45. The Lutheran record: coercion, the Jews, race and abuse

This chapter sets out the record of the Lutheran churches in the same format as the other records: what happened, the criticism, the Lutheran response, and whether it was corrected. It covers three episodes from the reformers' own lifetimes: Luther's tract against the peasants in 1525, the Wittenberg theologians' case for punishing Anabaptists with death, and Luther's writings against the Jews of 1543, with their use under National Socialism. It then turns to the Lutheran state churches of Germany and Scandinavia, which compelled conformity for centuries, and to the Church of Sweden's treatment of the Sámi; to Lutherans and slavery in America, the German Protestant churches under Hitler, and white Lutheran churches under apartheid; and to the 2024 study of sexual abuse in the German Protestant churches. Each case draws on the churches' own statements and on the historians and reports they have commissioned.

The criticism

- **The founder's own words.** The call to "smite, slay, and stab" the peasants (1525), the opinion that obstinate Anabaptists should be executed (1536) and the program against the Jews (1543) were written by Luther and his colleagues, not by later followers who misread them.
- **An alliance with princes and crowns.** Under the Peace of Augsburg (1555) rulers fixed the faith of their subjects, and Lutheran kingdoms later banished those who left the church (Sweden, until 1860) and wrote the exclusion of Jews and Jesuits into the constitution (Norway, 1814).
- **Obedience to the authorities.** Writing in the Lutheran journal *The Cresset*, the historian Richard M. Chapman traces a pattern of "firm, if not absolute, allegiance to the temporal governing authorities" from Luther's stand in the Peasants' War to American Lutherans' passive acceptance of slavery as the law of the land.
- **Confession came late.** The request for the Mennonites' forgiveness came in 2010, nearly five centuries after the persecution; the Stuttgart Declaration of 1945 did not mention the Jews; the apology to the Sámi came in 2021.
- **A divided structure.** Survivors of abuse in the German churches say that twenty regional churches, each counting cases differently and controlling its own files, made a full reckoning harder.

How Lutherans answer

- **The church is not without sinners.** The Augsburg Confession teaches that "in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled" with the church (Article VIII), and Lutherans have never claimed that Luther or any church body was free from error.
- **The Word, not the sword.** The Confession teaches that bishops act "without human force, simply by the Word" (Article XXVIII), and Lutherans today hold that calling on the state in matters of faith "must be rejected for all time," as Luther himself had argued in 1523.
- **Honoring Luther without excusing him.** The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America recalls Luther's "bold stand for truth" and his witness to God's saving Word, and "in the spirit of that truth-telling" rejects his "violent invective" against the Jews.
- **Repentance as part of the Reformation.** Before the 500th anniversary of 2017, the Lutheran World Federation's general secretary called for "a spirit of honesty and repentance" alongside celebration, and Lutheran bodies have apologized to Mennonites, Jews, the Sámi and people of African descent.
- **They commissioned the record themselves.** The Lutheran–Mennonite history (2010), the Church of Sweden's White Paper on the Sámi (2016) and the ForuM study of abuse (2024) were ordered and paid for by the churches and made public.

Summary

1. The Peasants' War and "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes"

Period: 1524–1525

Status: DISPUTED

Key correction: Never retracted; still debated by historians

2. The persecution of Anabaptists in Lutheran lands

Period: 1529–1550

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: LWF asks Mennonites' forgiveness (Stuttgart, 2010)

3. Luther's writings against the Jews and their later use

Period: 1543–1945

Status: REPUDIATED

Key correction: LCMS (1983); ELCA (1994); EKD synod (2015)

4. Confessional coercion in Lutheran states

Period: 1555–1956

Status: ENDED

Key correction: Norway (1851, 1897, 1956); Sweden (1860, 1951)

5. The Nordic Lutheran churches and the Sámi

Period: 16th–20th c.

