

## The Significance of Lutheranism for Fellowship among Churches

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Does a confessional church still make sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The question is always out there. Of this I am convinced: Holding fast to the Lutheran Confessions and the evangelical Lutheran Church is not a peculiarity, but rather enriches the Evangelical Church in Germany and strengthens her identity. I would like to make this clear in a number of points. “Evangelical Lutheranism” is not to be understood as a line of demarcation against things “Roman Catholic,” or other expressions of Protestantism, but rather as an enrichment of the whole Church of Jesus Christ, since the evangelical Lutheran churches have a valuable, living, inheritance to contribute.

It is indisputable that Martin Luther did not seek to create a new church. Instead, he sought to free the church from abuses and misunderstandings handed down through tradition and return it to the one, true Gospel. The Reformers saw the Gospel fully contained in the ancient confessions of the ecumenical councils, Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds. For this reason they adhered to them in the Confessions. They did not create a new confession, but rather confessed the faith of the ancient church. Hence the Lutheran churches are not 500 years old, but part of the 2000-year-old church.

The issue for the Reformers in the debates with pope and emperor was not a matter of theological controversies, but rather the salvation of mankind, and thus it was about truth. The Augsburg Confession is eloquent testimony to their witness to the truth and their commitment to the unity of the church. They did not understand that which they taught as an exit from the church, but rather to be integrated into the life and teaching of the church. This desire for unity in truth is the ecumenical standard of Lutheranism for fellowship among churches within the Church of Christ to the present day. Since imperial recognition of the Lutheran Confession of 1530 was not granted, the Western church split, leaving the Reformers with no alternative but to organize the churches in the evangelical territories.

In recent times not only is there a greater desire for unity, but it is strengthened through that which Lutheranism has to offer for fellowship among churches. On the one hand, for Lutherans it has to do with the fact that they understand themselves to be -- as the Confessions state -- part of one, holy, universal (= catholic), and apostolic church, and are thus committed to normal relationships with other churches and to creating ties to the various confessions [of faith]. Out of this arises Lutheranism’s way of thinking and the nurturing of worldwide partnerships with other churches as a fundamental characteristic of the Lutheran Church.

On the other hand, there is the question of one’s own identity within the variety of confessions. Out of the wealth of expressions of faith which comprise the life and teaching of the Lutheran churches, I wish to address three elements that are essential, as well as important and helpful, for us and for fellowship among churches.

The first is the Lutheran understanding of Holy Scripture. Naturally every Christian expression of faith draws on the words of scripture. Since a particular way of thinking became especially important for every confession in its own situation, various emphases and interpretations characterize the respective scriptural understandings. These pluralities of biblical witness were known to the Reformers, who were highly accomplished biblical exegetes. For this reason they sought to narrow the focus to a central hermeneutical foundation: The core of scripture, in Christian thinking, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That means that all witnesses of the Old and New Testaments point to God's salvation of humanity in Jesus Christ. They possess no importance outside of promoting Christ. This is also the belief of the ancient creeds and is incorporated in them. This understanding of scripture, while allowing for many interpretations in faith, nevertheless means that the Gospel is not a long compilation of declarations and truths, but has Christ at its core. In him scripture is revealed.

This understanding of scripture has high ecumenical potential, which the churches today especially need in their perceived unity in Christ. At the same time it rejects all extreme and narrow forms of biblical interpretation, such as fundamentalism, enthusiasm, or shortsighted individual teachings. And against accommodating to the "spirit of the time," it sets in all clarity the key question of a personal relationship with Christ. The Lutheran confession endeavors to maintain this understanding as the interpretive norm so that it might bear much fruit in the whole church.

The second element is the Lutheran understanding of church. When the Reformers wrote the Augsburg Confession, they based Article 7 on the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Article 4. Church may not be defined by what the apostles, and, since then, what Christendom has created, but by the presence of the crucified and risen Lord. How he comes to his people and reveals himself to them is the salvific event in this world. The central proclamation of the church is that he reveals himself in the congregation (*Gemeinde*) gathered in his name, in the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. So understood, we Lutherans stand in apostolic succession. Everything else, whatever is done in the church, or how it presents itself to the world, is of secondary importance and must remain so. The outward appearance of the church, including whatever organizational structure it assigns itself, may not have any other goals than to create the conditions whereby this core mission of the church can be discerned unimpeded. This understanding of church subordinates all structural models and all forms of service to the working of Jesus Christ; it supercedes them, makes them changeable and renewable. That affords us huge freedom in the forms of fellowship in faith, Christ alone being the one who binds all together who follow him. At the same time it rejects the notion that we or our churches all need to be uniform in order to be effective. The Lutheran confession places its trust in Christ alone for all times so that it might produce faith in the whole church.

The third element is the importance of the Lutheran emphasis on our being sent into the world: recognizing the two ways in which God rules, the so-called Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. The Middle Ages were largely given over to struggles for dominance in worldly and political might. The Lutheran Reformation sought to avoid these controversies through the limitation of powers: church is church and may not dictate to

the state, the empire is the empire and is to stay out of matters of faith. Both empire and church are God's spheres, but for each sphere there is a method of governing: for the church and faith – the Gospel, for the state – the law. The advantage was: political power was not to put limitations on freedom of faith and conscience, and the church was not to view politics as its appendage, but rather groom Christians to be good citizens, engaged for the common good with Christian responsibilities. The Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms prevented presenting things human as eternal, and things divine as human, thus barring a mixing of the two. The Lutheran confession holds fast to freedom and conscience that it might bear fruit for the whole church and the world.

These Lutheran insights are not only important with respect to the Roman Catholic Church and its theology, but also for fellowship with the churches that developed out of the Reformation period. The Leuenberg Agreement, the foundational document for fellowship among churches of varying confessions, pronounces the way to productive ecumenism via Augsburg Confession 7: The binding confessions of the churches that have joined it are not negated. The Leuenberg Agreement does not presume to be a confession per se, but allows for various confessions to enter into fellowship as they grow in mutual recognition, which follows from a common understanding of the Gospel.

Protestantism in Europe has discovered unity on the basis of the Leuenberg Agreement which is lived out in church fellowship. On this foundation the united Lutheran churches (VELKD and the German National Committee of the LWF), as well as other Reformation churches in Europe and Germany, are working together. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), according to our founding documents, is a church fellowship based on the model of the Leuenberg Agreement. This is the matter of great importance that Lutheranism brings to the fellowship among churches: it points to the basis for unity, which is found in Christ alone. And through its rich tradition it witnesses to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The evangelical Lutheran Church is therefore not some alternative path, but a church, which clearly defines Protestantism, while also binding churches together.

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