

LUTHERANISM — *and* — OTHER DENOMINATIONS



A RESOURCE FROM *THE LUTHERAN WITNESS*

LUTHERANISM — *and* — OTHER DENOMINATIONS



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A version of this text was originally published in the October 2022 issue of *The Lutheran Witness*, titled “We Believe, Teach and Confess.”

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Table of Contents

Preface4

Roman Catholic 7

Eastern Orthodox10

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America12

Anglican 14

Reformed.....16

Presbyterian18

Methodist20

Baptist22

Pentecostal 24

Amish & Mennonite26

Non-Denominational28

Conclusion32

Preface

COMMON QUESTIONS, ESSENTIAL ANSWERS

By the Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison

Thousands of Christian denominations cover the globe, including “non-denoms,” which are themselves a kind of denomination. How can confessional Lutherans possibly claim that we have the correct teaching of Christ over against so many others? It’s not quite as complex as it seems. Only a couple of questions help us get to the heart of the matter. Think of it like a flowchart.

The first question is: “What is the highest authority in the church?”

If the answer is church, council or pope, then one has the choice between the Roman Catholic Church or Eastern Orthodoxy. If the answer is that Scripture is higher than popes or councils, it’s a choice between so-called Protestant churches.

Rome places councils and popes above Scripture as seen in the promulgation of doctrines about Mary in 1854 and 1950. The first states, “The most Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception ... was kept free of every stain of original sin.” The second, in 1950, states, “Mary, Immaculate Mother of God ever Virgin, after finishing the course of her life on earth, was taken up in body and soul to heavenly glory.” Rome asserts that there are “traditions” outside of Holy Scripture that must, if confirmed by the pope and church, be believed by all faithful Christians. There’s only one problem: The Holy Scriptures say not a whisper about these teachings.

Our response is that no matter how significant and meaningful these traditions are to you, you cannot charge the church to believe anything that is not found in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. Scripture alone determines doctrine. Lutherans have a positive view of tradition. Luther’s was a conservative reformation. The Lutherans retained and purified traditions and practices that did not contradict the Gospel of free forgiveness in Christ’s cross and resurrection. But tradition must always be subservient to and normed by Scripture alone. Just note the way Jesus rejected traditions not supported by the Bible: “In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (MATT. 15:9).

The second question in the flowchart is, “What role do works play in salvation?” Today, the question is often asked this way: “Does

Scripture teach that you must make a decision to be saved?" If yes, go to the churches that teach decision theology. If no, go to the churches that teach that salvation is by God's complete work alone. The Gospel is exceedingly clear. Augsburg Confession IV lays it out, based upon Romans 3-4: "Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight."

This confession draws a line over against any teaching or tradition that would turn the Gospel into Law (our doing, our decision, our action) and condemns such teachings.

A third question then arises: "How does what happened on the cross 2,000 years ago and thousands of miles away (from the central U.S.) get to us here and now?" If the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross is delivered to you in some abstract, imperceptible or internal way, go to the churches without Sacraments. If Jesus delivers His forgiveness in real, perceptible, tangible ways — water, word, bread and wine — go to a church with these Means of Grace.

The Lutheran Church is nothing new. It is as old as the word of the apostles and prophets. It is the church that believes Scripture is the sole rule and norm of faith and practice. It is the church that believes salvation is 100% God's work, that no contribution of man, however small, is required. And it is the church that believes God delivers His gifts in physical means, in Sacraments.

We could add other questions to the flowchart:

- ✚ Is the Word of God mere information upon which I am to make a decision? Or is God's Word "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow" (HEB. 4:12)? Is it "the power of God for salvation" (ROM. 1:16)?
- ✚ Does the word of the Law actually condemn, "that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (ROM. 3:19), or does it only give the way to live a God-pleasing life? It's not the Gospel if salvation is finally up to me. God says, "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked ... but God ... made us alive" (EPH. 2:1-2, 4-5).

- ✦ Is Baptism a symbol of grace, or worse, something I do to show I'm serious about God? Or does it actually bestow the forgiveness of sins as the New Testament repeatedly teaches? Does it bring the treasures of Christ's death and resurrection to me as God's own act? "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (TITUS 3:5).
- ✦ Is the Lord's Supper a symbol of the body and blood of Christ, which are far away in heaven, or is what Christ says true? "This is my body ... this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (MATT. 26:26, 28).

