



Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)
Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communion d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)

Agreement between Reformation churches in Europe (The Leuenberg Agreement)

16th March, 1973

1. In assenting to this Agreement, the Lutheran and Reformed churches, the united churches which grew out of them and the related pre-Reformation churches, the Waldensian Church and the Church of the Czech Brethren, affirm, on the basis of their doctrinal discussions, a common understanding of the Gospel as elaborated below. This enables them to declare and to realize church fellowship. Thankful that they have been led closer together, they confess at the same time that the struggle for truth and unity in the Church has also been, and remains, marked by guilt and suffering.

2. The Church is founded on Jesus Christ alone. Through the gift of his salvation in preaching and the sacraments, he gathers the Church and sends it out. This is why, according to the understanding of the Reformers, the necessary and sufficient pre-requisite for the true unity of the Church is agreement in the right teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. It is from these Reformation criteria that the participating churches derive their understanding of church fellowship as set out below.

I *The road to fellowship*

3. Faced with real differences in style of theological thinking and church practice, the Reformers could not, in faith and conscience, see their way to avoid divisions, despite the numerous things they had in common. In this Agreement, the participating churches acknowledge that their relationship to one another has changed since the time of the Reformation.

1. Common features at the outset of the Reformation

4. With hindsight, it is easier today to discern what was common in the witness of the churches of the Reformation in spite of all the differences between them: their starting point was a new experience of liberation and assurance in the power of the Gospel. In taking a stand for the truth as they recognized it, the Reformers found themselves in common opposition to the church traditions of that time. They were at one therefore in confessing that the life and doctrine of the Church are to be measured by the original and pure testimony of the Gospel in scripture. They were at one in testifying to the free and unconditional grace of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for all those who believe this promise. They were at one in confessing that the practice and shape of the church are only to be determined by the commission to deliver this testimony to the world, and that the Word of the Lord remains sovereign over every human ordering of the Christian community. In all this, together with the whole of Christendom, they received and confessed anew the faith

expressed in the creeds of the early Church, in the Triune God and in the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ.

2. Changed elements in the situation of today's churches

5. In the course of four centuries, the theological grappling with the questions of modernity, the development of biblical research, the church renewal movements and the rediscovery of an ecumenical perspective have led the churches of the Reformation in similar directions to new ways of thinking and living. Admittedly, these developments have also given rise to new differences which cut across the confessions. But again and again, especially in times of common suffering, there has been an experience of Christian fellowship. All this led the churches, especially since the revival movements, to seek to give contemporary expression to the biblical witness and the Reformation confessions of faith. In this way they have learned to distinguish between the fundamental witness of the Reformation confessions of faith and their historically conditioned thought forms. Because they bear witness to the Gospel as the living Word of God in Jesus Christ, these confessions of faith do not bar the way to continued responsible testimony to the Word; on the contrary they unlock it with a summons to follow it in the freedom of faith.

II The common understanding of the Gospel

6. In what follows the participating churches describe their common understanding of the Gospel insofar as this is required for establishing church fellowship between them.

1. The message of justification as the message of the free grace of God

7. The Gospel is the message of Jesus Christ, the salvation of the world, in fulfilment of the promise given to the people of the old covenant.

8 a) The Reformers expressed the true understanding of the Gospel in the doctrine of justification.

9. b) In this message it is testified of Jesus Christ:
that he became human, and that in him God has bound God's self to humankind;
that he was crucified and rose from the dead, taking God's judgment upon himself, and in so doing demonstrating God's love for sinners;
that he is coming again, and as judge and saviour, leads the world to its consummation.

10. c) Through the Word of God in the Holy Spirit, God calls all people to repentance and faith and assures believing sinners of their righteousness in Jesus Christ. Those who put their trust in the gospel are justified in God's sight for the sake of Jesus Christ and set free from the accusation of the law. In daily repentance and renewal they live within the fellowship in the praise of God and in service to others in the assurance that God will fulfil his reign. In this way God creates new life and sets in the midst of the world the beginnings of a new humanity.

