

The Lutheran Reformation Then and Now

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation isn't important just for confessional Lutherans. Lutheranism in general is celebrating its 500th birthday. Other denominations are also participating. Even the Roman Catholic Church is joining the jubilee (albeit with some reservations). In Germany the anniversary was ceremonially started on October 31st, 2016 in Berlin by ecclesiastical and political representatives. Federal President Joachim Gauck expressed appreciation for the changes which have arisen from the Reformation. In many respects even the state was shaped by the Reformation.¹

But is this birthday party — organized in a way that is very effective from a PR perspective — at all legitimate? Luther's posting of the Theses is often portrayed by the media as a legend.² Even the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) speaks of the important event as a "protestant founding myth."³ But the posting of the Theses isn't a legend. Historical evidence for example can be found in a letter of Luther to Archbishop Albrecht dating October 31st, 1517. In it Luther mentions the 95 Theses. Obviously the theses were originally attached to the letter, although they weren't discovered in the archives.⁴

But is it enough to commemorate an event which happened 500 years ago like we otherwise observe anniversaries or birthdays — by having a nice celebration? Luther himself probably would protest the loudest, if we celebrate this anniversary elaborately without asking what Luther and the Reformation were all about. If we really want to celebrate the anniversary in accordance with the wishes of Luther and our Lutheran fathers, we need to ask about their actual concerns and motives. Then we will grasp the actual heritage of the Lutheran Reformation. And this is necessary, if we want to preserve it faithfully in order to pass it on to future generations. First, we want to get an overview of the Lutheran Reformation in the 16th century. Then we will think about its significant impact on Lutheranism today.

¹ <http://www.heute.de/festakt-zum-reformationstag-in-berlin-gauck-fordert-einen-agenten-der-entaengstigung-45803472.html> (accessed November 21st 2016).

² Ibid.

³ Erinnerung heilen - Jesus Christus bezeugen: Ein gemeinsames Wort zum Jahr 2017, Ed. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland und Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, Gemeinsame Texte 24, Hannover: 2017, p. 33.

⁴ Gottfried Herrmann, Luthers Thesenanschlag - eine Legende?-, Theologische Handreichung und Information 4 (2016), p. 6. It may very well be that the Theses weren't discovered at the archives in Mainz because they had been sent to Rome when the Archbishop brought a formal complaint against Luther.

1. Lutheran Reformation Then - an Overview

1.1. A Miner's Son Becomes a Reformer

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben on November 10th, 1483, the son of the miner Hans Luther and his wife Margaretha Lindemann.⁵ After attending different schools at Mansfeld, Magdeburg, and Eisenach, Luther started his studies in 1501 in the college of Liberal Arts at Erfurt.⁶ He earned the degree of a *Magister Artium* and took up the study of law in 1505. But after the death of a friend, and after Luther himself almost died during a thunderstorm, he discontinued his studies to become a monk. Luther searched for the greatest possible certainty of salvation. He wanted to achieve it by doing good works and living in strict obedience to the monastic vows.

But Luther soon realized that he wasn't able to achieve that. He wasn't even able to fulfill the 1st commandment completely by fearing, loving, and trusting, the true God above everything else. So Luther could only be scared of the holy and righteous God who judges sin and punishes the sinner in his righteous anger. How should he stand before this harsh judge? Luther found certainty of salvation neither through the ascetic life in the monastery nor through his theological studies, which were shaped by late medieval Ockhamism.⁷ He took the medieval piety and the obedient lifestyle to which he was obligated by his monastic vows very seriously. He believed that man was able to love and trust God. But in spite of his serious efforts, Luther failed again and again. He suffered from the constant accusations of his conscience. In his deep distress Luther initially received help from his friend and pastor Johann Staupitz.⁸ He pointed Luther away from Jesus the judge, to Jesus the crucified. As a result, Luther, who was frightened about his sins and feared the anger and punishment of the holy God, could recognize the love of God. Köhler, however, remarks: "Although what he said was correct, Staupitz nevertheless remained in the middle ages and learned later from

⁵ The historical overview follows mainly the presentation of Joh. Ph. Köhler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, Milwaukee: 1917, p. 346ff.

⁶ The studies contained grammar, dialectics, rhetoric, arithmetic, music and astronomy. The professors at the arts faculty of Erfurt felt connected to Ockhamism, although they also had already been open to the new intellectual movement of humanism.

⁷ Back then there were two schools of thought within theology: **Thomism** traces back to Thomas Aquinas. It taught the *via antiqua* [old way], which gave more credit to human reason. The results were some mixing of philosophy and theology. **Ockhamism** was founded by Wilhelm of Ockham (1285-1347) and Gabriel Biel. It taught the *via moderna* [new way], which differentiated more clearly between divine revelation and human reason. Only the Bible was decisive.

⁸ Johann Staupitz (died 1524) belonged to a reputable noble family of Saxony. He was born about 1470 at Motterwitz near Leisnig and entered the Augustinians convent at Tübingen in 1497. After earning a doctor's degree he became a professor at the university. Later he contributed to the erection of the university at Wittenberg which was founded by Frederick the Wise in 1502. One year later he was elected as the vicar general of Augustinian convents of Germany. Cf. Carl Meusel, *Kirchliches Handlexikon*, Vol. 6, Leipzig: 1900, p. 398.

Luther to really understand the Gospel."⁹ Following the advice of his monastic brother, Johann Staupitz, Luther started not only to study the works of Augustin and Bernhard, he also started to study the Bible thoroughly - and that turned things around for Luther.