If I believe salvation is something worked by a secret voice of God, quite apart from His Word, if the Sacraments are symbols of salvation, then I belong in one of the many Reformed churches, which include many of the "non-denominational" churches.

Confessional Lutherans have never denied one can be saved outside the Lutheran church. A pure confession doesn't save; Jesus saves. Faith clings to Him. The point of being Lutheran is not to be proud of one's confession, but to be confident of one's salvation, purely for the sake of Jesus.

It's not easy to be confessional Lutherans who have the highest regard for the inerrant Scriptures and the summary of Scripture in the blessed catechism, and to hold to them over against many false teachings about Jesus and His Gospel. But it's never been different. We hold to the right teaching of the Gospel and all its articles because therein we have absolute certainty that we are God's children by His grace alone. We will not compromise or give up anything of the Six Chief Parts (Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Keys, Supper). These are very clearly taught by Jesus in the Gospels and bolstered by the rest of the New Testament. But we also rejoice greatly when we see, hear and know sincere people who love Jesus and believe in His forgiveness, even if they get some things wrong.

Roman Catholic

FAITH AND WORKS

History

The Roman Catholic (RC) church traces itself to the apostle Peter, whom it considers to be the first pope. According to RC teaching, Peter was chief among the original 12 apostles and served as the first bishop of Rome. Many historians, however, consider the RC church to have been instituted in A.D. 590 when Gregory I (also known as Gregory the Great) consolidated the church's authority and initiated the papacy as it exists today.

The RC church has had far-reaching influence on the world not only in spiritual matters but also in temporal matters, involving itself in politics, war and other societal forces. The conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in A.D. 312 and the rise of Islam in the seventh century were pivotal events that, along with the sending of missionaries, contributed to the spread of Christianity in Europe and beyond.

In 1054, a schism split the church between East (Orthodox) and West (RC). As Roman Catholicism reached the height of its power and influence in the 12th and 13th centuries, the church increasingly began persecuting those who challenged its teachings. This persecution — known as the Inquisition — sometimes led to the execution of the so-called heretics. In 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses, setting off the Reformation. In the centuries that followed, one group after another broke away from the RC church and its offshoots, resulting in the tens of thousands of Christian denominations that exist today.

Confessional Documents

The RC church subscribes to a “sacred deposit of faith” that comprises both Scripture and tradition and is transmitted to the church through the pope via his bishops. The core documents of the RC church, in addition to the Bible, are the RC catechism; the codes of canon law (rules for the church's organization and governance); 21 ecumenical councils, including Vatican I and Vatican II; and the official acts of the Holy See (the Vatican). The RC church also recognizes as Scripture seven Old Testament books, known as the Apocrypha, that are not included in Lutheran or Protestant Bibles.

Key Beliefs

The Roman Catholic Church teaches:

- ✦ It is the one true church, deriving its authority from the “apostolic succession” of its popes, who retain the authority granted to Peter by Jesus in Matthew 16:18–19: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”
- ✦ The doctrinal pronouncements of the pope are infallible.
- ✦ According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), “Justification establishes cooperation between God’s grace and man’s freedom” (CCC 1993). According to RC doctrine, Christ has freed the faithful from eternal punishment for sin, but not from temporal punishment, which must still be paid, either on earth or in purgatory (an intermediate step on the way to heaven). However, the life and work of Christ, along with that of Mary and the saints, has built up a storehouse or treasury of merit that is held by the church and dispensed, as the church sees fit, in the form of indulgences. Indulgences may lessen the time one needs to spend in purgatory.
- ✦ Mary is preeminent among the saints and holds a unique place at God’s right hand. She was immaculately conceived, that is, without original sin and remained sinless throughout her life. She also serves as a “co-redemptrix” with Christ by virtue of bearing Him, and she intercedes to the Father on sinners’ behalf.
- ✦ The sacraments, according to the CCC, are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed.” The RC church recognizes seven sacraments — Baptism, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation (confession and penance), Extreme Unction (anointing of the sick), Holy Orders (ordination) and Marriage — and teaches that they are required for salvation: “If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary unto salvation, but superfluous; and that, without them, or without the desire thereof, men obtain of God, through faith

alone, the grace of justification; though all (the sacraments) are not indeed necessary for every individual; let him be anathema” (The Council of Trent, Seventh Session, Canon IV).

