

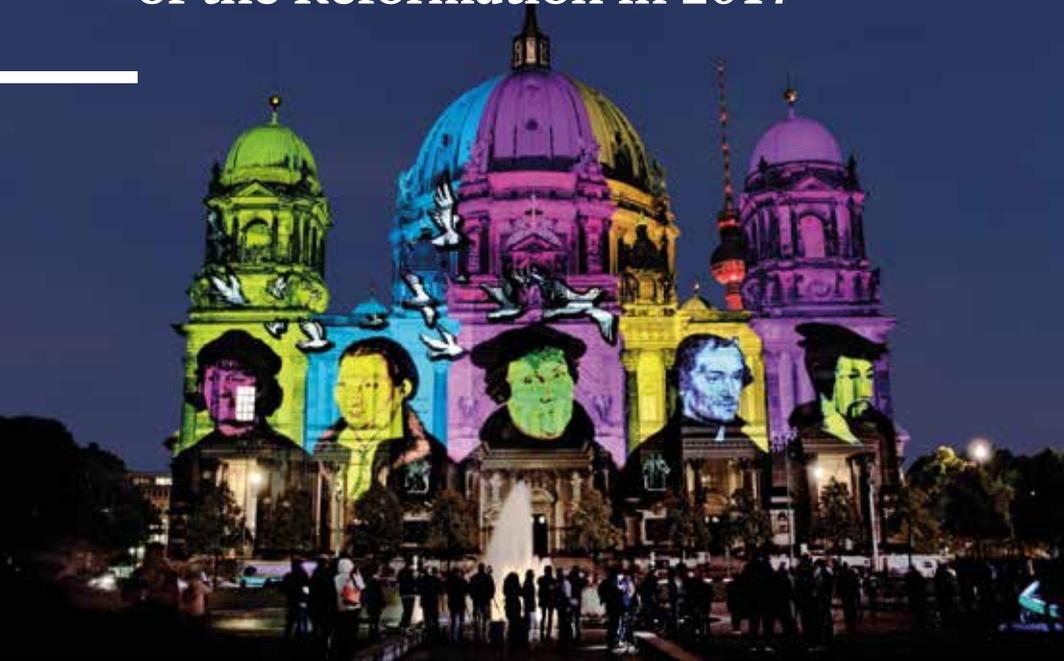


Evangelische Kirche  
in Deutschland

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# Celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017

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*Live sober, upright,  
and godly  
lives in this world*

*Tit 2:12 (RSV)*

## CELEBRATING THE 500<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE REFORMATION IN 2017

*Every age rolls out its own commemoration. All communities tell stories about their origins against the background of their present. That applies to every anniversary, and to 2017 as well. The 16<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are worlds apart. Five centuries ago, America had only just been discovered, and printing invented. Today smartphones are omnipresent and we live in a globalized, multicultural and, in parts, secularized world. From here we look back to what happened 500 years ago, which started with questions about who God is and how humans relate to him. These questions – and the answers the Reformers gave them – changed the understanding of faith, the church and European societies. The Reformation played a substantial role in shaping the world in which we live today. 500 years later we recall those events – and, at the same time, we want to show that the core ideas of the Reformation have lost nothing of their power. They are still relevant in our age. Yet the Reformation anniversary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be celebrated differently than in past centuries. 2017 is a significant date for Germany, for Europe and the world – in spiritual and church life, and also for the whole of society. For this commemorative year, the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) presents some thoughts on the importance and content of the Reformation.*



A photograph of a clear blue sky with scattered, light-colored clouds. Two dark, thin lines, likely power lines, cross the sky diagonally from the bottom left towards the top right. The word "Remembering" is written in a white, italicized serif font, centered in the lower half of the image.

*Remembering*

*Christianity, and indeed human society, always lives from the memories of its history. An honest engagement with the Reformation is always informed and enlightened by historical critique. A genuine understanding of history will presuppose an educational process distinguishing between historical events in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and what this history means for us today. Such an understanding will avoid any non-historical glorification or naive instrumentalization of those events.*

## A DATE.

Reformation Day on 31 October looks back to Martin Luther's 95 Theses. Whether Luther really nailed his theses on selling indulgences to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church can no longer be established with historical certainty. Taken by itself, 31 October 1517 is an individual date whose empirical importance should not be over-stated. However, it is of central symbolic significance. The Reformation started with the criticism of abuses in the church. To mark the Reformation commemoration, we are telling the story of this historical beginning whose impacts reach into our times. Through remembering our past, we can sound out the relevance of the historical events for our present.