11. d) This message makes Christians free for responsible service in the world and also ready to suffer in that service. They know that God's will, as demand and gift, embraces the whole world. They stand up for justice and peace on earth between individuals and nations. In consequence, they must join with other people in seeking appropriate rational criteria and play their part in applying these criteria. They do so in confidence that God sustains the world, and as those who are accountable to him.

12 e) With this understanding of the Gospel we take our stand on the basis of the creeds of the early church and reaffirm the conviction, common to the Reformation confessions of faith, that the unique mediation of Jesus Christ in salvation is the heart of scripture and that the message of justification as the message of God's free grace is the measure of all the Church's preaching.

2. Preaching, Baptism and the Lord's Supper

13. The fundamental witness to the Gospel is the testimony of the apostles and prophets in the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is the task of the Church to transmit this gospel through the spoken word in preaching, through pastoral comfort, and through Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In preaching, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ is present through the Holy Spirit. Justification in Christ is thus imparted to people, and in this way the Lord gathers his church together. He works through various forms of ministry and service and through the witness of all the members of his church.

14 a) Baptism

Baptism is administered with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism Jesus Christ receives irrevocably human beings fallen victim to sin and death into his fellowship of salvation, that they might become new creatures. In the power of the Holy Spirit he calls them into his church and to a life of faith, with daily repentance and discipleship.

15. b) Lord's Supper

In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness of sins and sets us free for a new life of faith. He enables us to experience anew that we are members of his body. He strengthens us for service to humankind.

16. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the death of Christ, through which God has reconciled the world to God's self. We confess the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Rejoicing that the Lord has come to us, we await his future coming in glory.

III Agreement regarding the doctrinal condemnations of the Reformation period

17. The conflicting views which from the time of the Reformation onwards made church fellowship between the Lutheran and Reformed churches impossible and gave rise to mutual condemnations concerned the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, christology and the doctrine of predestination. We take these decisions of the Reformers seriously but we are able today to agree on the following statements on the subject:

1 The Lord's Supper

18. In the Lord's Supper, the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgement.

19. We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

20. Where there is such consensus between churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions of faith are inapplicable to the doctrinal position of these churches.

2 Christology

21. In the true human being Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, and so God's self, has given himself to lost humanity for our salvation. In the word of promise and in sacrament the Holy Spirit, and so God's self, makes the crucified and risen Jesus present to us.

22. Believing in this self-offering of God in God's Son, we perceive, with regard to the historically conditioned nature of traditional thought forms, that our task is to give fresh validity to the insights of the Reformed tradition with its particular concern to maintain the unimpaired divinity and humanity of Jesus and to those of the Lutheran tradition with its particular concern to maintain the unity of his person.

23. In these circumstances it is impossible for us to reaffirm the former condemnations today.

3 Predestination

24. In the Gospel we have the promise of the unconditional acceptance of sinners by God. All who trust this promise can know that they are saved and praise God for their election. For this reason we can speak of election only with respect to the call to salvation in Christ.

25. It is the experience of faith that the message of salvation is not accepted by all; yet faith respects the mystery of the action of God. It bears witness at one and the same time to the seriousness of human decision and to the reality of God's universal purpose of salvation. The witness of the scriptures to Christ forbids us from supposing that God has uttered an eternal decree, condemning for all time specific individuals or a whole people.

26. When there is such consensus between churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions of faith are inapplicable to the doctrinal position of these churches.

4 Conclusions

27. Wherever these statements are accepted, the condemnations of the Reformation confessions in respect of the Lord's Supper, christology, and predestination are inapplicable to the doctrinal position. This does not mean that the condemnations pronounced by the Reformers are irrelevant; but they are no longer an obstacle to church fellowship.

28. There remain considerable differences between our churches in forms of worship, types of spirituality, and church order. These differences are often more deeply felt in the congregations than the traditional doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, in fidelity to the New Testament and Reformation criteria for church fellowship, we cannot discern in these differences any factors which should divide the church.

IV. *The declaration and realization of church fellowship*

29. In the sense intended in this Agreement, church fellowship means that, on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible co-operation in witness and service to the world.

