University of Frankfurt, Tetzel presented his own 106 *Theses* in response to those of Luther. "Moved by Tetzel's attack, the Dominicans formally denounced the impertinent Wittenberger at Rome on suspicion of heresy.... The Dominicans were soon boasting that Luther would be burned at the stake" (129). Some of Luther's own friends and colleagues questioned what he had done and began to distance themselves from him, though others expressed to him their support.

Luther's initial response seems to have been a mix of defiance, concern for his own safety, and a desire that others not be adversely affected by what he had written. Citing the words of Luther himself, von Loewenich notes: "In Luther's own cloister, apprehensive voices were raised. Dr. Schurff warned him, "You

wish to write against the pope? What are you going to do? It won't be tolerated!" I replied, "And if they *have* to tolerate it?" (117; emphasis added). Here Luther appears defiant. The concern for his safety is evident in the *Explanations of the 95 Theses (Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute)*, a "weighty Latin work" he composed at the beginning of February 1518. There he tried to convince those who were angered and offended by his theses that he was not questioning the authority of the Church and the pope and that he did not represent a threat to the "system." According to von Loewenich:

He did not want his statements to be taken as definitive assertions, but as propositions for discussion. He repeatedly declared his willingness to respect ecclesiastical authority.... In May of 1518, Luther sent a copy of the *Explanations* to Staupitz [Luther's immediate superior in the Augustinian order], accompanied by a letter requesting him to have them transmitted to the pope.... He also stated that he was in such poor health that Staupitz should not fear his violent death. This was followed by an appeal to Leo X, to whom the *Explanations* were dedicated. His call for a debate had been justifiable. He had previously approached several persons of rank within the church, but to no avail. He now wished to submit himself to the judgment of the pope, and would accept the voice of the pope as the voice of Christ. He had not proposed anything that contradicted Holy Scripture, the teachings of the church Fathers, or the law of the church. He might have erred, but he was not a heretic (118-119).

During the first months of 1518, Luther continued to write not only on the question of indulgences but also on other subjects that responded to his pastoral concern for the lay people, including numerous sermons which he also preached (119-120). In April of 1518, after Elector Frederick the Wise had given him a letter

of safe conduct, Luther made the ten-day journey from Wittenberg to Heidelberg to attend the general meeting of his order there. At the meeting, he presented his "Heidelberg Disputation," at the heart of which stood his "theology of the cross" (121-126). While in general he was warmly received, Luther felt that the theologians who had heard him had not understood his thought and had rejected it. "He wrote to Spalatin that—like Christ—having been rejected by the Jewish authorities, he would go to the Gentiles." (127).

As a result of a meeting of the general chapter of the Dominican order in Rome at the end of May, a citation was sent to Luther ordering him to appear in Rome within 60 days of its reception to meet with Cardinal Cajetan, general of the order. At the meeting, Cajetan had awarded Tetzl a doctorate in theology and the Dominicans had denounced Luther a second time and initiated proceedings against him (130-131). According to von Loewenich, in Rome Luther had already been declared a "notorious heretic," largely as a result of a sermon he had preached on May 16 questioning the power of the pope and Church to excommunicate. On August 23, Leo X ordered Cajetan as his legate to arrest Luther immediately, wrote to Frederick demanding that he surrender "the son of iniquity" to Cajetan, and "ordered the abbot of the Augustinian order, Gabriel della Volta, to imprison Luther and bind him hand and foot" (131-132). However, this order did not reach Cajetan until nearly two months later.

In the meantime, thanks to the intervention of Frederick, Luther's meeting with Cajetan was moved to the German city of Augsburg. Frederick also asked Cajetan to "hear Luther in Augsburg as a 'father,' not as a judge, and then allow him to return to Wittenberg unhindered" (133-134), and Cajetan agreed. Luther, in a depressed state, set out for Augsburg on September 26. Von Loewenich writes:

All along the way he had been warned that he would be no match for the Italian cardinal; he would be burned at the stake. "Now you must die, I say to myself." "What a disgrace I will be to my dear parents." Yet from Nuremberg he wrote to his Wittenberg friends: "Christ is Lord in Augsburg, even among his enemies! Let Christ live and Martin die!" (135).

