

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

RLJ-2083

JOHN S. TORELL

SEPTEMBER 6, 2026

PART 14: THE STATE CHURCH COMPROMISE

LUTHERAN ORGANIZATION

I am thankful that Martin Luther challenged the Roman Catholicism and brought back the teaching that a person must be born again to be saved. The doctrine of justification by faith restored the standard of Jesus that every person needs to receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

The strong power of the Holy Spirit diminished after Martin Luther gave the princes a green light to slaughter the peasants and the rest of his life was spent setting forth church doctrine.

LOCAL CHURCH

From the outset of the Reformation, Luther advocated each local church call their own pastor and church membership should be limited to people who were born again.

In contrast, the priest was generally appointed from above, not chosen by the congregation. The bishop had formal authority, while patrons (congregants) often had nomination rights. The people in the pews usually had little control over who actually served their parish. Any person became a member through baptism. Since infant baptism was standard, most people in the Holy Roman Empire were considered members of the church from infancy.

Luther did not compromise justification by faith to please the princes, but he did accept a broad visible-church structure tied to baptism, parish life, and territorial rulers, rather than insisting on a church consisting only of born-again members. His dependence on princes helped produce state-supported Lutheran churches because once Luther broke with Rome, he needed someone else to protect and organize the Reformation. In the Holy Roman Empire, that was the territorial prince.

After Luther was excommunicated and declared an outlaw, he survived largely because Frederick the Wise protected him. Lutheran reform later spread where princes or city councils allowed it. Without political protection, Lutheran preachers could be arrested, expelled, or executed. As a result, Lutheran reform depended heavily on rulers who were willing to shelter it.

Luther accepted this compromise because he did not want chaos. He feared that without lawful order, reform would collapse into radicalism, violence, and private revelation, just like what he witnessed with the Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, and the Peasants' War.

The weakness of this arrangement is made apparent in the fact that Lutheran churches became tied to territorial rulers and church membership often remained broad and civic. People were baptized, catechized, and treated as members of the parish because they



lived in a certain territory.¹ That meant the visible church included true believers, nominal Christians, hypocrites, politically compliant citizens, and unbelievers.

Luther's theology stated that a man is justified by faith in Christ alone. But the Lutheran state-church believed a person belongs to the parish church by baptism, residence, and public confession.

The state-church model gave Lutherans stability, protection, schools, pastors, and public influence. But it also made them dependent on rulers, mixed church membership with citizenship, limited congregational freedom, produced many nominal Christians, and gave princes too much influence over church life.

VISITATION

Luther and his colleagues supported visitations authorized by the Saxon elector to inspect local churches, correct abuses, examine pastors, improve preaching and doctrine, and bring congregations into conformity with evangelical doctrine and worship. These visitations also sought to identify and suppress teachings judged false or disruptive.

WORSHIP

Luther did not want chaotic worship. He believed the church service should be orderly, reverent, biblical, and understandable. He kept many familiar parts of the Mass such as Scripture readings, sermon, prayers, singing, Lord's supper, Liturgical structure, with the spoken language mainly in German. His worship reforms were conservative in relation to the order of the church service, but radical in theology.

The traditional Mass was performed even when the people did not understand it. For Luther, the church was built by the preached Word, not by ceremonies people did not understand. Preaching became central with the intent to teach Scripture, proclaim Christ, expose sin, comfort consciences, instruct ordinary Christians, explain the gospel, and guard against false doctrine. This fit Luther's core conviction:

"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17)

Luther introduced a German Mass so the common people could understand and participate. He did not immediately abolish Latin, but thought it could still be useful in schools and educated settings. German was necessary for the ordinary parish, making Mass more accessible to common people.

Luther gave the congregation a real voice in worship. He encouraged hymns in German so the people could sing doctrine, Scripture, and praise. This was a major change as worship was no longer just something the priest performed while the people watched. The congregation participated through song, confession, prayer, listening, and receiving the Lord's Supper. For Luther, hymns were not a service filler; they were theology set to music.