Status: APOLOGIZED; WORK UNDER WAY

Key correction: White Paper (2016); Church of Sweden apology (2021)

6. Slavery and racism in American Lutheranism

Period: 1730s–1960s

Status: APOLOGIZED FOR

Key correction: ELCA Declaration to People of African Descent (2019)

7. The German Protestant churches under National Socialism

Period: 1933–1945

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Stuttgart Declaration (1945); Weissensee (1950)

8. White Lutheran churches under apartheid

Period: 1948–1994

Status: ENDED

Key correction: LWF status confessionis (1977); suspensions (1984)

9. Sexual abuse in the German Protestant churches

Period: 1946–present

Status: ONGOING

Key correction: ForuM study (2024); uniform recognition payments (2026)

Close all

A. The reformers' own record 3

1. The Peasants' War and "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes" 1524–1525 DISPUTED
2. The persecution of Anabaptists in Lutheran lands 1529–1550 APOLOGIZED FOR
3. Luther's writings against the Jews and their later use 1543–1945 REPUDIATED

B. State churches and minorities 2

4. Confessional coercion in Lutheran states 1555–1956 ENDED
5. The Nordic Lutheran churches and the Sámi 16th–20th c. APOLOGIZED; WORK UNDER WAY

C. Race and National Socialism 3

6. Slavery and racism in American Lutheranism 1730s–1960s APOLOGIZED FOR
7. The German Protestant churches under National Socialism 1933–1945 ACKNOWLEDGED
8. White Lutheran churches under apartheid 1948–1994 ENDED

D. Abuse 1

9. Sexual abuse in the German Protestant churches 1946–present ONGOING

The other records: Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist.

1. The Peasants' War and "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes" 1524–1525 DISPUTED

WHAT HAPPENED

In 1524–1525 peasants in southern and western Germany rose against their lords, invoking divine law to demand agrarian rights and freedom from oppression. Their Twelve Articles, which went through some 25 printings in two months, asked among other things for each village's right to elect its own pastor and for release from dues not found in the Bible. Luther's *Admonition to Peace* granted that the peasants had been badly treated but rejected rebellion, complaining that they had made "Christian liberty an utterly carnal thing." After the rebels' massacre at Weinsberg at Easter 1525, he published *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* (May 1525), telling the princes that a ruler is "God's minister and the servant of his wrath" (Rom 13:4) and urging anyone able to "smite, slay, and stab" the rebels. The princes' armies, chiefly the Swabian League's, crushed the rising; at Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525, thousands of peasants died, and Thomas Müntzer, who had led them, was captured and executed soon afterward. Some 100,000 peasants are estimated to have been killed in the war. When friends and critics called the tract unchristian, Luther answered in *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book* (1525): he withdrew nothing, though he accused the lords of going too far in their reprisals.

The criticism

Historians and many later Christians hold that Luther gave the princes a religious license for slaughter, against a movement that had taken up his own language of Christian freedom. Britannica judges that his condemnation "contributed to its defeat," and the historian Michael Bruening argues that the war dashed the peasants' faith that the Reformation stood for their freedom; Lyndal Roper calls the suppression "slaughter on a vast scale." Critics add that the Open Letter shows the harshness was not a passing outburst: challenged over its severity, Luther repeated it.

Lutheran response

Lutheran writers answer that Luther opposed rebellion, not the peasants' grievances: his *Admonition* conceded that the peasants had been wronged by their lords, and he held that the gospel gives no warrant for overturning government by the sword (Rom 13:1–4), however unjust the rulers. They note that the princes had already taken the field before his tract appeared, so it probably had little effect on their immediate response, though they may have used it afterward to justify their brutality; and that the leaders who turned the protest into armed revolt, Müntzer above all, bear the first responsibility for Frankenhausen.