## A SPIRIT.

The Reformation period focused on the question of the human relationship with God. God's righteousness does not destroy people, it raises them up; this insight became the »Gate to Paradise« for Martin Luther in his religious searching. Meaning and freedom, consolation in living and in dying, certainty in times of fear and tribulation – these are not things we can earn. The life and death of Jesus Christ shed new light on God and on what it means to be human. The Reformers sketched out a new understanding of faith: with our conscience bound to God's Word, we are inwardly free and ready to care for our neighbour.

## A HISTORY OF READING.

The history of Protestant theology and spirituality has always emphasized the importance of reading the Bible. Engaging with Scripture, translating it into German, perceiving its authority and critical function vis à vis church traditions and institutions – these became distinguishing features of the Reformation. Important further steps were, with the Enlightenment, the development of Scripture reading according to critical, rational standards and, with Pietism, a biblical piety touching the heart and defining an individual's own way of life. These two strands still live on, in the scholarly exposition of Scripture and critical discussion of biblical content, on the one hand, and in faithful interpretation and ethical orientation, on the other. Since the Reformation, a love of the Bible has been ingrained in this faith tradition.

## A MOVEMENT.

Martin Luther substantially contributed to the progress of the Reformation in the first few years after 1517. He inspired other Reformers in Wittenberg, Strasbourg, Geneva, Zürich and many other places. Alongside Luther, Jean (John) Calvin became a towering figure in early Reformation times, comparable to the Wittenberg Reformer in terms of significance and influence. The same period saw the formation of more radical movements, to which some Free Churches today can trace their origins. Territorial rulers and city councillors, ordinary citizens and peasants – those embracing the Reformation came from all walks of life. Networks of individuals and groups, women and men, carried the Reformation movement forward, leaving their imprint on it far beyond Wittenberg and ensuring its survival. In its many shapes and forms, the Reformation became a European event. Protestantism then reached out on a grand scale internationally, notably in its Reformed variety. The Reformation anniversary is therefore more than a »Luther« anniversary.

## A REFORM.

The Reformers wanted to renew the church of Jesus Christ in the spirit of the gospel, not to divide it. The Reformation cannot simply be reduced to ending the »darkness« of the Middle Ages and an allegedly »degenerate« papal church. The Reformers drew on a rich spiritual and theological heritage, linking it to previous reform endeavours. The faith renewed by the Reformers encountered resistance, which gave rise to a new, separate form of church. Realizing the goal of a universal reform proved unfeasible. However, the Roman Catholic Church also underwent change because of the Reformation. It had thus gained significance for the whole of western Christendom.

## A HISTORY OF LEARNING.

Laboriously, and only after a long history of violence and suffering, the European powers learned how to organize the peaceful coexistence of different branches of Christianity. Further steps on this path were the formation of a non-religiously grounded understanding of the state and law, and growing religious and ecclesiastical self-government. In Germany today, all religions, not only the Christian churches, are tasked with ensuring that their self-understanding and organization does not conflict with the prevailing legal order, which is neutral with respect to religion. At the same time, the denominational diversity within Protestantism is substantially a result of this history. While it can be burdensome, this diversity is also enriching, and challenges the denominations to mutually inspire and question one another in an ecumenical spirit.

## MANY CONSEQUENCES.

Over the centuries, Protestantism has grown into a multi-faceted, powerful force in society, undergoing much restructuring and development on its way into the modern era. From the start it underwent constant change, and embraced critical questions and new insights. Denominational »competition« has had significant impacts on cultural history. Protestantism – often with difficulty and internal struggles – has contributed to shaping the modern world and allowed Christian faith to feel at home there.





