



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

Sermon for Asia Pre-Assembly  
Bangkok  
15 August 2016

Bishop Dr. Munib Younan  
President of the Lutheran World Federation

\*\*\*

**Galatians 3:23-29**

*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

\*\*\*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is a joy to be with you today as we launch this Lutheran World Federation pre-assembly. Our theme for this gathering, as well as for our year-long celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation, is "Liberated by God's Grace". Our freedom in Christ is the Good News which unites us all. From every corner of the globe, we give thanks that all who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. For there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female—and there is no longer German or Palestinian, Namibian or Thai, Chilean or Norwegian,



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

neither African, American, Asian, European, or Australian—for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.

For many years now, the Lutheran World Federation has been planning and preparing for what we have called simply “Reformation 2017.” As part of our preparations for this anniversary, we have reflected carefully on what the theme of such a celebratory year should be. What should be our message to the world? After 500 years, what does it mean to be a Lutheran today? What is a Lutheran vision for the future of the church and of the world? After much discussion, this simple but direct theme was adopted: “Liberated by God’s Grace.”

Of course this theme, “Liberated by God’s Grace”, did not come out of our own heads, but is taken directly from the theological writings of Martin Luther. Of great importance to the Reformation movement is the doctrine of justification by faith, which states that in Christ, God’s grace is given to us as a free and unconditional gift. This has been called “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls”.

Just as this anniversary theme did not come from our own heads, it is important to note that the doctrine of justification did not come from Dr. Martin Luther’s head. It comes from Holy Scripture. Luther’s careful study of Scripture, especially the book of Romans, led him to an exegetical break-through, and a new understanding of the word “righteousness.” Luther came to understand that righteousness is never something we achieve on our own, or even in cooperation with God, but is Christ’s own righteousness gifted to us through the cross.

In the “Smalcald Articles”, Luther writes:

The first and chief article is this:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification (Rom. 4:25). And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world. (John 1:29) and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all. (Is. 53:6). Likewise: All have sinned and are justified without merit [freely, and without their own works or merits] by His grace, through the



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President

[lutheranworld.org](http://lutheranworld.org)

redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood. (Rom. 3:23f)  
*(Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article 1)*

And again, in the 4<sup>th</sup> article of the Augsburg Confession, the reformers wrote:

“Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. (Rom. 3 and 4.)” *(Article IV, Augsburg Confession)*

The understanding that sinful humans are saved through the work of God alone remains the cornerstone of our faith as Christians today. You cannot be a Christian if you do not believe that Jesus saved us on the cross freely. “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Romans 3:28) and “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” (Habakkuk 2:4)

Five hundred years later, this Gospel message of grace through faith, apart from works, still holds power, and sounds as fresh and radical as it did in Luther's time. For this reason, during our anniversary year, Lutherans across the world will stand firm on the foundation of this belief. Liberated by God's grace, through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, the worldwide Lutheran communion has much to offer to our broken world today. During this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we wish to offer the world God's gift of freedom and liberation.

Of course, the Good News of liberation is not only a theological concept. We are liberated by God's grace from our sin, but also are freed from everything that disturbs the dignity of the human being, for freedom and dignity have been retained on the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ frees us from human sin of every kind, both our own



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

individual sins and systemic injustices, including racism, colonialism, genocide, occupation, prejudice, and religious extremism.

As we look at our world today, we see that these powers and principalities are still at work in the world. We see that the forces which defy God are still claiming a hold on humanity. Preachers of the prosperity gospel sell people the lie that if you fill a preacher's pockets with money, God will fill your life with blessings. Greedy corporations pay workers pennies to sew a \$20 suit, which will be sold for \$500 to people in the North—this is the face of modern-day slavery. Across the globe, fewer and fewer people are controlling more and more of the world's money and resources. Racism and sexism seem to be getting worse, not better. Religious extremism is spreading like a disease, and no religion or tradition is immune from its contagion.

Therefore, when we talk about being “liberated by God's grace”, we remember that Christ came to free us from these chains as well. The cross of Christ is not only a theological concept—it is concrete liberation. The resurrection is not only Good News for the women who found the tomb was empty—it is Good News for all those today whose futures seem empty. For this reason, as we look to the next five hundred years, we Lutherans will proclaim to the world, “Salvation is not for sale! Humans are not for sale! Creation is not for sale!”

These “not for sale” sub-themes of our 2017 celebration are suggested as ways for your communities to delve deeper into the meaning of liberation in the Asian context.

The first sub-theme is this: Salvation—Not for Sale:

And what does this mean?