After being consecrated a priest in 1507, Luther, at the instigation of Staupitz, was called to the University of Wittenberg to complete his studies. After further short-term study at Erfurt and a journey to Rome due to some affairs of the Augustinian order, Luther returned to Wittenberg in 1511 and graduated as a doctor of theology in 1512. In theological lectures Luther expounded the Psalms, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In addition, he preached at the parish church and fulfilled different tasks in his Order. During these years the decisive turn of Luther's life took place, though it cannot be dated with absolute precision. After scholars debated for a long time about the precise date of the so-called "tower experience," the conclusion prevailed finally that Luther passed through a gradual process of understanding between 1515 and 1520.¹⁰ Köhler mentions the reasons for this far reaching turn:

"By this development Luther started to understand and present more purely the thoughts that have always been in the mind of believers but could not be presented clearly because of the inadequate philosophical mindset and the legalistic disposition: the actual knowledge of God is not given through the law but through the gospel; thereby the right and thorough understanding of the law is achieved and the law achieves its purpose. Luther suddenly started to understand some key passages of Scripture in particular, which then shed more light on the whole sequence of thought. Especially Rom 1:17 and thereby the whole letter to the Romans looked different when Luther understood that (the term) righteousness of God at this place doesn't refer to the anger of the judging God, but to the mercy and love which becomes our inner possession by trusting."¹¹

Luther's theological breakthrough wasn't caused by special experiences or by the influence of famous theologians or other contemporaries. The thorough reading and studying of the Bible precipitated the decisive turn by which Luther finally became the Reformer.¹²

1.2. The Controversy with the Roman Catholic Church

By his study of Holy Scripture, Luther recognized how much the medieval Church had fallen away from God's Word and how many grave abuses had spread. One of them was the selling of indulgences, a fruit of the fatal false doctrines of purgatory and work righteousness. Near Wittenberg, the Leipzig Dominican Prior Johann Tetzel preached indulgences. After an agreement with Pope Leo X, Albrecht of Brandenburg raised through indulgences the 10,000 ducats that he had borrowed from the Fuggers in order to pay for the Electorate of Mainz. Half of the amount obtained would go to Rome to fund the building of St. Peter's church.

⁹ Köhler, p. 347 (transl. HW).

¹⁰ Hermann, p. 3.

¹¹ Köhler, p. 166f (Transl. HW).

¹² Ibid., p. 349.

Tetzel went on the road as a representative of Albrecht, and did his job in an especially shameless way. Luther took notice of the selling of indulgences and spoke about it in sermons and in the confessional. When that, however, didn't bear fruit and Luther also observed the evil results of the indulgences in the confessional, he published 95 Theses on the door of the castle church of Wittenberg to initiate a discussion.¹³ Luther also sent the Theses to out-of-town friends to invite a response. Only half a year later they were known in all Europe. They dealt with questions for which many people were looking for answers.¹⁴ But the discussion of scholars Luther had hoped for didn't come about. It seems even the pope didn't take the matter very seriously at first. When the Dominicans stood up for Tetzel and denounced Luther, the papal court theologian Sylvester Mazzolini Prierias drafted on behalf of the pope a superficial and harsh evaluation which justified the selling of indulgences on the basis of papal infallibility.

At the beginning of 1518, Luther gave an account of his teaching at a conference of the Augustinians at Heidelberg, through which the hearts of some students were won for the saving Gospel (e.g. Butzer, Brenz). In May of 1518 Luther sent his *Resolutiones* with a detailed explanation of the Theses and a letter of his loyalty to the pope. Now Rome took the matter more seriously. The Papal legate Cajetan¹⁵, who was staying in Augsburg, had to deal with Luther because elector Frederick the Wise had rejected action against Luther in Rome.¹⁶ Cajetan examined Luther mainly about two of the 95 Theses. He accused Luther of denying in Theses 58 that the treasure of the Church is identical with the merit of Jesus and the Saints. In addition, Cajetan said that through his comments on Thesis 7, Luther was saying that we aren't justified by the Sacrament itself, but by faith alone. No agreement was reached. Luther escaped from Augsburg and appealed to a general council.

Rome, however, chose a more cautious course to start. After Emperor Maximilian died in 1519, an election for a new king would soon take place. Karl von Miltitz was sent to Germany to achieve the handing over of Luther by formally conferring an honor ("golden rose of virtue") on Frederick the Wise. The elector, however, resisted and protected Luther again.

¹³ Luther probably didn't nail the 95 Theses himself on the door of the church, but had it done by a university employee. Cf. Hermann, p. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵ Thomas Cajetan (1469-1545) belonged to the Dominican Order since 1483 and was an zealous Thomist. In 1508 he became general of the Dominican Order, in 1517 cardinal, and in 1518 papal legate in Germany. Cf. Carl Meusel (Ed.), *Kirchliches Handlexikon*, Vol. 1, Leipzig: 1889, p. 629.

¹⁶ Frederick the Wise (died 1526) reigned as elector of Saxony since 1486 and was personally devoted to the pilgrimages, veneration of relics, and the adoration of saints within the medieval Church. But he wanted the University of Wittenberg which had been founded by him in 1502 to be a place known for its legitimate science and piety. So he protected Luther against the powerful hand of his enemies. But shortly before his death Frederick received communion in both kinds and thereby confessed to the Reformation. Cf. Carl Meusel, Vol. 2, p. 630-631.