¹ Catechized means to receive systematic, foundational religious instruction.

Luther kept the Lord's Supper, but rejected the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass as a repeated sacrifice offered by the priest. He believed Christ's sacrifice on the cross was once for all:

"For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." (Hebrews 10:14)

The Lord's Supper was not the priest re-sacrificing Christ, but Jesus giving His true body and blood to believers according to His promise. Luther also rejected withholding the cup from the laity.² In Lutheran practice, everyone was to receive the bread and the wine. This opposed the Romanist practice where ordinary people only received the bread.

Luther was not as radical as some reformers. He did not demand that all images, vestments, candles, or ceremonies be immediately destroyed. His approach was to remove what contradicts the gospel and keep what can serve order and teaching. That put him firmly between Rome and the radicals. Luther believed forced removal could become legalistic and disruptive. He wanted consciences taught by the Bible before external changes were imposed.

Luther's worship reforms were tied to catechism.³ He wanted Christians to understand the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, baptism, confession, and the Lord's Supper.⁴ The church service was not isolated from teaching. Worship, preaching, catechism, family instruction, and schools all belonged together.

Luther's new worship service was a reformed evangelical Mass. It kept much of the old structure, but changed the theology. The service was now centered on Scripture, preaching, congregational singing, German-language participation, and the Lord's Supper as God's gift rather than a priestly sacrifice.

WATER BAPTISM

Luther believed water baptism was a true means of grace, not merely a symbol. He baptized infants and adults, and did not teach that a person had to show evidence of being born again before baptism. That is one of the major differences between Luther and later Baptist traditions.

Luther did not see baptism as an empty ceremony or only a public testimony. He believed God attaches His promise to baptism. He connected baptism with passages such as:

"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved..." (Mark 16:16a)

² Laity refers to the ordinary members of a religious faith who are not members of the clergy.

³ A catechism is a summary of religious doctrine used to instruct believers, particularly children and adult converts.

⁴ The Creed in Roman Catholicism is an authoritative summary of fundamental beliefs. Papists regularly profess their faith using two primary creeds: the Nicene Creed (the standard profession recited during Sunday Mass) and the Apostles' Creed (used in baptisms and the Rosary).

“...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38a)

“...Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins...” (Acts 22:16b)

“...the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.” (Titus 3:5c)

For Luther, baptism was not powerful because of the water alone, but because of God's Word and promise joined to the water.

Martin Luther accepted adult baptism when the person had not previously been baptized. He expected preaching, instruction, repentance, and faith for adults. An adult convert should hear the gospel and receive baptism in faith. The pattern was to hear the Word → believe the gospel → receive baptism

Luther did not believe baptism was merely an outward sign of something already completed inwardly; instead, he saw water baptism as God's act of promise, cleansing, and incorporation into Christ.

Luther strongly defended infant baptism. He believed infants should be baptized because Christ commanded baptism, infants are included in the promise of God, and Romanism had practiced infant baptism historically.

He rejected the idea that infants should be excluded because they were incapable of intellectually explaining faith. To Luther, that argument made faith too dependent on human mental ability. If salvation was truly by grace, then he argued that helpless infants are not disqualified from receiving God's promise.

Luther did not teach that a person must first prove regeneration before receiving baptism; rather, baptism was connected to regeneration and he spoke of baptism as a “washing of regeneration,” echoing Titus 3:5. It was not merely for those who had already demonstrated the new birth; baptism was one of the means through which God gives, seals, and applies His promise.

For adults, faith should accompany baptism. For infants, Luther believed God could create infant faith and that the child would later be taught doctrine and instructed to live in the promise of baptism.

Question	Luther's answer	Baptist answer
Who should be baptized?	Infants and unbaptized adult converts	Only professing believers
What is baptism?	Means of grace; God's promise joined to water	A public testimony/sign of faith
Must someone show evidence of new birth first?	No, especially not infants	Yes
Does baptism relate to regeneration?	Yes, closely	Usually no, or only symbolically

Are baptized infants church members?