Here we find an explicit affirmation that, by that time, Luther had reached the point at which he was *willing to die for his faith and his work on behalf of the gospel*, like the members of the Mekane Yesus Church to whom President Gobena referred. His actions backed up his words: he continued on to Augsburg rather than turning back, refusing to heed those who sought to dissuade him from putting his life at risk by going there.

On October 9, after he had arrived in Augsburg, a representative of Cajetan went to meet with Luther at the monastery where he was staying "to persuade him to agree to whatever Cajetan might request," including recantation. At the end of their conversation, "he asked Luther whether he believed the elector would use force on his behalf. 'By no means,' replied Luther. 'But then where will you stay?' 'Under heaven,' retorted Luther" (135). A couple of days later, Luther wrote a letter to his colleague Philip Melancthon expressing his sadness that he might never see him and his other Wittenberg friends again, yet added "that he would rather accept separation than recant" (137). As a result of his refusal to recant, his meetings with Cajetan got nowhere. Angry and frustrated, Cajetan merely began yelling at Luther and finally ordered him to leave his presence and not return until he was willing to recant. In the midst of this harrowing situation, knowing full well that his life was at stake, on October 14 Luther wrote to another Wittenberg colleague, Andreas Karlstadt, that in spite of his apparently lofty qualifications, Cajetan was "as incapable of handling this matter as an ass is at

playing the harp" (140). When one thinks about it, this is astounding: instead of trembling in fear or collapsing from nerves, Luther resorts to humor to make light of the situation!

In the ensuing days, Luther wrote a note to Cajetan telling him that, since his conscience would not let him recant, he was going to leave Augsburg. He also sent Cajetan an appeal to the pope that he asked Cajetan to deliver personally to the pope and had the appeal posted to the door of the Augsburg cathedral after having it notarized. In the appeal, he gave the reasons why he would not go to Rome to be examined there (140). Conscious of the fact that Cajetan might have him arrested before he could leave, Luther decided to abandon Augsburg secretly. Von Loewenich describes what happened next:

Luther's friends decided to help him escape. On the night of October 20 he left the city through a small door in the city wall and mounted a horse that had been provided for him. One companion went with him. Years later Luther still recalled with horror that ride on a nag without any suitable clothing. On the first evening he arrived at Monheim (in the district of Donauwörth) and, no longer able to stand, fell on the straw like a dead man. He reached Nuremberg on October 23 and was taken in by a circle of friends....

While in Nuremberg Luther received a letter from Spalatin [private secretary to Frederick], accompanied by a copy of the papal brief of August 23 ordering his immediate arrest. At first he questioned its authenticity, but then it became clear to him what danger he had escaped....

Luther was now certain that he would be excommunicated. In order not to make things more difficult for the elector, he planned to leave Wittenberg and eventually go to Paris, where the university had been able to preserve a certain freedom over against the jurisdiction of the papal teaching office. On December 1 he said farewell to his friends. In

the meanwhile the elector had received a letter from Cajetan demanding Luther's extradition. But on December 18 the elector ordered Luther to stay (140-141).

Two observations are in order here. First of all, *Luther did not want to die*. On the contrary, he took great pains to avoid being arrested and sent to Rome. Yet by this point, what was much more important to Luther than avoiding a violent death was *standing up for his faith and the gospel he had dedicated his life to proclaiming*. Was he afraid of such a death? I would answer, He must have been! Under those circumstances who would not be? Yet he would not let that fear stop him from remaining faithful to his work on behalf of the gospel. Well aware of the price he might have to pay, he went to Augsburg and stood his ground.

Secondly, what motivated Luther to be willing not only to be put to death for his faith but also to live the rest of his life in exile and constant threat of death if necessary was *his love for others*. He repeatedly expresses his concern, not only for his parents, his friends, and his colleagues and parishioners in Wittenberg, but even for Frederick the Wise. Luther was more concerned for his prince the elector than he was for himself, and thus preferred to go into an uncertain exile rather than put Frederick in a difficult position. He was ready to leave Wittenberg at his own initiative, not because he thought eventually Frederick would arrest or expel him, but precisely because he believed that Frederick would protect him and that this would create problems for Frederick. He had to be *ordered* by Frederick to stay, which implies that he did so to some extent *against* his will.