*Reassurance*

*Reformation is a historical event from the 16<sup>th</sup> century – and also a process of constant renewal of faith, church and society. In the interplay with other forces and ideas, the Reformation left its imprint on many areas of society throughout the centuries, and launched a history of learning. For the 21<sup>st</sup> century it holds true that being inspired by the Reformation means going beyond it. The historical effects of the Reformation should not be confused with Reformation faith itself. The EKD Council therefore sees the anniversary year of 2017 as a wonderful opportunity to present a credible and attractive approach to life shaped by the spirit of the Reformation. This »Reformational approach« is one in which the search and longing for God, for the holy, for spirituality and inwardness, goes hand in hand with responsibility for our neighbour, the world and the future. The following seven basic dimensions describe this approach. Although each person will develop it in his or her own way, it reflects the one spirit that God has given us, not »a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control«.*

*2 Tim 1:7 (RSV)*

## TRUST IN GOD.

A Reformational approach to life knows that faith is a gift. Faith does not live from holding to church doctrines, or observing ritual acts, or following moral precepts. It lives from trust in God as the »mystery of the world«. As God's creatures we are wanted, and we have inherent dignity. God's Spirit frees us from fears and calls us to new life. From a Protestant standpoint, faith does not fear rationality. Rather, it itself contributes to recognizing irrationalities and abuses, and excludes them from faith. It can therefore ally itself with a worldview shaped by the Enlightenment, the sciences and the humanities. In the dialogue between scholarly research and faith, this worldview makes it easier to recognize – and break through – ideological fixations and narrow-mindedness on both sides. It is the duty of faith to resist any misuse of religion, by using our reason.

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THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THIS SPIRIT OF TRUST IN GOD.

## BEING HUMBLE.

A Reformational approach to life is founded in faith in Jesus Christ, his life, suffering and resurrection. The root of every demeanour and all hopes is the cross. It confronts us with profound guilt and brutal violence, with evil and inconceivable injustice, but at the same time with the reconciling power of love. It makes us sensitive to human suffering and realistic about human guilt – including our own. The cross of Jesus Christ can transform people in their innermost selves. It pushes human limitations into the light of God's indestructible goodness and opens hearts to shame and guilt, to honesty and repentance. The Cross cuts across established certainties. It makes the soul ready for God's mercy and, at the same time, humble and willing to defend all those suffering humiliation.

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THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THIS SPIRIT OF HUMILITY.

## LIVING OUR FREEDOM.

A Reformational approach to life strengthens our inner freedom and helps us to remain upright, confident and open to being touched by others. Protestant faith proves itself in our family life and at work, in everyday responsibilities and practical tasks. Reformation piety is not withdrawal from the world, but turning towards it and attending to the needs of our neighbour. Such a way of life can make us spiritually rich and give us inner breadth, compassion and sensitivity. It also includes the broad cosmos of culture – from music to literature, the fine arts, education and research, not to mention the culture of debate in politics and civil society. God’s Word creates a new spiritual space, giving us stability and a firm stance, consolation and courage,

self-confidence and freedom. Religious education and spiritual exercises help us to strengthen our innermost selves and to be attentive to our neighbour. Lively worship and enthusiastic Bible-reading, regular prayer and meditation, stillness and retreat – all these are sources of a Protestant freedom that proves itself in daily life.



THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THE SPIRIT OF THIS FREEDOM.

## BEING RESISTANT.

A Reformational approach to life supports the liberal, democratic constitutional order of our society. It motivates us to take part in public and social life. For a long time, German Protestantism had trouble accepting modern ideas about the state due to a close alliance of »throne and altar«, during the time when territorial lords controlled church governance. At the same time, Protestantism underlined the importance of a faith-based freedom of conscience, was sceptical of hierarchies and authorities, and attached greater value to life in the world. In so doing, it contributed to creating a modern political awareness and an open society. Thus, a Reformational approach to life stands for a culture of resistance to the abuse of power, fundamentalism and attacks on social minorities. Protestantism participates constructively in societal debates and champions the freedom of individuals to make decisions about their own lives.

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THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THIS SPIRIT OF RESISTANCE.

