

What Did It Once Mean to Be a Lutheran?

What does it mean to be a Lutheran today? For most people, I suppose, it means that a person is a member -- active or inactive -- of a church that includes the word "Lutheran" in its name. Like members of St. John's Lutheran Church or Messiah Lutheran Church or Trinity Lutheran Church, etc.

But this description of a Lutheran does not tell us very much about what a Lutheran believes or confesses or how that Lutheran person is different from a non-Lutheran person. The fact is that in our day the persons called Lutherans are very much in disagreement with one another in matters of belief and confession and practice, as will be demonstrated in our seminar this evening.

Today men and women call themselves Lutheran, and others are happy to call them Lutheran, even though there is only a slight resemblance between what they believe and confess and what Martin Luther believed and confessed. It is a sad fact, yet an easily documented fact, that many who go by the name of Lutheran today do not at all agree with historic or confessional Lutheranism.

You see, there is a fairly easy way to determine whether individuals or groups agree with Martin Luther and have the right thereby to call themselves Lutheran. Martin Luther confessed his faith before all the world in his two catechisms and in a series of doctrinal statements known as the Smalcald Articles. Luther's younger friend and associate Philip Melancthon also drew up a summary and explanation of Bible teaching that Luther was happy to acknowledge as being in full agreement with his own beliefs. This summary and explanation are known as the Augsburg Confession and the Apology (defense) of the Augsburg Confession. After Luther's death there was a period of time when persons of varied doctrinal views claimed the name "Lutheran." But eventually, in the year 1580, fifty years after the first presentation of the Augsburg Confession, the *Book of Concord* was published as the confession of all genuine Lutherans. This *Book of Concord* contains the three ancient creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, Athanasian), the two catechisms of Luther, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, Luther's Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord. This last document was a settlement of the many controversies among and between Lutherans after Luther's death. These controversies were resolved by letting the Holy Scriptures decide the issues. This is the only God-pleasing way that doctrinal controversies can be decided.

Let us then begin our examination of present-day Lutheranism by asking the question: What Did It Once Mean to Be a Lutheran? We restrict ourselves this evening to four areas of doctrine: 1) Justification; 2) the Bible as our only source of doctrine; 3) the Means of Grace; and 4) questions concerning church fellowship.

Justification

There can hardly be any doubt that the doctrine of justification is the most important teaching of historic Lutheranism. It is only right that this should be so, for justification is the central teaching of Holy Scripture. The doctrine of justification answers the all-important question of how we sinful beings can hope to gain salvation or eternal life. When the Holy Spirit through Luther's study of the Bible taught him the doctrine of justification, the Reformation of the church began.

Article IV of the Augsburg Confession summarizes the doctrine in these clear words: **"We cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith."**

The Bible basis for this teaching is presented in many places, but perhaps the most concise declaration is recorded in Romans, chapter 3: **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. ... We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."**

This section of Scripture clearly teaches that all persons in the world, all of them being sinners, have been declared righteous by God, have been pardoned by God, on the basis of the life and death of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. We sinners receive the benefit of God's pardon not by working for it or by earning it in some fashion but simply by putting our trust in what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. We are saved alone by this faith.

In order to understand the doctrine of justification correctly, we need to understand the difference between the Law and the Gospel. Article V of the Formula of Concord says: **"The distinction between Law and Gospel is an especially glorious light that is to be maintained with great diligence in the church so that, according to St. Paul's admonition, the Word of God may be divided rightly."**

The Formula of Concord goes on to define both the Law and the Gospel in these words: **"The Law is a divine doctrine which teaches what is right and God-pleasing and which condemns everything that is sinful and contrary to God's will." "The Gospel ...teaches what a man who has not kept the Law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man's merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins."**

This careful distinction between the Law and the Gospel is something that distinguishes the historic Lutheran teaching from the teaching of all other Protestant churches. It is based entirely on many clear Scriptural references. One of the clearest of these is found in Second Corinthians, chapter three, where the Law is called **"the ministry of death"** and **"the ministry of condemnation"** but the Gospel is called **"the ministry of**

righteousness" and "the ministry of the Spirit." The difference between the two is further emphasized by the apostle's words: **"The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."** In this passage "letter" refers to the Law and "Spirit" refers to Gospel, as is clear from the context. Obviously, if a Christian teacher uses the Law where he should use the Gospel, he will end up killing and condemning persons instead of giving them life. Likewise, if he uses the Gospel where he should use the Law, he will falsely assure someone of life who first needs to know that he is a lost and condemned sinner. Only after God's Law has shown us our sin and condemnation are we ready to hear the Gospel of Jesus, which is nothing but unconditional forgiveness bestowed on us because of the perfect life and death of Jesus Christ in our place.

