

A THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY  
OF LUTHERAN EDUCATION

A Report of the Commission on Theology  
and Church Relations

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

May 2025

## Abbreviations

<b>AC</b>	Augsburg Confession
<b>AE</b>	<i>Luther's Works</i> . American Edition. 82 vols. Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955–.
<b>FC SD</b>	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
<b>LC</b>	Large Catechism
<b>SC</b>	Small Catechism



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## PREFACE

The 2023 Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod convention passed Resolution 5-10, which tasked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) with articulating a “theology and philosophy of Lutheran education.”<sup>1</sup> The convention specifically asked the CTCR to “develop principles of Lutheran education rooted in Lutheran doctrine,” including doctrines such as “justification, biblical creation, first article gifts, right and left kingdom perspectives, and Lutheran anthropology.” The process was to include consultation with representatives of the Concordia University System universities and Synod education executives, among others, with the goal of producing a “clear, concise, and readable” pamphlet that would be accessible to “workers, lay leaders, and families” and applicable to all levels of education, from preschool through secondary education.

The CTCR’s primary task is to provide guidance to the Synod in explaining and defending what it believes, teaches, and confesses, in accord with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Its charge from the constitution and bylaws of the Synod is to “conserve and promote the unity of the true faith,” “provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism . . . , and heresy,” and “aid congregations by providing a variety of resources and opportunities for recognizing, promoting, expressing, conserving, and defending their confessional unity in the true faith.”<sup>2</sup> This report aims to fulfill that charge and the Synod’s resolution, but it is not comprehensive, nor does it provide actionable directions for pedagogy. It provides an overarching principle that drives all of Lutheran education and a theological analysis of select doctrinal themes that pertain most directly to the current intellectual, pedagogical, and social concerns facing classrooms at every level and which were named in the resolution.

Ultimately, this is a theological report. It focuses more on explaining the relevance of these doctrines for Lutheran education than on educational method or practice. Many other themes and topics could have been considered (for instance, explaining the sacraments to students and families from nonsacramental churches, the

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1 2023 Resolution 5-10, *2023 Convention Proceedings*, 155. The resolution is provided in full at the end of this booklet.

2 LCMS Constitution, Article III, 1 and 6; cf. Bylaw 3.9.5.

use and role of classical or biblical languages, curriculum and methodology, among other perennial concerns). However, the Commission does not envision this document as the end of the discussion. Rather, it intends that other, more educationally specific entities of the Synod (such as the Concordia University System and its universities, Synod education executives, and others not named in the resolution, like school administrators and educators) might take up these ideas and augment them, expand on them, apply them, or otherwise use them in their context as they see fit.

In the process of drafting this report, the Commission engaged specialists in Lutheran education—including Concordia University System presidents and administrators and Lutheran school administrators and teachers—in the hopes of addressing concerns that are most relevant to them. Yet it concluded that those educational professionals are more apt to evaluate competing educational theories and prescribe more specific applications than the Commission itself. This report is submitted for the purpose of clearly and faithfully articulating how these Lutheran doctrines could and should govern education within Lutheran institutions.

A THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF LUTHERAN EDUCATION

THE OVERARCHING  
PRINCIPLE

**What guides Lutheran education?**

The truth of Holy Scripture—God’s Word—is the guiding principle in Lutheran churches, in the schools of those churches, and in the education those schools provide. Lutheran Christians affirm that Scripture is the ultimate authority for our faith and life together.<sup>3</sup> The books of the Old Testament and New Testament are the inerrant Word of God—inspired by the Holy Spirit, trustworthy and true in all that they teach (John 10:35; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21).<sup>4</sup> We also believe that the Lutheran Book of Concord, which contains theological statements from sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers, is a correct interpretation of that Word of God, and we require that all pastors and rostered teachers in our churches and schools affirm those teachings without reservation or alteration. The teachings of Holy Scripture govern what we believe (our doctrine) and what we do (our practice). Wherever that Word of God speaks, we must abide by it and conform our minds to it. That extends to matters of science, creation, and history, or any other subject, in addition to the teaching of the church’s faith. Where and to what extent it does not speak on a matter, we are free to exercise the God-given reason that all humans have, yet always bearing in mind that human reason is fallible and subservient to what God has clearly said in His Word.

We believe that the center of this Word of God and of these Lutheran Confessions is Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who is true God and true man. He is the Word of God made flesh (John 1). With all Christians of every time and in every place, we believe in the saving death and res-

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3 See FC SD Comprehensive Summary, 9.

4 See also *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (Adopted 1932), sections 1–3, available at <http://www.lcms.org/doctrine/doctrinalposition>, and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, available at <http://www.lcms.org/doctrine/scripturalprinciples#IV>.

urrection of Jesus Christ, and we proclaim the forgiveness of sins through faith in this Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:11–21; 1 Peter 1:23–25). While that may not necessarily provide concrete direction for all practical matters related to education, it must be said that Jesus, the forgiveness of sins He offers through His Gospel, and the mission and ministry carried out in His name and at His command (Matt. 28:16–20) are the reason for the work Lutherans do in their congregations and in their schools and give focus to our proclamation, worship, and education.<sup>5</sup>

How does this Lutheran understanding of the Word of God as the overarching principle of Lutheran education (and Christ as the incarnation and center of that Word), then, impact the work of our schools on a practical level? We may divide matters such as these into three different spheres or domains, corresponding to the three articles of the ancient Christian creeds: one dealing primarily with our daily, bodily lives, or the gifts of creation; one dealing with salvation, or redemption from sin; one dealing with the Christian life, or sanctification.

