

Are Lutherans Congregational?

- **Are Lutherans Congregational?** No. We have not followed those in the Lutheran Free Church who *required* congregationalism because the New Testament prescribed it.
- **Are We Papal?** No. But we agree with Melancthon that even a papacy, if it is not *required* but is “of human right,” could be useful (*Book of Concord*, p.316).
- **Are We Presbyterian?** No. Even though we are in full communion with Presbyterians and they hold their polity in highest regard. But they do not *require* that we adopt that polity, because full communion is “mutual admonition.”
- **Are We Episcopal?** No. Even though some LWF member churches have episcopal structures, they do not regard their polity as *required*, nor do they require other Lutherans to adopt it.
- **Are We Charismatic?** No. You can be charismatic if you want, as your own spirituality, but you cannot *require* it of other Lutherans.

What Are We?

The “Word Alone” is Our Identity. Our Confession says that for the true unity of the church proclaiming the gospel purely and celebrating the sacraments rightly is enough (AC 7).

Do We Say the Church Is Invisible? No. Our Confession says that the church is both visible and audible because it is present wherever Christ uses the means of Word and sacrament.

Is Lutheran Ecclesiology Incomplete? Unsettled? No. Our Confession says God instituted the office of ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and sacraments (AC 5). God didn’t do a half-way job. What is required is right proclamation; all else is human construct.

Do Bishops Safeguard the Gospel? No. Through these means (Word and sacraments), God gives the Holy Spirit, who creates faith when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel (AC 5).

No one safeguards the Gospel; It is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). We only proclaim the Word; it alone convicts of sin and convinces of grace. Nothing is or can be added to this Word, and no one has a special grace or charisma to safeguard it. The Word is self-authenticating.

Are We Against Traditional Structures? The Lutheran Reformers were not against oversight. But they radically revised the office of oversight. In AC 28, bishops and pastors equally share the one office of ministry. Pastors too can ordain (*Book of Concord*, p.331).

“Useful” is O.K., “Required” is Not. Apology 14 says that Lutherans wanted to retain traditional structures *if* both parties agree they are “of human right.” This phrase means “if they are useful.” But when any particular structure is *required*, then the church has wrongly limited Christ by claiming he is dependent on a special structure. The truth of the Gospel is that Christ uses *means*, not *mediators*. Christ is the only Mediator.

Are Lutherans Anti-Ecumenical? No, we are among the most ecumenically open of all Christians. We are eager for unity with all those who require nothing more than the Word and sacraments, rightly proclaimed.

What was Luther’s favorite? Luther did not lay down a favorite polity but gave a criterion for evaluating all structures: Whatever promotes the truth of the gospel and the exercise of Christian freedom.

Freedom for New Structures. Lutherans can and should be open to many structures for the sake of mission. This includes freedom to adopt new structures and not be tied to those of the past, even significant historical offices such as the threefold order of bishop, priest, and deacon. To lock ourselves into one form is to add a requirement to the gospel which will ultimately narrow our ecumenical future.

The ELCA’s official policy statement, *Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA*, expresses our freedom with regard to structures when it says our definition of full communion “allows for flexible, situation-oriented decisions about order” (D 4).

One Priesthood & The Word Alone. Luther’s emphasis on the universal priesthood of all believers and the authority of the Word alone suggests that a good structure for today might be a combination of representative assemblies (not quotas based on race and gender) and expertise in Scripture and the Confessions. But even such a structure could not be *required* as a “safeguard” to the gospel, as the Concordat claims for bishops in the historic episcopate.