



Why are we Lutheran?

If someone came up to you and asked, "Why are you Lutheran?" how would you answer?

"Well, my parents were Lutheran."

"I married a Lutheran!"

"I live right down the street from a Lutheran church."

Hopefully, you have a better reason than those!

At the center of all Lutheran theology is Jesus Christ our Savior. We believe that the Bible is much more than a rule book that tells us how we are to live our lives. The Bible is God's revelation about how Jesus Christ saved us. We believe Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ways God offers us the forgiveness that Jesus Christ won on the cross. We believe that every single verse, every single chapter, every single book of the Bible, and every single doctrine ultimately point to Jesus.

Jesus Christ our Savior is at the center of a Lutheran's hope. If you ask the question "Why are you saved?" many people will want to talk about their lives. "I have tried my hardest to be a good person," they will say. Or perhaps "I have done my best." How horrible it must be for such people to go through life, wondering if their best is good enough to be saved!

Others will try to answer that question by talking

A Lutheran answers the question "Why are you saved?" with four words: Jesus Christ my Savior.

about their faith. "I'm saved because of my strong faith!" That too is a terrifying thought. Does that mean when I have doubts, my salvation disappears? Does it mean when my faith grows weak, my salvation grows unlikely? Does it mean when I am faithful, I am saved; but the times when I am unfaithful and commit sin, I am damned?

A Lutheran answers the question "Why are you saved?" with four words: Jesus Christ my Savior. Lutherans understand we are saved for one reason. Jesus Christ died to save us. Whether our good works are many or few, whether our faith is weak or strong . . . these things have no bearing on our salvation. For such things do not affect what Jesus did on the cross. He died so that we might live. He rose to prove we too will rise.

We are Lutheran because we are Christian.

None of this is Martin Luther's invention. Lutheran doctrine was not created by Martin Luther. Luther discovered nothing new. He simply taught what the Bible teaches. Lutheran teaching is biblical teaching, and the Bible teaches us about Jesus Christ our Savior.

Since Jesus Christ is at the center of all that Lutherans teach and believe, we realize that there is only one reason we are Lutheran. *We are Lutheran because we are Christian.* Christians love Christ, and since every aspect of Lutheranism points us to Christ, that's the reason we love being Lutheran.

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Faith alone

As Lutherans we summarize our beliefs with three phrases: FAITH ALONE, GRACE ALONE, and SCRIPTURE ALONE. That's Lutheran. But what do we mean when we say that we are saved by FAITH ALONE?

First, we need to understand what faith is. Perhaps you have heard someone say, "Keep the faith!" or "You've got to have faith!" Those expressions equate faith with optimism. When people say those things, they view faith as a warm feeling that "everything will be okay." Is that the way the Bible uses the word *faith*? Is that what we mean when we teach that we are saved through "faith alone"? Not at all.

If faith isn't just an optimistic hope that everything will be okay, then what is it? What does the Bible mean by faith? Paul tells us everything we need to know about faith when he writes, "[I do not have] a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Philippians 3:9).

Faith is trust in Jesus Christ and his work.

Paul tells us what faith is and what faith does.

Saving faith is "in Christ." Faith is trust in Jesus Christ and his work.

What does faith do? It receives Christ's righteousness. You can think of faith like an organ of the body. Through your eyes you receive visual

images. Through your ears you receive sound. Through your nose, smells. And through your faith you receive God's righteousness.

What is righteousness? Another way to describe righteousness is "holy perfection." God tells us that we receive holy perfection through faith. But no one has such perfection, except Jesus Christ. When we believe, God gives us the holy perfection, or righteousness, of Jesus. Faith is the organ that receives this great gift from God.

Our salvation depends on Christ's righteousness, that is, his holy perfection, given to us through faith. Jesus taught FAITH ALONE.

Therefore, when we teach that we are saved through FAITH ALONE, we are teaching that we need only Christ's righteousness to be saved.

The whole Bible says the same thing. We find it in the Old Testament: "Abram believed [that is, he had faith in] the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). Jesus teaches the same thing. Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him [that is, has faith in him] shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus does not say, "Whoever believes and tries his hardest to be a good person . . ." He says, "Whoever believes."

Our salvation depends on Christ's righteousness, that is, his holy perfection, given to us through faith. Jesus taught FAITH ALONE. And, therefore, so do we.