Luther's flight from Augsburg, therefore, was an act, not of cowardice, but of prudence and love. Luther did not want to be arrested or to die a martyr's death. On the contrary, he wanted to continue to live in order to be able to continue his work on behalf of the gospel out of

love for God and others. He would do whatever was necessary in order to avoid death, with one exception: he would not deny or compromise his convictions regarding that gospel. Or more accurately, he would do whatever he could to be able to continue to proclaim and promote the gospel he had discovered—a gospel that had transformed him into another person. Undoubtedly, Luther wanted to be a martyr, but only in the original sense of that word and not in the sense in which we use that word today. He wanted to be a *martyr*, a “witness,” someone who testified to his faith in God and the gospel loudly and publicly, *not because he wanted to die*, but because out of love for the world he wanted everyone to come to discover the incomparable treasure he had come to possess through that faith and that gospel. He had come to understand perfectly well what Paul wrote to the Philippians: “whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil. 3:7-9).

Speaking of Paul, it caught my eye the other day when looking at 1 Corinthians 1-2, where Paul describes his boldness in proclaiming nothing but “Christ-crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1:23) and contrasts divine and human power, wisdom, weakness, and foolishness, that he then tells the Corinthians, “I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (2:3). This is surprising, given the fact that both the book of Acts and Paul's letters consistently give the impression that Paul never wavered in his dedication to his work as an apostle. However, even Paul trembled in fear when he proclaimed the gospel, yet he was empowered to do so boldly through his faith in God and Christ and his love for the gospel and for others.

Throughout the rest of Luther's life, we continue to see the same mix of elements. Luther worked endlessly on behalf of the gospel, preaching virtually every day and publishing a mind-boggling number of writings. When he was called to appear before Emperor Charles at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he once again was warned by his friends not to go,

but Luther would not be swayed from his decision.... At the very last even Spalatin warned him to stay away. Elector Frederick did not want him to come and would not be able to protect him; he had already been condemned. Luther, as he later recalled, responded from Oppenheim in this way: "If I had known that as many devils as there are tiles on the roofs of Worms had taken aim at me, I would still have entered the city." He expressed the same thought to the elector in a letter of March 5, 1522. Later, in 1540, he confessed: "I was not afraid; God can make one insanely daring. I am not sure I could be that daring today" (191-192).

Among the things that had changed by 1540, of course, was the fact that Luther had a wife and children. It is generally much more difficult to take a stand such as Luther did when one is no longer single. Luther himself had originally not wanted to wed because he believed that any woman who became his wife would have to live with the constant tension of knowing that Luther might face a violent death at any moment and would in fact soon become a widow. Standing before the emperor was by no means easy for Luther, despite his bravado, and he was greatly relieved when he was able to make it through what had been a tremendous ordeal (192-195). On the way back to Wittenberg, Luther was taken captive by armed horsemen in the service of Frederick and taken to Wartburg castle, where he spent almost a year in seclusion, *against* his will and not because he was afraid to return to Wittenberg. He stayed there as long as he could bear it, primarily out of

obedience to Frederick, but finally he could stand it no longer and returned to Wittenberg, once again entering a city despite being fully conscious of the fact that to do so might well cost him his life. The reason he returned is that, from his perspective, what was taking place in Wittenberg in his absence was *contrary* to the gospel and was doing the gospel harm, rather than promoting it.

So what was this gospel that Luther was willing to die and give up everything for? To answer that question, I think we need look no further than the words Jesus spoke to others repeatedly through out his ministry: "Follow me." Those words are at the same time a tender invitation and a harsh demand (see thesis 19 of my "94 Theses"). Why? Because following Jesus means loving God and others with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength in the way Jesus taught (Mark 12:28-34). Yet it also means more than this. I have never met anyone who says we should not love one another. But to love others *by following Jesus* and to love God and others *as he did and continues to do* is something distinct from what most human beings understand by love. In fact, I am convinced that it is also something very distinct from what most Christians understand by love.

Many times and in many places I have tried to explain what it means to love God and others *by following Jesus*. What we as human beings usually call "love" is a far cry from love as defined by and through Jesus, who as crucified and risen is not dead but alive—or rather, is both. I do not claim to have comprehended fully what it means to love or what it means to follow Jesus. That is something that I, like others who are committed to loving God and others by following Jesus, must still seek to comprehend every day, even though we know that as long we remain in this life, we will always remain learners. That is not something to be lamented,

but rather something over which we can only rejoice.

