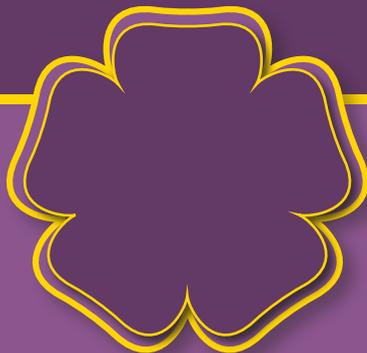




THE LUTHERAN  
WORLD FEDERATION  
GERMAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE



# UNDERSTANDING LUTHERANS

A Pocket Guide to Lutheranism in Germany

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# PREFACE

Looking through a stained glass church window is always a peculiar experience. The colour and curvature of the glass alters the view. With the right lighting, you may be able to see a wealth of forms and colours. However, often enough the view can also simply be blurred, and people and proceedings in the building hardly recognisable. Either way, it will not be a genuine depiction of what is happening inside.

Looking into a church building may be compared to looking at a congregation or denomination, the Lutheran denomination for example. From the outside, it is hard to understand why they are doing things the way they are. Of course, one might have heard of Martin Luther who started his reformation in 1517 by nailing 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg (at least as it is told). But how does that relate to the present churches carrying his name? Are they really only as old as 500 years? What did Luther mean with his »justification by faith alone«? Why is the Lutheran church a singing church and how is ecumenism a guiding principle for them?

Of course, these are questions even Lutherans themselves might find hard to answer. In an increasingly secular society, such as Germany, the denominational specifics within churches are

losing importance, so it seems. But are they indeed? For the Lutheran churches in Germany, their Lutheran denomination remains a cornerstone of identification. Knowing one's own identity makes it easier – or is maybe even the prerequisite – to engage with other churches, other religions, or a secular society.

Looking through coloured glass often doesn't offer the best view – regardless if you are looking in or out. Opening a window can help: not only to let in fresh air, but to get a good view of what lies outside – and, of course, to allow people to get a proper look inside. Similarly, this booklet wants to offer a better view of Lutherans over and above common knowledge or perception. Where do Lutheran churches come from? What is the core of Martin Luther's theology? How do Lutherans worship? How do Lutherans engage with other churches and organise themselves internally? The next pages want to give some first insights into these questions: short but hopefully not superficial, theologically grounded but not overly complicated, from a German perspective but with an eye for the world.

We wish you interesting and fruitful reading,  
*Oliver Schuegraf and Florian Hübner*

# 1. WHERE DO LUTHERANS COME FROM?

The history of the Lutheran Church did not begin, strictly speaking, with the Reformation 500 years ago. The reformers rather considered themselves explicitly to be within the tradition of the »one, holy, catholic (= universal) and apostolic church«, and they wanted to re-establish its true expression. For this reason, they always referred to the Ecumenical Creeds which had been formulated at the four Ecumenical Councils of the ancient church between the 4th and 6th century as the substance and expression of the faith they taught.

Where is the starting point for all teaching and theology within the Lutheran church? According to Martin Luther (1483–1546), faith has always to be grounded in and correspond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ himself, who – by the Holy Spirit – gives witness to himself in people’s hearts and thus calls them to communion with himself. With this core understanding, the Lutheran Reformation was first of all a renewal movement in the western part of the worldwide church. It was not Luther’s intention to establish a new church, nor did he want to introduce new doctrine. On the contrary, his concern was to ensure that the one church remained in the truth (I John 4:13 ff.). The formation of independent church structures only came about once it was clear that the pope and most of the bishops rejected the Reformation. Luther never restricted the

true church to his followers. He recognised the church wherever the word was proclaimed and the sacraments were administered in accordance with the Gospel – albeit with different emphases.

In 1517, Luther made his views and theological insights public for the first time in the 95 theses against the trade in indulgences. Contradicting the false security linked with indulgences, Luther pointed to true penitence and the real treasure of the church: the holy Gospel of God's unconditional grace.

Luther's protest, which was theologically based, did not only relate to the predominant church doctrine of the time but also to the Roman church order. Thus, for example, he disputed the unrestricted teaching authority of the pope. Consequently, the pope put a ban on him which was followed by the ban imposed by the emperor. Luther's regional ruler, Frederick the Wise, however, protected him. In 1520, after the Diet of Worms, he hid him in the Wartburg Castle. But in spite of the ban, there was no way of stopping the Reformation thrust which Luther had set in motion. In pamphlets, articles and hymns, the basic biblical message which he had rediscovered continued to spread.

Some states of the empire – especially the Electorate of Saxony, Brandenburg and Hessen – together with Nuremberg and other free imperial towns were finally able to get the Reformation movement recognised even under imperial law at various imperial diets including the famous Diet of Augsburg in 1530. But during the following period the Reformation movement did not evolve in a uniform way. Soon, clear differences became ap-

parent between the Lutheran Reformation and the reform movements that started with Huldrych Zwingli in Zurich and John Calvin in Geneva. There was disagreement in particular over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The internal differences between the Protestants caused divisions which considerably harmed the acceptance of the Reformation. It also led to Lutheran and Reformed Churches which are still distinct expressions of the Reformation today.

When Martin Luther died in 1546, many parts of Europe – especially countries in northern Europe – had been influenced by his teaching, but in Germany the Reformation was far from securely established. In Trent, a council was held (1545–1563) which gave Roman Catholicism a new identity and stability. The Protestant states of the empire were constantly involved in political and military disputes. Initially, these were pacified by the Augsburg Settlement of 1555. This introduced the principle that the regional princes could determine whether their states were to adopt the Roman Catholic or the Lutheran confession (*cuius regio, eius religio*). This enabled the territorial spread of the Lutheran Reformation to be established. It was not until the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 that the Reformed churches achieved equality with the Lutherans under imperial law. When the Brandenburg Elector Johann Sigismund converted to Calvinism, the Prussian estates, however, succeeded in ensuring that the Lutheran subjects did not have to follow the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*. This later led to a third denominational model of

an Evangelical<sup>1</sup> territorial church in Germany: that of a United church (unierte Kirche).

