



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

## **Scripture – Confession – Church**

Provisional result of a doctrinal discussion of the  
Community of Protestant Churches in Europe

*Released from the Council of the CPCE on October 3th 2009  
for further comments and discussion*

## 1. The challenge

1 The Leuenberg Agreement reminds in LA 4 of what the churches of the Reformation  
2 always had in common: *“Their starting point was a new experience of the power of the*  
3 *Gospel to liberate and assure. In standing up for the truth which they saw, the Reformers*  
4 *found themselves drawn together in opposition to the church traditions of that time. They*  
5 *were therefore at one in confessing that the Church’s life and doctrine are to be gauged*  
6 *by the original and pure testimony to the Gospel in Scripture.”*

7 This conviction is a common heritage of the Reformation and binds us together as  
8 churches in the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe.

9 We also share the consensus that we are lead by our confessions and doctrinal texts  
10 in our interpretation of Scripture. However, we differ in the question of which confessions  
11 we think are important and how far they may claim validity. But we understand this diver-  
12 sity as richness, for when the Leuenberg Agreement declares church fellowship among  
13 the “churches with different confessional positions” (LA 29; see also 37), it means to say  
14 that the one Gospel of Jesus Christ finds its expression in different forms of confession.

15 But there are differences in the way in which we understand and interpret the Bible;  
16 differences within individual churches as well as between churches and confessional  
17 traditions. Therefore the Leuenberg Agreement already mentions the “hermeneutical  
18 questions concerning the understanding of Scripture, confession of faith and church” as  
19 one of the themes which needs to be worked on further (LA 39).

20  
21 1) The necessity of dealing with the question of the understanding of Scripture and of  
22 the hermeneutic of the confessions was always obvious in the history of the church. To-  
23 day we deal with it not only within the member churches of the CPCE, but also in the re-  
24 alization of fellowship between them.

25 The question of how we can understand the Bible properly and what authority its wit-  
26 ness has, gains in our community a more fundamental and urgent significance. Many  
27 people, within and outside our churches and congregations, ask what meaning the texts  
28 of this old book still have for life today. Some doubt that we can still gain orientation from  
29 them for the current questions of life. They have difficulties in recognising what connec-  
30 tions exist between the old stories of the Bible and the message which the Church is  
31 proclaiming today. They also question the exclusive claim of the Bible compared to other  
32 religious traditions.

33 At the same time there are very vibrant movements within Christianity for which a  
34 strict identification of the text handed down with the ever valid Word of God is fundamen-  
35 tal. Not infrequently this is attractive to young people, who are looking for support in their  
36 lives. But it often leads to a legalistic message, which is in danger of contradicting the  
37 Gospel. Especially the Protestant churches are facing the challenge of how they can  
38 bring scripture to life, and present the meaning and authority of Holy Scripture as the  
39 Word of God, without falling into the trap of a fundamentalistic misunderstanding, which  
40 would miss the basic message of Scripture.

41  
42 2) The question of the understanding of Scripture has also been raised in dialogue  
43 with churches and movements outside the CPCE. On the one hand our appeal to the Bi-  
44 ble as the basis and guideline of all Christian teaching and action connects us with all  
45 Christian churches and groups. The confession of the basic authority of the Holy Scrip-  
46 ture is the ground for all ecumenical cooperation and the doctrinal conversations of our  
47 time. This holds true concerning the encounter between very different forms of Protes-  
48 tant Christian life in evangelical, charismatic or neo-pentecostal movements or the Pen-  
49 tecostal churches and congregations, as well as within the conversations with the  
50 churches of the Orthodox or Roman Catholic tradition.

51 On the other hand, we find significant differences breaking out concerning the under-  
52 standing of Scripture. In conversations with churches and groups of the neo-pentecostal

1 movement for example, there is a controversy concerning the meaning of the gifts of the  
2 Spirit, the New Testament vocation of healing and the biblical promise of blessing in rela-  
3 tion to the overall witness of Scripture.

4 Also in the dialogue of the churches of the CPCE with the Orthodox churches and the  
5 Roman Catholic Church the reference to Scripture is still an open problem. Several offi-  
6 cial documents have made us aware in recent years how much Rome and Orthodoxy  
7 still dispute that the churches of the Reformation are truly churches. Because we are  
8 dealing in this context with the becoming normative of particular developments in the his-  
9 tory of the church; for example, with the question of the understanding of ordained minis-  
10 try, it becomes clear that there needs to be further clarification concerning the relation  
11 between Scripture and tradition, despite all of the convergence achieved so far. The is-  
12 sue here is not any more the recognition of the significance of tradition as such, but its  
13 normative role beyond the witness of Scripture. It is also beyond dispute in Protestant  
14 churches that the question of the authority and meaning of Scripture cannot be viewed  
15 independently from the relation between Bible and Church.

16  
17 3) The canon of biblical writings developed within the life of the Church itself; the  
18 Church has kept and handed down these texts. In the history of the Church the Holy  
19 Scripture has time and again given an important impulse for reformation and new orien-  
20 tations, which has also led to a stronger evaluation of the Bible. Most people today also  
21 get to know, learn, and to appreciate the Bible through its use in their churches and con-  
22 gregations, and depend on the assistance of this context to understand the texts of the  
23 Bible.

24 This, however, leads to the question of the responsibility of the Church, and especially  
25 of those who speak on her behalf, for the interpretation of the Bible. Is there within the  
26 realm of the Protestant Churches, a principle of a creative rivalry concerning various in-  
27 terpretations, which try to gain the approval the listeners? Or do the Protestant churches  
28 also have the responsibility to interpret in a binding way? This, however, leads to the  
29 question of whether there is something like a “magisterium”, and what kind of function  
30 and authority such a “magisterium” has, and how it is exercised, especially by Protestant  
31 synods? This question opens up the next question concerning the significance confes-  
32 sions and other doctrinal documents have for the present interpretation of Holy Scripture,  
33 and which institutions can determine this.