Was it corrected? Disputed. Luther stood by the tract in his *Open Letter* of 1525. Reprisals and new restrictions discouraged further attempts by the peasants to better their condition. Historians still disagree over how far the tract shaped the princes' conduct, and the war's 500th anniversary in 2025 renewed the debate over Luther's part in it.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Peasants' War"; Columbia University Libraries, Luther exhibition: *Eyn Sendebrieff von dem harten buchlin widder die bawren* (Wittenberg, 1525); 1517.org, "The Battle of Frankenhausen and the Ruin of Thomas Müntzer"; Michael Bruening, "500 years ago, German peasants revolted," Religion Unplugged / The Conversation (March 2025).

2. The persecution of Anabaptists in Lutheran lands 1529–1550

APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

At the Diet of Speyer in 1529 the evangelical princes joined in renewing the imperial law, inherited from Roman law, that made rebaptism a capital crime. In Electoral Saxony, Anabaptists rearrested near the monastery of Reinhardsbrunn, by Gotha, were executed when six of them refused to recant; when a troubled pastor, Friedrich Myconius, wrote to Melanchthon, he replied that the rebaptizers were "angels of the devil" and defended the elector's severity. In 1530 Wittenberg published Justus Menius's defense of punishing them, with a preface by Luther, and Luther's commentary on Psalm 82 (1530) taught that rulers must punish sedition and open blasphemy. Early in 1531 Luther added his agreement to a memorandum drafted by Melanchthon for Elector John urging stricter punishment. In 1536, answering Philip of Hesse, Luther and Melanchthon wrote, and Bugenhagen and Cruciger also signed, an opinion defending coercion and the death penalty: anyone who recanted was to be spared, but obstinate leaders were to be "judged and executed with the sword for sedition," and the authors cited Lev 24:16 on blasphemers as binding on all governments. The Augsburg Confession (1530) also condemns Anabaptist teachings in several articles. Catholic and Protestant authorities together executed some 2,000 to 3,000 Anabaptists in the sixteenth century, and imprisoned, tortured and exiled thousands more.

The criticism

Mennonites and historians point out that the persecution was argued for by the reformers themselves, not merely carried out by princes. Luther had been condemned in the papal bull against him for rejecting the death penalty for heretics, and in 1523 he had taught that temporal government has no authority over faith; by 1530 he and Melanchthon had given rulers theological reasons to imprison and kill people for their faith, calling it sedition. The Confession's condemnations then shaped Lutheran portrayals of Anabaptists and Mennonites for centuries, while the persecution itself was forgotten.

Lutheran response

Lutherans note that the record was not uniform: Johannes Brenz and the Nuremberg theologians opposed the death penalty for belief, and even the 1536 opinion insisted on due process, instruction and mercy for those who recanted, and Luther added that the prince might always act leniently. Lutherans were not the only, or by numbers the most deadly, persecutors of Anabaptists. But the Lutheran–Mennonite commission concluded that such points do not excuse the reformers: "the only adequate response is repentance." Lutherans today "seriously regret" that Luther and Melanchthon did not keep to the limits of temporal government that Luther had set out in 1523.

Was it corrected? Apologized for. After a Lutheran–Mennonite international study commission (2005–2008) wrote the history together, the Lutheran World Federation Council voted unanimously in October 2009 to recommend an act of repentance. On July 22, 2010, the Federation's Eleventh Assembly at Stuttgart unanimously adopted the *Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of "Anabaptists"*, expressing regret and sorrow and asking forgiveness "of God and of our Mennonite brothers and sisters." The commission's report says that calling on state authorities in matters of faith "must be rejected for all time." Danisa Ndlovu, president of the Mennonite World Conference, accepted the request and gave the Federation's president a wooden tub for foot-washing.

Sources: Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission, *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ* (Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference, 2010); Worldwide Faith News, report from the LWF Assembly, Stuttgart (July 22, 2010); Lutheran World Information, Stuttgart Assembly news (July 2010); Christian Post, "Lutherans Seek Forgiveness for Persecution of Anabaptists" (July 23, 2010).