After he had taken a closer look at the circumstances, Karl tried to win Luther over. Luther got himself into longer negotiations and restricted himself to contact Rome only by several humble letters. But he didn't recant his convictions. Luther was ready to wait for a formal legal hearing and to be silent until then.

This changed, however, with the Leipzig Disputation in 1519. After Joh. Eck had disputed with Karlstadt for a week about the free will, Luther was provoked to intervene by the theses of Eck and disputed about the papacy, beginning on July 4th. Eck wanted to intimidate Luther by insinuating that Luther's teaching could be compared to the Hussite heresy. Luther retorted by stating: "Pope and Councils may err". Now it became clear to the general public that Luther's battle was directed against the papacy and its power. In the period that followed, Luther drafted his main Reformation writings: "An kaiserliche Majestät und den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung", "De captivitate babylonica ecclesiae" and "Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen".

Meanwhile, Eck travelled to Rome in 1520. From there he brought along the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* [Arise, O Lord]. Luther and his followers were threatened with the ban if they wouldn't recant within 60 days. When Eck published the bull and burned the writings of Luther in the west of the empire, Luther publicly broke with the papacy. He drafted his short text *Adversus execrabilem Antichristi bullam* [Against the bull of the Antichrist] and burned the bull before the Elster Gate at Wittenberg on December 10th, 1520. So Rome published on January 3rd, 1521 the bull *Decet Romanum pontificam* [It is fitting for the Roman Bishop] to finally impose excommunication on Luther.¹⁷ His further fate now depended on the stance of the empire. The princes, under the lead of Frederick the Wise, prevailed in having Luther called to the Imperial Diet at Worms to be examined. It was the first Imperial Diet held by young King Karl V on German soil. Trusting God's protection and help, and with an assurance of safe conduct, Luther travelled to Worms. In the famous session on April 18th, 1521, Luther held to his confession that was grounded in Holy Scripture. He did so in a longer speech held first in German and then in Latin. He indeed would have been ready to recant, but only if his mistakes would have been proven to him from Holy Scripture. Otherwise, he wasn't able to recant, as he then would have denied God's Word - and Luther couldn't

¹⁷ The Catholics of Worms addressed a petition to the Pope on June 18th, 1971 (at the 450th anniversary of Imperial Diet of Worms) to rescind the ban of Luther. While the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) rescinded the excommunication between Rome and Constantinople, Rom considered a suspension of the ban of Luther impossible and not an appropriate way to express effectively how the evaluation of Luther by Catholics had changed. The catholic relationship to "Lutheran communities" should be improved by further study, prayer and application of "other means of ecumenical action". Cf. <http://www.unifr.ch/iso/assets/files/Iserloh/15.pdf> (accessed March 9th, 2016).

reconcile such behavior with his conscience. Already on April 19th the Emperor declared to the Estates of the Empire that he was determined to take action against Luther as a true and convicted heretic.¹⁸ When Luther departed, the papal nuntio Aleander, who, together with Eck, had delivered the bull threatening excommunication, drafted the Edict of Worms on behalf of the emperor. It imposed the imperial ban on Luther and his followers, and mandated the burning of their writings and the implementation of a spiritual censorship in regard to all books printed in Germany.¹⁹ The emperor signed and proclaimed the edict on May 26th, 1521 (after elector Frederick the Wise had departed).

1.3. The Consolidation of the Reformation

On his way back Luther was kidnapped in a "cloak and dagger operation" and taken to the Wartburg Castle on the order of Frederick the Wise. For the time being, Luther "went underground" and stayed at the Wartburg Castle from May 1521 to March 1522 concealed as "Junker Jörg." But he didn't remain idle. Luther drafted further writings and tackled his most important work: the German translation of the Holy Scriptures (September-NT 1522). In 1521 Luther's coworker Philipp Melanchthon published the 1st edition of his *Loci Communes* (a first summary of the most important biblical doctrines) in Wittenberg. The Augustinian convent also started practical reforms together with the university. Andreas Bodenstein of Karlstadt urged suspension of celibacy and the monastic vows. Gabriel Zwilling demanded the chalice for the laity and the suspension of the private Mass, where priests celebrated the mass without the congregation. The elector, however, prohibited the innovations when riots occurred among the laity during the implementation of the new communion service. With the approval of Luther, Karlstadt established at Christmas a simple communion service, including only the words of institution and the distribution. Most Augustinian monks left their monastery. The city council of Wittenberg implemented a new order to remove the images from the church and to put all spiritual benefices and endowments into a general treasury for the payment of the clergy and the support of the poor. The so-called Prophets of Zwickau, Niklas Storch, Markus Stübner, and Thomas Drechsel, added fuel to the fire. They had been expelled from Zwickau and in December of 1521 they began spreading spiritual Schwärmerei²⁰ at Wittenberg. Karlstadt started to preach against scholarly education. Latin schools were closed and such a confusion arose that the elector prohibited any further innovations. Against the will of the elector, Luther returned from the Wartburg Castle to

¹⁸ Karl Heussi, *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte*, Tübingen, 1949, § 75 y.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ A "Schwärmer" teaches that the Holy Spirit works apart from the means of grace.

Wittenberg on March 3rd, 1522. He cooled the heated atmosphere by preaching daily sermons (Invokavit sermons). Luther urged Christian patience with the weak. However, the sacrificial prayers of the mass continued to be omitted from the liturgy of the communion service. The general treasury was retained, but the chalice for the laity was abolished for the time being. The Zwickau Prophets had to leave Wittenberg.