- ✚ The Eucharist is both a sacramental (Christ’s work) and a sacrificial (man’s work) act: “We carry out this command of the Lord by celebrating the *memorial of his sacrifice*. In so doing, *we offer to the Father* what he has himself given us: the gifts of his creation, bread and wine which, by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the words of Christ, have become the body and blood of Christ” (CCC 1357). When the priest speaks the Words of Institution, the bread and wine are changed, in their substance, into the body and blood of Jesus; they are no longer bread and wine but only appear to be. This is known as transubstantiation.

— WE CONFESS —

As Lutherans, we confess that Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead paid the price, once and for all, for sin. The only human who was ever born without sin or lived a sinless life is Jesus Christ. There is nothing a human being can do to add to Christ’s work (*solus Christus*). Sinners are justified by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*), and this is not their own doing, but a “gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (EPH. 2:8–9). This truth is revealed to God’s people only in His Word (*sola Scriptura*). Regarding the Lord’s Supper, Lutherans confess that it is God’s gift and entirely His work, and that the body and blood of Christ are present in, with and under the bread and wine; we call this the real presence.

Eastern Orthodox

REVELATION IN LITURGY

History

By the sixth century A.D., Rome became the center of Western Christianity, with the bishop of Rome as its head. Constantinople was the center of Eastern Christianity, with the patriarch of Constantinople as its head. Increasingly, the East and the West diverged from one another in theology and practice.

In A.D. 1054, these divergences came to a head in the Great Schism, which divided the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church rejected the West's insistence on the primacy of the bishop of Rome (the pope) and on the inclusion of the *filioque* in the Nicene Creed (the confession that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*).

Confessional Documents

Eastern Orthodoxy has long had an aversion to confessional documents, considering such systematic formulations the heritage of Western philosophy. Dogmatic statements, they concede, are occasionally necessary to combat false teaching, but generally cannot capture incomprehensible truths.

Instead, they argue, all Orthodox Christians partake in the “Treasure of Faith” handed down to them and instilled in them through the life of the church. This Treasure of Faith (or “Tradition”) includes the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the Nicene Creed (without the *filioque*), Scripture, the teachings of the church fathers, the liturgy, the lives of the saints, prayers, hymns and icons.

Key Beliefs

- ✚ **Theosis (or “deification”)** — The purpose of the Christian life is *theosis*, or ascension toward God. Orthodox often quote Athanasius: “God became what we are so that we may become what He is.” The Holy Spirit works in Christians to restore the image of God in us, but He does so only with our active participation.
- ✚ **Ancestral sin** — The Orthodox reject the notion of “original sin” in favor of the concept of “ancestral sin.” Mankind has inherited Adam’s inclination toward sin; however, we

are guilty only for the sin that we ourselves commit. Further, man's nature is not utterly depraved, merely distorted by sin. Man still has the power to seek God.

✚ **Divine Liturgy** — The Orthodox believe that their divine liturgy developed over time as part of the Treasure of Faith. Just like Scripture, the liturgy is a part of God's revelation to man.

✚ **Revelation** — Orthodox Christians believe that man can know God only insofar as He reveals Himself to us through the church and its Treasure of Faith. Scripture is God's revelation, but "it does not contain wholly that revelation," and the Orthodox Church is the "guardian and interpreter of the Scriptures" (see goarch.org/-/teachings-of-the-orthodox-church).

✚ **Veneration of saints** — The Orthodox view saints as those who have attained salvation. Their examples of holy living can help us along the way in our spiritual lives. The Orthodox thus pray to saints for intercession and revere their icons.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans confess that, while the Holy Spirit restores Christians to the image of God, mankind cannot actively participate in our salvation or choose to accept Christ (ROM. 9:16-18). Mankind inherits not only Adam's dark inclinations, but also his sinful nature, which merits damnation apart from Christ (PSALM 51:5; EPH. 2:3). Both redemption and salvation are entirely God's act, not ours. Sanctification follows these and is also the work of God.

