



# The Lutherans

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Introduction: Like Catholics, Lutherans have had a hand in the shaping of life in America from very early on. Lutheran colonists arrived on Manhattan Island from Holland in 1623. As America grew, Lutheran settlements sprung up throughout the land, mainly as a result of immigrations from Germany and Scandinavia (Mead, 1980, p. 157). There are today approximately 80 million Lutherans throughout the world with over 8 million in the United States (Heyne). In the continental U. S., Lutherans are strongest in the upper-middle section of the country.

Lutherans believe in the Bible as the word of God; they claim to revere the scriptures as the sole infallible standard of faith and practice. They also deny that church tradition carries the same weight of authority as the Bible (Tappert, 1987, p. 117). This is important common ground for us. We as Christians should have a more positive outlook toward studying the Bible with Lutherans than we might have toward studying with many other religious people. We should be excited about comparing Lutheran beliefs and practices to the Bible in order to learn how best to conduct a profitable spiritual discussion with Lutherans.

## < Point of Origin >

Martin Luther was born in the central German town of Eisleben on November 10, 1483. He is generally regarded as both the father of the Protestant Reformation and the founder of the Lutheran church; in point of fact, neither description is strictly true. In the first place, protests of abuses and attempts at reforming the Catholic church had been ongoing for centuries before Luther. Philip Waldo, William of Occam, John Wyclif and John Huss, among others, each had a significant following of protestors. But the Catholic church had successfully restrained these earlier movements, often by

force. For instance Wyclif's followers, who taught against the authority of the papacy and the sale of indulgences in the late 1300's, were "burned as heretics or hanged as rebellious spirits" (Bergendoff, 1967, p. 24). In the second place, Luther did not set out to start a church to wear his name. He had emphasized the importance of an individual following the scriptures in accordance with his own conscience. He further stated, "I beg that my name be not mentioned, and that people be called Christians, not Lutherans" (Tappert, 1987, p. 116).

Educated at Erfut University, Luther received a master of arts degree in 1505. That year he became an Augustinian monk and soon a Catholic priest. He was assigned as an instructor at the University of Wittenberg in 1508. Appointed to the chair of biblical study there, Luther's study of the scriptures eventually led him away from the teachings of the Catholic Church. He came to believe that, instead of doing good works to merit salvation as the Church taught, man could do nothing at all to bring about his own salvation (Bainton, 1987, p. 111).

But it was the sale of indulgences that brought Luther into direct conflict with the Catholic Church. In Luther's day, representatives of the Pope, notably John Tetzel, were selling indulgences to build St. Peter's basilica. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed "The Ninety--five Theses" to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This document contained 95 paragraphs Luther proposed to debate. In it, Luther denied the jurisdiction of the Pope over purgatory. He said that if the pope could release the souls in purgatory, he should let them all out without collecting a penny from selling indulgences.

Luther was branded a heretic by Pope Leo X and excommunicated in June, 1520 (Stewart, 1964). The Pope demanded that Luther be tried before the leaders of the German empire at the Diet of Worms [Note: a "diet" is a formal meeting of rulers; "Worms" is a city in Germany]. Luther was called upon to reverse his position. His famous reply was, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me." (Bainton, 1987, p. 114).

Luther would have been arrested and probably burned at the stake had it not been for the political climate in Germany at the time. Luther lived in an area ruled by an independent prince named Frederick of Saxony. Frederick hid Luther in Wartburg Castle. For some time Luther stayed in seclusion, translating the Bible into German, studying and writing. When the reformation movement in Wittenberg really began to

take shape under the guidance of his friend Philip Melanchthon, Luther returned to public life as a professor and preacher. He was revered and protected by the people of Wittenberg. He married, had six children, and died in bed in Eisleben, the town of his birth, on February 18, 1546.

Luther tried to reshape the Catholic Church in accordance with his understanding of the New Testament. He believed that the "clergy" could marry, that all believers are priests, that baptism should preferably be by immersion, and that it is essential for salvation. However, Luther taught infant baptism, saying that the infants are aided by the faith of others who bring them to be baptized. He also accepted many other Catholic traditions because he believed that traditions which were not specifically forbidden by scripture could be "retained

### < Fundamental Distinctive Points of Lutheran Belief >

1. Faith Only. The most basic teaching of Luther, and the most fundamental belief of Lutherans today, is that "justification is solely for Christ's sake and solely by faith." (Mayer, 1961, p. 157). Man cannot do anything to bring about his own salvation; it is by faith alone. Luther felt so strongly about this that, in his translation of the Bible, he added the word "only" to Romans 3:28 to make it read: "... a man is justified by faith only, without the deeds of the law." Due in part to this sentiment, Luther did not care much for the epistle of James and its emphasis on works. Although his view on this matter is not shared by the Lutheran church, Luther called the epistle of James "a right strawy epistle" and said that it "is no right apostolic epistle." (Lenski, 1966, pp. 514–515).