In Wittenberg, Luther's close friend and colleague, Philipp Melanchthon, continued to work until 1560. In a sense, Melanchthon was the theoretician of the Reformation, who knew how to relate Luther's insights to church politics. Serious effort for the unity of the church was very important to Melanchthon. It was also Melanchthon who drew up the document defending the Lutherans before the Emperor Charles V. Even today, this so-called »Confessio Augustana«, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, is one of the most important confessional documents of the Lutheran church. Admittedly, a group of Lutherans which exclusively followed Luther's words, the so-called »Gnesio-Lutherans«, suspected Melanchthon, the »teacher of Germany« (*praeceptor germaniae*), of deviating from Luther's teaching. The theological disputes relating to this were brought to an end in 1577 with a further confessional document, the »Formula of Concord«.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *evangelisch* is rendered as Evangelical, reflecting the German word used in the full name of the regional churches. It indicates their origins in the Reformation period and is not meant in the more personal or narrowly theological sense of »evangelical« (*evangelikal*), with all its different expressions in the English-speaking world. For that reason it was preferred to the frequent translation of *evangelisch* as »Protestant«, which could cover a broader range of denominations.

Making reference back to Luther, in the early 17th century two movements of great significance came into being. Representatives of a dogmatic orthodoxy («true belief») tried to systematise the diverse aspects of Lutheran theology in a subtle, formalised doctrinal structure. In connection with a widespread, profound dissatisfaction with conditions in the church, Pietism («spirituality») strove for a »new Reformation« concentrating less on true doctrine than on Christian spirituality and a corresponding Christian way of living.

The strong influence of the Enlightenment in the 18th century also had consequences for how Lutheranism understood itself. In this period, it was self-confident reason which formed the predominant framework for the interpretation and expression of Christian life. This was connected with an optimistic, active concern for the world. The theology of creation and ethics acquired special importance, while sin, redemption and eternity took second place.

At the same time, large groups of German Lutherans, however, remained faithful to the Pietist movement, represented e.g. by Johann Albrecht Bengel and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger. At the beginning of the 19th century they initiated the so-called renewal movements in Saxony, the Harz and Pomerania, among other places.

These were also associated with the rise of a new confessional self-confidence and an increasing interest in mission. Large missionary societies came into being in Hermannsburg, Leipzig,

Neuendettelsau and elsewhere, whose work led to the establishment of Lutheran churches in many parts of the world, especially in North America, Africa and Asia.

The end of the First World War in 1918 brought with it profound changes for the churches in Germany. Up to that time, the state rulers had been responsible for the leadership of the churches in their states. As a rule, they were supported by consistories for the genuinely ecclesiastical matters. With the abdication of the state rulers following the war, however, the regional churches became autonomous and were compelled to reorganise themselves within the framework of a church constitution. Since that time, they have been governed by synods, episcopal offices and a church administration (see p. 42ff. for details).

During the church struggle in National Socialist Germany, Protestants managed to speak for the first time with one voice despite confessional differences. In resolute resistance to the National Socialist distortions of the Evangelical regional churches by the »German Christians«, Lutheran, Reformed and United Christians drew up the so-called Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934, a clear confession of Jesus Christ as the one and only head of the church.

At the same time, the German Lutheran churches found their way to closer cooperation within their denomination. In 1935 they formed the »Lutherrat« (Luther Council) which was to counteract the nationalist approach of the »German Christian« ideology. This cooperation also led to the establishment of the Uni-

ted Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) in 1948 in Eisenach. Today, the VELKD is composed of the independent regional churches of Bavaria, Brunswick, Hanover, Saxony, Schaumburg-Lippe, Central Germany, and Northern Germany. The common foundation of this communion is the Lutheran confession. In the following 70 years, the barriers between the Evangelical denominations in Germany were further lowered. This is illustrated by a growing importance of the umbrella organisation of Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches founded in 1945, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). Finally, in 1973 the theological consensus reached in the »Leuenberg Agreement« led to church fellowship (= altar and pulpit fellowship) among the Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional churches in Germany (see p. 37).

On the global level, the convergence of Lutheran churches also experienced a leap after the Second World War. In 1947, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was established as a free association of Lutheran churches. By now, it is a communion of 145 Lutheran churches from 98 countries sharing altar and pulpit fellowship. Among them are eleven German Lutheran churches which form the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (GNC/LWF).

## 2. WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY?

In this chapter, some core aspects of the theology of Martin Luther are introduced. Luther's central insights are still very much relevant for Lutheran theology today and they form the basis of present Lutheran theology in Germany and worldwide.

### **The Gospel**

As already mentioned, the foundation of the Lutheran Church is the Gospel, the joyful news of the unconditional love of God for sinful human beings, as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This insight mirrors a personal experience of Martin Luther who, in his struggle against hatred of God and despair about himself, finally found the way to trust in God and to self-acceptance. In this process, he was plagued by the question of how to find a gracious God. Luther discovered the answer in a verse of the Bible (Rom 1:17) which enabled him to realize that he did not need to earn God's justice, nor to despair about God's benevolence, because God is always near and ready to come to our aid – and to do so without any prerequisites.

The young Augustinian monk, who was profoundly unsure of himself, experienced this unconditional nature of God's love as an existential liberation from all self-made and external demands, compulsions and fears. Luther's understanding of faith,

as a new definition of the human being in his/her relation to God, one's own self and the world, reflected Luther's biographical experience. It meant being relieved of any pressure for self-justification by relying on God's prevenient mercy.

