

Facts About Lutheranism

What is a Lutheran? The first fact about Lutheranism is that many people have little or no idea what it is all about. In many parts of the world, Lutheranism seems to be one of the best kept secrets.

Demographics: Those calling themselves Lutherans are numerous to say the least. There are over 70 million professing Lutherans worldwide, 9 million of these living in North America. Lutherans can be found on all the major continents and scattered throughout many countries. Only the Roman Catholic and Orthodox church have more professing Christians in their ranks. The large number of Lutherans can partially be explained by the fact that in some European countries (such as Denmark), Lutheranism is the state religion. Lutheran Christians have been around for over 460 years.

A Brief History: "Lutheranism," in one sense, was founded by Martin Luther (1483-1546). Luther began as a very faithful son of the Roman Church. Precisely because of this, like so many others of his age, he was deeply concerned about his soul's salvation. Also like many, Luther was terribly frightened that because of his sin the righteous and angry God would cast him into purgatory or hell. Unlike many, however, Martin Luther had an intensely sensitive nature that made him remarkably and painfully aware of his sinfulness. That, coupled with his incredible knowledge of Scripture, especially the thunderings of God's law, led Luther to a growing awareness that he was condemned by God's law and in desperate need of help.

Because of this crisis in his relationship with God, Martin Luther, soon after beginning graduate studies as a law student, made the decision to give up his legal career and become a monk in the order of the Augustinian hermits. He took this dramatic step because the Church taught at that time, and Luther believed, that becoming a monk was the surest road to forgiveness and entrance into heaven. However, he discovered that this way was sadly lacking. In fact, the more he searched the Scriptures and compared those Scriptures with the teachings of the Church of his day, the more he found important differences between the two.

The biggest difference concerned the doctrine of justification or salvation, that is, how to find forgiveness with God and enter heaven. The Roman Church directed people to trust in their own love, holiness, and good works. In addition, they also directed the struggling sinner to trust in Mary and the saints. Luther discovered that this flatly contradicted the Gospel, the most important teaching of the Bible. The Gospel (means "good news") directed struggling sinners to Jesus Christ alone. It joyfully declared that Jesus Christ has already paid for all our sins by His death on the cross. To all who put their trust in Him alone as Savior, God gives full forgiveness and heaven as a free gift.

In the years that followed, Martin Luther became increasingly aware that many teachings of the Roman Church clashed with this Biblical Gospel. With great alarm Luther saw that the authorities of the Roman Church were leading people away from God and into even greater darkness. So through his preaching, teaching, and writing, he began to protest the false teachings of Rome and to call for a Reformation of the Church. Luther's desire was never to start a new Church, but simply to restore the catholic Church to its original purity through a rediscovered

Gospel. Luther contended that it was not he who had broken away from the Church. Rather, it was the Roman Church, who, by its false teaching and practice, had broken away from the ancient Christian Church of the first centuries.

As time past, thousands supported Luther's movement, not because they were supporting Luther the man, but because they agreed that what he taught was what the Bible taught. They were drawn to the truth by the Holy Spirit, just as Luther himself had been. Already during Luther's lifetime, those who had received the Biblical Gospel that Luther had rediscovered began calling themselves "Lutheran." At first Luther had vigorously protested using his name for the movement. Later he consented to this since it was merely one way to identify those who believed the Gospel.

What Lutherans Believe

The answer to the question "What is a Lutheran?" can really only be answered by looking at the teachings of the Lutheran Church. Although the scope of this little tract does not allow a complete discussion of such teachings, a general idea can be given. Lutheran teaching can be summed up by what are called the "Three Alones": (1) Grace Alone; (2) Faith Alone; (3) Scripture Alone.

Sola Grace: A Lutheran believes in "Grace Alone." That is, a Lutheran believes that on the basis of God's Holy Word that a person is forgiven and enters heaven by God's grace alone. The Biblical word "grace" refers to God's attitude of undeserved kindness toward us. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It is not our conduct or performance that moves God to save us, it is his grace that moves God to save us. In fact, we can't do a thing to save ourselves. According to the Bible we are dead in sin (read **Eph.** 2:1; **Romans** 5:6). But God offers us full forgiveness and heaven as a free gift because Jesus lived and died to atone for our sin. Our salvation is not teamwork between us and God. It is not a matter of us doing our part and God doing His. We are not saved by God's grace plus our good works or anything we do. We are not saved by God's grace plus anything. We are saved by God's grace ALONE.

We don't deserve this. What we do deserve is eternal punishment in hell for our sin. But God, because Jesus bore our punishment on the cross, gives us what we don't deserve: eternal life. *"For the wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord"* (**Romans** 6:23).

Sola Faith: A Lutheran also believes that we are forgiven and enter heaven by "Faith Alone." "For we maintain that a man is justified [declared innocent, righteous] by faith, apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3:28). Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have been tempted to believe that faith in Jesus as Savior (or faith in the Gospel promise) is not enough. They have been tempted to believe that something WE do must be added to faith: our keeping of God's Commandments, our love, our holiness, our victory over sin, or something else that we do.

But the Scriptures consistently teach that we are saved through faith plus NOTHING. We are saved by faith ALONE.

Since God truly promises heaven as a gift to the human race on account of Christ, then there is only one way to receive a promised gift: faith. The moment we think that our entrance into heaven is contingent upon our conduct in any way, at that moment heaven ceases to be a gift and begins to be something we have earned and deserve. For a gift to remain a gift it must simply be received. Faith in Jesus as Savior is the open hand that receives God's gift of salvation. *"For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life"* (**John** 3:16).

Sola Scripture: A Lutheran believes in "Scripture Alone." That is, a Lutheran believes that all teaching that claims to be Christian is to be drawn from the Bible alone. The canonical books of the Bible are the only source, the only authority, and the only judge of Christian teaching. When the question is raised, "is this teaching or practice Christian?" the Holy Scriptures are the highest Court of Appeals and only they can decide the matter.

The reason the Bible is such an authority for Lutherans is because we believe that Holy Scripture is not merely the word of man; it is also the inspired and inerrant Word of God himself. The human authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down exactly what they did. Every word of the canonical Bible is the Word of God. *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God"* (**2 Timothy** 3:16) and *"Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"* (**2 Peter** 1:21).

The Lutheran Confessions: For a fuller discussion of what Lutherans believe one need only turn to a group of writings called "the Lutheran Confessions." Written by Martin Luther and others, these are historical statements of faith taken from the Bible that Lutherans believe to be a correct exposition of God's Word. They provide a standard of what is truly Lutheran and what is not. They include the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian), the Augsburg Confession of 1530, as well as seven other Confessions. They are gathered together in the "Book Of Concord of 1580."

In Conclusion: The Lutheran Church, when faithful to its historical roots and Confessions, is a Biblically conservative Church made up of joyful and committed Christians serving their crucified and risen Lord. Anyone searching for a Church that truly teaches the Bible need look no further