God granted that at first there were no further threats from the government against Luther and the Reformation. The emperor was at war with France. This kept him away from Germany until 1530. And the government of the empire, since 1522 led by Duke Ferdinand, the brother of Karl V, wasn't willing to obey the pope completely. A new imperial diet decided, however, in 1524 to enact the edict of Worms as much as possible. A national assembly was scheduled in November to deal with questions of the Reformation. But Duke Ferdinand, the Bavarian dukes and most southern German bishops prevented it. The split within the German church and empire became final. But the Reformation movement hadn't only grown by winning over further rulers. The gospel message spread among the people and the Reformation became a widespread popular movement.²¹

But the next years also brought clarifications and divisions. During the Peasant's War of 1525 Luther had to deal with the enthusiast and rabble-rouser Thomas Müntzer. Luther entered into controversy with the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli about the doctrine of the Holy Supper. In his work "De libero arbitrio," the famous humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam attacked Luther's teaching of the complete inability of the human nature to do any spiritual good as "unbiblical" and "dangerous." Luther answered with arguably his most important writing "De servo arbitrio." In it he emphasized the doctrine of election of grace as well as the doctrine of hardening. He also completed the presentation of the main features of his teaching about the Holy Scriptures. Later, Luther only had to expand individual parts of it. In addition to these clarifications, the outward expansion of the Reformation also continued. The Lutheran faith spread also beyond the borders of Germany (e.g. into Sweden and Denmark).

Because of the Peasant's War the Reformation had become discredited in the eyes of some people without warrant. Some Catholic rulers in Southern German misused the conflict to persecute evangelicals. In Northern Germany Georg of Saxony, Albrecht of Mainz, Joachim of Brandenburg and Erich and Heinrich of Braunschweig used it as an opportunity to form the "alliance of Dessau." Young Hessian Landgrave Philipp answered by forming the "alliance of Torgau" with elector Johann of Saxony. Later Ernst of Lüneburg, Heinrich of Mecklenburg, Wolfgang of Anhalt and Albrecht of Preussen also joined. Already in January of 1525, the

²¹ Köhler, p. 361.

emperor had taken Franz of France prisoner during the battle at Pavia. In January of 1526 they concluded the "peace of Madrid." As a result of this victory, Karl sent his instructions to the Imperial Diet at Speyer in 1526 on how to take action against the evangelicals. At the Imperial Diet the Catholics formed the majority. But the evangelical princess drew comfort from the words above their emblem: "The word of the Lord stands forever" (Is 40:8; 1 Pe 1:25). After the Pope released King Franz of France from his oath, he formed with him the League of Cognac. So the emperor needed the support of the evangelical princess both against Rome and against the imminent danger of the Turks. And therefore the Catholic rulers had to temper their demands. Concerning the edict of Worms it was therefore resolved that every prince should proceed with it as he was able to answer for it before God and the Emperor.

So for the Reformation, a three year period of rest began, which was used for organizing the Lutheran churches. Now the German state churches²² were established that still exist today, although some alterations occurred and changes happened in the outward circumstances. The territorial rulers implemented the reforms. Luther conferred the duty on them to maintain order within the church.²³ Actually the Reformers wanted to reinstate the true Episcopal and Visitation Office, as it was greatly needed. But they didn't consider themselves competent to exercise it. So they asked the electors to function as "emergency bishops."²⁴ In 1528 the Emperor could form new alliances with the Pope and with France. Afterwards, he convened a new Imperial Diet at Speyer in 1529. The Catholic majority decided to implement the edict of Worms to a greater extent. No further reforms were to be undertaken in all states and cities of Germany. Catholic worship was to be tolerated. Bishops that had been suspended from office were at least to again receive their wages. In addition, harsh action was to be taken against the so-called "Sacramentarians." Five evangelical princess and fourteen cities protested. From then on, they were called "Protestants."

At the same time Electoral Saxony, Hesse, Strasbourg, Ulm, and Nuremberg formed a defensive alliance. Philipp of Hesse also wanted to include the Swiss Reformation and hosted a colloquy in October of 1529 at Marburg. On the one side were Luther, Melanchthon, Jonas, Brenz and Osiander. On the reformed side were Zwingli, Ökolampad, Butzer, Hedio and

²² Luther knew that such a system of "state churches" does not correspond to what is taught in Holy Scripture about the Church. In his preface to the German Mass, Luther says clearly that the great majority of the people still aren't believers, although they attend worship. They still need to be won for the Gospel message. Therefore Luther advises those who seriously want to be Christians and confess the Gospel by word and deed to gather around the means of Grace in houses, to register by name, to collect offerings and to exercise church discipline as it is commanded by the word of Jesus. Cf. Martin Luther, *Die Deutsche Messe*, Martin Luther Taschenausgabe, Vol. 3, Berlin: ²1983, pp. 119-120 (WA 19,75).

²³ Heussi, § 78.

²⁴ Kurt Aland, *Geschichte der Christenheit*, Vol. 2, Gütersloh: ²1991, p. 111.

others. The proceedings resulted, however, in a final separation as no agreement could be achieved in the doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ under the bread and wine in holy communion. Although brotherhood was offered, Luther rejected. He recognized that they weren't united in spirit.²⁵ He sharply opposed Zwingli in the 17 Schwabach Articles which Luther had already drafted at Wittenberg in September of 1529.