Lutheran liturgy is drawn from Scripture, and we prize it insofar as it delivers the Means of Grace. However, it is not itself a part of God's revelation; it is a creation of the church and subject to the authority of Scripture. Changing it, for better or for worse, would leave God's revelation whole and untouched.

Lutherans agree that man can know God only insofar as God reveals Himself. However, God's Word is the primary source and rule of this revelation. God reveals Himself through it to all Christians, and all that contradicts its teachings must be rejected (2 TIM. 3:16-17).

The invocation of the saints has no place in the Lutheran church; we have a better advocate with the Father than any saint: Christ Jesus (1 TIM. 2:5). We give honor and reverence to Christ alone.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

DIVERSE, INCLUSIVE, ECUMENICAL

History

Not every denomination bearing the name “Lutheran” is actually Lutheran. The ELCA is the largest church body in America with Lutheran in its name. As such, many people consider the ELCA a representative example of Lutheran doctrine and teaching. Do its teachings bear this out?

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) formed in 1988 from three Lutheran church bodies: The American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America. Since the ELCA's history is one of merger and union, its history precedes 1988.

The American Lutheran Church formed in 1960 by the merger of three other church bodies, which were the result of the merger of yet other Lutheran church bodies in America. The same is true of the Lutheran Church in America, which formed in 1962. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, however, formed in 1976 not by virtue of merger, but by congregations leaving The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) as a consequence of theological disagreement and the subsequent political fallout.

In the years since its founding, the ELCA has declared full fellowship with numerous church bodies despite fundamental doctrinal differences. In 1997, the ELCA entered into full fellowship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ. In 1999, the ELCA declared fellowship with The Episcopal Church and The Moravian Church, and in 2009 with the United Methodist Church.

In 2009, when the ELCA decided to allow clergy in committed same-sex relationships to serve in the church body, a group of ELCA congregations and clergy left the church body and formed the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). While the NALC does not allow homosexual clergy, they still ordain women into the pastoral office.

Confessional Documents

The ELCA accepts the Bible, the Ecumenical Creeds and the *Book of Concord* as the foundation of its teaching; it does so, however, on a different basis than the LCMS. The ELCA both avoids saying that Scripture is inerrant and emphasizes the historical nature of the Lutheran Confessions. That is, it only holds to those parts of the Lutheran Confessions it finds to be in agreement with Scripture.

Key Beliefs

- + Church fellowship is of paramount importance, reflecting the ELCA's background as a church body resulting from mergers. For full fellowship, the ELCA only requires agreement in the Gospel (narrowly defined) and the administration of the Sacraments. What agreement means is uncertain, since the ELCA practices fellowship with those who deny Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper.
- + Women, along with practicing homosexual and transgender people, can be ordained into the Office of the Ministry.
- + Lutheran doctrine is simply one perspective among many. Other teachings — even contradictory to the ELCA — are equally valid teachings of the church.
- + Diversity and inclusion initiatives allow a wide range of teaching and practice within the church body, as seen in Her Church (originally, Ebenezer), an ELCA congregation based in San Francisco. The congregation openly practices witchcraft and worships the “feminine” aspects of God, referring to God as “the goddess.”

— WE CONFESS —

The members of the LCMS confess that the Scriptures are breathed out by God and are, therefore, inerrant (without error or contradiction).

The LCMS also holds to the teaching of the *Book of Concord* because it is a faithful exposition of Scripture. All LCMS pastors and church workers promise to teach and preach in accord with these confessions.

The Scriptures describe fellowship as full agreement in all that the Bible teaches. The LCMS, therefore, only recognizes fellowship with church bodies who teach in accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The Scriptures teach Christians to mark false teaching not only to avoid falling into temptation (GAL. 6:1), but also to avoid those who cause divisions so that they do not deceive the naive or weak in faith (ROM. 16:17-18).