## REMAINING SENSITIVE.

A Reformational approach to life is grounded in a responsible, enlightened faith, drawing its spiritual power and practical orientation from the Bible. Enlightened piety enhances the ability to engage in critical personal reflection and in dialogue with others. Faith lives from our relation to God and becomes practical in love of our neighbour both near and far. Both come together in the formation of Christian personhood. Education must be more than a means to an end. The more global and plural our experience of the world, the more we come to appreciate the basic Reformation insight that education fosters value orientation and personal development. It broadens our horizons, sheds light on other approaches to and ways of life, and makes us sensitive to the cares and sufferings of others.

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THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THIS SPIRIT OF SENSITIVITY.

## FINDING A HOME.

A Reformational approach to life involves a healthy balance between autonomy in religious matters and a common space in which faith is at home and can take shape. It is typically Protestant to subject the church as an institution to critical scrutiny. However, a faith that focuses only on itself runs the risk of evaporating in daily life. Faith presses towards community in which there is mutual stimulus and empowerment. Experiences of community are a source of enrichment that we do not want to forgo: they range from huge church festivals to small prayer meetings, from one-time experiences of evangelization to the reliable reassurance of our personal faith in services of worship. Baptism, Sunday school, confirmation, a church wedding and a Christian burial are milestones in our lives and mark biographical transitions. The calendar of Christian festivals provides salutary interruptions in the course of the year and the week. Our landscapes are

dotted with church buildings, ranging from small village churches to large urban cathedrals next to the market square and town hall. Hymn and song books, all kinds of choirs, brass bands and organs, drums and keyboards, Bach cantatas and pop-oratorios – these are yet more symbols of the creative drive of Protestant faith and its ability to give people a spiritual home.



**THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THIS SPIRIT OF FEELING AT HOME.**

## TAKING A BREAK.

A Reformational approach to life is certain that creation and world history, the present and the future, do not depend alone on what we do, or what we leave undone. When responding to overburdening and self-exploitation, or prophecies of doom and gloom, this approach puts trust in God and not in the illusion that happiness can be created by human hands. A Reformational approach to life is characterized by serenity and thankfulness; it can celebrate and savour the moment. It takes each day as it comes, with its own joys and sorrows.

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THE 2017 ANNIVERSARY PROVIDES  
AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK OUR OWN LIVES  
IN THIS SPIRIT OF PAUSING FOR A WHILE.

A scenic view of a mountain range with a power line stretching across the foreground. The mountains are covered in dense evergreen forests, and the sky is a clear, pale blue. The power line is a dark, thin line that runs diagonally from the top left towards the right side of the frame. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

*Being Responsible*



*A Reformational approach to life is not focused solely on itself. It helps to shape different life contexts with responsibility: »Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a cheerful, willing, free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbour voluntarily« (Martin Luther: Freedom of a Christian).*

*A Christian approach to life can today take many different forms. Reformation faith can allow a plurality of ethical decisions. The EKD Council recognizes this diversity and considers it to be enriching. For the Reformation anniversary in 2017 the Council recommends the following:*

## CELEBRATE CHEERFULLY.

Critical commemoration and cheerful celebration belong together. The Evangelical Church in Germany is celebrating the year 2017 in the community of Reformation churches in Europe and worldwide, and together with the whole of society. Activities range from outstanding musical productions to modern theatrical performances to literary and educational events. Each in their own way, they show that the Reformation also wrote cultural history. We are convinced that Reformational voices can do (global) society good.

## REMAIN SELF-CRITICAL.

The Evangelical Church in Germany has pledged to be honest and critical in dealing with its own history. The need for this is clearest with respect to Luther's hostile attitude towards the Jews. This memory fills us today with sorrow and shame. Polarizations during Reformation times and their far-reaching effects – the often aggressive and unbridled polemics against Catholics or radical Reformers – need to be critically reappraised. We must bring our contradiction and approval of the Reformation into a theologically responsible relationship. Only then will there be a real chance of the anniversary in 2017 showing productive ways forward for the church and society.