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5 See also LC II, 54–55.

# THE FIRST ARTICLE

## Lutheran Education and Creation (or Our World, Lives, and Everything in Them)

### What role does human reason play in Lutheran education?

Lutherans believe that God has created every person and has given each of them the gift of human reason, which helps all people—including those without Christian faith—to understand and appreciate the world around them. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism says that God has given me “my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, *my reason* and all my senses, and still takes care of them.”<sup>6</sup> God has given us human reason to understand the world which He has created, to support and protect our bodily lives, and to love and serve our neighbors. As the Lutheran Confessions say (citing St. Augustine):

We grant that all people have a free will. It is free as far as it has the judgment of reason. This does not mean that it is able, without God, either to begin, or at least to complete, anything that has to do with God. It is free only in works of this life, whether good or evil. Good I call those works that spring from the good in nature, such as willing to labor in the field, to eat and drink, to have a friend, to clothe oneself, to build a house, to marry a wife, to raise cattle, to learn various useful arts, or whatsoever good applies to this life.<sup>7</sup>

Human reason in this sense is not reduced to strictly logical, cerebral expressions, but also includes creative expressions such as art and music. We are free to use this human reason, but only in a way that does not contradict what God has revealed to us in His Word.

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6 SC Explanation of the First Article; emphasis added.

7 AC XVIII 4–5.

Lutherans have often referred to this as the *ministerial* use of reason, which helps us understand the truths God has revealed in His Word, the truths that are present in His observable creation, and the basic conventions of language, grammar, logic, and rhetoric that we use to communicate and debate. This is different from the *magisterial* use of reason, by which sinful humans force Holy Scripture to conform to our natural understanding of the world and everything in it.<sup>8</sup> Human reason, as we see it exercised in education, must not undermine or contradict Holy Scripture. Where Scripture speaks, we must believe and teach that truth. Where Scripture does not speak, we are free to use the human reason given to us by God to pursue an understanding of our world. Even non-Christians have the gift of human reason and use it to the benefit of those around them—think of the innumerable advances in science, technology, the fine arts, literature, history, to name but a few, where we have learned and benefited greatly from those who do not share our Christian faith. Nevertheless, this does not mean Lutherans divide or oppose faith and reason. On the contrary, we believe that Christians should always use human reason in light of the truths God Himself has revealed in Holy Scripture. Human reason informed by God’s Word will prevent its misuse or misapplication, which is especially harmful in areas like morality and ethics. Moreover, Lutherans also understand that human reason—unlike God’s Word—is not infallible. The human understanding of the world around us will invariably change as we gain more information or as we revise our prior knowledge through experimentation, logic, etc. We cannot trust human reason to be correct in all things; we can, however, trust God’s Word in all that it tells us.

## How do Lutherans study subjects not clearly revealed in Scripture?

When it comes to biblical teachings on the faith or morality (these teachings are most often referred to as “theology”), what Scripture says is clear and must be reflected in our own teaching. But what about subjects like the sciences, art, or music? Where Scripture does not directly address these subjects, we are free to use our God-given human reason to explore them. This is because God has established His world in an orderly way that is open to human study and observation. However, our teachers must distinguish between the complete certainty of what God has revealed in Holy Scripture and the provisional nature of what is known by other means. For instance, in relation to disciplines such as the natural sciences, it is scripturally clear that God created the world in six days (Genesis 1). That means

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8 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:196–200.

we cannot accept an evolutionary theory that contradicts this six-day creation. On the other hand, Scripture does not teach how we are to conduct scientific research, such as the use of scientific methods of experimentation, so we are free to teach that method as human reason best sees fit, at the same time always conscious of the truths revealed in Scripture about creation. Lutherans are not opposed to science. Nicolaus Copernicus found support in Wittenberg among the Lutherans. Even when scientific views contradict the Bible, we do not deny the use of reason within its domain. Rather, we revel in the advance of science where it confirms the complex ordered nature of the world from subatomic particle to the far reaches of the universe or identifies a common human as ancestor of all living people, thereby pointing to a creator.

The arts and literature are approached in a similar way. We teach, study, and practice the visual or fine arts using our God-given “eyes, ears, and all [our] members”<sup>9</sup> to create and appreciate the beauty of the sung word, painted canvas, or architectural design. This is a gift of God’s creation. To take but one example, Martin Luther himself extolled the ancient histories, poetry, and literature of the classical period, even though they were composed by pagans who did not know the God of the Holy Scriptures. They provided illustrations of beauty, skill, and citizenship that could be admired by Christians. On preparing youth for participation in government, for instance, Luther says,

Here we are excelled and put to shame by the pagans of old, especially the Romans and Greeks. Although they had no idea of whether this estate was pleasing to God or not, they were so earnest and diligent in educating and training their young boys and girls to fit them for the task.<sup>10</sup>

There are no strict rules in Scripture governing history or poetry, music or art. Yet we must not use those created gifts in a way that undermines what God has revealed or in a way that misuses His creation. In the case of the humanities or social sciences, we are free to create, read, and interpret all the literature in these fields as expressions of God-given human reason, but we do so with a discriminating eye. Like the natural sciences, we dare not teach the findings of non-Christian social theories as if they were certain or categorically true. Moreover, we must reject them when they conflict with scripturally based beliefs about humanity or the created world or morality. Social theories can and may be wrong, for their authors are not infallible—only God’s Word is infallible and trustworthy.

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9 SC Explanation of the First Article.

10 Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” AE 45:367.