1.4. From the Imperial Diet at Augsburg to the Religious Peace of Augsburg

After the Pope crowned Karl V Emperor at Bologna, Karl convened an Imperial Diet in Augsburg. He wanted to appear again in Germany for the first time in nine years. Karl was hoping to resolve the ecclesiastical questions in an amicable way. The elector of Saxony instructed his theologians to draft the Torgau Articles regarding ecclesiastical abuses. Melancthon reworked the Torgau Articles and the Schwabach Articles to produce the "Augsburg Confession." This first evangelical confession was signed by the Protestants of Speyer, by Reutlingen and Nuremberg. It was read in German to the Emperor and the Estates of the Empire on June 25th, 1530 at Augsburg. The emperor instructed the Catholic theologians Faber, Eck and Cochläus to write a "Confutatio" [refutation]. It was read as his opinion. But when the evangelicals asked for a transcript of it, they were refused. On the basis of his notes, however, Melancthon drafted the "Apology" [defense]. But it wasn't accepted by the Emperor. The Imperial Diet resolved to maintain the Edict of Worms. Time for consideration was offered to the Protestants until April of 1531. A council was also announced.

The evangelical rulers formed the Alliance of Smalcald in February of 1531 in order to take a stand against the Emperor if necessary. After England, France, Denmark and even the Catholic dukes of Bavaria were included, it was possible to form an anti-Habsburg alliance. When the Emperor saw this, he relented at first. A moratorium was enacted at Nuremberg in 1532. It allowed tolerance of the evangelicals until the proposed council. Within the next years the Turks and the French, however, demanded the attention of the Emperor. He stayed away from Germany for nine more years. The Alliance of Smalcald was also strengthened outwardly when the gospel message spread further. But at the same time, the Reformation suffered several setbacks. After the simple clarity of the Lutheran doctrine had been attacked during the controversy with Zwingli, Calvinism now gained more influence. Especially countries in the west and east of Europe were won for Calvinism, which significantly hindered the further spread of the biblical Lutheran faith. Finally, political intrigues and the

²⁵ Köhler, p. 375.

unchristian moral conduct of leading personalities²⁶ also caused great damage to the Smalcald League and the Lutheran Reformation.

When Pope Paul III (1545-1549) finally called for a council in Mantua (Italy) in May of 1537, Luther wrote the Smalcald Articles to demonstrate which articles of faith couldn't be abandoned. At the meeting of the Smalcald League, however, only the theologians discussed and signed the Articles. They were not presented to the Estates of the Empire as they were considered to be too harsh. On behalf of the Estates of the Empire, Melancthon drafted as an appendix to the Augsburg Confession his "Traktat von der Gewalt und Obrigkeit des Papstes" and "Von der Bischöfe Gewalt und Jurisdiktion". In it he granted a leadership role to the pope as long as it was based on human right. The proposed Council, however, didn't come about again. Much later a Council took place at Trent (1545-1563) and laid down clearly Roman Catholic doctrine in order to be distinguished from Lutheran belief. Martin Luther finally died at Eisleben on February 18th, 1546. So he didn't witness the Emperor taking military action against the Smalcald League and defeating it (1546/1547). But after further political entanglements, the Emperor saw himself forced to guarantee the Protestants full peace and equality with the Catholics in the Peace of Passau in 1552. In 1555 at the Imperial Diet of Augsburg, the Protestants still had to put up with being called "Confessional relatives of Augsburg" (*Corpus Catholicorum, Corpus Evangelicorum*). But the expansion of that kinship wasn't limited any more, even though the spiritual principalities which still existed weren't allowed to be reformed.²⁷ The church leadership of the territorial rulers which had started as an order of emergency became a permanent institution. Later it was boiled down to the short formula "*Cuius regio, eius religio*": the territorial ruler determines the religious confession of the land. Whoever was of a different opinion was allowed to emigrate. The peace of Augsburg was announced on September 25th, 1555. Now it was officially approved that there would be an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany in addition to the Roman Catholic Church.

2. Lutheran Reformation Now - What's the Lasting Heritage?

Luther's posting of the 95 Theses now celebrates its 500th anniversary. In Germany the event isn't being celebrated just in the current year. The evangelical state churches wanted to

²⁶ For example the bigamy of Landgrave Philipp of Hesse.

²⁷ Regarding the spiritual principalities a "spiritual reservation" (*Reservatum ecclesiasticum*) came into force: By changing his confession a spiritual ruler became a private person. He lost his spiritual dignity and his secular lordship. Cities within the spiritual principalities belonging to the Augsburg Confession were allowed to remain evangelical. Cf. Wolfgang Sommer, Detlef Klahr, Kirchengeschichtliches Repetitorium, Göttingen: 1997, p. 161.

prepare for it with a whole "Reformation decade." In so doing much was said about the impact of the Reformation on our country. The official text that was published by the church leadership of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) on occasion of the anniversary says for example:

"As an event of world-historical relevance, the Reformation didn't only change church and theology but also all private and public life and (among other factors) shaped it up to the present. It gave impetus to education, contributed to the development of the modern basic rights of religious freedom and freedom of conscience, changed the relation of church and government, contributed to development of the modern concept of freedom and the modern understanding of democracy - only to mention a few examples."²⁸

Certainly there is some truth here. The Lutheran Reformation doubtlessly changed society and prepared the way for what we enjoy today and often wrongly take for granted. But were these aforementioned impacts actually the main concerns of the Reformers? That's the question we are going to deal with in the second part of this paper. By studying three major topics, we want to demonstrate the true heritage of the Lutheran Reformation which we should preserve thankfully and pass on to future generations.