3. Luther's writings against the Jews and their later use 1543–1945 REPUDIATED

WHAT HAPPENED

In his earlier writings Luther had criticized Christians for treating Jews "as if they were dogs" and urged that they be received cordially. Later, in *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543), he proposed to the German princes seven measures of "sharp mercy": burn the synagogues and schools; move Jews into communal settlements; confiscate their writings; forbid rabbis to teach, on pain of death; revoke their safe-conduct; seize their money; and put them to manual labor. Few rulers acted on them, since most Jews had already been expelled from German lands, though at least one anti-Jewish measure of 1543 cited the treatise. Under National Socialism Luther's "Jewish writings" were widely disseminated from 1933 and, in the historian Manfred Gailus's words, "reaffirmed the already-existing Protestant antisemitism." Immediately after the pogroms of November 1938, Martin Sasse, the Lutheran bishop of Thuringia, printed extracts from them and sent them to the pastors of his church.

The criticism

Jewish scholars and historians argue that the problem is not only later misuse: the program of 1543 is Luther's own, and his authority in Protestant Germany gave it weight for four centuries. That a Lutheran bishop could greet the November pogroms with Luther's words shows, in this view, how deeply the writings had shaped church opinion. Critics of the churches' response note that when the Evangelical Church in Germany distanced itself in 2015, Josef Schuster, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, called its treatment of the subject "unfortunately very vague."

Lutheran response

Lutheran churches separate Luther's witness to the gospel from his invective. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America honors "his bold stand for truth" while acknowledging with pain "Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings." The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod holds that his hostility was theological rather than racial, "anti-Judaism rather than anti-Semitism," but adds that "we cannot endorse or excuse what he wrote." Lutherans also note that many of Luther's own companions rejected these writings in the sixteenth century.

Was it corrected? Repudiated. In 1983 the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod resolved that "we deplore and disassociate ourselves from Luther's negative statements about the Jewish people." On April 18, 1994, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declared, "we reject this violent invective," deplored the use of Luther's words by modern antisemites, and pledged to oppose antisemitism; a revised text was reaffirmed in 2021. On November 11, 2015, the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany unanimously distanced itself from the anti-Jewish statements of Luther and other reformers and spoke of the church's failure toward the Jewish people "with grief and shame."

Sources: Eric W. Gritsch, "Was Luther Anti-Semitic?", *Christian History* 39 (1993); Manfred Gailus, "Luther's Evil Writings," *Contemporary Church History Quarterly* 23/3 (September 2017); ELCA, *A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community* (1994; reaffirmed 2021); LCMS, "Luther and the Jews" (FAQ, citing the 1983 resolution); WELS, "Was Luther anti-Semitic?"; evangelisch.de, "EKD-Synode distanziert sich von Luthers Judenfeindschaft" (November 11, 2015).

4. Confessional coercion in Lutheran states 1555–1956 ENDED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Peace of Augsburg (September 25, 1555) let each prince of the Empire choose Lutheranism or Catholicism for his territory, a principle later summed up as *cuius regio, eius religio*; subjects who dissented were allowed to emigrate, and Calvinists and other Protestants were left outside the settlement. In Sweden the Uppsala Synod of March 3, 1593, bound the church to the Augsburg Confession; the Conventicle Act of 1726 forbade and punished any religious gathering not led by the parish priest; and until 1860 banishment was the penalty for leaving the Lutheran faith. Norway's

constitution of 1814 declared in Article 2 that "the Evangelical-Lutheran religion remains the public religion of the State," required its adherents to raise their children in it, and added that Jesuits and monastic orders were not to be tolerated and that "Jews are still excluded from access to the realm."

The criticism

Catholics, Jews, Reformed Christians and the free churches point out that the Lutheran reformation, which had appealed to conscience against Rome, put in place established churches that compelled membership for centuries. The Augsburg Confession teaches that bishops act "without human force, simply by the Word" (Article XXVIII), yet Lutheran crowns banished those who left the church, forbade prayer meetings without the parish priest, and in Norway wrote the exclusion of Jews and Jesuits into the constitution itself.