2. How faith comes. Lutherans believe that saving faith can only come through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit uses the gospel as the sole means of creating faith in man. Lutherans would be generally opposed to the "charismatic" movement which teaches that the Holy Spirit uses other vehicles besides the Word to reach man.

3. Authority of Scripture. Lutherans believe the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God. They say, "No one may add to the Bible or take away anything from it. We dare not corrupt the Word of God by putting our own meaning into the text, thereby endeavoring to make God say what we want Him to say" (Koehler, 1960, p. 18). But it should be said that Lutherans, following Luther's own rule, willingly accept traditions which the scriptures do not specifically forbid. In other words, Lutherans do not believe that the silence of the scriptures is prohibitive.

Lutherans also have high regard for other writings, particularly those of Martin Luther himself. The most significant of these are the Large and Small Catechisms (1529) and the Schmalcald Articles (1537). These documents have been collected together along with the Augsburg Confession written by Melanchthon, the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, and the Formula of Concord (1577) into what might be called the official Lutheran creed book; it is known as the Book of Concord. Lutherans do not claim this book as authoritative, but they do believe its teachings are in harmony with scripture.

4. The Sacraments. Lutherans accept only two of the seven Catholic sacraments -- the Lord's supper and baptism. These are visible acts carried out by the church through which believers supposedly receive God's grace. Infants are "baptized" by sprinkling, through which they are born into the church. Later, usually in the 7th and 8th grades in America, they undergo a lengthy training process (catechetical instruction) after which they may receive "confirmation" as church members and become eligible to participate in communion. The Lord's supper is offered to all church members. Lutherans reject the Catholic notion that the bread and fruit of the vine are changed into the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation); rather, they accept the description of Luther that the sacrament of the Lord's supper is "the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine" (Small Catechism).

5. No Special Priesthood. Lutherans teach that all believers are priests. Unlike the Roman Catholics, Lutherans claim no special power for their church leaders.

6. The church. The universal church is composed of all who have faith in Christ. This is the only unity that is required. The Lutheran church itself is viewed as a denomination. "Lutherans are saints -- as are Christians of any denomination" (Heyne).

### Basic Lutheran Practices

Lutheran churches usually contain both an altar and a pulpit. They frequently make use of special clothing for clergy (vestments), crucifixes and candles. Hymn singing and congregational participation in liturgical responses are distinctive features of the Lutheran worship service (Tappert, 1987, p. 117). Originally, the Lutheran service maintained many similarities with the catholic mass. "The Lutheran church retains all such ceremonies as serve the Christian in his worship, as help to establish the historical continuity of the church, as are pedagogically useful and promote outward

decency and order in public worship" (Mayer, 1960, p. 151).

Lutherans feel that an exact form of church government is not prescribed by scripture, and therefore they are free to adopt whatever form they deem expedient. In America, this has usually led to individual congregations uniting together in synods or regional conferences, to which each congregation sends elected representatives. The synods may serve as church legislatures or merely as advisors. These in turn may be united into a larger synod or church of national or international proportions. These general bodies usually supervise the larger work done in education, publications, charity, and missions. A local Lutheran church is typically overseen by "a council consisting of the preacher, who is called the pastor, and elected individuals from the congregation" (Stewart, 1964, p. 34). Historically, Lutherans have been divided into many different organizational bodies in America, but this trend has reversed itself over the last few years. Presently, after several decades of unions and mergers, there are two main divisions among Lutheran churches: The American Lutheran Church – Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod).

## Cross-points

Lutherans come closer to imitating New Testament Christianity than the Roman Catholics previously studied in this series of lessons. However, there still are many contradictions between Lutheran doctrine and the Bible. This is especially so if we let plain statements of Lutheran doctrine stand "as is" against plain statements of scripture.