Although grace is a free gift of God, there are many influences in the world which attempt to convince us otherwise. Preachers of the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” are popular in countries across the globe. These false shepherds trick their flocks into believing they will receive material benefits such as money, cars, houses and good health if only they will fill the preacher's pockets with money. They preach that the pleasures and priorities of the world should be ours



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President

[lutheranworld.org](http://lutheranworld.org)

to enjoy, and have conformed the message of Jesus to fit within their own desires. But what about one's child were to become sick, or one's spouse were to die? What will they say then? The prosperity gospel offers no Good News for such circumstances. Even so, sadly this type of message is wildly popular in some of the poorest places on the planet, where people can least afford its consequences.

There are other influences who sell us the un-biblical idea that salvation is something that can be purchased, earned, or deserved. Religious extremism is one of those influences. Leaders of extremist movements may not ask for money in return for salvation, but they do ask for other currency: absolute loyalty to their cause, for example, or acting to create a homogeneous society, or even committing acts of terror. Truly, it is not even correct to call this "religious" extremism, for these movements have nothing to do with God. These leaders--whether they claim to be Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or other religions—are actually promoting their own agendas, not God's agenda. They are the ones who use biblical texts for a cheap, worldly, material benefit, not for liberation by God.

But we would be mistaken to believe that it is only prosperity preachers or extremists who are in the business of selling salvation. All too often, we find similar theology in our own churches. All too often, the free gift of grace is perverted into a set of laws, cultural norms, or a political platform which all are expected to follow. Whether preached from the pulpit, or implied within a church community, this message that the Gospel is a formula to achieve happiness, acceptance, worth, or righteousness, is no different from the one preached by the fundamentalists we find so easy to accuse. This is the reason that in Asia, we must revisit our theologies and perceptions, and reevaluate them from the perspective of the cross, liberated by God's grace.

I assure you, dear sisters and brothers, that the only Savior is our Lord Jesus Christ, and the only formula for salvation and worth is the one he has already completed for your sake. For as Scripture says,

"For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all." (1 Timothy 2:5-6)



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

Together, we must proclaim to all and shout: Salvation is not for sale.

The second sub-theme for our 2017 celebration is “Human Beings—Not for Sale”.

And what does this mean?

Although we have made many advancements as a human community in the past five hundred years, it is a sad fact that humans are still considered to be commodities, whose only value is measured in terms of profit. Child labor, child marriage, and child soldiers are found in many places. Human trafficking and slavery still run many economies. Although we may like to think slavery is a thing of the past, the reality is that exploitation of workers is just done in a quieter, less visible way today. As we are in Asia, we the church must express our worry for all migrant workers who are obliged to leave their families from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and other countries, to work in many parts of the Middle East and the Gulf States. The human rights of these workers are often denied in the host countries. The churches in Asia must not keep quiet about these such violations, but must increase the world’s awareness of this contemporary economic slavery. We can call them migrant workers, temporary workers, or undocumented domestic help, but in the end this is economic slavery.

We also see human beings treated as commodities today at the borders of the countries of the world. Over the last year we’ve seen many thousands of refugees seeking safety and welcome outside of their war-torn nations. Many countries are opening their borders, and many people of goodwill are opening their hearts and homes. But at the same time, the way many speak of refugees today reveals that they are seen only as political commodities or economic liabilities. How many times must we hear of “hordes”, “waves”, or the “crisis” of refugees? These are not hordes – these are people. These are not waves – these are families. These are not only an economic problem to be solved – these are brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers.



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

This is the reason that the Lutheran World Federation, along with other religious leaders, three years ago signed the UNCHR document called “Welcoming the Stranger Among Us.” This document not only reflects our own Lutheran theology, but shows that refugees are an integral part of our common humanity. Together with other people of faith, we affirm and agree that we are called to receive refugees into our homes and our countries. This is the reason that the LWF today serves 2.3 million refugees worldwide. This commitment to serving refugees is an integral part of our prophetic diakonia in the world.

Indeed, in such a time, our role as a church is to raise our voices for the human rights of all people. God created all of us in God’s image: black, white, yellow, brown, woman, man, indigenous, immigrant, refugee, rich, poor, child, or elderly. For as Scripture says, the God of creation knew us before we were formed in our mothers’ wombs. We were knitted together, created in love, and all of us are precious in God’s sight. (*Jeremiah 1:5, Psalm 139:13*)

For this reason we proclaim from our theology of the cross: Human beings are not for sale!

The third sub-theme for reflection this year is “Creation—Not for sale.”

And what does this mean?

It is very timely for us to be considering this theme after the landmark meeting in Paris at the COP 21 conference. The outcome of that meeting, called the “Paris Agreement”, has been signed by 174 countries so far, and signals a global understanding that the earth is the responsibility of every nation. We are all caretakers of the precious gift of our earthly home, and of every creature that lives upon it.