34  
35 4) Through the continued development of its community the CPCE is challenged to  
36 clarify ever more precisely what kind of binding nature common resolutions have, and  
37 how mutually committed speaking is possible within the community. In the sphere of the  
38 proclamation of faith and especially in the area of ethically responsible action we see de-  
39 velopments which urgently call for common statements from the churches. Is it possible  
40 that we could jointly express ourselves as churches of the Reformation on the basis of  
41 our common understanding of the Gospel, in a way, which would in some sense be bind-  
42 ing on individual churches and Christians?

43  
44 The present study wants to respond to three questions:

- 45 • How do we understand the Holy Scripture properly and how do we interpret it  
46 according to the Gospel?
- 47 • What help and binding orientations do the confessions and the doctrinal docu-  
48 ments of our churches provide for this task and what authority do they have for  
49 interpretation and proclamation?
- 50 • What significance does the present-day interpretation of Scripture have for the  
51 formation of a common will concerning theological and ethical questions in our  
52 synods, and also within the CPCE?

## 2. The word that bears witness to itself

It is the common conviction of the faith of Christian Churches that we only know something about God, and speak of God to others, because God has revealed Godself. People of all times have somehow felt that in creation and in history they can sense an opponent of their existence. However, God is only recognised definitely in his action and being, where he can be perceived in his self-revelation in his people Israel and then in a final way in Jesus Christ.

We only know about God's revelation in the history of his people Israel and in the story of Jesus of Nazareth through the witness of the Holy Scripture. Historically speaking these writings are a collection of documents in which we find the account of very different faith experiences from Israel and early Christianity. But they have one thing in common: they are witnesses to the encounter with the one God, who seeks himself encounter with humanity.

It belongs to the being of God, as he is witnessed in the Bible, that this God doesn't remain by himself. God moves out from himself and makes, through the creation of the world and human beings, a partner for himself, for whom he exists and to whom he speaks.

This is spoken of in its utmost concentration and precision at the beginning of the Gospel of John: *(New Revised Standard Version)*

*In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
He was in the beginning with God.  
All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.  
What has come into being in him was life,  
And the life was the light of all people.*

If we additionally take into account that the Greek word *logos* has an overall meaning broader than the English expression *Word*, we find a deep consensus in the main message here: It belongs to the very being of God to be "dialogical", and to exist as a partnership-like community (*koinonia*). Through his Word, that means through his nature as one who concerns himself with being understood by the other with whom he is face to face, he created the world (Genesis 1). In the Word he emptied himself in order to be able to be experienced and recognised in the existence of his creatures as the ground of their life.

So God speaks to humankind from the very beginning, according to the witness of the Bible. Humankind knows of the gift of life and of the earth as their home. They know about the gift of God's commandment and experience the distressing consequences, when people don't keep the rules which God gave them. In the calling of Abraham and the election of Israel God's speaking becomes definite: God's actions towards his people and his speaking to them become the model of his will for salvation, which will not be broken even by disobedience and unfaithfulness. In his word God turns towards his people, he liberates them and leads them through an eventful history. The Old Testament witnesses to us God's powerful speaking to his people: *This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life; through it you may live long.* (Deuteronomy 32:47)

God doesn't give up, even not when people close themselves to God's search for them, and refuse to receive his word which determines the reality of their life. He goes a new way to bring his love close to people. The fulfilment of the history of God's communication with us is found in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. The prolog of the Gospel of John describes it with the words (1:14):

1           *And the Word became flesh and lived among us,*  
2           *and we have seen his glory,*  
3           *the glory as of a father's only son,*  
4           *full of grace and truth.*

5           The “Word”, that means God’s being for us – and that means in other words: God’s  
6 son, Jesus Christ – becomes man and takes all the frailty and narrowness of created ex-  
7 istence upon himself, so that humanity can experience and understand him in his love  
8 and devotion. God’s “Word” is God’s action for our salvation. This correlates to the wit-  
9 ness of the Johannine community regarding the encounter with Jesus: “*We have seen*  
10 *his glory.*” In the man Jesus of Nazareth, the Word that became flesh, God’s divinity is  
11 revealed and visible. This glory is described with a pair of words, which are already used  
12 in the Old Testament to characterise God’s being and acting: grace and truth; that  
13 means God’s life-giving graciousness and his unbreakable faithfulness. In Jesus of Naz-  
14 areth humanity encounters the reality of the presence of God, namely, his mercy and his  
15 faithfulness. Since God is really concerned about us human beings and his unconditional  
16 “Yes” to us, it also includes his “No” to everything which separates us from him; at the  
17 same time it includes his call to us to entrust our lives to him in faith.

18           According to Hebrew 1:1f: “*God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by*  
19 *the prophets*” and lastly and finally by the son. Jesus Christ is the decisive Word of God.  
20 This Word is made known by the apostolic witness that has been held fast and made  
21 known in the New Testament for us. At its centre stands the witness that God has raised  
22 the crucified from the dead. From this certainty the disciples understand the meaning of  
23 Christ’s death on the cross. Through the giving of the life of the son, God himself enters  
24 the world of sin and death by his love and overcomes the forces which separate us hu-  
25 man beings from him and from true life. The “*message about the cross*” (1 Corinthians  
26 1:18) becomes the Gospel, and its meaning becomes plausible in the light of the Holy  
27 Scriptures of Israel.

28           God’s speaking through his Word is not only present in the church as a “text” in the  
29 form of a written book. In the Leuenberg Agreement it is said: “The fundamental witness  
30 to the Gospel is the testimony of the apostles and prophets in the Holy Scriptures of the  
31 Old and New Testaments. It is the task of the Church to spread this Gospel by the spo-  
32 ken word in preaching, by individual counselling, and by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”  
33 (LA 13)

34           The community of Jesus Christ endows itself with the Word of God in different “word-  
35 forms” in its history. It is always heard anew in the *spoken* Word of proclamation, through  
36 which the apostolic witness is interpreted for the present time; it is experienced through  
37 the *visible* word of the sacraments, through which Jesus meets us in “speaking signs”  
38 and in the communion which is constituted through it, and it becomes alive in the re-  
39 sponse of faith, in prayer, in praise and confession. So the word is embodied in the wor-  
40 ship of the community.