Lutheran response

Lutherans answer that these laws were the work of princes, diets and parliaments in an age when nearly every European state enforced a single religion, and that the Peace of Augsburg was a peace: it ended open war between the confessions and gave dissenters the right to leave rather than be punished. The same Lutheran societies later repealed the restrictions themselves, and the Lutheran World Federation's commission with the Mennonites concluded that calling for or accepting state intervention in matters of faith "must be rejected for all time."

Was it corrected? Ended. In Norway the exclusion of Jews was removed from the constitution in 1851, after a campaign led from the late 1830s by the poet Henrik Wergeland; the ban on monastic orders fell in 1897 and the ban on Jesuits in 1956. In Sweden the penalty of banishment was abolished in 1860, and the Religious Freedom Act of 1951 let anyone leave the Church of Sweden without joining another body; in 2000 the legal ties between church and state were largely dissolved.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Peace of Augsburg"; Church of Sweden, "Tidslinje" (timeline); Church of Sweden, "Svenska kyrkans historia"; Store norske leksikon, "Jødeparagrafen"; Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission, *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ* (2010); Augsburg Confession (1530), Article XXVIII.

5. The Nordic Lutheran churches and the Sámi 16th–20th c.

APOLOGIZED; WORK UNDER WAY

WHAT HAPPENED

From the sixteenth century the Church of Sweden took part in the forced Christianization of the Sámi, the Indigenous people of the far north. Sámi religion was denounced as devil worship, and in the religious trials of the seventeenth century at least one Sámi was burned at the stake. Sámi sacred sites were

destroyed, Sámi languages were suppressed, names, dress and customs were stigmatized, and Sámi graves were opened by priests and scientists alike in the search for a "proto-Aryan" race. Sámi representatives have described their experiences of boarding schools as horrific, and the church's own research project examined the effects of the Nomad School Act of 1913. Its historians document how the church supported the state in the attempt to erase Sámi culture.

The criticism

Sámi voices and scholars describe the church as an active partner in the colonization of Sámi land, and say the acknowledgment came late: the Church of Sweden apologized some thirty years after it first began to discuss reconciliation with the Sámi. The theologian Helga West has said that Swedish institutions have found it especially hard to admit their colonial history. The journalist John Last notes that the same synod that heard the apology rejected motions to rethink the church's management of its forests in Sámi territory and its identity as a "national church," and argues that reconciliation will require more than acknowledging past wrongs.

Lutheran response

The Church of Sweden commissioned the research on its own record: a White Paper project begun in 2012 produced a two-volume scholarly anthology, *De historiska relationerna mellan Svenska kyrkan och samerna*, published on April 15, 2016, in which the church sets out the violations and wrongs it committed. Archbishop Antje Jackelén said, "When we betrayed the Sámi, we also betrayed ourselves and God." Ingrid Inga, chair of the church's Sámi Council, said she hoped the apology would lead to change, and that it "isn't just empty words" because commitments came with it.

Was it corrected? Apologized; work under way. On November 24, 2021, at a service in Uppsala Cathedral during the General Synod, Archbishop Jackelén apologized on behalf of the Church of Sweden. The church announced a ten-year plan with eight commitments and 40 million kronor for the work, and planned a second apology at the Sámi church conference in Luleå in October 2022. The Church of Norway acknowledged in 1997 that it had wronged the Sámi, and Bishop Samuel Salmi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland apologized to the Sámi at Inari in 2012.

Sources: The Christian Century, "Church of Sweden apologizes for abuse of Sámi people" (December 2021); The Barents Observer / Yle Sápmi, "Swedish Church plans to apologise to the Sámi" (June 29, 2021); John Last, "The Delicate Work still undone in the Church of Sweden's Reconciliation Process," The Arctic Institute (October 11, 2022); Church of Sweden, "Vitbok om kränkningar mot samerna" (April 15, 2016).