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Grace alone

If someone asked you, “What do Lutherans teach?” you could answer: “For one thing, Lutherans believe in GRACE ALONE.” But what does that mean?

The apostle Paul once wrote to Timothy that God “has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (2 Timothy 1:9). That one passage tells us much about grace. It tells us . . .

- 1. God’s grace is the reason that we’re saved.** Paul wrote that God has saved us because of his own purpose and GRACE.
- 2. God’s grace is undeserved.** By saying that God saved us, Paul tells us we have sinned. For only sinners need salvation. The Bible makes it clear what sinners deserve: “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Yet God chose not to condemn all people to eternal death. Rather, God chose to show us GRACE—*undeserved love*.
- 3. God’s grace is unearned.** Imagine if we had to somehow earn God’s grace to be saved. That would mean every night when we went to bed, we would have to wonder, “Have I done my part?”

God saved us not because of what is inside us. He saved us because of what is inside him—GRACE!

We could never be certain that we are saved! But Paul tells us that God’s salvation has nothing to do with “anything we have done.” God saved us not because of what is inside us. He saved us because of what is inside him—GRACE!

GRACE ALONE is the answer to life’s biggest question: “Why am I saved?”

- 4. God’s grace is seen in Christ Jesus.** God sent his only Son to die for those who rebel against him. The perfect one was punished. The imperfect are set free.
- 5. God’s grace is complete.** Paul didn’t say, “God saves us,” as if our salvation is an ongoing process. Nor does he say, “God will save us,” as if there is something left to do. He said God “*has saved* us.” Salvation is a done deal. On the cross Christ said, “It is finished.” His word is final. It is GRACE ALONE.
- 6. God’s grace is eternal.** Think about it. God had decided to send Jesus to save sinners “before the beginning of time.” His love for us is older than time itself!

GRACE ALONE is the answer to life’s biggest question: “Why am I saved?” To answer that question we don’t look to ourselves, our lives, or even our faith. Rather, we look to our gracious God, who has always loved us for no other reason than that he chose to love us.

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What's a sacrament?

Lutherans believe that the Bible identifies two special ceremonies as sacraments. They are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. They are special because Jesus established each of them and gives us forgiveness in both. What are the reasons Lutherans emphasize the use of these sacraments?

- 1. A sacrament is what God does for us, not what we do for God.** A sacrament is not a ceremony like a wedding or a confirmation. Those ceremonies do not forgive sins. Nor do the sacraments involve a sacrifice, as when we bring our offerings to the Lord. Sacraments ask nothing of us. They give something to us. In Baptism and the Lord's Supper, God comes to us to give us forgiveness.
- 2. The power of the sacraments lies in the Word of God.** Both sacraments include earthly elements—water for Baptism and bread and wine for the Lord's Supper. These earthly elements, by themselves, are nothing. But when they are connected with the Word of God, they give us forgiveness.

Sacraments ask nothing of us. They give something to us.

For example, there is no such thing as "holy water." What makes Baptism powerful is the Word, which is used with the water. The Bible calls Baptism the "washing with water *through the word*" (Ephesians 5:26, italics added). Likewise, there is nothing special about bread and wine. But in the Lord's Supper, those elements are connected with

Christ's promise, "Take and eat; this is my body. This is my blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:26,28).

- 3. God works in our human hearts through the sacraments.** God gives forgiveness in both sacraments. Because God works through the gospel of forgiveness in Jesus, the Holy Spirit works through the sacraments. God can create faith in the heart of an infant in Baptism because he is the almighty God of all creation and promises to work through Baptism. God also strengthens faith when we receive the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper.

God's endless love connected the forgiveness of sins to something we can see and touch in the sacraments.

- 4. The sacraments are for our benefit.** A husband tells his wife, "Honey, I love you." A husband gives his wife a bouquet of flowers and says, "Honey, I love you." In both cases the husband's love is genuine. The flowers don't make the love more real. They make it more vivid. God created us; therefore, he understands human beings like to use all their senses to help them understand something. So God's endless love connected the forgiveness of sins to something we can see and touch in the sacraments.

Why do Lutherans emphasize the sacraments? They are the means by which God gives us forgiveness, and they are the means by which God creates and preserves our faith.

