

## The Bishoftu Letter: An introduction

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It all started back in 2014. Leading Evangelical Lutheran Network (ELN) in Norway at the time, I attended a meeting in Germany by Internationale Konferenz Bekennender Gemeinschaften (IKBG). As leaders from USA, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Norway shared concerns about the situation for classical Biblical believers in the Western Lutheran churches, we ended up with an initiative to meet the following year at the annual Lutheran Week of North American Lutheran Church (NALC). At that occasion, in Dallas / Texas in August 2015, we formed what we called Global Confessional and Missional Lutheran Forum (Global Forum).

The circle of international church and mission leaders grew as we continued to meet the following years. Even though the first initiative to form a global forum of missional and confessional Lutherans came from the Norwegian side, it has been crucial that NALC has spent resources on establishing this initiative. The vision was from the beginning to involve the global Lutheran family in the network, including the growing churches in East Africa. Thus, The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the largest and fastest growing Lutheran church in the world, has been an important contributor since the beginning.

The emphasis on giving the African churches a leading role in building the Global Forum has been paramount from the Norwegian side, in order to streng-

then the missional emphasis. This has been of decisive importance in establishing the forum. It constitutes a key part of the background for the following mission statement from 2016:

*The Global Lutheran Forum will provide support and encouragement for those who are working for the reform and renewal of the church throughout the world. The character of the Forum will be a confessional and missional alliance in accordance with the witness of the Holy Scriptures and as affirmed in the Lutheran Confessions. The Forum will engage in Biblical and theological reflection, and will stimulate strategies that will carry out the mission Christ gave to his church – namely, to make disciples of all nations. The Forum will aim at equipping all believers to share their faith in Christ. The intention of the Forum will be both the renewal of the church and the outreach of the Gospel to those who have not yet believed in Christ.*

An editorial group consisting of four theologians from USA, Germany, Ethiopia and Norway worked on a statement of faith for our Global Forum from 2016 to 2018. The finalising of the statement was accomplished after the meeting of Global Forum in Bishoftu, Ethiopia, in September 2018. The participants brought it back to their respective church and mission bodies for approval. Representatives from churches and missions on five continents now have approved, and the circle of endorsements is growing. The Bishoftu

Letter now functions as statement of faith for the Global Forum. We hope that other entities of cooperation and other institutions might use it in a similar way.

Let me mention two perspectives about the contents of the Bishoftu Letter. When ELN in Denmark was established in 2006, the Odense Declaration became their statement of faith. The Global Forum has taken great advantage of this work and has largely followed its structure. On the other hand, the Bishoftu Letter

has a much stronger emphasis on creation theology and what our belief in God means regarding seven challenging global issues.

The Global Forum of leaders will continue to meet, next time in 2020 in Germany, hopefully and seemingly still with a growing number of Lutheran bodies identifying themselves as classical Biblical believers with a firm commitment to mission.

## The Bishoftu Letter to the Churches<sup>1</sup>

### The Global Confessional and Missional Lutheran Forum<sup>2</sup>

We intend this Bishoftu Letter to be a summary and clarification of the teachings that are our biblical and confessional heritage. We are also issuing a call—an invitation to Lutherans worldwide to confess, repent, be renewed, reformed and refocused by the Word of God, that together we may be a witness to the world, bringing others to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This letter also serves as our response to certain errors that have recently arisen among and within certain churches of the Lutheran confession.<sup>3</sup>

*Reformation Day, October 31st, 2018*

Formed in 2015 in Dallas, Texas, *The Global Confessional and Missional Lutheran Forum* met September 4th – 6th, 2018, in Bishoftu, Ethiopia. As part of our process, we prepared a letter to the Lutheran worldwide community of churches, referred to as *The Bishoftu Letter to the Churches*. This letter:

- is a call to faithfulness to the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- is a call to commitment to his Word which is trustworthy and true;
- is a call to obedience to Jesus Christ.