## BELIEVE ECUMENICALLY.

In 2017 we are able to enjoy an ecumenically inviting Reformation anniversary, one that regards denominational differences as enriching, both throughout history and in the present. The Evangelical Church in Germany is grateful for the fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church. Under the heading of Christustag (festival of Christ) they together recall the foundation of their faith that binds them together. They confess their mutual guilt to one another before God and declare their joint responsibility for society. The Protestant regional churches celebrate the anniversary with Free Churches, and are glad of the partnership and cooperation with sisters and brothers in the Orthodox Churches. The worldwide dimension of the Reformation becomes visible in the variety of these ecumenical relationships.

## RECONCILE RELIGIONS.

The Reformation anniversary in 2017 is taking place in a world in which religious forces are also experienced and endured as sources of violence and terrorism. By contrast, the regional Protestant churches in Germany rely on the reconciling and peace-building power of faith. In view of their entanglement in a long history of violence, they have learned how important it is to deploy the power of faith for peace; this can best happen when the religions are allowed to be visible and effective in the public square, and can integrate themselves into the complex fabric of modern society with critical solidarity and shared responsibility.

## INVITE THE PUBLIC.

The Evangelical Church in Germany is celebrating the Reformation anniversary in a modern, religiously neutral legal state. It invites all citizens to join in. The involvement of public authorities in the celebration reflects the awareness that Reformation ideas also contributed to the emergence of the legal state. The EKD welcomes the fact that the Reformation anniversary is evolving into a historical and culturally diverse event involving the whole of society. It is particularly pleased that 31 October 2017 has been declared a public holiday all over Germany.

## PRACTISE MERCY.

The EKD deplores the fact that, even 500 years after the Reformation, many people are excluded from participation in and contributing to the church and society. The Reformation anniversary in 2017 offers an opportunity for renewed commitment by diaconal institutions and social service centres, together with churches and congregations, to actively stand by persons or groups who are disadvantaged or excluded – due to poverty or illness, age, the loss of their homeland, or some other impediment. (Global) society benefits when people speak up in the spirit of the Reformation, and active Christians confidently contribute to seeking just and supportive relationships and ways of living together.

## BE HOSPITABLE.

The EKD looks forward to welcoming many ecumenical guests from all over the world. They personify the meaning of and commitment to Christian unity. Their presence will also remind us of global conflicts and present-day challenges. It would be inappropriate to promptly »update« the Reformation anniversary and harness it for political purposes. However, in terms of tackling these global conflicts and challenges, a Reformational approach – thoughtfully responding to them in faith and love – is now more relevant than ever.

*A Reformational approach to life – nurtured by historical commemoration, trusting in God, rooted in Scripture, bearing responsibility in the present – is a wellspring of humanity for every society.*

*After all, a wisdom refined by spirituality teaches us to  
»live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world«*

*Tit 2:12 (RSV)*

## PICTURES

Cover:  
Celebrating the 500th anniversary of Reformation: At the »festival of Lights« on Oct 12, 2015, the society »Reformationsjubiläum 2017 e.V.« ([www.r2017.org](http://www.r2017.org)) invited the visitors to come to Wittenberg in summer 2017 with this installation of light projected on the Dome of Berlin. It showed (from left to right) portraits of Huldrych Zwingli, Luthers wife Katharina von Bora, Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon and Johannes Calvin.  
Picture (retouched): epd-bild/Rolf Zoellner

Pictures inside: Sebastian Artl

## FURTHER READING

*Justification and Freedom. Celebrating 500 years of Reformation in 2017.*  
A foundational text of the Council of the EKD. 2014.  
[https://www.ekd.de/english/texts/justification\\_and\\_freedom.html](https://www.ekd.de/english/texts/justification_and_freedom.html)

*Trusting God in New Ways.*  
*Magazin for the Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017*  
Published by Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), Church Office  
[http://www.gott-neu-vertrauen.de/sites/default/files/downloads/FINAL%20-neu-%20Reformation2017\\_English.pdf](http://www.gott-neu-vertrauen.de/sites/default/files/downloads/FINAL%20-neu-%20Reformation2017_English.pdf)

## PUBLISHED BY

Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)  
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30419 Hannover  
+49(511) 2796 0  
[www.ekd.de](http://www.ekd.de)

May 2017

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[www.ekd.de](http://www.ekd.de)

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