Anglican

THE FIRST ENGLISH CHURCH

History

The Anglican church takes its name from the Latin root *Angli* — meaning the “Angles,” or English people. In 1534, King Henry VIII of England sought to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, because the marriage had not produced his desired heir. (The Roman Catholic Church does not recognize divorce.) Previously, Henry had appointed the English theologian Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury because Cranmer supported Henry’s efforts to annul his marriage to Catherine (declared an illegitimate marriage in the eyes of the church). In 1533, Cranmer pronounced the marriage invalid, and in 1534, Henry removed England from the jurisdiction of the pope, effectively inaugurating the Church of England, or the Anglican church.

The Anglican Communion — those churches that formally subscribe to the official teachings of the Anglican church — was formed in 1867 by then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Longley. It is the third-largest Christian communion in the world, behind Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Some churches that call themselves “Anglican,” however, do not subscribe to the Anglican Communion.

Confessional Documents

In addition to the Bible, the foundational document of the Anglican church is the *Book of Common Prayer* (*BCP*), a repository of prayers, liturgies and other resources first published in 1549. Many aspects changed little from their Roman Catholic counterparts, but others were significantly altered to reflect doctrinal differences between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

The *BCP* has been cited by various historians as one of the most significant influences on the development of the English language, along with the King James Bible and the works of Shakespeare.

The *BCP* includes the 39 Articles, a statement of the key doctrines of the Anglican Communion. While the number of articles varied at first, they were finalized as the 39 Articles in 1571.

Key Beliefs

Those in the Anglican Communion:

- + Hold the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and the supreme authority in matters of faith (they read the Apocrypha, but do not look to it for doctrine);
- + Confess the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds;
- + Recognize two primary sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) and five secondary sacraments (confirmation, penance, ordination, matrimony and the unction of the sick);
- + Practice infant Baptism and believe that Baptism is not merely symbolic but works faith in the baptized;
- + Believe in the Trinity; original sin; and justification by faith alone, not works;
- + Reject the concept of purgatory;
- + Do not forbid priests to marry;
- + Find their unity best expressed in shared worship practice: *lex orandi, lex credendi* ("the law of praying is the law of believing");
- + Believe that Christ is spiritually, not bodily, present in the Lord's Supper; and
- + Organize around an episcopal structure, with bishops, priests and deacons. However, there is no pope or other single authority. The Archbishop of Canterbury is the symbolic head of the church, but his role is advisory, not binding.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans and Anglicans have much in common. But whereas the central, unifying document of the Anglican Communion is the *Book of Common Prayer*, for Missouri Synod Lutherans, it is the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions as a faithful exposition of the Bible. Perhaps most significantly, though, confessional Lutherans believe that in the Lord's Supper, Christ is bodily present — in, with and under the bread and wine — and that believers enjoy both a spiritual and physical communion with Christ. Anglicans, by contrast, believe that the Lord's Supper offers only a spiritual, not a physical, communion with Christ.

Reformed

JUST REMEMBER TULIP

History

Historians typically mark the beginning of the Reformation in 1517 when Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses. Luther was far from the only reformer, however.

The history of the Reformed churches begins when Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), a Swiss pastor whose work reforming the church began in 1522, convinced the Christians of Zurich to abandon the compulsory Lenten fast. While Zwingli shared many theological understandings with Luther, he also differed on a few key points, most significantly, the Lord's Supper. In 1531, Zwingli died in battle defending his Reformed teachings against an alliance of Roman Catholic states.

The next major name in Reformed theology is John Calvin (1509–1564), a French reformer. Calvin's extensive writings moderated some of Zwingli's teaching, but he could not reach agreement with Lutheran doctrines of predestination and the Lord's Supper. Most Reformed churches trace their theological heritage to Calvin.

Half a century later, when a Dutch professor named Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) sought to further moderate some Reformed teachings, in particular predestination, the Reformed church met in Dort. This meeting, called the Synod of Dort, formulated the five points of Calvinism, summarized in the acronym TULIP:

Total depravity: Man's entire nature has been thoroughly corrupted by sin.

Unconditional election: God elects a person without any consideration of that person's deeds or future faith. It is entirely God's choosing.

Limited atonement: Christ only died for the sins of the elect.

Irresistible grace: The human will cannot resist God's grace, just as it cannot accept it.

Perseverance of the saints: The saints cannot fall away from faith in Christ.

The Synod of Dort officially condemned Arminianism, though some churches that claim a Reformed heritage teach Arminian doctrines.