This experience of the Gospel was granted to Luther in the course of an intense study of Holy Scriptures, but it was not the immediate result of his own efforts and work. On the contrary, in the preface to the Latin edition of his works in 1545, Luther traced his understanding of God's righteousness back to God's merciful workings within him. Luther experienced the Gospel as an event beyond his control, in which the gift of divine righteousness was given to him in a miraculous way.

The reason why it was not within his control was that the Gospel is far more than the sum of its contents which could be described theologically. Rather, the Gospel is at work as the creative force (Rom 1:16) by which God's love – as an undeserved gift – addresses the human being him/herself and transforms his/her life to make a new creation.

### **The spirit and the letter**

As divine power and truth, the Gospel is and remains fundamentally distinct from and in advance of any human attempt to witness to it. And yet it is not a power which directly overpowers human beings; rather it makes use of external words and signs to express and thus impart itself to our understanding and comprehending appropriation. In view of this dialectic, Luther distin-

guished between the divine spirit, which our human words try to express, and the letter, that changes in the course of time and is used for this purpose. When considering the witness of the Old and New Testaments, a distinction must therefore be made, on the one hand, between the many different, historical expressions and forms of the biblical texts, and the one truth which is expressed through them on the other. Hence, faith does not aim at a literalist devotion to the biblical text, but rather seeks and finds God's spirit and wisdom in and behind the letters.

For this, it is necessary time and again to return to the Bible and to interpret the Scriptures anew for the church's preaching and teaching. This has to be done, because the word of God as testified in Holy Scripture constitutes the exclusive criterion for statements of faith (*sola scriptura*). According to Luther's basic Reformation insight, the criterion for the right understanding of Scripture can be found only in the Gospel which forms the spiritual core of the Scriptures. Consequently, each word of the Scriptures should be considered with regard to how, and how far, it conveys to people an understanding of God, the world and themselves which corresponds to the Gospel.

## **The Confessions of the Lutheran Church**

The interpretation of the Scriptures that is grounded in the Gospel and serves as the foundation for the church's preaching requires binding guidelines. This is achieved by an internal church process, ending in agreement on a doctrinal consensus. For Lu-

therans, this function is fulfilled by the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This collection begins with the three Ecumenical Creeds and thus emphasizes the claim of the Lutheran Church to continuity with the Early Church. Then follows the Confessio Augustana with its Apology, Luther's Smalcald Articles, Melancthon's Treatise on the Power of the Pope, Luther's two Catechisms and the Formula of Concord. Those foundational texts formulate the doctrinal consensus of the Lutheran church which is intended to provide and safeguard the conditions under which the biblical witness can be grasped in the spirit of the Gospel which Luther rediscovered. The Lutheran confessional documents can therefore be described as summaries of Luther's discovery.

### **Justification by faith alone**

However personal Luther's experience may have been, it was still far more than merely a central moment in an individual's biography. Indeed, Luther's experience mirrors in an exemplary fashion the basic religious situation which is characteristic for every person in their encounter with God – both in those times and today. So the Gospel did not only become the central factor in Luther's life, but also the principal criterion for formulating his theology.

His experience of the Gospel – that God's mercy for human beings is unconditional – therefore logically leads to the heart of his theology. In accordance with insights of the Apostle Paul

(cf. Rom 3:28), he expresses God's saving works in the doctrine of the justification of the sinner by grace alone. The righteousness of human beings before God – the fact that they are just, beloved, valued and dear – is based exclusively on the grace of God (*sola gratia*) and is received exclusively by faith and trust in this same grace (*sola fide*).

Luther connects two important insights with this doctrine.

1. The absolute value and inviolable dignity of our lives are not the product of human achievement, ability or strength, but rather lie mysteriously inherent in the concern which God bestows on every human individual, thereby acknowledging him/her. So Luther understands God's justice as »passive justice through which the merciful God justifies us through faith« (preface to the Latin edition of his works).

2. Although God's justice is ascribed to human beings without any contribution of their own, it must nevertheless be appropriated by them, when human beings for their part then also recognise God as God. This recognition or honouring of God takes place, according to Luther, in faith: »to give God the honour means to believe him, means seeing God as authentic, wise, just, merciful and almighty.« In faith, the human being appropriates the divine concern actively and thus encounters God as a self-conscious person responsible before God.

Only in this dialectic unity of trust in God and self-consciousness is communion between God and human beings possible. So the doctrine of justification does not only say something about the relationship between God and humans; it also defines the conditions which make this relationship possible. For the Lutheran church, this is not just one doctrine among others but rather the article of faith by which the church stands or falls.

### **The joyful exchange**

Communion between God and human beings is only possible if it is given to us by God, since humans are separated from God by sin. Sin describes the natural interest of human beings in themselves, trying by all means to give themselves the honour and not God. Sinful man is focussed on himself in a godless way; to put it in Luther's terms, he is »turned in on himself« – and hence subject to the powers of sin, death and the devil.

The only cure for this was seen by Luther in the person and work of the crucified Christ who sets a »threefold image« before the sinner: the image of life against death, the image of God's grace against sin and the image of heaven against hell. Immersing himself in these images helped the young Augustinian monk finally to overcome his doubts and temptations. The concentration of his Christology on the redemption of human beings from their godlessness was characteristic of Luther throughout his life.

Luther's basic idea focussed on Jesus Christ on his cross, suffering for our sake under the alien powers which separate us

from God, and thus taking upon himself the consequent remoteness from God. That one person could bring salvation for all is, however, only conceivable given that Jesus was not just a human being like us but simultaneously shared in God's nature and God's power to overcome sin, death and the devil. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ – his human and his divine nature – was central for Luther.

The redemption of humankind takes place in a mysterious exchange. God lays the burden of human godlessness on Christ and identifies him with sinners. In exchange, Jesus' freedom from sin is attributed to us humans through the identity of Jesus' will with God's will. So God identifies us sinners with Christ. Luther calls this the »joyful exchange« because it liberates humans from turning inwards and leads them into communion with God.