### 41 42           **3. Holy Scripture as a witness of God’s speaking**

43           God’s speaking and actions in the history of his people Israel and the history of Jesus  
44 of Nazareth are made known through the witness of the biblical writings. The reason why  
45 these writings are more for us than historical documents concerning the religious convic-  
46 tions of Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or a small group of people who relate them-  
47 selves in the first century to a Jewish prophet by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, has its  
48 reason in the fact that we, like the first Christians before us, hear the ever new, effective  
49 and perpetually living voice of God speaking in it.

50           The writings collected in the biblical canon are foundational for our witness. Even  
51 though they may not be simply identified with the Word of God, only through them do we  
52 have access to God’s original speaking in the history of God’s people Israel, the fate of  
53 Jesus, and the mission of the apostles.

1 As witness to the Gospel the message of the Holy Scripture is sufficient for salvation.  
2 There is no need for supplementation or enhancement. However, the Gospel cannot be  
3 extracted from the overall message of the Scripture, be it through reference to the his-  
4 torical Jesus, or be it through the reference to so-called "crucial verses". Through the  
5 work of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to hear the gospel anew through the whole of the  
6 biblical witness. Three aspects are crucial for this listening and the interpretation which  
7 follows it:<sup>1</sup>

- 8 1) The biblical writings are the written deposit, formulated and witnessed by human be-  
9 ings, of the speaking of God in the history of the people of Israel, the fate of Jesus,  
10 and the mission of the apostles and the response of the people in praise, lamenta-  
11 tion, narration, proclamation and reflection. These Scriptures are to be called 'holy',  
12 because and in so far as they foundationally and sufficiently bear witness to the will  
13 of God for salvation, and contain everything that "belongs to the right teaching about  
14 the blissful faith and a life which pleases God" (Confessio Helvetica Posterior I).
- 15 2) The witness of the Holy Scripture is given new life through God's Spirit, where this  
16 Word is publicly proclaimed and where people read, meditate and interpret Scripture  
17 for one another and thus are encouraged and admonished. God's Spirit effects the  
18 faith in hearing, and faith hears the address of God in the human words of Scripture.  
19 Those who hear have a decisive share in the event of the word of God. As much as it  
20 accords with the Reformation understanding of faith that individuals are always ad-  
21 dressed in it, it is also true that it is not the isolated individual who understands Scrip-  
22 ture. The understanding of Scripture comes about in the community of those who  
23 hear and believe.
- 24 3) The witness of Scripture is rightly understood when questions are asked about its  
25 centre and interpretation is rooted there. The centre can only be found in the whole-  
26 ness of the variety of the diverse witness of Scripture, New and Old Testaments. To  
27 put it the other way around, this wholeness of Scripture can only be opened up from  
28 its centre. Reformation theology identifies the centre with God's action in Jesus  
29 Christ for the salvation of humankind and describes this action with different stress-  
30 points. The Leuenberg Agreement stresses the mediation of Jesus Christ in salvation  
31 and emphasises, that "the message of justification as the message of God's free  
32 grace is the measure of all the Church's preaching." (LA 12) The witness of God's  
33 reconciling action in Jesus Christ, his unconditional "Yes" to the weak and to sinners,  
34 to the poor and the burdened, in its very different forms is the definite and supporting  
35 centre of Scripture. Thus individual parts of Scripture are not excluded or given spe-  
36 cial emphasis, however a hermeneutical key is gained which gives a clear perspec-  
37 tive to the interpretation of the diversity of biblical voices.

#### 38 39 **4. God's Word as promise and claim**

40 God speaks to human beings. He does that in different ways. Already in the first  
41 pages of the Bible it is reported that God gives human beings a living space and com-  
42 missions them to till and preserve the earth (Genesis 1:28f; 2:15). However, the Bible  
43 also tells of how God goes after human beings who have failed, seeks them out and  
44 asks: "*Where are you?*", "*What have you done?*" and holds them responsible for the  
45 consequences of their deeds: "*Because you have done this...*" (Genesis 3:9, 13-17).

46 God's Word happens anew in different situations and yet remains true to itself, be-  
47 cause it is the Word of the one God.

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<sup>1</sup> It is - also between the churches of the CPCE - an open question, how far, and in which way, the confessions of the church can give orientation for the interpretation of Scripture. This question, with which we are also dealing with the significance of tradition for interpretation, needs to be considered in the following paragraphs. However, for systematic coherence it is not discussed before chapters 6 and 7.

1 God's Word is a *Word of salvation*, the promise of his life-giving, liberating and forgiv-  
2 ing presence. Because God's word seeks to preserve justice and creates peace, it is  
3 also guidance and commandment.

4 God's word is his *assurance* of grace: God so loved the world that he gives himself to  
5 the world in his beloved Son that all who believe in him shall not be lost but have eternal  
6 life (cf. John 3:16).

7 God's word is his *claim* on people: since God is love and his love gives orientation for  
8 human beings, God expects people to love (cf. John 15:12). This claim is summarised in  
9 the double command to love (Mark 12:28-32).

10 In this way God's Word is a *word of salvation* and at the same time a *Word of judge-*  
11 *ment*: it exposes human guilt, but finally works in it as a claim on the life of his creatures  
12 that preserves life and creates beneficial boundaries. The biblical judgement oracles  
13 convict the people of their refusal of the love of God and for humanity, as well as of their  
14 reception or denial of the graceful and correcting word of God. The Gospel tells us that  
15 we are already judged in Christ and called to life.