### Lutheran Doctrine

1. Original Sin. "Since Adam's fall, all men begotten after the common course of nature are born with sin" (Augsburg Confession). "All mankind has inherited from Adam a total corruption of the whole human nature. This total corruption passes on from parents to children." (Koehler, 1960, p. 43).

2. Church Unity. "Unto the true unity of the Church it is sufficient to agree

### The Bible

1. Original Sin. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." (Ezekiel 18:20).

2. Church Unity. "I plead with you, brethren . . . that you all speak the same

concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments: nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by men should be alike everywhere." (Augsburg Confession).

3. Oath Taking. "Christians may . . . take an oath when the magistrates require." (Augsburg Confession).

4. Faith Only. "Faith alone without works justifies, sets free and saves". "Since, then, works justify no man, but a man must be justified before he can do any good work, it is most evident that it is faith alone which . . . can worthily and sufficiently justify and save the person; and that a Christian man needs no work, no law, for his salvation; for by faith he is free from all law..." (Martin Luther).

5. Mode of Baptism. "The mode of applying water in Baptism is not indicated in the Scriptures, neither does it depend on the amount of water used or where it is applied. It may be applied by pouring, washing, sprinkling or immersing." (Koehler, 1960, p. 138).

6. Infant Baptism. "According to the Scriptures 'all nations' are to be baptized; this includes men, women, and children."

thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement." "...as I teach everywhere in every church." I Corinthians 1:10; 4:17b).

3. Oath Taking. "But I say to you, do not swear at all..." "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is of the evil one." (Matthew 5:33a, 37).

4. Faith Only. "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." (James 2:24). "...Not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ..." (I Corinthians 9:21b).

5. Mode of Baptism. "Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there." (John. 3:23). "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately, coming up from the water..." (Mark 1:9b-10a). "And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him" (Acts 8:38). "Buried with Him in baptism..." (Colossians 2:12).

6. Infant Baptism. "And the eunuch said, 'See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?' Then Philip said, "If you

"Little children are baptized without previous instruction." (Koehler, 1960, p. 138). "Faith does not belong to the essence of baptism. Faith is indeed necessary, not to make baptism efficacious, but to receive its blessings."

"The psychological problem as to an infant's capability to believe is ruled out of order, for even if children could not believe, Baptism still would remain God's ordinance." (Mayer, 1961, p. 165f).

7. Imputation of Christ's Righteousness. Man is declared just by God "not because of his own righteousness, but because of Christ's, which is a foreign righteousness and is communicated through grace. Therefore in this article righteousness is always the imputation of a foreign righteousness." (Apology of the Augsburg Confession).

believe with all your heart you may." (Acts 8:36b–37a). "But when they believed...both men and women were baptized." (Acts 8:12). "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16a).

7. Imputation of Christ's Righteousness. "Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous." (I John 3:7). "The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ezekiel 18:20).

## < Weak Points of Lutheranism >

1. Acceptance of many Catholic traditions. As we've seen, it was Luther's mission to make reforms within the Catholic church, not to break away from it. Neither he, nor those who wear his name today, see anything wrong with most of the human traditions within Catholicism. Many of these traditions have been adopted by Lutherans, so that the Lutheran church today more closely resembles the modern Roman Catholic church (at least externally) than it does the church you can read about in the New Testament.

2. Acceptance of human creeds and catechisms. It is highly inconsistent to claim the Bible as the sole source of authority, and yet rely so heavily on the works of men to define acceptable beliefs and practices.

3. Luther was against Lutheranism. Martin Luther expressly stated that he did not want his followers to be called "Lutherans". He no doubt recognized that such was expressly condemned in scripture (I Corinthians 1:10–13; 3:4). The fact that the Lutheran church exists today, against both the expressed wishes of God and Luther, indicts Lutherans as being disrespectful to the man to whom they owe their religious ideals, and disobedient to God to whom they owe all else.

### Review Questions on Lutheranism

1. Was Martin Luther the one who first began protests against the Roman Catholic Church?
2. Did Luther want his followers to be called "Lutherans"?
3. What were some of the main differences Luther had with the Catholic Church?
4. What was "The Ninety-five Theses"? What did it protest?
5. Explain this statement: "Luther could not live by a Diet of Worms."
6. What do you think Lutherans would identify as their most important belief?
7. Which book of the New Testament did Luther say was not really an "apostolic epistle"?  
Why did he say this?
8. In your opinion, what is the clearest contradiction between Lutheran teaching and the Bible?
9. What do you see as the biggest weakness in Lutheranism?

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