For Christ's sake alone (*solus christus*), God thus turns to humankind in his mercy. His grace is unconditional, but not unfounded. In this sense, the Gospel can be experienced only in the encounter with the crucified Christ. And, correspondingly, the Christian faith is also not a vague trust but rather directed towards a concrete object. For Luther, believing in a Christian way always means trusting Christ.

### **Simul iustus et peccator**

The joyful exchange between Christ and the sinner opens up a new perspective on and for our lives. Christ, who is set before us as a wholesome image of life, grace and heaven, is the goal

towards which we can and should direct our lives. Only if we try to find ourselves in the image of Christ and not in ourselves, according to Luther, shall we find ourselves and have successful lives.

Therefore, the image of Christ should not be viewed merely theoretically; rather it must take on existential form in human beings and reshape their lives so that they become increasingly similar to Christ. In Luther's view, faith has a force which transforms existence. In faith, the human being becomes a new creature. But this force does not take hold of the person outwardly like a magic power; on the contrary, being shaped in Christ's image takes place in a life-long process.

In this process, we do not only make progress; we repeatedly regress as well. Because, as Luther put it, the old images of death, sin and hell enter human hearts again and again and try to occupy them. »And where that happens, human beings are lost and God is completely forgotten.« Human beings are not freed once and for all from the temptations and threats from powers alien to God; on the contrary, they are constantly battling against them.

This tension cannot be resolved in this life and is therefore characteristic of Christian existence. On the one hand, Christians no longer seek and find the truth of their lives within the circumstances of this world, but rather in God alone. On the other hand, their lives continue to be lived in the realities of this world and must be shaped in and under worldly conditions which, however,

are marked by the omnipresent power of sin and death. So, in Luther's words the Christian is both justified and a sinner at the same time: *simul iustus et peccator*.

### **God's two ways of ruling**

The insight into the tension between a person's experience of being a sinner and the gift of Christian freedom also influenced Luther's political ethics. He distinguishes fundamentally between the two ways in which God rules (God's two regiments or realms). These terms are more precise than the frequent reference to the so-called doctrine of two »kingdoms«, because Luther was not concerned about areas of life which could be separated objectively; he was making a functional distinction between different contexts of God's rule to which our life is subject in its relation to God, to the world and to ourselves.

As experience teaches time and again, the interests of sinful people contradict the will of God and the wellbeing of our fellow humans. Human beings who are turned in on themselves are in danger of abusing God's commands in order to serve their own needs and aims to the detriment of other people. For this reason, authoritative rules are necessary, e.g. the law, patterns of social behaviour or political structures, in order to safeguard peaceful coexistence. These rules make human life in community in its social and political dimensions subordinate to the general good. And in certain cases they can and must be enforced, irrespective of the voluntary consent of individuals. In order to coun-

teract the consequences of sin, measures of social discipline are essential and should be seen as an expression of divine order.

From the point of view of faith, however, human beings are justified by God and hence liberated from the power of sin. So they no longer need to be disciplined by the law in order to act according to God's will and for the wellbeing of their neighbours. Indeed, they are able to recognise, want, and do what is good of their own accord. As a consequence of the effects of the Gospel, God therefore aims at the free development of the conscience of each individual, which then serves as the guideline for all realms of life.

The church participates in both of the contexts in which God is at work. As a visible organisation it uses various structures to create order, e.g. different offices, leadership bodies and administration, or provisions of church law. But, as the hidden community of all believers, it is the communion of individual believers linked in Christian freedom by their conscience through the Holy Spirit.

## **Holy Scripture**

The Bible is the source of faith and the foundation of the Lutheran churches. All that the church does must be prepared to be proved by Holy Scripture; Christian life must be inspired by the Bible, because God binds himself to the external written word.

Contrary to fundamentalist misinterpretations, the Bible is not a closed system; it offers leeway for interpretation and grants freedom to its readers and hearers. The clear centre, however,

is the Gospel of Christ, the incarnate son of God, his self-giving and his victory over sin and death.

To prevent these words on paper from becoming a dead letter and, on the contrary, to make them powerful, living words, the work of the Holy Spirit is required. The Spirit touches people's hearts and enlightens them. Real enjoyment and love can become reality when biblical sayings are able to enter into people's spirituality, when they are constantly »mulled over«, as Martin Luther recommended. Ultimately they penetrate into flesh and blood and these words are transformed into prayer. If the Bible is interpreted »in the right way«, applied to personal life, to a particular time and its issues, then the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel, can be heard. Then it can be as if Jesus Christ himself is speaking.

### **The Church as »creature of the word«**

The church is the place where God's word is heard. It is »the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel« (Augsburg Confession, Article VII). »Purely preached« means that the interpretation of Holy Scripture is guided by the statements in the Lutheran confessions.

The church is not an authority which stands between God and humankind. It is not the product of a group of people who think alike. It is formed, like faith, by hearing, tasting and seeing how good God is. It is nourished by the Holy Spirit which awak-

ens faith in individuals and calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole of Christendom.

The Lutheran definition of the church has great ecumenical breadth. It makes it possible to recognise all Christian communities as churches, provided that they practise pure preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments (see p. 36f.).

Fundamentally, all Christians are called to a priestly ministry. Therefore, one can speak of the priesthood of all the baptised. Every person can pass on the salvation in Christ. Every member of the congregation should use the gifts which he/she has received from the Holy Spirit to build up the body of Christ.

In order that the preaching of the good news may not come to a standstill or become inaccessible to people, there exists the ministry of public preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments. It has a special responsibility to serve the unity of the church. In the Lutheran church, »no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called« (Augsburg Confession, Article XIV). Thus the ministry is imparted either by ordination or commissioning. The individual called into the ministry commits him/herself to Holy Scripture and the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. He or she is blessed by prayer and the laying on of hands and sent out to serve in the ministry of the church. The Lutheran regional churches in Germany ordain both men and women into ministry.