16 Regarding the different forms of the word of God, Reformation theology speaks of the  
17 necessary distinction between law and Gospel. Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist theo-  
18 logy differs in how they understand the relationship between these two functions of  
19 God's Word, and especially in the importance and status they attach to the law. Never-  
20 theless, there are convergences which are expressed in the CPCE study about law and  
21 Gospel in the following way: "Law and Gospel belong together as God's Word, in so far  
22 as the law claims the whole person for God, who has intended salvation for him in fel-  
23 lowship with him. However, law and gospel are also to be distinguished, as human be-  
24 ings in no way attain salvation through fulfilling the demands of the law but only through  
25 faith in the Gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>

26 As promise and demand, God's Word is related to human beings as one in the face of  
27 the other. His Word calls for an answer. As the word of reconciliation God's word prom-  
28 ises us that God has reconciled the world in Christ. However, because reconciliation is  
29 lived out as relationship, this Word requests us at the same time to: "*Be reconciled with*  
30 *God!*" (2. Corinthians 5:20). The response of faith is thus simply to allow to be effective  
31 what God has already done for us. This faith becomes action by the way we live out  
32 what Christ has done for us.

33 Faith is not a human achievement. Paul says: "*So faith comes from hearing the mes-*  
34 *sage. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ!*" (Romans 10:17). That Christ  
35 speaks in our proclamation is what constitutes our faith. It is not my faith that makes the  
36 Word of the Gospel, but the Gospel creates my faith and my faith allows me to recognise  
37 the Gospel as Gospel. Such hearing concerns the existence of every individual human  
38 being, but it always happens in the sphere of the fellowship of the church and the con-  
39 gregation and is related to it.

## 41 **5. The Interpretation of the Holy Scripture**

42 The Word of God attested in Holy Scripture, that God has spoken in history in a living  
43 and saving way, also goes out in the present. That this happens, and that words which  
44 many centuries previously were addressed in a very different culture to men and women  
45 in their then situation address men and women today, and that this brings about trans-  
46 formation, reconciliation and authority, is the work of the Spirit of God which is promised  
47 to us. The activity of the Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture includes the challenge to  
48 investigate the text, to grasp its message and to open ourselves to the encounter with  
49 God.

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<sup>2</sup> Law and Gospel, A Study also in Respect of Decision Making in Ethical Questions, ed. M. Bün-  
ker and M. Friedrich, Leuenberg Texts 11, Frankfurt am Main 2007, p. 199.

1 Three hermeneutical rules are decisive for the interpretation of Scripture:

- 2 1) Taking note of the historicity of the biblical testimony: The Bible is a book with a his-  
3 tory and its texts are shaped by it. This reflects that God's revelation has taken place  
4 in history and that he speaks in concrete situations. Therefore the precise recognition  
5 of the historically conditioned linguistic and literary form of these texts is essential for  
6 its understanding.
- 7 2) The effort to understand the original intention: Even if some biblical texts may  
8 speak to us directly today and others *a priori* seem strange to us, it is part of the  
9 humility and caution of the present-day interpreter to listen first of all to the original  
10 message of the text. This does not exclude the possibility that the words, stories and  
11 images of the Bible bear within themselves a potential meaning which leads beyond  
12 their intention that we can recognise historically. Thus cumbersome texts can speak  
13 again, and seemingly well known texts may disclose new insights.
- 14 3) The readiness to expose our present life to the promise and claim of the biblical mes-  
15 sage: God's speaking in Scripture can be liberating and relieving, encouraging and  
16 comforting, but also admonishing and criticising, urging change and calling for obedi-  
17 ence. This requires that we open ourselves personally to what God is saying to us  
18 today, and at the same time enter a process of communal hearing.

19 Hearers and readers bring to their hearing and reading of the texts their own experi-  
20 ences and patterns of language. This plays an essential part in shaping their under-  
21 standing, and thus allows the texts to become their own. The encounter with biblical  
22 texts in worship, in liturgical readings, or as texts for musical compositions also contrib-  
23 utes to this. Concerning the interpretation of biblical texts various approaches are possi-  
24 ble and necessary, which can supplement each other.

25 Historical-critical interpretation intends to do justice to the *historical character* of Scrip-  
26 ture and through its questions about the original statements of the text preserves us  
27 against commandeering them too hastily for the present. Rightly understood, historical-  
28 critical interpretation presupposes that we interpret not only texts which are important for  
29 the history of religion, but also testimonies to what God says in history. Since the texts of  
30 the Bible are literary witnesses, literary and linguistic methods are applied in opening  
31 them up as well as the methodological tools of the historical disciplines. Help is offered in  
32 recognising the promise and claim of the biblical texts by approaches which enable a re-  
33 flective treatment and acquisition of the texts related to the questions of our time, e.g.  
34 depth psychology, feminist and social-historical approaches, which take specific aspects  
35 of human experience and context and bring them into conversation with biblical texts. In-  
36 teractive approaches like bibliodrama also help towards a possible identification with bib-  
37 lical figures and their experiences with God.

38 Just as approaches oriented on experience can preserve historically oriented ap-  
39 proaches from predominantly remaining at the level of analysis and the communication  
40 of information, so approaches with a historical orientation can introduce a critical poten-  
41 tial which may work against the danger of an arbitrary subjectivity of interpretation.

42 Principally it must be maintained that there is not just *the* (one) correct meaning of a  
43 text (the only right interpretation), which has to be ascertained. Rather, the texts express  
44 different biblical aspects contained in them in relation to the context and the hearers or  
45 readers, each time with a different weight.

46 This also finds its expression in the various Bible translations with their very different  
47 approaches.

48 A majority of methodical approaches are legitimate, if a dialogue between them is  
49 possible. Such dialogue takes place in theological scholarship as well as in sermon  
50 preparation and in work with the Bible in church and congregations – in all places where  
51 people ask after the right understanding of Scripture.