Rather than trying to explain here what it means to love God and others by following Jesus, I wish simply to affirm what by God's love and grace I have come to comprehend: that unless you understand why Luther, like Paul before him, was willing to give up his life and everything he had and was for the sake of the gospel, you have not yet grasped what that gospel really consists of, nor have you fully grasped what love is and what following Jesus means (see thesis 27 of my "94 Theses"). But when you have begun to understand why Luther, like many before him, was willing to say, "I would rather die, or lose everything I have, or be subjected to the worst kind of suffering, rather than recant my faith and stop following Jesus," then you have begun to understand the gospel as well.

When that happens, you then realize that Jesus' command, "Follow me," is not merely a tender invitation but a firm command. Jesus does not say, "I invite you to follow me if you feel like it." "Following me is a great idea, but it's up to you." "I really want very badly for you and everyone else to follow me, but I will not demand that of you or anyone else." No! On the contrary, his words are a *command* and a *demand* precisely because they are motivated by the same unyielding, uncompromising love that led him to do everything he did, including giving up his life on a Roman cross, not because only in that way could he enable God to forgive us, but because *he refused to stop calling people to follow him*. He says, "Follow me," not for *his* sake, but for *yours* and *mine*.

According to Mark 8:31-38, when Jesus told his disciples that he was going up to Jerusalem, where he would be killed—not because he

wanted to be killed (on the contrary!) but because he felt called to continue to *carry out there his ministry on behalf of others, in spite of the consequences*—Peter began to rebuke him for saying such a thing. In response, Jesus began to rebuke Peter and said to him, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus "called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For any who wish to save their life will lose it, but any who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit anyone to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?'"

Why did Jesus call Peter "Satan?" It may have been because Peter simply wanted Jesus to be acclaimed Messiah in power and glory and lead a large movement or establish a new "reign" that would replace that of Rome, at least in Palestine and perhaps Jerusalem, not through loving service but through a show of power. But I think that in effect Peter was calling on Jesus to avoid any type of confrontation with the Jewish and Roman authorities that might lead to suffering and death. In effect, he was telling Jesus what many of Luther's friends told him: "Stop following the path you are on and instead go somewhere safe so as to save your skin. You can work on behalf of your gospel from there instead." The substitutionary understandings of Jesus' death and the gospel that I have denounced so strongly elsewhere in my writings would have us believe that Jesus' death was an act of love because it was the only way he could satisfy God's justice, make atonement for our sins, or appease God's anger at those sins. That is false, and if you are ever to understand the gospel, you must repudiate such ideas.

Jesus did not want to go up to Jerusalem any more than Luther wanted to go to Augsburg or Worms or to return to a dangerous situation

in Wittenberg from the castle at Wartburg. But he went to Jerusalem for the same reasons Luther went to those German cities: his love for God and his understanding of the gospel left him no choice but to give witness to that gospel there. Luther went to Augsburg because he was called by the pope to do so. His concern was not to obey the pope but to obey the gospel, and from his perspective, to refuse to go to Augsburg under those conditions would have meant denying the gospel, and thereby doing irreparable harm to the sake of the gospel. When one refuses to stand up for the gospel when one is called on to do so, then by one's actions one shouts to the world that the gospel one proclaims is false.

Likewise, Luther went to Worms against the will of those who supported him, including Frederick the Wise, because he had to testify to the truth of the gospel. In the situation in which he found himself, in Luther's mind, to refuse to go to Worms would in essence have been to declare his gospel a lie. For the same reasons, Luther's love for others and the gospel left him no choice but to abandon Wartburg and return to Wittenberg, because at that moment of his life, that love and that gospel demanded his presence in Wittenberg.

After Luther had met with Cajetan at Augsburg, however, the way in which Luther persisted in standing firm for the gospel in order to give witness to that gospel for the whole world was by escaping from Augsburg through a hole in the city wall and enduring an exhausting horseback ride to safety. At that moment, that was the form that his love for others and his commitment to the gospel had to take. He needed to seek safety rather than continuing to put his life at risk. Otherwise he would be doing harm to the cause of the gospel rather than testifying to it through his life's work.