Together, we affirm that Jesus is the one and only Savior who gave his life on the cross for humanity and was raised from the dead to give the hope and promise of new life to all who believe in him.

We believe that Holy Scripture is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. With the Church of the Ages, we confess the ecumenical creeds. As evangelical Lutherans we accept the Lutheran Confessions, especially the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism.

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### **Belief in God**

We believe in one God, eternal and unchanging, living and personal. In accordance with the confession of the Nicene Creed, the only true and faithful God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three Persons.

God is not the projection of human reflection onto the divine. God's existence is prior to and beyond human imagination. In accordance with the Bible and the Christian tradition, we proclaim God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The center of the Church's ministry is a simple trust and faith in this living God.

In Holy Scripture God is revealed as the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth. God's created order shapes every aspect of life, society and culture. The Church proclaims the work and will of God the Creator and must resist heresies against the Creator, creation and created order. For example:

1. The Church opposes the pollution and destruction of the environment as God's good creation.
2. Where a secular philosophy denies the unique dignity of humanity, the Church insists that man, unlike the animals, was created in God's image and after his likeness (Genesis 1:26-27).
3. The Church opposes racism and its

false doctrine of the inequality of races, and

4. the Church rejects any ideology or construct which attacks the divine creation of man and woman, as "male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27b).
5. The Church affirms and supports the created order of holy matrimony (Genesis 1:27-28 ; 2:21-25).
6. In the name of the Creator, the Church stands in opposition to abortion, affirming it is God who knits us together in our mother's womb. Each person is wonderfully made and has received the breath of life from the living God. (Psalm 139).
7. Because God is Lord of life and death, the Church stands against euthanasia and any attempt to shorten or end human life unnaturally.

When, because of sin, we depart from or pervert God's created order, existence is disordered, chaos ensues, society is destroyed and the created child of God can be led into unhealthy, damaging and self-destructive lifestyles, relationships and understandings.

### **Belief that God Speaks to Us**

Through history and the created order God provides a partial witness to himself. In the Bible God speaks to us in plain words—with Jesus Christ as the climax and center. Therefore, the Bible is the revelation of God's Word and will by his prophets and apostles. It is the only trustworthy and final authority regarding Christian faith, doctrine and ethics.

This means that the Bible not only contains the Word of God, it is the inspired Word of God. "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all

doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong” (*Formula of Concord: Epitome*). Centering on Jesus Christ, God speaks to us reliably and faithfully. We know no Christ other than the biblical Christ, and we reject any alleged “truths” that oppose the faith, doctrine and ethics of the Bible.

### **Belief in Jesus Christ**

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity who is the Son of God and one with God. “In the fullness of time” he became a man, born of the Virgin Mary. He died among us, in solidarity with us, and in our place. Through his death on the cross, he redeems us. He rose physically from the grave and ascended to heaven where he sits at the right hand of God as Lord of the universe. He will return as Savior and judge. Jesus is the only hope for salvation and eternal life for us and for the world.

In some respects the biblical message about Jesus Christ contradicts human experience and all other world views. The demand to adapt the biblical message to modern opinions and tastes is to reject the Person and work of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus was more than a man who loved God and his neighbor in an exceptional way. He not only showed what God is like. He was and is fully God as well as fully human.

### **Belief in the Holy Spirit**

We believe in the Holy Spirit, who calls us to repentance and to faith in Jesus Christ. Through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, the means of grace, the Spirit gives us forgiveness of sins as God’s gift of salvation. The Holy Spirit creates and nourishes faith and equips us for shared ministry and

mission as the Body of Christ in the world. This is the “communion” or fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14).

Therefore, Christian faith is more than a private matter and the Church is more than a gathering of likeminded individuals. Christian faith is communal and the church is a corporate community, the body of Christ. The Christian faith must be lived out within the church, nurtured by the means of grace, and must lead to a many-sided ministry and witness to our neighbors and to the world.

