

## What is the Church?

The Christian church is made up of those who have been baptized and thus have received Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world. Lutherans believe that they are a part of a community of faith that began with the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's presence with his people, on the day of Pentecost. The church, regardless of the external form it takes, is the fellowship of those who have been restored to God by Christ. Indeed, to be called into fellowship with Christ is also to be called into community with other believers.

The church is essential to Christian life and growth. Its members are all sinners in need of God's grace. It has no claim on human perfection. The church exists solely for the hearing and doing of God's Word. It can justify its existence only when it proclaims the living Word of Christ, administers the Sacraments and gives itself to the world in deeds of service and love. Most Lutherans recognize a wider fellowship of churches and are eager to work alongside them in ecumenical ministries and projects.

Why a Lutheran church ?

Martin Luther (b. November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany, d. February 18, 1546 in Eisleben) is known as the Father of Protestantism. He had been a lawyer before becoming an Augustinian monk in 1505, and was ordained a priest in 1507. While continuing his studies in pursuit of a Doctor of Theology degree, he discovered significant differences between what he read in the Bible and the theology and practices of the church. On October 31, 1517, he posted a challenge on the church door at Wittenberg University to debate 95 theological issues. Luther's hope was that the church would reform its practice and preaching to be more consistent with the Word of God as contained in the Bible.

What started as an academic debate escalated to a religious war, fueled by fiery temperaments and violent language on both sides. As a result, there was not a reformation of the church but a separation. "Lutheran" was a name applied to Luther and his followers as an insult but adopted as a badge of honor by them instead.

Lutherans still celebrate the Reformation on October 31 and still hold to the basic principles of theology and practice espoused by Luther, such as Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura:

We are saved by the grace of God alone -- not by anything we do;

Our salvation is through faith alone -- we only need to believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who died to redeem us;

The Bible is the only norm of doctrine and life -- the only true standard by which teachings and doctrines are to be judged.

Scriptures and worship need to be done in the language of the people.

Many Lutherans still consider themselves as a reforming movement within the Church catholic, rather than a separatist movement, and Lutherans have engaged in ecumenical dialogue with other church bodies for decades.

Luther's Small Catechism is still used to introduce people to the Lutheran faith, as is the Augsburg Confession. These and other Lutheran confessional documents included in the Book of Concord may be ordered from the ELCA Publishing House at 800/328-4648.

## **What Lutherans Believe**

"Do Lutherans believe theirs is the only true religion?" This question was once put to the late Dr. Elson Ruff, editor of *The Lutheran*. His answer was, "Yes, but Lutherans don't believe they are the only ones who have it. There are true Christian believers in a vast majority of the churches, perhaps in all."

What is it, then, that Lutherans believe and practice? Here are some brief answers to questions often asked. Before answering the questions, however, it is well to remember that not all Lutherans express their beliefs in exactly the same way. Within Lutheranism there is room for differences in interpretation and understanding, but on issues central to the faith there is, with few exceptions, common accord.

## **Who is Jesus Christ?**

Jesus is God's son, chosen by God to become human like us. In his life and being he broke through the prison of sinfulness and thus restored the relationship of love and trust that God intended to exist between himself and his children.

The man, Jesus of Nazareth, lived and died in Palestine during the governorship of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate; and we believe him to be the Messiah chosen by God to show his love for the world. He is God, yet with all the limitations of being human. His relationship to God, however, was not one of sin but rather of perfect obedience to the Father's will. For the sake of a sinful world, Jesus was condemned to death on the cross.

But death could not contain him. On the third day after his execution, the day Christians observe as Easter, Jesus appeared among his followers as the risen, living Lord. By this great victory, God has declared the good news of reconciliation. The gap between all that separates us from our Creator has been bridged. Thus, Christ lives today wherever there are people who faithfully believe in him, and wherever the Good News of reconciliation is preached and the Sacraments administered.

## **How do Lutherans look upon the Bible ?**

To borrow a phrase from Luther, the Bible is "the manger in which the Word of God is laid." While Lutherans recognize differences in the way the Bible should be studied and interpreted, it is accepted as the primary and authoritative witness to the church's faith. Written and transcribed by many authors over a period of many centuries, the Bible bears remarkable testimony to the mighty acts of God in the lives of people and nations. In the Old Testament is found the vivid account of God's covenant relationship to Israel. In the New Testament is founding the story of God's new covenant with all of creation in Jesus.

The New Testament is the first-hand proclamation of those who lived through the events of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection. As such, it is the authority for Christian faith and practice. The Bible is thus not a definitive record of history or science. Rather, it is the record of the drama of God's saving care for creation throughout the course of history.

## **What do Lutherans believe about Creation ?**

Lutherans believe that God is Creator of the universe. Its dimensions of space and time are not something God made once and then left alone. God is, rather, continually creating, calling into being each moment of each day.

Human beings have a unique position in the order of creation. As males and females created in God's image, we are given the capacity and freedom to know and respond to our creator. Freedom implies

that we can choose either positively or negatively to respond to God. Doubtlessly, this is God's most generous gift to humankind.

"Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice," an ELCA Statement on caring for God's creation, is available from the ELCA Distribution Service (800/328-4648) free (+ postage and handling). Order Code: 67-1185.

### **Where do Lutherans stand on the question of sin ?**

Lutherans believe that all people live in a condition which is the result of misused freedom. "Sin" describes not so much individual acts of wrongdoing as fractured relationships between the people of creation and God. Our every attempt to please God falls short of the mark. By the standard of the Law, of which the Ten Commandments are a classic summary, God expresses his just and loving expectations for creation, and our failure to live up to those expectations reveals only our need for God's mercy and forgiveness.

### **What Sacraments do Lutherans accept ?**

Lutherans accept two Sacraments as God-given means for penetrating the lives of people with his grace. Although they are not the only means of God's self-revelation, Baptism and Holy Communion are visible acts of God's love.

In Baptism, and it can be seen more clearly in infant Baptism, God freely offers his grace and lovingly establishes a new community. In Holy Communion -- often called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist -- those who come to the table receive in bread and wine the body and blood of their Lord. This gift is itself the real presence of God's forgiveness and mercy, nourishing believers in union with their Lord and with each other.

### **Do Lutherans believe in life after death ?**

While there is much we do not and cannot know about life beyond the grave, Lutherans do believe that life with God persists even after death. Judgment is both a present and future reality, and history moves steadily towards God's ultimate fulfillment.

This, of course, is a great mystery and no description of what life may be like in any dimension beyond history is possible. Anxiety for the future is not a mark of faith. Christians should go about their daily tasks, trusting in God's grace and living a life of service in his name.

### **What must a person do to become a Lutheran ?**

To become a Lutheran, only Baptism and instructions in the Christian faith is required. If you are already baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it will be necessary only to attend a membership class in a Lutheran congregation and thus signify your desire to become a part of its community. Active members of other Lutheran congregations usually need only to transfer their membership.