The Bible as Our Only Source of Doctrine

A second important area to examine is the Bible as our only source of doctrine. Our Lutheran confessions do not even have a specific paragraph or article labeled "Bible." Such an article was not needed in those days, for all the parties were agreed that the Bible is the Word of God. Nevertheless, there are some clear statements in our Lutheran confessions that give a definite indication of confessional Lutheranism's view of the Bible.

For example, in discussing baptism in his Large Catechism Luther makes the statement: **"God does not lie. My neighbor and I -- in short, all men -- may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err."** Likewise, in the Smalcald Articles, as Luther is discussing the Lord's Supper, he says: **"The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel."** It is therefore Lutheran to say with the Formula of Concord: **"We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated."**

This, of course, is saying no more than the Bible says of itself. In John 10:35 Jesus Himself said: **"The Scriptures cannot be broken."** The context indicates that Jesus here is referring to one single word recorded in Psalm 82, and He is saying that word must stand, simply because it is recorded in the Scriptures. In 2 Tim. 3:16 the apostle Paul wrote: **"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."**

The Means of Grace

The third area we consider in our look at historic Lutheranism is the teaching of the means of grace. The Augsburg Confession follows up Article IV on justification through faith with Article V on the means of grace. **"To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel."** The Smalcald Articles speak at greater length on this matter. In Part III, Article VIII Luther declares: **"God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before."** Again: **"God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament."** Luther's Small Catechism explains this in a similar way: **"I believe that I cannot by my own reasoning or effort believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel."**

This teaching is solidly based on the New Testament. Our Lord Jesus Himself prayed for His Church of believers (John chapter 17) and described them as **"those who will believe on Me through their word"** (that is, the word of His disciples). The apostle Paul states: **"It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe,"** (1 Cor. 1:21) and asks: **"How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?"** (Rom. 10:14)

Church Fellowship

Last of all, we come to the area of church fellowship. Almost all Lutherans today have forgotten (or never known or confessed) our historic Lutheran stance over against false teaching. Martin Luther explained how God's name is hallowed in his Small Catechism explanation of the First Petition: **"When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we as children of God also live a holy life according to it. Help us do this, dear heavenly Father. But whoever teaches and lives contrary to the Word of God dishonors God's name among us. Keep us from doing this, heavenly Father."**

Our Lutheran confessions warn us against the many doctrinal errors of Roman Catholicism, Calvinism, synergism (the teaching that man cooperates in his own conversion), and enthusiasm (the teaching that God's Spirit works without the means of grace). These warnings are not only to be heard with the ears but heeded by the whole body. Listen to this warning against the church of the papacy. **"Just as we cannot adore the devil himself as our lord or God, so we cannot suffer (permit) his apostle, the pope or Antichrist, to govern us as our head and lord"** (Smalcald Articles, Part II, Art. IV). And again: **"All Christians ought to beware of becoming participants in the impious doctrines, blasphemies, and unjust cruelties of the pope"** (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 1537).

The Augsburg Confession, Art. X, says: **"The true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected."** Art IX on Baptism says: **"The Anabaptists who teach that infant Baptism is not right are rejected."** The Formula of Concord says with respect to a large number of doctrinal errors found among various Anabaptist sects of the time: **"We have no part or share in their errors, be they few or many."**

False teachers among the Lutherans were denounced and avoided in the same way. External peace could have been achieved with more people if serious doctrinal errors had been overlooked. But our Lutheran fathers learned from bitter experience what they boldly confessed in the Formula of Concord: **"We have no intention to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually intended for its suppression. Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. ... We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him forever through the sole merit of Christ"** (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. XI).

These many warnings against error are, of course, based on many similar admonitions in the Holy Scriptures. Jesus Himself warned against false prophets in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 7:15): **"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves."** Almost every letter written by the apostle Paul in our New Testament contains some such warning. From Galatians: **"A little leaven leavens the whole lump."** From First Timothy: **"Charge some that they teach no other doctrine."** From Romans: **"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them."** The apostle John teaches the same thing: **"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds"** (2 John 10-11).

This concludes our summary of what it once meant to be a Lutheran. Lest we be misunderstood, we add this warning for the benefit of ourselves and others. Small church bodies like ours and sometimes even larger ones are guilty of teaching or implying that their group is the only saving church and that all those in all other churches are going to hell because they are not members of "our" church.

We would not be faithful to Lutheranism or Holy Scripture if we taught such a thing. The one way of salvation is Jesus Christ. All those who truly trust in Him alone for their salvation are children of God and heirs of salvation, regardless of the external church organization of which they are members. We joyfully teach and believe that our Lord has

His own in many different Lutheran and non-Lutheran church bodies, as long as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in them to any degree at all. But this truth should never make us careless with respect to the many warnings against false teaching spoken by our Lord and His apostles.

May the Holy Spirit bless the speaking of God's Word here tonight!

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