The office of bishop is a special office of episkopé (oversight) within the onefold ministry. As the office of a »*pastor* *pastorum*«

(shepherd of the shepherds, pastor of the pastors), it is an office of spiritual leadership as well. It based on an election, and the installation includes a renewal of the ordination commitments, prayer and blessing.

The spiritual government of the church takes place primarily by the preaching itself, by listening to and interpreting Holy Scripture. The task of leadership is shared by lay and ordained persons, as well as synods and church administrations, by administrative bodies that are elected or appointed at various levels and in many forms, as well as by the bishops (see p. 42ff. for details).

## **Worship**

»In worship nothing other should take place than that our Lord himself speaks to us through his holy word and we in turn speak to him through prayer and praise«. That is how Martin Luther expressed his conception of Lutheran worship in 1544 in his sermon at the dedication of the church in Torgau, and it is still determinative for Lutheran churches today.

Worship is communication of the Gospel. Who and what God is for the congregation should be put into words in a way that makes the Gospel effective, so that it comforts, exhorts, and changes people, speaks to their reason, their heart and all their senses and elicits a response. For this reason, worship must be comprehensible. It invites participation. It gives pleasure to the senses. Martin Luther stopped the iconoclasts of his time. He encouraged church music and made the Lutheran church a singing church (see p. 29ff.).

## **The visible word: Baptism and Holy Communion**

According to Lutheran understanding, the most important features of the church, apart from the preaching of the Gospel, are the celebration of baptism and Holy Communion. These two sacraments are nothing other than the visible and physical form of the assurance »Christ for you«. God's presence is felt tangibly in sensual perception, awakening trust that he is there for us and redeems us.

In the sacraments, it is not primarily the pastors who act. On the contrary, God himself is at work. In the sacrament, the Holy Spirit induces faith and strengthens it.

In baptism, God promises his presence once and for all. Baptism is an unrepeatable act which affects the whole of the Christian's life. Martin Luther talked about people repeatedly »crawling« into baptism and coming out again every day. He said it tears »the devil out of the throat« of the baptised. In baptism God lays claim to the baptised for himself and strengthens the new person. It brings about »forgiveness of sins and gives eternal blessedness to all who believe in it« (Small Catechism).

Through baptism, God builds up his church and incorporates the baptised into the community of the one Church of Jesus Christ. The union with Christ which is given through baptism is a call to overcome divisions and to enable communion to become visible. For more details see p. 30ff.

In the celebration of Holy Communion, Jesus Christ himself is present in, with and under the bread and wine. We can taste

God's kindness to humankind. For Martin Luther, »the whole Gospel« is contained in Jesus' words of institution as a »short summary«: given for you, for your benefit. The doctrine of justification also influences the Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion. Christ who is present includes us in God's reconciliation with humankind and thus grants us forgiveness of sins. This takes place independently of the personal disposition of the celebrant or of the recipient, but is a reality for those who believe in it.

The ecumenical conversations of the past decades have further broadened the Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion. The aspect of thanksgiving, of »Eucharist«, has become more widely accepted again. Just as Jesus took bread and wine and »gave thanks«, so the congregation now comes before God to praise and thank him for Jesus Christ. It perceives Jesus' self-sacrifice in the present and asks for the gift of the Holy Spirit. »It should be a great pleasure and joy for us that we serve God and praise and thank him for his grace and goodness« Martin Luther preached.

Holy Communion, which is also called the Lord's Supper, creates communion with Christ, but also among us. By receiving the body of Christ, the congregation becomes one body and is united with those who participate at all times and in all places. In this way, the celebration of the Eucharist transcends the limits of space and time, aims at the renewal of the whole creation, and the celebration anticipates the coming of the kingdom of God. For more details see p. 32ff.

Occasionally, confession is also described as a sacrament in the broadest sense. The normal distinction over against baptism and Holy Communion is based on the argument that these two ceremonies were instituted by Christ and involve a tangible sign (water; bread and wine).

### 3. WHAT ARE THE FORMS OF LUTHERAN WORSHIP?

#### **Continuity and diversity**

Worship services, particularly in a Lutheran context, are subject to the tension between preservation and revision. They are influenced by the great Christian liturgical tradition. They respect the existent local practice. At the same time, they are open to change and reorganisation, should this be demanded for the sake of the clarity of the Gospel. Forms have a serving function.

The present situation is marked by continuity and diversity. Alongside services which are more traditional, e.g. in the form of the Eucharist, there is a wealth of new, flexible forms for particular target groups, in different places, at unusual times, with new themes and alternative forms. The search for forms of expression suited to the present, the significance of all that is tried and trusted, and the attempt to compromise between differing attitudes leads to challenges which cannot always be harmonised.

Certain services for special occasions have acquired new importance, namely baptisms, marriages and funerals as well as various forms of blessing. Services at turning points in their lives are often valued by people who normally have little contact with worship services on Sundays or feast days. On such occasions, the proclamation of the Gospel can fall on fertile soil if it is linked to the specific biographies and the particular situation of the people attending the service. Pastoral care and accompaniment, the interpretation of personal biographies or circumstances in the light of Bible texts, liturgical rites, blessings and prayers often establish new relationships and link the church's activity more closely with everyday life.

In German Lutheran churches, membership of a regional church is normally the prerequisite for a church marriage or Christian funeral. For the baptism of a child within a Lutheran church, at least one of the parents has to be a member of that church. Exceptions to the rule for pastoral reasons are sometimes possible.

## **Baptism**

The baptismal rite is in the Lutheran church essentially identical with that of all Christian denominations. Baptism is performed by pouring water three times or by immersion accompanied by the words »N.N., I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit«. As is typical for Lutheran thinking, the element of water is combined with the word of God.