6. Slavery and racism in American Lutheranism 1730s–1960s

APOLOGIZED FOR

WHAT HAPPENED

Lutherans in the southern colonies held slaves from at least the 1730s. In colonial New York, Pastor Wilhelm Christoph Berkenmeyer, who owned an enslaved couple, framed his church's constitution of 1735 so that enslaved members could not claim freedom from their baptism. The Salzburger Lutherans who settled near Savannah, Georgia, in the 1730s at first followed their pastor John M. Boltzius in opposing slavery, then accepted it after Urlsperger of Halle assured him that taking slaves "in faith" with the aim of leading them to Christ would not be a sin. At Hebron Church in Culpeper, Virginia, up to nine enslaved people worked the church's fields to pay its expenses and Pastor George Samuel Klug's salary. In 1835 the South Carolina Synod condemned the abolitionists as contrary to the precepts of Christ, citing Paul's return of a runaway slave (Philem 1:10–16); in 1861 the Virginia Synod declared the Confederate cause "just and righteous." The General Synod divided along sectional lines in 1862. After emancipation the southern synods organized separate Black congregations, an effort that had petered out by the 1880s.

The criticism

The sharpest criticism comes from Lutherans themselves. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America acknowledges that southern Lutherans defended slavery and white racial superiority from Scripture, and that Lutherans as a whole "remained on the sidelines" through the Jim Crow years and much of the civil rights era. The historian Richard M. Chapman finds that most Lutherans "did not become strong anti-slavery advocates," and suggests a pattern of firm allegiance to the governing authorities going back to Luther. When the apology was presented in 2019, Lamont Wells of the African Descent Lutheran Association warned that it could not be received "simply as a cheap indulgence."

Lutheran response

Lutherans point out that the record was mixed. Francis Daniel Pastorius, a Lutheran émigré, presented the first antislavery petition in British America at Germantown in 1688; Henry Melchior Muhlenberg denounced slavery; Samuel Schmucker, founder of the Gettysburg seminary (1826), opposed it and helped train the African Methodist Episcopal leader Daniel Alexander Payne; the Franckean Synod of New York resolved in 1838 to speak "boldly and plainly" against slavery; and the Norwegian Eielsen Synod denounced the slave traffic in 1850. Many Lutherans were recent immigrants, occupied with their own communities and with little contact with Black Americans, enslaved or free.

Was it corrected? Apologized for. Slavery ended in 1865. The ELCA's social statement *Freed in Christ* (1993) confessed racism as sin. In 2016 its Churchwide Assembly resolved to "confess and repent of the Lutheran church's complicity" in four hundred years of enslavement and oppression, and on June 27, 2019, the Church Council adopted a Declaration to People of African Descent, apologizing "for its

historical complicity in slavery and its enduring legacy of racism"; it was presented to the Churchwide Assembly on August 6, 2019, alongside a Lutheran World Federation Council resolution marking the 400th anniversary of the forced transatlantic voyage of enslaved Africans.

Sources: Richard M. Chapman, "Just Enough? Lutherans, Slavery, and the Struggle for Racial Justice," *The Cresset* 71/5 (Trinity 2008); ELCA, *Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent* (2019); Living Lutheran, "Assembly recap: diversity strategy adopted, slavery apology presented" (October 2019).