Just like the grace we have received through the cross of Christ, creation is a free gift from God our Creator. We did nothing to deserve such beauty, such diversity, such abundance. Care for creation is a fundamental commitment of our Christian faith, growing



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

out of the first article of the Nicene and Apostolic creeds. This is God's creation and human beings are to care for it; we are to tend to God's beautiful garden. There are times, however, when we can distract ourselves with theological language; it is time that the church speaks plainly about the looming crisis of climate change. I have become even more convinced that the crisis of climate change is an area beckoning for church involvement in order to provoke societal response.

It is at this point, however, that religious traditions can hinder rather than help our ability to respond constructively to the challenges of climate change. Resistance to scientific knowledge is a key characteristic of some forms of religious commitment. Misguided resistance could lead toward disaster. The crisis of climate change provides an important new opportunity for our global Lutheran communion to recommit to constructive engagement with scientific knowledge.

If we are to be like trees planted by streams of living water, we must do our best to preserve the climate in which those waters flow. If we are to be deeply rooted, we must do our best to address the interlocking systems that could lead to much greater displacement patterns than we have already seen in climate-related disasters. Our calling is to be deeply rooted so we can follow God's law, the law to serve the poor and to shelter the vulnerable.

Just as we have seen with economic growth alone, climate change will bring even greater inequalities. Countries in the Global North will become even more food secure, while the Global South will become more barren. How can the church start now to speak out for fairer food distribution? We cannot be content with the fact that the rich will become richer while the poor become poorer due to global warming.

For this reason, one of the best things we can do to honor 500 years of the Reformation is to join the people of every nation in saying "Creation is not for sale."

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, truly the Good News of Jesus Christ is still as critical today as it was 2,000 years ago. The powerful





THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

witness of the Church of the Reformation is just as fresh as it was 500 years ago. Such a generous gift must not be kept to ourselves! For Jesus said: “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others.” (*Matthew 5:15-16*)

For this reason, as we celebrate 2017, we will not spend our time looking to the past five hundred years. Instead, we believe that God is calling us forward into the next five hundred years. In a time when religious extremism, greed, hatred, and division are trying to kidnap not only the church but the entire world, we have a responsibility to let the light of God’s free gift of grace shine, for the sake of our neighbors.

I would like to end by sharing with you a story from the Arab literature:

One day, an angel came down to the world to see the beauty of God’s creation. Everything the angel saw was so wonderful, he wanted to take something back to the Lord as a gift. The angel came to a lovely flower and said, “This flower I will take with me, for it will please my Lord.” So the angel plucked the flower as a gift for the Lord.

Then the angel found a glittering piece of gold and said to himself, “This is so shiny and new, I know it will please my Lord.” So the angel picked up the gold and took it also as a gift for the Lord.

Then, the angel came to something beautiful indeed. He saw a mother and her child, and the love between them was truly a sight to behold. The angel said, “Now this is something special! I will take the love of this mother for her child, for it will surely please my Lord.” And with that, a whirlwind came to take the angel and the three beautiful gifts up to heaven.

The angel soon arrived at the gates of heaven, but there he noticed that not all the gifts had survived the journey. The flower had withered and faded. The glittering gold had slipped from his fingers. The angel thought, “What now do I have to offer the Lord?”



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

The President  
lutheranworld.org

When he came to the throne of the Lord, the angel said, “Lord, I went to see the beauty of the earth you created, and I found many wonderful things. But on the journey home I lost all that is material. I have but one thing to offer you now—the love of this mother for her child. But as you can see, its beauty is beyond compare.”

And indeed, the Lord was pleased, for in the love between the mother and her child, he saw the beauty of the whole creation—and he saw that it was good.

Dear friends, this story reminds us of the beauty of the liberating love of Christ. This is truly the love that remains—for 2,000 years, for 500 years, through every struggle, and in spite of any oppression. The love of Christ is free for all. It calls us back when we go astray. Although we sin, this love never condemns, never imprisons, but if we confess, this same love liberates us forever.

This love, the love we have seen on the cross, the love we have received by grace through faith, is the love proclaimed by the Church of the Reformation. It will never fade. It will never be lost. It is yours forever.

When Jesus went to the cross in Jerusalem, he did it out of love for every single human being. He went to the cross for the powerful and the wealthy, as well as for those whom the world has forgotten or cast out. He suffered for the Jews and the Greeks, for the slaves and the free, for men and women, young and old. He gave his life for Germans, Norwegians, Chinese, Thai, Palestinians, and Liberians. If we know this to be true, then we will truly be “liberated by God’s grace.” If we know that Christ cares for every one of us equally, then we will be cleansed of the selfishness, the egocentrism, and the narrow-mindedness which cause so much suffering in the world.

For if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. This is exactly what it means to be liberated by God’s grace today.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.