2.1. The Lutheran Reformation and the Commitment to Holy Scripture

The Lutheran State Church of Germany today forms with Lutheran church bodies in other countries the "Lutheran World Federation" (LWF). They consider themselves the heirs of the Lutheran Reformation. Actually the whole Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) considers itself the heir of the Lutheran Reformation, although it not only includes church bodies which call themselves "Lutheran" but also Reformed and Union state churches. But are those churches still committed to the main concern of the Lutheran Reformation?

The decisive turn in Luther's life wasn't brought about by personal experiences or the influence of famous theologians. The important insight which made Luther the reformer was given to him by God through the study of Holy Scripture. Luther was convinced that Holy Scripture was the Holy Spirit's own special book, writing and word. He confessed that Holy Scripture, even down its wording and phrasing, originated from the Holy Spirit. Therefore Luther took a vigorous stand for the Bible as the Word of God. He didn't want to debate even one word with someone who rejects that the writings of the Evangelists are God's Word, since such a denier of the divine inspiration of Scripture rejects the decisive fundamentals (*prima principia*).²⁹ This basic attitude was essential for Luther and the whole Lutheran Reformation.

²⁸ Rechtfertigung und Freiheit: 500 Jahre Reformation 2017, Ed. Kirchenamt der EKD, Gütersloh: 2014, p. 9 (transl. HW).

²⁹ Helge Stadelmann, Grundlinien eines bibeltreuen Schriftverständnisses, Wuppertal: ²1990, p. 20.

Although there is no special article about Holy Scripture in the confessional writings of the Lutheran church, they constantly point out that the Bible is the source and foundation of all right preaching and teaching in the Christian Church. It is the norm by which to measure all doctrine. Gottfried Wachler says rightly with reference to the Augsburg Confession (CA XXI,1f):

"For our Confession "divine word" and "Holy Scripture" are one and the same. What is rooted in Scripture and therefore is in accord with it, is in accord with the divine Word. Neither at this nor at any other place do (our confessional writings) differentiate between the true Word of God and the fallible word of man within Scripture, but the whole of Holy Scripture is equated with the Word of God."³⁰

In its official text on the occasion of the anniversary of the Reformation, the Evangelical Church of Germany says, however, that Evangelical Christianity went through an open "History of Learning" since the actual Reformation:

"Reformation isn't a completed event. It's a process of renewal which continues. Therefore many theological insights and institutional forms have existed since the 16th century which so to speak came into being later in the spirit of the Reformation. We call that the Reformation's "History of Learning."³¹

This "History of Learning" started mainly with Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), the father of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. Semler rejected the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. He declared that the interpreter was obliged to interpret the Bible "historically." In his "Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon" (1771-1775) Semler differentiated between God's Word and man's word in Holy Scripture. As a result of rationalism and enlightenment, the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible developed in Germany and spread like wildfire at German universities. Many biblical doctrines fell prey to radical criticism until finally practically nothing was left of biblical belief. Rudolf Bultmann, who taught New Testament at the University of Marburg, declared in the 20th century that nobody really could expect anymore that people who use electric lights and radio still believe in the world of spirits and miracles taught by the New Testament. He denied the ascension of Christ and his descent into hell, his visible return for judgment, and the main doctrine of Scripture teaching us that Christ made atonement for our sin by suffering and dying on our behalf.³² So the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) says in its official text:

"Since the 17th century, the texts of the Bible are studied according to the historical-critical method. Therefore they cannot be considered to be God's Word anymore as in the time of the Reformers. The Reformers still assumed principally that the texts of the Bible indeed originated from God himself."³³

³⁰ Gottfried Wachler, Bekenntnis zur Bibel: Heilige Schrift und Lehre der Kirche nach dem lutherischen Bekenntnis, Zwickau 1999, p. 27 (transl. HW).

³¹ Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 35 (transl. HW).

³² Helge Stadelmann, p. 36.

³³ Rechtfertigung und Freiheit, p. 84.

The Lutheran state churches today don't feel bound to the main concern of the Lutheran Reformation anymore. They explicitly distance themselves from the Reformers who still assumed that the texts of the Bible indeed originate from God. They don't want to understand anymore the Reformation principle "Scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*) means that Holy Scripture indeed was given by God word for word. They believe human experiences with God became condensed in the biblical texts. As a result, other people can now rediscover themselves and their personal experiences with God in the Bible. The texts of the Bible today can only be called God's Word because people feel spoken to and touched on the inside "in, with, and under" those texts.³⁴ This understanding of Holy Scripture originates with the reformed theologian Karl Barth. To him the whole Bible was the refutable word of man. Therefore he wanted to interpret Scripture in a historical-critical way. But Barth believed on the other hand that the Bible marvelously could become the Word of God to us when and how it is pleasing to God, namely when a certain passage of the Bible becomes God talking to us personally.³⁵

But there are also some larger Lutheran church bodies with a more conservative attitude. Therefore they don't belong to the Lutheran World Federation, but have united themselves with the "International Lutheran Council" (ILC). Do those churches still feel bound to the central commitment to Holy Scripture, which was essential for the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century? At first it seems so. Whoever visits the home page of the ILC can read:

"The ILC is a worldwide association of established confessional Lutheran church bodies which proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of an unconditional commitment to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired and infallible Word of God and to the Lutheran Confessions contained in the Book of Concord as the true and faithful exposition of the Word of God."³⁶

If, however, somebody looks into individual members of the ILC, it becomes more than doubtful if those Churches indeed still feel themselves bound to the commitment of the Lutheran Reformation to Holy Scripture. In Germany the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church (SELK) is a member of the ILC. For many years it has been increasingly open to the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible to a certain extent. Alexander Deeg³⁷ stated in a speech on June 10th, 2015 at the 13th synod convention of the SELK in Hermannsburg:

"The paradigm of the *Inspiration* (the Holy Spirit is author of Scripture) isn't formal, objective (as this statement developed in Old Protestant Orthodoxy!). It only proves itself to be this during the reading of

³⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁵ Helge Stadelmann, p. 38-39.