### **Salvation in Christ Alone**

The center of the Bible and the life of the Church is the Person and work of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God reveals the meaning of creation, reconciles sinful humans with himself and establishes the possibility of a life in this world according to the will of the Creator. By his death and resurrection he has rescued us from the power of sin and promised us eternal life in him. Through Word and Sacrament the incarnate Christ is bodily present in the worshiping community as Savior and Redeemer. By grace and through faith, God forgives our sins freely and graciously, apart from our works and merits. Though we deserve death and judgment, for we are guilty of sin against God and our neighbors, God gives life and acquittal to all who believe and trust in him.

For this reason, we refuse to place Jesus Christ on a par with other religious leaders and thinkers. Although some of them have contributed to the well-being of human culture, Christ alone is Savior and Lord. It is Christ alone whom we must worship and follow.

### **Obedience to God’s Will**

Faith in Christ means following Jesus in obedience to God’s will. We are saved by

grace through faith, but faith never stands alone. Faith is effective in deeds of love and obedience.

The Christian church is a community of sinners who are aware that they never fully live up to God's law and commandments. But the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins also calls us to live a holy new life. Therefore, the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins through faith does not repeal the call to follow Christ, nor does it set aside the summons to obedience.

### **Love of God and our Neighbor**

God's love for us finds its response in our love for God and for our neighbors, as expressed in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40). The Great Commandment itself is expressed in the Bible through specific ethical standards of behavior. These biblical standards provide the norm for ethical behavior for the Church at all times in every place.

The Church is called to care for all persons, and especially the outcast, the despised, those who are vulnerable and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Thus we see that the Church is directed to advocate for and maintain biblical ethical norms. In our own day this is especially the case regarding the doctrine of marriage, a life-long union of one man and one woman. In the face of opposition from some sectors which support other forms of partnerships, the Church must speak out faithfully and clearly regarding the biblical standards for the relationship between men and women. It is our Christian faith that the relationship between man and woman in marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and his Church (Ephesians 5).

### **The Church's Mission**

The mission of the Church is twofold. On the one hand we are called to worship and serve the Triune God. At the same time, we are called to proclaim the Word of God to all people. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) indicates the breadth and width of the Church's mission: to make disciples of all nations.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, the Church is charged by God to preach the Gospel and to lead all people to a living faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. The Church's mission is in obedience to the words of Jesus, "As the Father has sent me, so also I send you" (John 20:21). The Church's calling is to take part in his mission by preaching the Kingdom of God in words and deeds until Christ returns in glory. As followers of Christ, Christians should carry out works of mercy and participate in the struggle for peace and justice.

We acknowledge that the Church is often unfaithful in its teaching and practice. We acknowledge that the Church today is failing in its proclamation and mission. We acknowledge that we, as members of the Church, have not always witnessed to the truth of the Gospel. We confess our lack of faith, obedience and love.

We call all Lutherans and Lutheran churches in the world to work for reformation within the Body of Christ.

We believe this will only happen:

- through repentance, as we turn away from sin which undermines our relationship with Christ, leading us away from him and the authority of his Word in our lives and in our various communities of faith;

- through submission and obedience to Christ, conforming our lives and our communities to his will, revealed in Holy Scripture;
- through the Holy Spirit working toward the amendment of life, personally and corporately;
- through refocusing—turning us back to the mission Christ gave to his Church.

We are praying for this reformation in the Body of Christ and stand ready to encourage, support and sustain this work within the Lutheran churches.

We give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is a gracious and merciful God. He has raised his Son from death to life. He has given us his Spirit, “the Lord and giver of life.” To him, the only wise God, be praise and honor, now and forever (Romans 16:27).

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## Notes

1. <https://globalforum.co/#letter>
2. <https://globalforum.co/#about>
3. <https://www.globalforum.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/10/Press-Release-Oct-31-2018-GCLMF-Final.pdf>