The reasons why Jesus decided that he needed to go to Jerusalem, despite knowing that he would be put to death there, are not entirely clear from the Gospel accounts. I have discussed many of the possible reasons in Chapter 5 of my work *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought*. However, we can be sure that whatever led Jesus to go to Jerusalem, it was not a desire to die. Rather, at that time in his life and ministry, he was convinced that the way in which he needed to give witness and testify to the gospel was by facing whatever awaited him in Jerusalem. Like Luther and Paul after him, Jesus trembled at the thought of being put to death. He affirms that his soul is "troubled" (John 12:27), and once at Gethsemane, he begins to be "distressed and agitated" and tells Peter, James, and John that he is "deeply grieved, even to death" (Mark 14:33-34). According to many manuscripts of Luke's Gospel, as he prayed to God in his anguish asking to be spared the death of the cross, "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:44). In the end, however, he prays that God's will rather than his own be done.

When Jesus calls on others to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him, he is not calling on them to seek suffering and death. Rather, he is calling them to love God by loving others in the way he does: unconditionally, unreservedly, unwaveringly, and unrelentingly. Yet he does so, not for *his own sake*, but for *their own*, as well as for the sake of others who will experience such love through them and hopefully make that love their own. Jesus wants his followers to love themselves and their own lives with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength; yet for Jesus they can only truly love themselves by *following him in loving God by loving others in the same way he does*. Exactly what form that type of love is to take in each situation in the daily life of a follower of Jesus must constantly be defined: sometimes it requires going to Augsburg and Worms, and as Paul

found out long before Luther, sometimes it requires escaping at night by means of a city wall (Acts 9:23-25; 2 Cor. 11:32-33).

When Jesus says that only those who lose their life for his sake and the sake of the gospel will “save” their life, he should not be understood as issuing a threat regarding eternal damnation or a promise regarding eternal salvation. Rather, he is merely stating what he knows to be true in *this* life. Like the Latin verb *salveo*, the Greek word *sōzō* that appears in Mark 8:35 refers to being whole, healthy, and well in both body and soul. For Jesus, this wholeness or wellness are something to be experienced, not only in a life to come, but in one’s *present life* as well. Paradoxically, only by taking up a cross can one find true life. I cannot stress strongly enough, however, that to take up one’s cross and follow Jesus is not to seek suffering or martyrdom—any who do that are actually acting *contrary* to the gospel—but to follow him in loving others in the way he did and does in spite of the suffering and risks that such love inevitably entails.

To live and love in that way involves paying an enormous price. That love will take everything you have and are. At times it will mean great grief or intense agony. Yet even at those times, it is also sheer joy. Furthermore, Jesus, Paul, and Luther all knew that, whether or not one takes up that cross, one will experience pain and agony in life, and the agony of those who carry that cross will not necessarily be greater than those who refuse to do so. To live in this world means suffering tremendously at times, whether one is a believer or not. While at times the suffering of believers may be greater, even at those times the fact that they are seeking wholeness for themselves and others and do so alongside others who are in solidarity with them makes that agony more tolerable and enables them to experience that agony with joy, however contradictory that may sound. Yet

while those who take up the cross do not necessarily experience greater suffering and know more agony than those who do not, from the perspective of Jesus, Paul, and Luther, those who refuse to take up the cross can never know the sheer joy that those who do take it up know. Nor can they ever experience the same wholeness, healing, and well-being. Thus, while those who carry that cross pay an enormous price, those who refuse to carry that cross pay a much greater price. The question, then, is never whether or not one will carry a cross. In this world, that is a given. The question is *which cross one will carry*, and whether that cross will bring only agony or will instead bring joy in addition to that agony.

When Luther came to understand these things, there was no turning back. He could never deny that gospel or the God in whom he had come to believe with all his being, the God of Jesus and the cross. Undoubtedly his study of the Scriptures made this change possible: Luther went from being a young man whose fear of death and God was so great that it drove him to enter a monastery in an attempt to ensure his salvation to someone who was so enamored of God that no threat of suffering and death could stop him from giving witness to that God. Yet only when he was actually forced to face the question of whether or not he was willing to suffer and die for that gospel did he truly come to grasp its significance and become the bold and fearless proclaimer of that gospel that he was for the rest of his life.