1. Declaration of church fellowship

30. In assenting to this Agreement, the churches, in loyalty to the confessions of faith which bind them or with due respect for their traditions, declare:

31. a) that they are one in understanding the Gospel as set out in parts II and III;

32. b) that in accordance with what is said in part III the doctrinal condemnations expressed in the confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal position of the assenting churches;

33. c) that they accord each other table and pulpit fellowship; this includes the mutual recognition of ordination and the freedom to provide for intercelebration.

34. With these statements church fellowship is declared. The divisions which have barred the way to this fellowship since the sixteenth century are removed. The participating churches are convinced that together they participate in the one Church of Jesus Christ and that the Lord frees them for and calls them to common service.

2. Realizing church fellowship

35. It is in the life of the churches and congregations that church fellowship becomes a reality. Believing in the unifying power of the Holy Spirit, they bear their witness and perform their service together, and strive to deepen and strengthen the fellowship they have found together.

36. a) Witness and service

The preaching of the churches gains credibility in the world when they give a united witness to the Gospel. The Gospel liberates and links together the churches for common service. In that this is a service of love, it focuses on human distress and seeks to remove the causes of that distress. The struggle for justice and peace in the world increasingly requires that the churches accept a common responsibility.

37. b) The continuing theological task

The Agreement does not affect the validity of the confessions of faith to which the participating churches are committed. It is not to be regarded as a new confession of faith. It sets out a consensus reached on central points that makes church fellowship possible between churches of different confessional positions. The participating churches allow themselves to be guided by this Agreement in their common undertaking of witness and service and commit themselves to continuing doctrinal conversations.

38. The common understanding of the Gospel on which the church fellowship is based must be further deepened, examined in the light of the witness of Holy Scripture, and continually made relevant to a contemporary context.

39. The churches are tasked with studying further the remaining doctrinal differences that persist within the participating churches and between them without being grounds for division. These include:

hermeneutical questions concerning the understanding of scripture, confession of faith and Church;

the relation between law and gospel;

baptismal practice;

ministry and ordination;

the "two kingdoms" doctrine and the doctrine of the sovereignty of Christ;

Church and society.

Consideration also has to be given to newly emerging problems relating to witness and service, order and practice.

40. On the basis of their common heritage, the churches of the Reformation must challenge the trends towards theological polarization that are increasingly evident today. To some extent the problems here go beyond the doctrinal differences that were once the basis of the opposition of Lutheran and Reformed.

41. It will be the task of common theological study to attest the truth of the gospel and to distinguish it from all distortions.

42. c) Organizational consequences

This declaration of church fellowship does not predetermine provisions of church law on particular matters of inter-church relations or within individual churches. The churches will, however, take the Agreement into account in considering any such provisions.

43. As a general rule, the affirmation of pulpit and table fellowship and the mutual recognition of ordination do not affect the rules in force in the participating churches for induction to a pastoral charge, the exercise of pastoral ministry, or the ordering of congregational life.

44. The question of organic union between particular participating churches can only be decided in the situation in which these churches live. In examining this question the following points should be kept in mind:

45. Any union detrimental to the lively diversity of styles of preaching, ways of worship, church order, and diaconal and social action, would contradict the very nature of the church fellowship inaugurated by this declaration. On the other hand, in certain situations, the service of the Church may call for formal legal unification because of the intimate connection between witness and order. Should organizational consequences be drawn from this declaration of church fellowship, it should not be at the expense of the freedom of decision of minority churches.

46. d) Ecumenical aspects.

In establishing and realizing church fellowship among themselves, the participating churches do so as part of their responsibility to promote the ecumenical fellowship of all Christian churches.

47. They regard such a fellowship of churches in the region of Europe as a contribution to this end. They hope that the overcoming of their previous separation will influence churches in Europe and elsewhere who are related to them confessionally. They are ready to examine with them the possibilities of wider church fellowship.

48. This hope applies equally to the relationship between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

49. They also hope that the church fellowship will provide a fresh stimulus to encounter and collaboration with churches of other confessions. They affirm their readiness to set their doctrinal conversations within this wider context.