The Lutheran church recognises the validity of every baptism which has been performed with water and in the name of the triune God. Changing from one denomination to another does not require a re-baptism. Such a change, or a re-admission, is preceded by a conversation with a pastor in the local congregation or at a church office for re-admissions, and is then normally celebrated at a Communion service.

In Lutheran churches infants are baptised, as well as young people and adults. The special importance attached to the baptism of infants and small children is based on the conviction that God's acts are not tied to rational understanding, and that infant baptism expresses particularly clearly that God in his mercy always anticipates human actions.

At the baptism of small children, the creed is recited by the parents and god-parents on their behalf. The person baptised then repeats this confession at a later age (usually around 14) at the ceremony of confirmation.

The baptism of adults, on the other hand, expresses more clearly that God's affirmative »Yes« calls for a response in the human »Yes«, namely belief, the confession of faith and discipleship. It is important for the church that both forms of baptism are practised.

The office of god-parent can be exercised by anyone who belongs to an Evangelical church and has been confirmed or baptised as an adult. Furthermore, the Lutheran regional churches in Germany signed a formal agreement with the Old Catholic

Church that welcomes members of the other church to serve as a god-parent. In addition to god-parents from those churches, members of other Christian churches can be accepted as additional god-parents or witnesses of the baptism, provided they share the Lutheran understanding of baptism and undertake to share responsibility for the child's Christian upbringing.

### **Celebrating Holy Communion**

In the Lutheran church, Holy Communion is celebrated according to the biblical words of institution: bread and wine are taken with thanksgiving, blessed with the words of institution (consecration) and distributed to the baptised believers in both kinds (bread and wine). In line with Western tradition, unleavened bread in the form of wafers is normally used.

For centuries, Holy Communion was only celebrated on especially important feast days, e.g. on Good Friday. But since the middle of the 20th century, it has increasingly become part of the Sunday service. Most parishes have a Eucharistic Sunday service at least once a month.

Access to Communion is linked to confirmation in many places. However, children who have not been confirmed are often also welcome to receive Communion following the necessary instruction.

For the sick and dying, Communion can be a source of comfort and strength (communion of the sick). However, it is not common that the reserved sacrament is brought to the sick and

dying after the parish Eucharist. Rather, the pastor is called to the home of those persons to celebrate Eucharist together with the family.

Within the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), all the member churches share Holy Communion fully with one another. As a result of the »Leuenberg Agreement«, Lutheran churches also share Holy Communion with Reformed, United, and Methodist churches as well with the other churches that are part of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (see below). Thanks to the Meissen Agreement, German Lutherans share Holy Communion with the Church of England. Furthermore, there are formal agreements with the Old Catholic Church and with the Association of Mennonite Congregations on mutual invitation to the Lord's Supper (Eucharist hospitality).

Members of other churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, are invited to take part as guests.

#### 4. HOW DO LUTHERANS RELATE TO OTHER CHURCHES?

Ecumenical commitment is integral to the self-understanding of the Lutheran churches in Germany. The Lutheran confessions, and the Augsburg Confession in particular, had the unity of the church in view from the very beginning. The Reformers saw themselves as catholic (= universal); their confessions were to be

a witness to the faith of the Church as a whole. They made this clear by including the creeds of the Early Church, the so-called »ecumenical symbols«, at the beginning of their confessional writings. Originally, the Augsburg Confession was also never intended to result in the founding of a separate church organisation; it only aimed to make the fundamental convictions of the Reformation clear in the context of the Western church. In this sense, the Augsburg Confession had a basic ecumenical concern right from the start. It was to serve the unity of the church.

### **Guiding Principles**

For the German Lutheran churches the guiding principles of this ecumenical commitment are the following:

The communion of Christians consists of a plurality of churches which differ in culture, nationality and denomination. This variety of expressions of the church does not only have historical roots – such significant events as the schism between the churches in East and West in 1054 and, five centuries later, the development of Evangelical churches in the course of the Reformation. It is also a consequence of the Holy Scriptures which the churches had in common from the beginning. Indeed, the witness of the writings of both the Old and New Testament opens up a wide spectrum of different approaches to theological interpretation and ways of reflecting on the experience of God in Jesus Christ.

However, that does not mean that the churches with their denominational diversity exist side by side without relating to each other. They refer back to the one truth of the Gospel which precedes faith and gives rise to it. Therefore, the unity of the church is based on the common participation by the churches in this truth of the Gospel.

But unity cannot be found directly in the visible, institutional communion of churches. With their faith in the unity of the body of Christ brought about by God, however, the churches also face the task of witnessing to this unity in and through the form of their institutional and social organisation. This underlies the ecumenical commitment of the churches to endeavour to understand and witness to the truth together. So ecumenical conversations are aimed not only at resolving specific doctrinal differences; they also endeavour to go beyond the level of ecclesiastical, doctrinal development to the **level of unity** in the truth of the Gospel which is based on faith in the Gospel.

The joint recognition of and witness to the truth of the Gospel takes place on the basis of interpreting the Scriptures. This task of understanding the **Gospel as the common point of reference** or as the key to understanding the Scriptures is therefore related to the diversities in the biblical texts.

In order for the right interpretation of the Gospel to be binding on the church's interpretation of Scripture, the church needs to reach an internal agreement in the form of a doctri-

nal consensus. The guidelines for this endeavour to understand and witness to the truth are found, for Lutheran churches, in the Lutheran confessions, especially the Augsburg Confession (Confessio Augustana) of 1530. The confessional documents set out precisely that doctrinal consensus of the Lutheran Church which is intended to help in understanding the biblical witness along lines corresponding to the Gospel as rediscovered by Luther (see p. 16f.).