Following John Nunes’s presentation at the convocation I attended, I went to sit down with Rev. Gabriel Lugakingira, a PhD student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, which is growing exponentially just like the Mekane Yesus Church in Ethiopia. I asked him what most of the members of his church would respond if they were asked whether they were

willing to die for their faith. As I expected, he did not hesitate but immediately exclaimed, “Absolutely!” That, I thought, is precisely why these two African Lutheran churches are growing while other Lutheran churches in the world are shrinking in size.

This raises a problem, however. If we can only truly grasp the gospel when we understand why believers such as Paul and Luther were willing to die for it, how can we come to such an understanding without being placed in a situation in which we are actually forced to make the choice between confessing our faith or being put to death? Obviously, we are not to seek to be placed in such a situation, but should instead do what we can to preserve and prolong our life and remain healthy and well. We love others by caring for ourselves. I like to tell my seminary students that, for this reason, as followers of Jesus Christ dedicated to sharing the gospel, even when we try to get a good night’s sleep, eat well, take a vacation, or enjoy ourselves in healthy ways, we are acting out of love for others, since only by seeking our own health and well-being can we seek that of others.

By no means do I have all the answers to the question of how we can get to the point of understanding why someone would die for the gospel—note that I speak of *understanding* why someone would die for that gospel rather than speaking of actually being willing to die oneself, because I don’t think that anyone can truly say that they would be willing to die for the gospel unless they are put in a situation in which they are actually forced to choose between remaining alive by denying the gospel or facing death if they continue to affirm it. I do believe, however, that in order to arrive at that point, there is one thing that is indispensable: a profound love for others that takes the form of solidarity with them, and especially with those who suffer due to injustice, oppression, poverty, illness, marginalization, discrimination, and other types

of hardship. In essence, this is simply taking up the cross to follow Jesus, and as a result discovering what true joy, peace, life, well-being, and wholeness are all about.

It must never be forgotten that there was one thing, and one thing alone, that led Luther to write and post his *95 Theses* in the first place: his pastoral concern for the people to whom he ministered, people for whom he cared deeply. He saw that the sale of indulgences was motivated, not by a concern for the well-being and salvation of people such as those he served, but by the greed, avarice, and lust for power and glory of those in positions of authority. Gradually, he came to see even more clearly the many other ways that many within the Church of his day were abusing, degrading, deceiving, oppressing, and impoverishing people in the name of God.² Naturally, seeing how so many people’s lives were being destroyed aroused his ire. In two of his most important writings, his *Appeal to the German Nobility* and his treatise on the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*—both written in 1520 when the conflict with Rome was at its height—Luther rails at the Church in general and the pope in particular for the “impious and desperate tyranny” it imposes on the people, destroying their liberty so as to take them captive and enslave them by imposing endless burdens on them: “For to be subjected to their statutes and tyrannical laws is indeed to become slaves of men.”³ The pope promotes “buying, selling, bartering, changing, trading, drunkenness, lying, deceiving, robbing, stealing, luxury, harlotry, knavery, and every sort of contempt of God....

If you have money in this establishment you can obtain all these things we have just discussed. Indeed, not just these! Here usury becomes honest money, the possession of property acquired by theft or robbery is legalized. Here vows are dissolved; monks are granted liberty to leave their orders. Here marriage is on sale to the clergy. Here

bastards can be legitimized. Here all dishonor and shame can be made to look like honor and glory. Here every kind of iniquity and evil is knighted or raised to nobility. Here marriage is permitted which is within the prohibited relationships or otherwise forbidden. O what assessing and fleecing goes on there! It seems as though canon law were instituted solely for the purpose of making a great deal of money.⁴

It was this same concern for justice, freedom, and the well-being of the common people that led Luther to stand up for the liberating gospel he had discovered, not only by posting and then defending his *95 Theses* in spite of the consequences, but by traveling to Augsburg and Worms and by returning to Wittenberg from the Wartburg castle, fully aware of the dangers involved. He realized that to flee, hide, become silent, or recant out of fear for his life would be a betrayal not only of his conscience but of all the people whose lives had been and would be transformed by that gospel. Throughout Luther's life, what led him to remain firm and proclaim the gospel tirelessly and fearlessly was his profound love for people and his solidarity with them. Undoubtedly, this love and solidarity were far from perfect. At times that love was misguided, and on many occasions he acted in ways that were anything but loving by advocating violence and contempt toward others. Yet there can be no doubt that it was his love for others and solidarity with them that led him to be more concerned for their life and well-being than he was for his own.