52 From the perspective of the Reformation it is essential that the statements of the Bible  
53 become liberating assurance which happens if Christ himself talks to us through them as



1 the *Christus pro nobis* [Christ for us]. An interpretation which works out in the texts of  
2 Scripture “*whatever advances the cause of Christ*” (cf. Martin Luther: “*was Christum*  
3 *treibet*”) will serve this purpose. For the interpretation of the Old Testament this does not  
4 intend an interpretation which supposes to find statements about Christ everywhere. It  
5 means an interpretation which, in the light of the action of God in Jesus Christ, recog-  
6 nises the action of this God also in the witness of God’s way with Israel. This corre-  
7 sponds to the faith in the triune God. Here we must respect that Jews read the Hebrew  
8 Bible with different eyes from us Christians. But these writings were also the Bible of Je-  
9 sus and were understood afresh by the apostles in the light of the Christ event.<sup>3</sup>

10 The criterion “*whatever advances the cause of Christ*” is applied from the Reformation  
11 to the whole Bible: “What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Saint Peter or  
12 Saint Paul taught it. Again, what preaches Christ is apostolic even if Judas, Annas, Pilate  
13 or Herod did it.”<sup>4</sup> Here Martin Luther is speaking in favour of a definition of the authority  
14 of Scripture in terms of content and against its formalisation; in this respect he can call  
15 on Galatians 1:8. Protestant scriptural interpretation will therefore not only use the exe-  
16 getical question of “*whatever advances the cause of Christ*” critically to guard against  
17 fundamentalist or legalistic forms of interpretation, but also see in it a fundamental help  
18 for interpretation which leads also to the hidden springs of the water of life in the biblical  
19 texts.

20 Three statements on theological hermeneutics should round off these considerations:

- 21 1) It is a basic Christian conviction that the biblical texts bear in their original meaning a  
22 message which can and should be understood by us. For working out this meaning  
23 the question of the author’s intention is important, but it is not the ultimate and only  
24 criterion. The meaning of a text is not exhausted by its original meaning. The biblical  
25 texts, with their often complicated prehistory, and in their canonical context, gain an  
26 autonomy over author and readers which makes them a living partner in the interpre-  
27 tation. This also leads to new aspects of meaning disclosing themselves in particular  
28 situations through new lines of questioning. The history of the influence [Wirkungs-  
29 geschichte] of these texts shows something of this diversity, but also teaches us to  
30 recognise where the interests of interpreters lead to interpretations which are far re-  
31 moved from the original message. Here synchronic and diachronic methods of scrip-  
32 tural interpretation can work together in a critical hermeneutical circle. But because  
33 Christian faith and the Church’s proclamation appeal to God’s revelation in history,  
34 from which the biblical texts are witnessing, the question of the original intention of  
35 the texts remains of decisive importance.
- 36 2) The task of understanding the message of the Bible and making it speak for us is  
37 confronted by a double challenge: first, we are dealing with ancient texts almost all of  
38 which are 2000 years old or older. It takes a high degree of knowledge and empathy  
39 to come as closely as possible to what they once wanted to say and it needs a syn-  
40 thesizing creativity to grasp what this could have to say to men and women today.  
41 Here lies the second challenge: particularly for those who understand intellectually  
42 what the biblical texts want to say, existentially this message can appear “folly” or a  
43 “scandalous affront” (1 Corinthians 1:18f).

44 That these texts nevertheless speak to us today in spite of these difficulties and  
45 find faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. Already 2 Timothy 3:16 talks about the mys-  
46 tery of the inspiration of Scripture. The statement that *all Scripture is inspired by*  
47 *God’s Spirit* does not describe a characteristic attached to the letter, but a miraculous  
48 enablement of the effect that through its word men and women are taught, put right,  
49 and guided by God in their lives. John Wesley has aptly observed on this passage in  
50 his “Notes on the NT” that God’s Spirit not only inspired those who composed the  
51 biblical writings but also constantly inspires those who read them with earnest

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Church and Israel, A Contribution from the Reformation Churches in Europe to the Relation-  
ship between Christians and Jews, ed. Helmut Schwier, Leuenberg Texts 6, Frankfurt am Main  
2001.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude (1522).

1 prayer.<sup>5</sup> According to John Calvin many clear signs attest that God speaks in and  
2 through Scripture, but the last certainty is granted us by the inner testimony of the  
3 Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

4 It is ultimately thanks to the activity of the Spirit of God if the proclamation of the  
5 church is both in accordance with Scripture and meets the present situation and time.

- 6 3) In our present-day society the churches see themselves confronted with a multiplicity  
7 of ethical questions for which there are no direct instructions in Scripture. And  
8 conversely, biblical statements in which we find today's questions of life must be  
9 thought about in a differentiated way, because the effects of simply transferring  
10 them to the present situation could contradict the basic concern of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> They  
11 have to be considered in regard to their basic intention in light of the centre of scrip-  
12 ture and from that standpoint they need to be applied to our present time. It requires  
13 a reflective application to old and new questions and situations, which is lead by the  
14 heart and through life experience. Only in this way can it bring concrete and binding  
15 results.

## 16 17 **6. Scripture, Church and Tradition**

18 For the life of the churches of the Reformation it is important that the Bible is always  
19 interpreted in the context of the Church. Whether people gather together to worship and  
20 listen to a sermon, or in the lecture theatre where exegesis is offered, or a small group  
21 comes together to make an effort to understand Scripture, but also when individuals  
22 study their Bible by themselves, interpretation always happens in the larger context of  
23 how the Bible has been read and understood down through history by the Christian  
24 community, and how its message has been interpreted and proclaimed. In this effort the  
25 Church is not closing itself up as a community of interpretation, but is always referring  
26 herself to Israel, which has built up a different tradition of interpretation. Tradition is the  
27 well kept treasure of these interpretations of the Church through history. However, read-  
28 ers are challenged by the Bible itself to consciously and critical evaluate traditional and  
29 governing interpretations, as the Reformers themselves did.