³⁶ <http://ilc-online.org> (accessed November 22nd 2016).

³⁷ Alexander Deeg is not himself a member of the SELK. But he was allowed to present a paper to the Synod Convention of the SELK. His paper wasn't objected to.

the Bible. During the reading of the Bible, while listening to its word, those words of man can become the Word of God which speaks to and changes me where and how it is pleasing to God."³⁸

Churches associated with the ILC obviously follow the path of the Lutheran church bodies which are united with the LWF. They don't confess without restriction that Holy Scripture is verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit and the inerrant Word of God. They only grant that the Bible as a word of man can by the action of God become a Word of God when it speaks to and changes a person.

In contrast to LWF and ILC, the confessional Lutheran churches which have united themselves in the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) united behind the main concern of the Lutheran Reformation already in their first common doctrinal statement. In it the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible was rejected, and the clear commitment was made:

"Scripture is given by inspiration of God (...). Inspiration does not consist only in the inspiration of the message or the thought content, neither does it apply only to the biblical writers, but it is a *verbal inspiration*, an inspiration of every word in the Bible."³⁹

Like Luther and the fathers of the Lutheran Church, we want to confess clearly that Holy Scripture has been inspired by the Holy Spirit word for word. Therefore it doesn't only become God's Word if we feel personally spoken to. Holy Scripture is the inerrant Word of God and therefore authoritative for faith and doctrine. This is the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation which we feel bound to and which we want to pass on to the future generations.

2.3. The Lutheran Reformation and the Doctrine of Justification

Luther's decisive turn came about when insight into the biblical doctrine of justification was given to him by God through the study of the letter to the Romans. Based on the term "justice of God," Luther understood that a human being who is by nature depraved by sin and therefore spiritually dead cannot earn salvation for himself. God by grace alone declares us righteous through faith, because Jesus Christ redeemed us by his sinless life and his vicarious suffering and death. This central doctrine of the Bible on justification by grace alone through faith alone is also clearly stated by the confessional books of the Lutheran church to be the main article of faith by which the Christian church stands or falls.⁴⁰ The Roman Catholic Church, however, rejected this pivotal doctrine of Holy Scripture at the Council of Trent.

³⁸ Alexander Deeg, *Vom Lesen der Heiligen Schrift*, In: LuThK 39 (2015): 112 (transl. HW).

³⁹ *Gottes Wort: Das ewige Wort* (Vol. 1), Ed. Konfessionelle Evangelisch-Lutherische Konferenz, Zwickau: 2000, p. 16-17.

⁴⁰ AS, B I,1; BSLK, 415.

There all were condemned who say "human beings are justified either by imputation of Christ's righteousness alone or by the forgiveness of sins alone, to the exclusion of the grace and love which is poured out into their heart by the Holy Spirit and inheres in them; or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the favor of God."⁴¹

This condemnation has never been revoked by the Roman Catholic Church up to this day. Nevertheless the LWF published in 1999 a mutual statement on the doctrine of justification together with the Roman Catholic Church. It was also signed by the World Methodist Council in the year 2006.⁴² And the paper that was recently published by the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) together with the German Conference of Catholic Bishops says this mutual statement demonstrates that the gospel of justification can be interpreted and accentuated differently, but the different "variants" have lost their schismatic impacts.⁴³ So the paper tries to unite Roman Catholic and evangelical understanding of the doctrine of justification.⁴⁴ But the view of the Roman Catholic Church indeed hasn't changed since the Council of Trent. The attitude of the great evangelical Churches has changed, as they distance themselves more and more from biblical doctrine because of continued Bible criticism. So Roman Catholic work righteousness today isn't considered a dangerous heresy anymore, leading people into eternal damnation. It's only a "different interpretation" or "accentuation" of the "gospel of justification." The confessional Lutheran Churches of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC), however, hold firmly and without restriction, to the biblical Lutheran doctrine of justification up to this day. Already the Second Triennial Convention of the CELC at Puerto Rico from April 23rd through April 25th, 1996 was dedicated to the theme "Justification of Grace through Faith: Our Heritage from the Lutheran Reformation." The established unanimity in doctrine could later be adopted and published in the second doctrinal statement of "The Eternal Word" on the doctrine of justification.⁴⁵

2.3. The Lutheran Reformation and Ecumenism

Luther didn't only confess himself to the pure doctrine of Holy Scripture before the pope and the emperor. In his controversies with the Schwärmer, the reformed or the humanists, Luther

⁴¹ Canones et decretae Concilii Tridentini Sessio VI: Canon XI, Transl. Smet, quoted from: Einigungssätze zwischen der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Altpreußens und der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche, Groß-Oesingen: 1983, p. 108 (transl. HW).