7. The German Protestant churches under National Socialism 1933–1945 ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

In 1933 about 40 million of Germany's 60 million people were Protestants, in 28 regional churches, Lutheran, Reformed and United, which that year were federated as the German Evangelical Church. The "German Christians," a movement within it that embraced Nazi nationalism and racial ideas, won the church elections of July 23, 1933, with a two-thirds majority, and Ludwig Müller, the regime's candidate, was elected Reich Bishop by the national synod at Wittenberg in September. The German Christians began to classify church members by race rather than faith, and some forced out clergy of Jewish descent. Opposition gathered in the Pastors' Emergency League led by Martin Niemöller and, after the Synod of Barmen (May 1934), in the Confessing Church; about 7,000 of the country's 16,500 Protestant clergy openly supported it. The Lutheran regional churches of Bavaria, Württemberg and Hanover, in Britannica's words, "remained independent of Nazi rule" and joined the Confessing Church in a provisional church government. In March 1935 the regime briefly arrested more than 700 pastors over a protest statement; Niemöller spent seven years in concentration camps, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed at Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945. In Thuringia, the Lutheran bishop Martin Sasse used Luther's anti-Jewish writings to greet the pogroms of November 1938 (see case 3).

The criticism

Historians note that most Confessing Church leaders concentrated on keeping the state out of church affairs and on defending church teaching, rather than on opposing the persecution of the Jews. Britannica records that in 1936 the Lutheran regional churches formed their own council, weakening the Confessing Church, and that it was its Reformed and United sections that remained particularly active in protesting euthanasia and the persecution of Jews. The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (1945) confessed failures in general terms but did not mention Jews, Judaism or antisemitism.

Lutheran response

German Protestants point to the Barmen Declaration, which held that the church owed its allegiance to God and Scripture and not to "a worldly Führer," and to the pastors who were arrested, imprisoned or

executed for resisting. Hans Meiser and Theophil Wurm, bishops of the Lutheran churches of Bavaria and Württemberg, led two of the churches that kept their independence, and both signed the Stuttgart Declaration. Its signers confessed that "through us has endless suffering been brought to many peoples and countries" and accused themselves "for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully."

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. The Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany issued the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt on October 19, 1945. In April 1950 the church's synod at Berlin-Weissensee confessed, in its statement on the Jews, that "by omission and silence we became implicated before the God of mercy." In 2015 the synod distanced itself from Luther's anti-Jewish writings (case 3). The Confessing Church ceased to exist in 1948, when the regional churches formed the reorganized Evangelical Church in Germany.

Sources: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The German Churches and the Nazi State"; German History in Documents and Images, "Ballot for the Church Elections in Berlin (July 23, 1933)"; Ambassador William E. Dodd to the Secretary of State, Despatch No. 174 (September 30, 1933), *Foreign Relations of the United States*; Facing History & Ourselves, "Protestant Churches and the Nazi State"; Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Confessing Church"; Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (October 19, 1945), Dialogika; Synod of the EKD, Berlin-Weissensee, statement on the Jewish question (April 1950), Dialogika.

8. White Lutheran churches under apartheid 1948–1994 ENDED

WHAT HAPPENED

Under apartheid some white Lutheran churches in southern Africa organized their church life on a whites-only basis. In 1977 the Lutheran World Federation's Sixth Assembly, at Dar es Salaam, appealed especially to "our white member churches in southern Africa" to recognize that the situation constituted a *status confessionis*, a matter on which the confession of the faith itself was at stake, so that on the basis of faith the churches would publicly and unequivocally reject apartheid; its statement held that "the racial separation of the church in compliance with apartheid" was such a case. When the white churches did not accept the decision, the Seventh Assembly at Budapest (1984) suspended the membership of two of them, citing their continued support of apartheid and their "continued failure to end racial division in their churches." When South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission held its faith community hearings in 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Natal-Transvaal) wrote on June 30, 1997, that it would make no submission; it later filed one, dated May 1998.

The criticism

The Lutheran World Federation's own assemblies held that a church separated by race in compliance with apartheid failed to manifest the unity of the church and was "compromising the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel." Critics note that the white churches did not accept the federation's call for

seven years, until it suspended two of them, and that a Lutheran church in South Africa first told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that it would make no submission at all.