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Scripture alone

As Lutherans we cherish the teaching of SCRIPTURE ALONE. Those two words emphasize how important Scripture is.

- 1. Scripture is God's Word.** We don't need to look for God in bizarre faraway places. We don't need to climb the mountains or cross the distant seas to find God. Where is God found? We know. In SCRIPTURE ALONE. For Scripture is God's very words. The Bible itself tells us, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). While Paul, Luke, and Moses put the pen to the paper, it was God who delivered the message of Scripture. God inspired the prophets and apostles to write the very words he wanted. Scripture is God's voice. Martin Luther once wrote, "Let the man who would hear God speak read Holy Scripture" (*What Luther Says*, p. 61). Are you looking for God? Do you wish to be close to him? Look in the Bible. You will always find him there.
- 2. Scripture is where God reveals Christ to us.** All of Scripture points to Jesus. The Old Testament promised that Jesus would come. The New Testament shows the promise fulfilled. The promise that God gives us in Scripture is the promise of forgiveness and eternal life, purchased by the blood of

God inspired the prophets and apostles to write the very words he wanted. Scripture is God's voice.

Christ. Scripture tells us step-by-step how Christ saved us. It tells us that Christ is God and that he became man. It tells us Christ lived a perfect life on our behalf. It tells us Christ gave his life as a payment for our sins.

Jesus himself said, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). Testimony is what is given in a trial. Scripture is God's own testimony that, in the great trial known as judgment day, we will be declared "not guilty" because of Jesus.

Scripture tells us step-by-step how Christ saved us.

- 3. Scripture is how God saves us.** God could "zap" faith into us if he wanted to do that. He could create faith while we are sleeping, eating, or playing a round of golf. But God has chosen to work through his SCRIPTURE ALONE. Through the gospel message, the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens saving faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible itself tells us, "By this gospel you are saved" (1 Corinthians 15:2).

Scripture is where God speaks to us. It is where God tells us about our Savior. It is the means by which God saves us. What do we need in order to have eternal life? SCRIPTURE ALONE. This is such a beautiful truth. A simple children's song tells us, "Jesus loves me, this I know." How do I know it? *"For the Bible tells me so."*

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Why is the catechism important?

When they are older, children should be allowed to decide for themselves whether they want to learn to read or not.

Would you agree with that statement? Of course not! Children need to be equipped with the proper tools to help them function in life. Imagine trying to get a job or trying to pay the bills without being able to read, to write, or to do simple math. It would be so difficult! We understand the importance of those “fundamentals”—reading, writing, and arithmetic. The very thought of waiting to teach reading until a child is old enough to make the decision to do so is ludicrous.

Reading is very important. But faith is even more important. Reading is of value to this life. But faith leads to eternal life. That’s why the very thought of allowing a child to grow up without basic *spiritual* instruction was ludicrous to Martin Luther. Luther took to heart what the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). Luther understood that the faith which the Holy Spirit creates in a child at Baptism must be nurtured with instruction in God’s Word. And so Luther wrote his Small Catechism. It was meant to be an instruction book that would help parents—especially fathers—teach the Bible to their children.

Luther’s Small Catechism is a series of questions and answers about the Bible’s most important teachings.

But what is a catechism? A catechism is any book that uses a series of questions and answers to teach a subject. Luther’s Small Catechism is a series of questions and answers about the Bible’s most important teachings. Working through those questions and answers with children enables us to teach them the fundamentals about the Bible. These are the six main parts of the catechism:

1. The Ten Commandments
2. The Apostles’ Creed
3. The Lord’s Prayer
4. Baptism
5. The Ministry of the Keys
6. The Lord’s Supper

Luther’s Small Catechism is infinitely more important than any reading or math book. For it teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why is it so important that we teach these things to our children? Luther writes, “In [the Catechism] the entire body of Christian doctrine, which every Christian must know in order to be saved, is contained. . . . Therefore we should by all means love and esteem the Catechism and diligently impress it upon youth” (*What Luther Says*, p. 124).

Luther’s Small Catechism is infinitely more important than any reading or math book. For it teaches the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is through the gospel that God accomplishes that which he loves most—the salvation of souls!

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We confess

We call ourselves confessional Lutherans. That means we are ready to tell others what we believe. WE CONFESS what we believe and teach. We have good reasons to confess.

