

# What do Lutherans believe?

By Dr. Samuel Nafzger (adapted)

Lutheran churches are creedal churches. We do not define ourselves by organizational structure (many Lutheran churches are basically congregational, but some can be quite hierarchical in polity). There are both "high-church" and "low-church" Lutherans in terms of patterns and styles of worship. But all Lutherans subscribe to creeds/confessions which state what we understand to be the teachings of the Bible, which alone can determine doctrine.

The Lutheran church derives its name from Martin Luther (1483-1546), an Augustinian monk whose posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517, sparked the Reformation. The documents which present what Lutherans believe, teach and confess were assembled and published in 1580 in The Book of Concord. For more than 400 years, these documents have served as a normative statement of the Christian faith as Lutherans confess it.

Significantly, the very first documents included in The Book of Concord are the three ancient ecumenical creeds compiled during the early, formative years of the Christian era—the Apostles' Creed (ca. third century A.D.), the Nicene Creed (fourth century), and the Athanasian Creed (fifth and sixth centuries). In addition, the Book of Concord includes Luther's Small Catechism (1529) and the Augsburg Confession (1530), and five other 16th century statements, including Luther's Large Catechism and the Formula of Concord.

Luther and the other writers of these confessions did not want to be doctrinal innovators. They, together with their contemporary descendants, maintain that we believe and teach nothing more and nothing less than what the Scriptures themselves teach and what Christians through the ages have always believed. We therefore consider ourselves to be catholic (small "c"), which means "universal." At the same time, we have always thought of ourselves as evangelical (in some countries, the Lutheran Church is still today referred to as simply the Evangelical Church), since the evangel—the Gospel, the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world—is at the heart and core of everything we believe and teach. We Lutherans, therefore, can rightly be regarded as evangelical catholics. Standing firmly in the tradition of the Trinitarian and Christological formulations of the 4th and 5th centuries, we believe that sinners are justified (declared right) with the Creator God by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), on the basis of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). These three great "Reformation solas" form a handy outline of what Lutherans believe, teach, and confess.

## Grace Alone

At the heart of what we believe is the conviction that salvation is the free gift of God's grace (undeserved mercy) for Christ's sake alone. "Since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin" (Augsburg Confession II, 1), the Lutherans confessed before Emperor Charles V in Augsburg, Germany, in 1530. This "inborn sickness and hereditary sin" makes it utterly impossible for people to earn forgiveness. If salvation were dependent on human initiative, there would be no hope for anyone. But God forgives our sins, says Luther in his Large Catechism (1529), "altogether freely, out of pure grace" (LC III, 96).

The basis for the grace of God that alone gives hope to sinners is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe, as Luther put it in his explanation to the second article of the Apostles' Creed, "that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person . . . not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. . . ." (Luther's Small Catechism with Explanations, p.14).

We believe that the Scriptures teach that God's grace in Christ Jesus is universal, embracing all people of all times and all places. There is no sin for which Christ has not died. Says the Formula of Concord (1577), "We must by all means cling rigidly and firmly to the fact that as the proclamation of repentance extends over all men (Luke 24:47), so also does the promise of the Gospel . . . Christ has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29)" (FC SD XI, 28). Therefore, there need be no question in any sinner's mind whether Christ has died for each and every one of his or her personal sins.

## Faith Alone

While God's grace is universal and embraces all people, we believe that the Scriptures teach that this grace can be appropriated by sinful human beings only through faith. Here is where Luther's decisive break came with the understanding of the doctrine of justification that had generally prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages.

A thousand years before the Reformation, St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) had fought strongly against the errors of a monk named Pelagius. Pelagius taught that sinners could contribute to their salvation by their own efforts, apart from God's grace in Christ. Relying on St. Paul's letter to the Romans, Augustine held that Adam's fall into sin had so corrupted human nature that the human will was completely depraved and enslaved to the flesh. But Augustine believed that sinners, following their conversion and infused with renewing grace by means of baptism, begin to be healed, and are actually empowered by God's grace to perform inherently good works. Christians, according to Augustine, do continue to commit some sins, but they also begin to do more good things and fewer bad things as they are gradually justified by God.

This Augustinian understanding of justification by grace, later rejected by Luther, was nevertheless of great help to him at the beginning of his career as he fought against the crass work-righteousness of indulgence selling. But try as he might, Luther's troubled heart would give him no rest. Despite his best efforts, Luther could not find in himself that pure love that Augustine said Christians were capable of manifesting following conversion. After years of struggle over this question, Luther finally discovered that the Scriptures teach that sinners are saved "through faith alone." God's grace is the sole basis of salvation for the sinner only when it is appropriated solely through faith.

Luther had learned from Augustine that only the grace of God could save him. But Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel in all its clarity took place when he came to see that he did not first have to do something to merit God's saving grace. Philip Melancthon, Luther's colleague at the University of Wittenberg, writes in the Augsburg Confession: "Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3,4)" (AC IV, 1-3).

The implications of salvation "through faith alone" permeate everything we Lutherans believe and teach. For example, we believe that the conversion of sinners is a gift of God and not the result of any human effort or decision. Lutherans therefore confess in the words of Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostle's Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." (Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation, p. 15).

Lutherans are by no means anti-intellectual, and we thank God for our reasoning ability. We use it to seek to understand, to present and to defend what we believe, but we do reject all suggestions that scientific evidence or rational arguments can prove Christian truth claims. By the same token, we uphold the importance of emotion and feeling in the life of the Christian, but we steadfastly repudiate any reliance on conversion experiences or "charismatic gifts" for the certainty of salvation. We believe that the Scriptures teach that the sole object of saving faith is Jesus Christ and his resurrection, and that it is only by the miraculous power of God the Holy Spirit that the Christian can say, "I believe." Faith is not a human work but a gift from God.