30 The ecumenical discussion of the last fifty years has shown that the Protestant  
31 churches may not simply play off the validity of the *sola scriptura* against the importance  
32 of tradition and should not deny its presence in the life and teaching of their churches.  
33 The life of a community is unthinkable without a living and a codified tradition. So the  
34 churches of the Reformation related themselves to the confessions of the early church  
35 and put themselves in line with the tradition of the first four councils. What is decisive is  
36 the role that tradition plays. It is basic for the Protestant understanding that tradition must  
37 always be critically evaluated and newly appropriated with its centre being the original  
38 witness of Scripture. However, in the newest theological and ecumenical discussion it is  
39 often pointed out that the origin of the canon is part of the formation of tradition by the  
40 early church. However, the canon has not been established by the church in an authori-  
41 tative act, but gradually formed itself in a lengthy process through which those scriptures  
42 which proved themselves in the life of the church and which have been used in a lively  
43 way by congregations became the "criterion" for the church's proclamation, i.e. they be-  
44 came the "canon". The decisions of bishops and the resolutions of synods merely  
45 brought about the final and legally binding establishment of what already existed. So one

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<sup>5</sup> Notes on the NT, on 2 Tim 3:16.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Institutes I, 7, 4+5 (testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum). See also Luther's understanding:  
„Scripture should be understood solely through the spirit through which it has been written, which  
spirit you cannot find anywhere more present and alive than in his holy scripture" (Assertio om-  
nium articolorum, WA 7,96).

<sup>7</sup> That relates to such different topics as the statements of the Old Testament on war, or the death  
penalty or an unthought-out adoption of the instruction in Gen 1,28 to subdue the earth, but also  
to dealing with the New Testament prohibition of divorce (cf. Matt. 5:31f; 19:3-12 par; 1 Cor 7:12-  
16).

1 can say that the biblical canon has been established by God and has manifested itself in  
2 the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

3 The establishment of the canon has brought about the distinction between the church  
4 founding apostolic witness and the later tradition of the early church. Only if the Church  
5 upholds this distinction can Scripture remain a critical and necessary partner.

6 The same is true regarding the special authority of the creeds of the early church. As  
7 an interpretation of the witness to God and Christ of the Scriptures, they found recogni-  
8 tion from the whole church. Biblical arguments were a constitutive factor in their origin,  
9 even if they then make use of extra-biblical linguistic formulations for what they say. LA  
10 12 therefore endorses the claim that the churches of the CPCE stand “on the basis of  
11 the ancient creeds of the Church” with their understanding of the Gospel.

12 In as much as there is a distinction between tradition and the original biblical witness,  
13 the tradition of the interpretation of the Church is also an important help in providing ori-  
14 entation for Reformation theology.<sup>8</sup> Here it becomes clear how important the dif-  
15 ferentiation between “fundamental witness” and “historically conditioned forms of  
16 thought” is for interpretation. (LA 5). For the sake of faithfulness to the origin, what has  
17 been said in the earlier time has to be formulated anew in the given situation and time.

18 According to the Reformation understanding the Church is an interpretative commu-  
19 nity because the Word of God is alive and at work in the Church. Hearing the Word leads  
20 the Church constantly to confess in particular historical situations. Thus listening to-  
21 gether to Holy Scripture, from the Reformation down to the present day, has time and  
22 again led to new confessions which have become fundamental ingredients of the Refor-  
23 mation tradition. One example of this is the Barmen Theological Declaration from the  
24 year 1934.

## 26 7. The Authority of the Confessions of the Church

27 The confession of Christians is a current and existential interpretation of Scripture. In  
28 it they say before God and publicly how God’s words affect their own lives. The church is  
29 always a confessing church, i.e. a church which hears and answers. The confessing of  
30 the church is the explicit Amen to God’s “Yes” to men and women. This confessing has  
31 different dimensions which belong together.<sup>9</sup> In worship (*leiturgia*) Christians confess the  
32 triune God and thus at the same time bear witness to God before their fellow human be-  
33 ings. In the confession of guilt people face the fact that their life has gone wrong, but at  
34 the same time make clear from whom they expect forgiveness and help.

35 In testimony to the outside (*martyria*) Christians say where they put their trust and  
36 hope for their lives and attest this in the extreme case in a readiness to pay with their  
37 lives.

38 In supporting people who are in need or whose dignity and life is threatened, they  
39 confess that God’s love is for all (*diakonia*).

40 For the life of a community (*koinonia*) confessions of faith have an important function  
41 in creating identity. That has been the case since the time of the early church, where the  
42 baptismal confession had not only the function of a personal proclamation of faith by the  
43 person baptised, but also of an endorsement of membership to the community.

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<sup>8</sup> In this connection the United Methodist Church, following John Wesley’s instigation, speaks of a hermeneutical „quadrilateral“: Scripture is interpreted by (1) Scripture itself (*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres est*); (2) tradition, especially the theology of the first centuries; (3) experience, not just of the individual but of the community; and (4) reason as an instrument of critical discernment (cf. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004, 104: Our Theological Task, pp. 74-86).

<sup>9</sup> More about the church founding functions of these four dimensions, in: The Church of Jesus Christ, The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity, ed. Wilhelm Hüffmeier, Leuenberg Texts 1, Frankfurt am Main <sup>3</sup>2001, Ch. 1.3.3.

1 Confessions, fixed in writing, time and again came into being in the history of the  
2 Church out of a need to formulate the message of the Gospel clearly in a current situa-  
3 tion. Here it is not a matter of reciting the statements of Scripture as literally as possible.  
4 It is rather a matter of stating the witness of Scripture anew under a new challenge. The  
5 creeds of the early church have preserved their validity until today not just because they  
6 were resolved by an ecumenical council but because and insofar as they reformulated  
7 the biblical statements about God's presence in Christ and the Holy Spirit anew. They  
8 are signs of continuity with the early church; the apostolicity and catholicity of the church.