Yes

No, not until personal profession

CATECHISMS

Luther's *Large Catechism* was a full teaching manual for explaining basic Christian doctrine. It was published in 1529, the same year as his *Small Catechism*.

The *Small Catechism* was short and simple, intended especially for fathers, children, and ordinary households. The *Large Catechism* was longer and more detailed, aimed at pastors, teachers, and serious students of doctrine.

Luther wrote the catechisms after church visitations in Saxony revealed widespread ignorance among both the people and many pastors. Many did not know the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the meaning of baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

Luther was alarmed because the Reformation was doomed if people rejected Rome but did not actually know why they believed what they believed. The catechisms were just textbooks of facts. Luther explained doctrine in a direct, practical way. He believed dogma must be taught, believed, prayed, and lived.

SALVATION

Luther came to the realization from reading the Book of Romans that a sinner is justified before God by grace through faith because of Jesus Christ's atoning work.

In comparison, Roman Catholicism teaches that justification begins by grace, but is inwardly increased and preserved through cooperation with grace, sacraments, love, and good works.

The Bible is clear that justification is not earned by any human acts of merit; rather, it is received as a free gift of God's grace, through the believer's faith in Jesus Christ.

- ❖ The *Lutheran Church Missouri Synod* says Christ purchased forgiveness and eternal life by His suffering and death, and frames this under Faith Alone.⁵
- ❖ The *Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* teaches that people receive forgiveness "not on the basis of their own works, but only through faith," and that justifying faith trusts Christ and His redemptive work.⁶

The modern Lutheran church does not usually feature a clear "steps to being born again" framework the way many evangelical or Baptist churches do.

A Baptist-style presentation might sound like the following: hear the gospel → repent → believe → be born again → be baptized → join the church

Lutherans believe that God creates faith through the means of grace: the preached Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. They teach the need for regeneration/new birth, but connect it closely with baptism and faith.

⁵ <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs>

⁶ <https://wels.net/faq/wels-teaching-on-justification>

Modern Lutheran teaching states that sinners are saved by grace through faith in Christ, not by works. They believe people are justified by grace for Christ's sake through faith, apart from works of the Law.

But Lutherans also teach that baptism is not merely symbolic. They connect water baptism with forgiveness, salvation, and regeneration.

The Swedish Lutheran State Church was firmly established when I was born in Sweden in 1939, and I automatically became a member. Less than a week after my birth, a state church pastor came to our home and baptized me by sprinkling.

When I was 12 years old, students were taken to the nearest state church during regular school hours. For three months, we were instructed from Luther's catechism. After completing the classes, I received my first communion during a Sunday morning church service.

Yet one essential truth was never taught to me: the need to be born again in order to be saved. As a result, my confirmation did not change my spiritual condition. I was just as lost afterward as I had been before.

SUMMARY

The great danger of a state church is that people can be surrounded by Christianity without ever becoming Christians. They can be baptized as infants, taught a catechism, confirmed, receive communion, attend church services, and still never repent of their sins and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Church membership cannot save you. Baptism cannot save you. Confirmation cannot save you. Communion cannot save you. Knowing Christian doctrine cannot save you. Jesus said:

"...Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3b)

Salvation requires a personal response to the Gospel. A person must recognize that he is a sinner, repent, believe that Jesus Christ died for his sins and rose from the dead, and place his faith in Jesus.

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

The Reformation recovered the truth that justification is by faith, but no church organization can substitute for an individual relationship with Jesus Christ. Whether you were raised Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, or in no church at all, the question remains the same. Have you been born again?

Do not trust in what was done for you as an infant, what church you belong to, what doctrines you know, or what religious ceremonies you have participated in. Your eternal destiny rests upon what you have done with Jesus Christ.

"...Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved..." (Acts 16:31b)