"Through faith alone" also implies that it is only through the proclamation of the Gospel—in Word and Sacrament—that the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith. The proclamation of the Gospel Word in public preaching therefore occupies a central position in our Lutheran theology. Lutheran churches are preaching churches. But we are also sacramental churches, for the sacraments—Baptism and the Lord's Supper—are the Gospel made visible.

We believe that Baptism has God's command and promise. Baptism is "the Word of God in water," Luther said (Smalcald Articles, Part III, V, 1). We believe that it is precisely in the baptism of infants, who are included in Christ's Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), that we can see the full meaning of "through faith alone." We believe that those who deny that God gives faith to infants through Baptism, nevertheless in actuality deny salvation by grace alone (perhaps without intending to do so). God's action in Baptism, apart from any human initiative, creates and bestows the gift of faith through which the Christian lays hold of God's grace. We also believe that the Scriptures teach that the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper are the true body and blood of Christ. Although we do not presume to understand how this takes place, we confess that in, with and under the earthly elements God gives the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Lutherans therefore seek a balance in public worship between the proclamation of the Gospel in the Word and in sacrament. It is only through these "means of grace" that sinners are brought to faith in Jesus Christ and preserved in it.

Finally, to say "through faith alone" means that we believe that, to use a phrase Luther made famous, Christians are at the same time sinners and saints (*simul justus et peccator*). Justification is an act, a declaration. It is not a process. Through faith in Christ, and only through faith, sinners are declared to be forgiven and to be perfectly right with God. This declaration is whole and complete, totally independent of any inherent goodness in us sinners. In short, because of God's act on the cross

received through faith, we sinners are declared to be perfect saints in God's sight. But this does not mean that forgiven sinners, when judged by God's law, do not continue to be sinners. We are not "perfectionists" in the sense of teaching that following conversion, Christians stop sinning. "Forgiveness is needed constantly," says Luther. "Because we are encumbered with our flesh, we are never without sin" (Large Catechism II, 54).

Because of our emphasis on justification through faith alone, we Lutherans have sometimes been understood to advocate, or at least to condone, what the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer condemned as "cheap grace," that is, taking sin for granted and ignoring concern for a life of holy living. But such notions are a perversion of what we believe. "Love and good works must also follow faith," writes Melancthon, because "God has commanded them and in order to exercise our faith" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, 74 and 189). In other words, we believe that good works are necessary—but they are not necessary for salvation. Because we believe that salvation is both "by grace alone" and "through faith alone," we Lutherans refuse to give a logically satisfying answer to the age-old question of why some people are saved and others are not. We disagree with those, like Calvin, who teach that since salvation is God's free gift, hell for those who do not believe must be proof that God does not want everyone to be saved. In opposition to this view, we maintain that the Scriptures clearly teach that God desires all "to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).

Yet we also disagree with those who answer the question "why some and not others" on the basis of something which human beings do or possess, as if the ultimate cause for salvation is our striving or cooperating or "deciding" for Christ. The Scriptures teach that all people by nature are "dead in ...transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1), utterly incapable of contributing anything to their conversion or salvation. If sinners, therefore, come to believe in Christ, this is the result of God's power at work in them. If they continue to reject the Gospel, this is their own fault. We do not regard this response as a "cop-out" but simply as faithfulness to what the Scriptures themselves teach about the doctrine of election. This brings us to the final sola, "Scripture alone."

### **Scripture Alone**

Luther's insight that salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone cannot be divorced from "on the basis of Scripture alone." For it was directly as a result of his commitment to Scripture that Luther came to rediscover justification by grace alone through faith alone. Together with his contemporaries, Luther held that the Bible is the Word of God and that it does not mislead or deceive us. But unlike his opponents in the Roman Catholic Church, Luther rejected the notion that an infallible magisterium of the church is necessary for the right interpretation of the Bible. Scripture alone, said Luther, is infallible. The institutional church and its councils, as well as its teachers, including the Pope, can and do err. But Scripture, says Luther, "will not lie to you" (Large Catechism V, 76).

While maintaining a deep appreciation for the church catholic, Lutherans believe that Scripture alone—not Scripture and tradition, Scripture and the church, Scripture and human reason, or Scripture and experience—stands as the final standard of what the Gospel is.

But we also believe that confidence in the reliability of the Bible is not possible apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Christians believe what the Scriptures teach because they first believe in Jesus Christ. Christ is the object of faith, not the Bible. We believe that the inversion of this order compromises "scripture alone" and results in rationalistic fundamentalism, as if an accepted demonstration of the Bible's truthfulness and reliability—perhaps a piece of Noah's ark, for example—could provide a foundation for faith in the Gospel. The Bible remains a dark book apart from faith in Christ, for He is its true content. But when sinners are brought to faith in Him, Christ points them back to the writings of the prophets and apostles as the sole authoritative source for all the church believes, teaches and confesses.

The key to understanding Scripture properly, we believe, is the careful distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The Law tells what God demands of sinners if they are to be saved. The Gospel reveals what God has already done for our salvation. The chief purpose of the Law is to show us our sin and our need for a Savior. The Gospel offers the free gift of God's salvation in Christ. The whole Bible can be divided into these two chief teachings. It is in the proper distinction between Law and Gospel that the purity of the Gospel is preserved and the three solas of "grace alone," "faith alone" and "Scripture alone" are united.