Since the church is understood as the gathering of all believers, it is »sufficient – but also necessary – for the ‘true unity’ of the church to agree on the right teaching of the Gospel, i.e. on proclamation in accordance with the Scriptures, and on the celebration of the sacraments as instituted...« (VELKD, Ökumene nach evangelisch-lutherischem Verständnis, 2004 = Ecumenism according to the Evangelical Lutheran Understanding). These reflections are based on the relevant definition of the church in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII: »It is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies, instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.«

Hence, for church communion, the two criteria necessary are those which also constitute the church in general: **word and sacrament**. Therefore, the Lutheran church stands for a broad ecumenical understanding of the church, not for tactical reasons

but because of its confessional theology. It is able to acknowledge the factual plurality of churches and to recognise the one church of Jesus Christ also beyond its own church borders. The goal is recognition and communion, not demarcation. But, finally, this unity of the church is God's doing and can never be brought about by the churches themselves. For this reason, the statement on »Ecumenism according to the Evangelical Lutheran Understanding« comes to the conclusion that, when churches recognise that they share the same understanding of the Gospel, then »the churches must do justice to this by declaring and implementing church communion in word and sacrament with one another«.

In this way, German Lutherans give preference, among the various ecumenical models of unity, to »communion in word and sacrament« as spelled out by the Leuenberg Fellowship (now the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe) and expressed in the »Leuenberg Agreement« of 1973. On the basis of their common understanding of the Gospel, and the recognition that the doctrinal condemnations contained in their confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal position of the signatory churches, more than 100 Reformation churches in Europe declared that they were in »altar and pulpit fellowship« with one another.

However, the requisite agreement on a common understanding of the Gospel makes it necessary to establish the fact by means

of theological dialogue. An appropriate model of unity must thus include communion in the confession of the faith. But communion in the confession of the faith does not mean that both parties must have the same confessional documents. Different confessional traditions can exist within the communion, provided that all agree that their differences are legitimate expressions of one and the same Gospel. And precisely this must first be clarified theologically.

Even churches which already enjoy church communion with one another are constantly called upon by God to make their communion visible, to strive for closer cooperation and, wherever possible, to carry out their ecclesial task together. But also churches which are not (yet) able to state a commonly accepted understanding of the Gospel can, according to the Lutheran understanding, cooperate already on as many levels as possible and continue to pursue their ecumenical conversations. So a Lutheran conception of unity is a model of **communion by various steps**. The consensus already reached must be reflected in corresponding steps along the road to unity. So the member churches of the GNC/LWF and the VELKD are convinced that, even if some differences still exist between churches, members of such churches can be invited to share in the word and sacrament (Eucharistic hospitality). By inviting sisters and brothers in the faith to the Lord's table, Lutherans recognise that the others, too, are witnesses to the crucified and risen Christ, even if differences in doctrinal traditions and spirituality still remain. At the

same time, this provides an opportunity to get to know one another's spirituality, thinking and experience in greater depth.

### **Communion among Lutherans**

These ecumenical convictions become a reality in the communion practised with the other Lutheran churches worldwide. Thus, all the Lutheran regional churches in Germany belong to the **Lutheran World Federation** (LWF) which was founded in 1947 in Lund. The LWF, according to its constitution, sees itself as »a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship. The Lutheran World Federation confesses the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church and is resolved to serve Christian unity throughout the world« (Constitution, Article 3). It currently represents 145 churches and congregations in 98 countries with more than 74 million members. In addition to promoting unity among Lutherans, its tasks also include inter-confessional dialogue on the world level, theological reflection, work on mission and development and aid to refugees and in emergencies. The highest decision making body of the LWF is its Assembly which is normally held every six years (2003: Winnipeg, 2010: Stuttgart, 2017: Windhoek).

### **Dialogues with other Denominations**

A second contribution to the Lutheran commitment to unity are the various multilateral and bilateral dialogues and conversa-

tions with other confessional families in Germany. Through their membership of the World Council of Churches (**WCC**), the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (**ACK**) or the Conference of European Churches (**CEC**) the Lutherans are involved in many multilateral dialogues and encounters.

In view of the different sizes of the various denominations in Germany, it is not surprising that the most intensive bilateral contacts of Lutherans are those with the **Roman Catholic Church**. Both churches have held theological conversations since 1976. In 1984, the Bilateral Working Group between the VELKD and the Catholic Bishops' Conference published a study document on church fellowship in word and sacrament. In 2000 followed a study on the communion of the saints, dealing inter alia with church fellowship and ministry, particularly the papal ministry, and the communion of the saints beyond death. Finally, in 2017, the third Bilateral Working Group published a document on God and human dignity.

However, those are not the only bilateral relationships by far. German Lutherans also foster intensive relationships with the **Old Catholic Church**. The results of theological conversations between VELKD and the Catholic Diocese of the Old Catholics in Germany led in 1985 to the »Agreement on a mutual invitation to participate in the celebration of the eucharist«. In 2017, the churches signed an »Agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism and confirmation« and adopted a joint liturgy for an ecumenical wedding.

The member churches of the EKD and therefore also the Lutheran regional churches have shared in a limited church fellowship/ ecclesial communion with the **Church of England** since 1988 in the framework of the »Meissen Declaration«.

Furthermore, the VELKD can look back upon a fruitful dialogue with the **Evangelical Methodist Church**. As a result of this Lutheran-Methodist dialogue, all Evangelical regional churches have been in full communion with the Methodist Church since 1987, when the official declaration of pulpit and table fellowship was signed in Nuremberg.

A dialogue between the VELKD and German **Mennonites** led to Eucharistic hospitality in 1996. In view of their troubled history, both churches also came together to confess their guilt before God and asked for forgiveness.

Talks between VELKD and the Union of Evangelical Free Church Congregations (**Baptists**) showed that the necessary preconditions for church communion with the Baptists will not be achieved without a common understanding on the sacrament of baptism. This has not yet been reached. But a new round of an official Lutheran-Baptist dialogue on the national level has started in 2017.

Also in 2017 the GNC/LWF and the German **Seventh-Day Adventists** started exploratory conversations to come to a better understanding of each other and to address injuries of the past.