1. We confess because we have been given the gift of faith. Imagine you won the multimillion-dollar Publisher's Clearing House sweepstakes. You would be so excited you would want to tell all the amazing details to everyone you know.

Those who have been given the gift of faith have won a heavenly sweepstakes: the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, riches stored up in heaven. Those gifts fill us with such joy that we cannot keep it to ourselves. We cannot help but relay the amazing details about what Christ has done for us, and for all. WE CONFESS.

2. We confess for the benefit of others. The gospel is God's promise of forgiveness.

Wherever that gospel is proclaimed, there the Holy Spirit is working on hearts. It makes no difference what form that gospel message takes. Reading the Bible, listening to a sermon, singing a hymn—all of these are ways we hear the gospel. Therefore, all of these are ways the Holy Spirit can strengthen our faith.

Our confession is yet another way to proclaim the gospel. For this reason, the confession of our faith to family, friends, and neighbors is

Our confession is yet another way to proclaim the gospel.

more than us talking. It is the Spirit working! When WE CONFESS, the Holy Spirit strengthens the faith of believers. Perhaps he will also bring unbelievers to faith!

3. We confess so that others will know what we believe. Just about every church will claim, "We believe what the Bible teaches." Yet different church bodies have vastly different teachings. Why is that? Sadly, many false teachers have twisted the truth of God's Word. WE CONFESS so that all will know that we are different from others who teach ideas not found in the Bible.

We want to tell the world what we believe and teach, so WE CONFESS.

Some might say, "As long as we agree that Jesus is the Savior, can't we agree to disagree about other parts of the Bible?" But God tells us that a little false teaching is enough to spoil a whole church. He says, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9), and he warns that false teaching "will spread like gangrene" (2 Timothy 2:17). WE CONFESS because not everyone believes the same things.

We want to tell the world what we believe and teach, so WE CONFESS. Martin Luther and his followers wrote down their confessions of faith. This collection of writings is known as the Lutheran Confessions. We cherish them and hold to them because we believe they accurately reflect what the Bible teaches and what we all still believe.

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What is a Lutheran?

A *Freudian* psychologist is one who adheres to the teachings of Sigmund Freud, the most famous of all psychologists. Some might define *Lutheran* in a similar way: someone who follows the teachings of Martin Luther. Yes, but there are two things wrong with that definition. First, some who claim to be Lutheran follow teachings inconsistent with those of Martin Luther. Second, and more important, Martin Luther would never have wanted people to blindly follow his teachings.

Luther lived at a time when the gospel was all but lost. The church of his day taught that sins were paid for by doing penance, that is, good works that supposedly erased bad deeds. If you couldn't do enough good works to pay for all your sins, you could buy the good works of others. This purchase was known as an indulgence. Jesus was never portrayed as the Savior, only as a merciless judge.

Martin Luther would never have wanted people to blindly follow his teachings.

Many people accepted these false teachings without question, because they had no way to hear the truths of God's Word. The few Bibles that existed were locked up in the monasteries and churches. And those Bibles were generally Latin translations, a language few understood.

When Martin Luther heard these teachings, he feared he would never be able to do enough good to win God's favor. He dreaded that he had no chance

of going to heaven. He became a monk to earn God's love. But when Luther became a monk, he gained access to the Bible. As he read and studied the Bible, he learned that humans of all time have been granted forgiveness of sins, full and free, because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

From that point on, Luther realized how dangerous it is to blindly follow the religious teachings of others. He understood that only God's Word can unlock the mystery of salvation. So Luther translated the entire Bible into German so that people could read it for themselves.

A Lutheran is someone who, like Luther, understands how important God's Word is to our salvation.

What is a Lutheran? A Lutheran is not someone who blindly follows the teachings of Martin Luther. How Luther would have hated that! Luther once wrote, "Nothing better could be wished than that all books would be put aside and nothing else stay in all the world, especially among Christians, but simply the pure Scripture or Bible" (*What Luther Says*, p. 112).

A Lutheran is someone who, like Luther, understands that only God's Word can dictate our conscience. A Lutheran is someone who, like Luther, understands how important God's Word is to our salvation. Simply put, being Lutheran means being like Luther when it comes to God's Word. We love it more than anything. We study it all we can. We defend it courageously. We proclaim it boldly. Just like Martin Luther.

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