⁴² Cf. Martin Hoffmann, Einig in der Rechtfertigung?, In: "Theologische Handreichung und Information" 4 (1999): 2-11 and 1 (2000): 2-14.

⁴³ Erinnerung heilen - Jesus Christus bezeugen: Ein gemeinsames Wort zum Jahr 2017, Ed. EKD and Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, Hannover: 2016, p. 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 43-44.

⁴⁵ Gaylin R. Schmeling, Make Known God's Manifold Wisdom, p. 18ff.

always pointed to God's Word as the only rule for faith and doctrine. God's Word shouldn't be denied. Therefore Luther, also during the Marburg Colloquy, wasn't ready to offer the hand of brotherhood to Zwingli. He recognized the missing unanimity in faith and doctrine. So it wasn't possible for him to have church fellowship and to cooperate with the Swiss Reformers.

This clear confession, however, has been completely lost in the mainline Lutheran churches today. They don't confess themselves to Holy Scripture as the inerrant Word of God which has been verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit. They don't warn any more against false doctrine. And they don't understand why it should be wrong to have fellowship or to cooperate with those who promote or tolerate a different doctrine. Already two hundred years ago, the anniversary of the Reformation was used to implement an ecclesiastical union among Lutherans and Reformed in Prussia.⁴⁶ Also, the rulers of other German territories united their former independent Lutheran and Reformed state churches into a "United Church." More progress was made in ecumenism when the ecumenical movement became stronger in the 20th century. All German state churches were united in the "Evangelical Church of Germany" (EKD) after World War II. And from March 12th through March 16th, 1973, the "Leuenberg Agreement" was developed at Leuenberg near Basel to establish pulpit and altar fellowship among the Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches of Europe.⁴⁷

This anniversary of the Reformation is supposed to bring further "progress" in ecumenism. Much ecumenical cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church is already going on. People want to celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation together with the Roman Catholics as a "common festival of Christ." Pope Francis even travelled to Sweden to introduce the year of the anniversary in an ecumenical worship service at Lund together with prominent leaders of the LWF. In this way they gave thanks for the "common path in ecumenical solidarity." The pope and the president of the LWF simultaneously issued a call to repentance because of the schism that still exists in western Christianity. Pope Francis noted in his sermon the contribution of the Reformation to the fellowship and the influence of Christianity.⁴⁸ The Evangelical Church of Germany and the German Conference of Catholic Bishops have organized a joint worship service of repentance and reconciliation at Hildesheim in March of 2017. Again they want to ask for forgiveness for the schism which still exists in Christianity, which obviously nobody really understands anymore. And they want to give thanks for the gifts they have in each other.⁴⁹ Within the large Lutheran churches obviously nobody is

⁴⁶ Heussi, § 188 g.

⁴⁷ [Http://www.ekd.de/glauben/grundlagen/leuenberger_konkordie.html](http://www.ekd.de/glauben/grundlagen/leuenberger_konkordie.html).

⁴⁸ Karl-Hinrich Manzke, Lund: Ein historisches Ereignis von Rang, in: "ideaspektrum" 44 (2016): 3.

⁴⁹ Erinnerung heilen, p. 5-6.

offended anymore by the fact that the pope didn't revoke the ban against Luther and his doctrine up to this day. They regret that it's still not officially possible to have a common communion service between the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical Churches, as there are still differences in the doctrine of Holy Communion and in the understanding of the public ministry. These differences, however, do not seem to be an obstacle to ecclesiastical cooperation or to prevent the pope from officially introducing the anniversary of the Reformation. Yet there are still indulgences in the Roman Catholic Church today. Popes proclaimed indulgences for example at the World Youth Days at Cologne (2005) and on the occasion of the year of Paul (2008/2009). Letters of indulgence aren't sold any more. Today you get your indulgence from the radio, television, or internet. Recently, Pope Francis proclaimed a holy year of mercy (December 8th, 2015 through November 20th, 2016). It eased conditions for getting a jubilee indulgence.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, also the churches of the ILC don't share the clear confession of the Lutheran Reformers of the 16th century either. The Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Germany (SELK) for example is also a member of the Association of Christian Churches (ACK),⁵¹ which serves the ecumenical cooperation between different churches (e.g. EKD, the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptists, or Mennonites). Most people in Germany don't understand anymore why it shouldn't be possible to have church fellowship or to cooperate even if there isn't full agreement in faith and doctrine. Ecumenical thinking has spread and anchored itself in our pluralistic society. All who criticize such ecumenical efforts are denigrated as "sectarians" or "fundamentalists."

But whoever really wants to preserve the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation and pass it on to future generations, must share the clear confession the Reformers of the 16th century advocated, trusting God's protection even at the risk of their life. As confessional Lutheran churches, we don't reject ecumenism in a good, biblical sense. Where full agreement in doctrine is achieved, it's necessary and beneficial to establish church fellowship and to cooperate. But where this full agreement hasn't been achieved, it's not possible to establish church fellowship with a clear conscience. But as much as it is up to us, we will earnestly pray for and seek to overcome those differences. Our confessional Lutheran churches have reached full agreement in faith, doctrine, and confession. The chief purpose of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference is "to give outward expression to the unity of spirit and oneness in faith and confession that binds the members of the conference

⁵⁰ Gottfried Herrmann, p. 7-8.

⁵¹ <http://www.oekumene-ack-.de/ueber-uns/mitglieder>.

together."⁵² May God preserve and strengthen this unity among us also in the future, that we may preserve the actual heritage of the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century purely and pass it on to future generations.

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