For further details on bilateral relations see: »Lutheran – Reformed – United. A Pocket Guide to the Denominational Landscape in Germany«.

## 5. HOW ARE LUTHERANS ORGANISED IN GERMANY?

The centre of the organisation of the Lutheran church is the congregation gathered around the Word of God and the sacrament. The congregation is led by the pastor/minister and a board (or parish council or presbytery) which is elected by all members of the congregation. This form of leadership follows an Evangelical principle that lay and ordained people both bear responsibility in the church. This leadership also bears the responsibility for the work of the congregation: for word and sacrament, pastoral care, diaconal service and the administration of church property. Pastors of congregations, who can be male or female, are appointed cooperatively by the congregation and the regional church.

The regional church (Landeskirche) is the other main organisational level in German Lutheran churches. Lutheran regional churches vary considerably in size, members, and numbers of congregations – ranging from some 20 congregations to more than 1,500. They normally encompass the territory of historically sovereign states long gone. Regardless of size, each regional church is headed by three bodies. Firstly, the synod which is made up of elected lay and ordained persons (in most cases two thirds to one third). The synod is a forum for developing objectives in the regional church and embodying unity and di-

versity. Secondly, the regional church is led by a church board, elected by the synod. And finally, the regional church is led by an ordained pastor charged with the task of episcopal oversight for the whole regional church and representation of this church. He or she is elected by the synod and carries the title of »Landesbischof/Landesbischöfin«.

Depending on the size of the regional church, one or two intermediary levels of organisation lie between the two main organisational levels of congregation und regional church. Some 20 to 30 congregations normally form a deanery or church district. This level is led by its dean or superintendent, its district synod and its district council. In the larger regional churches an additional layer of church leadership exists. Here, a regional bishop (or regional superintendent or provost) assumes the episcopal ministry at this level. His or her duties include ordaining new pastors and visiting the parishes.

On the national level, seven Lutheran churches form the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD). This communion of Lutheran regional churches, founded in 1948 in Eisenach, understands itself as one church. Its chief aim is the preservation and deepening of Lutheran teaching and unity in Germany. VELKD's governing bodies are the General Synod, the Church Council, the Bishops' Conference, as well as the Presiding Bishop. It works in close collaboration with the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), a national church body of Lutheran, Reformed,

and United churches. VELKD and EKD share a church headquarters. All VELKD members are also members of the EKD.

Communion with Lutherans worldwide is an important concern of the Lutheran churches in Germany. Consequently, a total of eleven German Lutheran churches are members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), among them all VELKD churches. They relate to the LWF via the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (GNC/LWF). This church body is led by representatives of all its eleven member churches in the Assembly of the GNC/LWF. It is represented by a Chairperson who is a bishop of one the member churches. The Lutheran World Federation is rightly dubbed as »A Communion of Churches« (see more details above). Its highest governing body is an Assembly of delegates of all 145 member churches. It meets every six to seven years. In the meantime, the LWF is led by a Council and a President.

For further details on organisation see: »Lutheran – Reformed – United. A Pocket Guide to the Denominational Landscape in Germany«.

## German Lutheran churches at a glance

|   | LWF and GNC/LWF | VELKD | EKD |
|---|-----------------|-------|-----|
| Church of Lippe                                 | X*              |       | X   |
| Evangelical Church in Central Germany           | X               | X     | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden            | X               |       |     |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria          | X               | X     | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick        | X               | X     | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany | X               | X     | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oldenburg        | X               |       | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg      | X               |       | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover          | X               | X     | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony           | X               | X     | X   |
| Evangelical Lutheran Church of Schaumburg-Lippe | X               | X     | X   |

\* Lutheran Section

## 6. SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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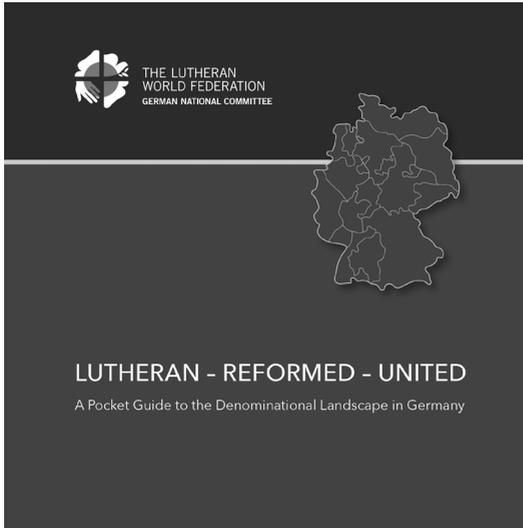
The Lutheran World Federation offers positions, statement, and views on issues concerning the Lutheran world on their website and in many publications. All can be accessed online on **[www.lutheranworld.org](http://www.lutheranworld.org)**.

Within Germany, the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation offers views and specific positions on international Lutheran or ecumenical matters from a German perspective. More information on **[www.dnk-lwb.de](http://www.dnk-lwb.de)**.

The VELKD publishes a variety of books, documents, statements on contemporary matters from a Lutheran perspective. Two periodicals, the »Texte aus der VELKD« and »VELKD-Informationen« provide regular views and information from the VELKD. Most publications can be accessed, with much more information, on **[www.velkd.de](http://www.velkd.de)**.

**Hungry for more? Learn more about denominational landscape in German and the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches with this publication:**

Lutheran – Reformed – United



A Pocket Guide to the Denominational Landscape in Germany by the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation. Published for the first time in 2017.

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It is not always easy for outsiders to understand a different Christian denomination or church family. One's preconceptions - for example about the Lutheran churches - may be coloured by common stereotypes or personal experience. This booklet is intended to show how German Lutherans see themselves from an insider perspective. What are their origins? What is Lutheran theology? How do Lutherans worship? And how do they relate to other churches?



THE LUTHERAN  
WORLD FEDERATION  
GERMAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE

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