It was not merely Luther's study of Scripture, therefore, that opened his eyes to the gospel and transformed him from a young man so driven by fear that he became a monk into a bold and outspoken critic of a system that oppressed people in the name of God. It was also his pastoral work, his interaction with people who faced all sorts of hardships and needed his attention, his support, his guidance,

and his words of hope, consolation, and encouragement. The people he served and worked alongside of transformed his life just as much as he did theirs. It was through them that Christ made Luther a different person and enabled him to grasp the truth of the words Christ had spoken: "For any who wish to save their life will lose it, but any who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it." Luther found out that taking up one's cross to follow Christ in loving and serving others despite the cost involved was indeed pure grace and led one to know what true life is. And once that happened, nothing could make him back down or deny the gospel that filled his life with joy, a joy he longed for others to experience as well.

From my perspective, then, in order to reach the point where one can understand why people such as Paul, Luther, and believers in Christ in countries like Ethiopia and Tanzania were and are willing to die for their faith and the gospel to which they cling, one must go through the same type of experience or process that Luther did. It is only as we reach out to others in love and enter into solidarity with them that we discover that taking up the cross to follow Jesus is pure grace. It is only as we give of ourselves that we receive in abundance. It is only as we are willing to lay down our life daily that we find true life. For that reason, it is important to seek the company and companionship of those who have come to understand the gospel in this way and live it out in their daily lives. Hopefully, this can take place in a Christian community, though unfortunately at times it is difficult to find a community whose primary characteristic is a commitment to living out this type of love, solidarity, and self-giving. No matter who we are or what we do, all of us constantly are in contact with people who are in some type of need and thus need accompaniment. However, it is especially as we reach out to make ourselves

present for those whose needs are the greatest or most urgent that we are transformed by Christ through them. Once that love and solidarity have taken root in our heart so as to bloom and blossom there, we have no problem understanding why so many have been and are willing to die for their faith and the gospel.

To reach out to others in love and solidarity, however, is not the only way to reach that point. We also grow in our faith when we ourselves experience hardships and great need and have no choice but to depend on God and those through whom God ministers to us. We tend to look elsewhere for security in our lives, especially those of us who live relatively comfortably in the global North. In contrast, those who live in greatest need, including not only the poor but people with illnesses and disabilities or those who have no one to care for them, are more easily led to the realization that in reality nothing and no one but God can truly provide us with security in this life and the next. When one has nothing to cling to but God and Christ, one learns what it means to live by faith, and one discovers that such faith is ultimately the only firm ground upon which we can stand and be secure. Those who reach that point also come to understand very well why one would be willing to die for one's faith. If we have never come to experience such hardships or great need ourselves, once again as we seek the company and companionship of those who have learned through hardships, trials, and losses that faith alone can make us secure and strong, we are transformed by them. The faith of such people tends to be "contagious" and therefore can become ours as well.

It is important to note, however, that many people would be willing to die for things that are *not* the gospel or may even be *contrary* to the gospel. Following Jesus does not involve becoming a fanatic—except perhaps if what we become fanatic about is loving and caring for

others together with ourselves in healthy ways. We are called, not to be extremists, but to be faithful witnesses of the God we have come to love and know through Christ. When Jesus says that those who follow him must take up their cross daily (Luke 9:23), he does not mean that we should seek to be crucified for our faith and the gospel, but that we must be willing to pay the price that loving others and living in solidarity with them often involves. It is important to stress, however, that this price includes taking care of ourselves, seeking that our own needs be met, and staying as healthy and strong as possible. Only by paying this price can we follow Jesus faithfully so as to live out the gospel as he did.

What, then, does it mean to be Lutheran? While I do not think that there is any simple answer to that question, I would argue that at the heart of any answer we give must be the conviction that denying oneself to take up the cross and follow Jesus is *pure grace*. To call on others to do so together with us is to proclaim the gospel, since we invite and exhort them to experience that grace alongside of us by reaching out with us in love and solidarity to those who are near as well as those who are far.