9 It was especially emphasised at the time of the Reformation that confession arises out  
10 of opposition to false teaching as well as the account of the Protestant faith before the  
11 forum of the world. The need to proclaim the witness of Christ in the Bible in the current  
12 time and guard it against dangers led to a variety of new and regional confessions. In the  
13 Lutheran churches the Augsburg Confession, the Schmalkald Articles, Luther's Cate-  
14 chisms and the Formula of Concord had the power of founding communities. In the Re-  
15 formed churches there is no single corpus of confessional writings, but the Heidelberg  
16 Catechism, the Confessio Helvetica Posterior and the Westminster Confession came to  
17 supra-regional importance. Further confessions had regional or national importance, for  
18 example the Geneva Catechism and the Confession de La Rochelle (Gallicana).

19 Here the confessions emphasise that they understand their statements to be derived  
20 from the Bible, as "a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the  
21 Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the  
22 Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and con-  
23 demned".<sup>10</sup> In this way confessions also take on the function of instruction in the right  
24 understanding of the Bible which emphasises the essentials and puts forward a particu-  
25 lar interpretation as appropriate. The confession is understood as assistance for inter-  
26 preting Scripture and Scripture as the basis for interpreting the confession. As the founda-  
27 tion, Holy Scripture has priority: it is *norma normans* [the ruling rule], whereas the con-  
28 fessions derived from it are *norma normata* [the ruled rule].

29 Especially Reformed confessions emphasise that their statements can be revised  
30 should the common interpretation of Scripture lead to other insights. Thus Heinrich Bull-  
31 inger says in the Second Helvetic Confession that he is happily prepared "not without  
32 gratitude to yield to those who teach us better from the word of God and follow them".<sup>11</sup>  
33 However, the Formula of Concord also clearly puts the confessions as "witness and ex-  
34 planation of the faith" under the Scripture, which is the "only judge, rule and guideline".<sup>12</sup>  
35 According to Lutheran understanding, too, the criterion of conformity with the confession  
36 is thus related to and subordinated under the criterion of conformity with Scripture.

37 Thus the confession has a twofold function: it formulates to others the understanding  
38 of the Gospel and its consequences in a particular given situation. Internally it has a rela-  
39 tive authority which is always to be revised on the basis of Scripture. Thus it becomes a  
40 reference point of a spiritual church leadership (*episkope*) in the service to the Gospel.  
41 Therefore, in the Reformation churches the basis of the ordination of the pastor was and  
42 is not obedience to the bishop but commitment to a confession. Thus new church identi-  
43 ties came into being which appeal to confessional writings.

44 But it is also true of church confessions that they must be interpreted in terms of their  
45 "centre", i.e. their basic intention to serve the Gospel. Just as Scripture becomes the  
46 Gospel because and in so far as it "*advances the cause of Christ*", so too the confession  
47 is given authority because and in so far as it contributes to gaining a hearing for the  
48 Gospel (or *Christus pro nobis* [Christ for us]).

49 At the time of the Reformation separate church bodies were formed which appealed  
50 to a diversity of confessional formulations. Lutheran and Reformed confessions regarded  
51 themselves as mutually exclusive. There were reciprocal doctrinal condemnations be-

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<sup>10</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, Comprehensive summary ..., 8 (cf. BSLK 769, 30-35).

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, Second Helvetic Confession, Preface.

<sup>12</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, Comprehensive summary ..., 7 (BSLK 769, 23).

1       tween Lutherans and Reformed in the case of individual doctrines. In the Leuenberg  
2 Agreement (LA 17-28), after thorough theological evaluation it has been attested that  
3 these verdicts of rejection no longer relate to the present doctrine of the other side. The  
4 mutual inquiry after the witness of the Scripture made it possible to understand the  
5 statements of the confessions of the Reformation in such a way that they could be con-  
6 fessed together.

7       The Leuenberg Agreement enables community between churches of different con-  
8 fessions as it explains that confessing together does not necessarily call for a common  
9 formulation. The one Gospel can be expressed in different linguistic forms. Therefore the  
10 Leuenberg Agreement consistently states: "In the sense intended in this Agreement,  
11 church fellowship means that, on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their  
12 understanding of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each  
13 other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible cooperation in  
14 witness and service to the world." (LA 29).

15       The importance of confessions is defined differently in the different traditions of the  
16 CPCE. However it is true for all of them that they are confessing churches in the descrip-  
17 tion mentioned above. With their assent to the Leuenberg Agreement they commit them-  
18 selves to "bear their witness and perform their service together" (LA 35).

19       Over and above the ecumenical obligation of all churches to realize their fellowship "in  
20 the common confession of the apostolic faith" (Canberra Statement 1991, 2.1) they are  
21 thus called in a special way to confess together.

22       Therefore it is not enough to remain with a description of the CPCE as a "community  
23 of churches with different confessions", but it is important to strengthen the "community  
24 in confessing" in various dimensions.

25       It is true that the Leuenberg Agreement does not understand itself as "a new confes-  
26 sion" (LA 37), it intends, however, the obligation of the member churches to join together  
27 a common way of confessing in spite of different confessional traditions. The Agreement  
28 is in this respect a "signpost" to those churches of the CPCE to walk the way of con-  
29 temporary confessing together.