Lutheran response

Lutherans point out that the condemnation came from within the communion itself: the Lutheran World Federation declared apartheid a matter of confession in 1977 and was prepared to discipline its own member churches in 1984. The Lutheran theologian Ulrich Duchrow, who worked on the 1977 decision, notes that its premise was that Christians may normally differ on political questions, but that a system can become so oppressive that rejecting it is required by the confession. Within South Africa, the Natal-Transvaal church's bishop, D. R. Lilje, wrote to congregations in March 1996 supporting the Commission and asking members to pray for the reconciliation process.

Was it corrected? Ended. Apartheid ended with South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. The federation's declaration of 1977 and its suspensions of 1984 stand as the Lutheran communion's judgment on church separation by race; the Natal-Transvaal church made its submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in May 1998.

Sources: Lutheran World Federation, history of the Assembly (2003); Lutheran World Federation, "History of the Assembly" (2023); Ulrich Duchrow, "What can we learn from Bonhoeffer concerning the churches facing Palestinian suffering?", *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9/4 (2023), quoting the LWF Sixth Assembly (1977); University of Cape Town, Department for the Study of Religions, "TRC Faith Community Hearings: Submissions".

9. Sexual abuse in the German Protestant churches 1946–present

ONGOING

WHAT HAPPENED

In 2020 the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the umbrella body of 20 regional churches, Lutheran, Reformed and United, with 19.2 million members, commissioned an independent study of sexual abuse in the church and its social-welfare agency, the Diakonie, and paid 3.6 million euros for it. The ForuM study, coordinated by Martin Wazlawik of Hanover University, was published on January 25, 2024. From the files it was given it counted at least 1,259 accused and at least 2,225 people abused since 1946. The researchers had mainly disciplinary files to work from, not the full personnel files of all pastors and deacons (only the disciplinary files of 4,282 pastors were reviewed), and estimated the real numbers at nearly 3,500 perpetrators and more than 9,000 children and teenagers abused. Wazlawik called the documented cases "the tip of the tip of the iceberg." The study found that those who reported abuse were often doubted and given little support, while perpetrators were often protected.

The criticism

Survivors say the church's structure itself hindered the reckoning. Detlev Zander, a spokesman for those affected, said before publication that the researchers lacked access to the personnel files of all 20 regional churches and that "every state church counts differently," and he called for a uniform system. Critics note that the regional churches controlled the files and that planned random checks of personnel files did not take place, and that recognition payments to survivors varied widely from one regional church to another.

Lutheran response

Bishop Kirsten Fehrs of Hamburg, chair of the EKD Council, asked survivors for forgiveness "from the heart" when the study was published: "As an institution, we have wronged countless numbers of people," she said, admitting that "we have structures which protect perpetrators." She said the church would accept the findings "with humility." The church points out that it commissioned and funded the independent study itself, and in 2024 almost all the regional churches that reported expanded their specialist offices on sexualized violence.

Was it corrected? Ongoing. On March 21, 2025, the EKD Council unanimously adopted a uniform guideline on recognition payments, drafted with survivors: a flat payment of 15,000 euros for criminal offenses, even where the statute of limitations has run, plus an individual payment with no upper limit, decided by commissions that must include outside experts and no church or Diakonie employees. It took effect in all EKD member churches and the Diakonie on January 1, 2026. New reports rose after the study: the Westphalian church, for example, recorded 60 cases in 2024, 56 of them after publication.

Sources: Associated Press, "Report on sex abuse in Germany's Protestant Church documents at least 2,225 victims" (January 25, 2024); Deutsche Welle, "Protestant Church in Germany faces sexual abuse allegations" (January 25, 2024); evangelisch.de, "Ein Jahr ForuM-Studie zu Missbrauch: Landeskirchen verzeichnen immer mehr Betroffene" (January 17, 2025); EKD, "Neue Anerkennungsrichtlinie für Betroffene sexualisierter Gewalt" (March 2025); Evangelical Church in Württemberg, "Hilfe und Anerkennungsleistungen".