As 1 John 4:18 affirms, such a love is able to cast out fear, because that love takes over our lives and makes us truly free. To use John's language, "abiding" in that love fills us with such joy and peace that we become willing to pay any price to remain there—even the price of our life, if that were to become necessary. In that way, we become "fearless" so that nothing can stop us from continuing to follow Jesus, the source of "life in abundance" both in this world and the next. Filled with such a faith, no matter what we may face in life, we reach the point where we are able to say along with Luther, "Here I stand. I can do no other."

Yet is this transformation not something that should take place in *all* who follow Christ,

and not just Lutherans? Of course it is. So why speak of being *Lutheran* Christians rather than just Christians, period? Personally, I would answer that question by affirming that many Christians would define the heart of their faith in terms that may be slightly different. While all would agree that we are to take up the cross to follow Jesus, and most would probably also agree that to do so is a source of tremendous joy, not all understand following Jesus in exactly the same way. While in essence both Lutheran and non-Lutheran Christians proclaim the same gospel, in each Christian confession or tradition one can find different emphases in the way in which that gospel is proclaimed and lived out. Rather than seeing this as something to be regretted or overcome, however, I think we must see it in a positive light: we learn from one another and complement one another by virtue of our differences, just as the authors of the books that make up the New Testament complement one another through their different emphases, style, language, and subject matter, even though they all proclaim the same God, the same Jesus, and the same gospel.

Should we as Lutherans, then, try to make other Christians and other people Lutherans as well? Without a doubt! Of course not! Both of these things must be affirmed simultaneously. On the one hand, we want all to know and learn and emphasize with us that taking up the cross to follow Christ is sheer grace. As I say in thesis 81 of my "94 Theses," one does not need to be a Lutheran to be a Lutheran. While I would not want to label others "Lutheran" who do not identify themselves as such, at the same time I would say that there are many non-Lutheran Christians who understand faith and the gospel in the same way that I have just described above. In that sense, I would indeed consider them to be Lutheran. There are also many Christians who call themselves Lutherans that either consciously or unconsciously define the essence of being Lutheran in terms that are

distinct from those I have laid out here. While I have shared here my own definition, I think that it is just as important for other Lutherans to share their definitions as well and therefore for dialogue on this question to continue as long as Lutherans exist.

On the other hand, however, I would *never* want all Christians to be Lutheran in the sense of abandoning their own traditions in order to join the Lutheran Church. As Christians, in order to be whole, we all need the diversity of thought and emphasis and the different ways of living out one's faith and worshiping God that characterize each tradition. We need to listen to the stories, history, and experience of other Christians in order to be enriched and for our faith to grow. As I tell my students at the ecumenical school where I teach, in that setting I have become even *more* Lutheran, since by becoming acquainted with other Christian traditions, I have grown to appreciate and value even more my own. Yet because I have also grown to appreciate and value the traditions of my students, I have also become more Methodist, more Presbyterian, more Baptist, more Pentecostal, and more Catholic. And I think that is a wonderful thing. While I thus share constantly my faith from a Lutheran perspective, I also encourage them to share their faith from the perspective of their own tradition and to get to know that tradition better.

Of course, while I appreciate profoundly what makes each Christian tradition special and unique, I continue to identify myself as a *Lutheran* Christian, for reasons that should be evident from what I have written above. I am Lutheran because I identify strongly with the way in which Martin Luther came to understand faith in Christ and the gospel, as well as the way in which he lived out his faith in the gospel that he dedicated his life to proclaiming. Above all, I think that what makes me Lutheran is that, by God's grace and with the help of those around

me, I have become able to understand why Luther was willing to risk everything, including especially his own life, for the sake of that faith and that gospel. And I would certainly hope that all who call themselves Lutheran are able to understand that as well.

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Notes

¹ Walter von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: Der Mann und das Werk* (Munich: Paul List, 1982). The references in this article are to the English version, *The Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg 1986). All numbers appearing in parenthesis throughout this article refer to the page number of this work.

² On this point, see especially John M. Todd, *Luther: A Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 101-109.

³ See *Luther's Works (LW)*, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis, Concordia, 1955-1986), 36:71-73.

⁴ LW 44:153-154.