## 30 31 **8. Obligation and binding character**

- 32       1) For the churches brought together in the CPCE Holy Scripture is fundamental and  
33 normative for all questions of proclamation and service. The condition for this ap-  
34 peal to the word of Scripture is listening afresh time and again to its message and  
35 its instruction. The necessary translation of this message and its ethical conse-  
36 quences for our time is made possible and focussed by orientation on the centre of  
37 the biblical testimony: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- 38       2) The churches brought together in the CPCE know that they are committed in differ-  
39 ent ways to the confessional writings of the Reformation period, particular articles of  
40 faith and doctrinal documents and also to the Barmen Theological Declaration. It  
41 belongs to the nature of their church fellowship grounded in the Leuenberg Agree-  
42 ment to respect these various confessional ties without making their unification a  
43 precondition for church fellowship. This is possible because these confessions are  
44 understood as different testimonies of the one Gospel. Thus we are not speaking of  
45 any arbitrariness in questions of faith and confession. There is a common basis for  
46 the understanding of the Gospel formulated in the Agreement which attests that the  
47 different confessional writings and doctrinal documents ultimately refer to the same  
48 foundation in Scripture and thus express the one faith. Their function is therefore  
49 not any more to create an identity through demarcation but to enable a common  
50 witness and common service in reconciled diversity.
- 51       3) The churches brought together in the CPCE know a "magisterium". It is exercised  
52 personally, collegially and synodically. Binding teaching comes about in synodical  
53 decisions on theological and ethical topics and in the interpretation of Scripture by

1 men and women who are appointed by the church for this purpose. According to  
2 Protestant understanding these “magisterial” statements cannot bind the con-  
3 science by a formal authority. But they can claim authority as a result of an open  
4 and many-voiced process of consensus in the orientation towards Holy Scripture  
5 and confessions. Even though the decisions are made by the rule of majority, the  
6 Protestant churches listen to the voices of the minority (cf. LA 45). We trust that the  
7 Holy Spirit is at work in the process of forming opinions, in the passing of resolu-  
8 tions and in the reception and the critical debate of documents. In this way the bind-  
9 ing teaching of the church of Christ is in process. A new awareness of the binding  
10 character in the spirit of the Gospel belongs to the challenges for Protestant Christi-  
11 anity of our times.

12 4) The churches brought together in the CPCE retain their independence. But they  
13 commit themselves to the development of a way of confessing together. The result  
14 of the assent to the church fellowship is for example also the obligation to consult  
15 other churches before important decisions with far-reaching implications are taken  
16 in local or regional synods. No church may isolate itself. All churches have the obli-  
17 gation to consider the ecumenical consequences of their decisions. They are facing  
18 the challenge to combine particularity and catholicity with one another and to reach  
19 beyond the present boundaries of their thinking. It needs to be proved again wheth-  
20 er the CPCE needs a synodical structure besides doctrinal conversations and con-  
21 sultations.

## Participants in the Doctrinal Discussion

### Initial Group 2007/2008

Prof. André Birmelé, Communion Luthéro-Reformée de France (Vorsitzender)  
Prof. Martin Friedrich, GEKE (Geschäftsführer)  
Pfr. Dr. Rudolf Gebhard, Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund  
Prof. Jutta Hausmann, Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház  
Bischof em. Dr. Walter Klaiber, Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in Deutschland

### Consultation September 2008

Dr. Tilmann Beyrich, Pommersche Evangelische Kirche  
Rev. Jörg Bickelhaupt, Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau  
Prof. André Birmelé, Communion Luthéro-Reformée de France  
Dr. John Bradbury, United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom  
Dr. Gijsbert van den Brink, Protestantse Kerk in Nederland  
Rev. Andrea Brunner-Wyss, Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche, Zentralkonferenz  
Mittel- und Südeuropa  
Mgr. Jan Cieślár, Slezská cirkev evangelická a.v.  
Prof. Theo Dieter, LWB  
Rev. Beate Fagerli, Den norske kirke  
Prof. Fulvio Ferrario, Chiesa Evangelica Valdese  
Prof. Martin Friedrich, GEKE  
Dr. Rudolf Gebhard, Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund  
Dr. Zsolt Görözdí, Reformovaná Kresť. Cirkva na Slovensku  
Prof. Jutta Hausmann, Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház  
Prof. Dr. Ulrich Heckel, Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg  
Rev. Peter Jörgensen, Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in Deutschland  
Dr. Idar Kjølsvik, Den norske kirke  
Bischof em. Dr. Walter Klaiber, Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in Deutschland  
Dr. Jochen Kramm, GEKE  
Bischof Milan Krivda, Evangelická cirkev a.v. na Slovensku  
Dr. Gerold Lehner, Evangelische Kirche A.B. in Österreich  
Dr. Guy Liagre, Eglise protestante unie de Belgique  
Drs. Lense Lijzen, Remonstrantse Broederschap  
Prof. Andreas Lindemann, Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen  
Prof. Johannes von Lüpke, Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland  
Dr. Daniel Mourkojannis, Nordelbische Evangelisch-lutherische Kirche  
Prof. Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Evangelisk-lutherske Folkekirke i Danmark  
Rev. Balázs Ódor, Magyarországi Református Egyház  
Dr. Gábor Viktor Orosz, Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház  
Dr. Volker Ortmann, Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck  
Dr. Burkhard Peter, Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche Schaumburg-Lippe  
Dr. André Ritter, Evangelische Kirche im Fürstentum Liechtenstein  
Dr. Jan Roskovec, Ceskokobratrská Cirkva Evangelická  
Dr. Pekka Särkiö, Suomen Evankelis-Luterilainen Kirkko  
Fr Thomas Seville CR, Church of England  
Rev. Christophe Singer, Eglise Réformée de France  
Rev. Dirk Stelter, Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers  
Prof. Randar Tasmuth, Eesti Evangeelne Luterlik Kirik  
Prof. Michael Weinrich, EKD  
Dr. William Weinrich, Latvijas Evangeliski Luteriska Baznīca  
Dr. Matthias Wüthrich, Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund  
Dr. Daniel Zikeli, Evangelische Kirche A.B. in Rumänien

Editorial Revision 2009

Prof. André Birmelé, Communion Luthéro-Reformée de France (Vorsitzender)

Dr. John Bradbury, United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom

Prof. Theo Dieter, LWB

Prof. Martin Friedrich, GEKE (Geschäftsführer)

Dr. Rudolf Gebhard, Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund

Prof. Jutta Hausmann, Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház

Bischof em. Dr. Walter Klaiber, Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in Deutschland

Dr. Jochen Kramm, GEKE

Prof. Andreas Lindemann, Ev. Kirche von Westfalen

Prof. Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Evangelisk-lutherske Folkekirke i Danmark

Dr. Jan Roskovec, Ceskobratrská Církev Evangelická