Confessional Documents

Classic Reformed teaching holds to the Scriptures and the three ecumenical creeds. Many Reformed churches also use the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession to further guide their teaching (similar to the LCMS' use of the *Book of Concord* and Luther's Small Catechism).

Key Beliefs

- + Zwingli denied Christ's physical presence in the Lord's Supper; Calvin and later Reformed theologians acknowledge a spiritual presence of Christ, but still deny His physical presence in the Supper.
- + Reformed churches teach double predestination, that if God predestined some to salvation, He therefore predestined others to damnation.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans teach that in the Lord's Supper, Christ gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink (1 COR. 11:23-27).

As for double predestination, the Scriptures indeed teach that God predestines for salvation (ROM. 8:28-30), but they also teach that God desires all to be saved (1 TIM. 2:3-4). While it might defy rational human thought, Lutheran doctrine affirms both single predestination and God's desire that all would be saved. How this works out in the secret counsel of God is not ours to explain.

As for the teachings of TULIP, Lutherans agree with total depravity, which we call original sin, and unconditional election.

However, the Scriptures and Lutheran doctrine differ from TULIP regarding the remaining points. Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, not just the elect (1 JOHN 2:2). As Isaiah prophesied, on Him was laid the iniquity of us all (ISAIAH 53:6). As for irresistible grace, Lutherans reject the distinction between the inward working of the Holy Spirit and His work in the Means of Grace. Finally, Lutherans do not maintain that once you are saved, you are always saved. The unrepentant, hardened heart can lose salvation.

Presbyterian

REFORMED THEOLOGY IN SCOTLAND

History

After Martin Luther ignited the Protestant Reformation, other reformers came forward throughout Europe. One of these was John Calvin (see page 16). John Knox, a Scottish minister, met Calvin in Geneva and brought his Reformation teachings back to Scotland. This resulted in a religious and political upheaval in Scotland. Eventually, Knox founded the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The name “Presbyterian” comes from the church body’s model of governance, which is organized into assemblies of presbyters, or elders.

In the 1600s, Presbyterians began immigrating to the New World for economic and religious reasons. In 1706, eight ministers came together to form the first presbytery in Philadelphia, which later joined other presbyteries in the area to create the Synod of Philadelphia. There are currently several Presbyterian church bodies in the United States. The largest is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC[USA]), which allows women and LGBT members to be elders and ministers. In contrast, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the second-largest Presbyterian church body, adheres to more traditional Calvinist doctrine.

Confessional Documents

Presbyterians believe the Holy Bible is the Word of God. The PCA also uses the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, which were written in England in the 1640s. The PC(USA) has the *Book of Confessions*, which contains some of the same creeds, confessions and catechisms.

Key Beliefs

Presbyterians adhere to the five major points of Calvinist theology:

- ✚ Total depravity (humans are evil from birth);
- ✚ Unconditional election (God saves the elect by His grace);
- ✚ Limited atonement (Christ’s death saves some but not all people);
- ✚ Irresistible grace (we cannot resist God’s grace); and

- ✚ The perseverance of the saints (the elect cannot be lost). (For more on these five points, see the “Reformed” section).

Presbyterian doctrine embraces double predestination. Since Presbyterians tend to place a high value on human reason, their doctrine states that if God predestines some people for salvation, then it follows that He must also predestine other people for eternal damnation. But those chosen from the beginning of the world have the assurance that no human action can affect that salvation. It is purely the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans and Presbyterians agree on many points, including that humans are sinful from birth, that they are unable to save themselves and that salvation comes only through Jesus' death and resurrection. It is only by the grace of God that people are saved through faith.

However, the two denominations differ in their understanding of who benefits from this saving work. Lutherans believe that Jesus Christ died for all and desires all people to be saved (2 COR. 5:15). God does not desire for anyone to face eternity in hell. The fact that some people ultimately reject this grace and love is their own doing, not God's.

Furthermore, Lutherans do not believe in eternal security — that it is impossible to lose salvation once attained. Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (JOHN 10:28). Yet, “if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (HEB. 10:26). Lutherans know that falling away from the faith is a real, ever-present danger. That's why we remember our Baptism, “that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Small Catechism, Baptism).

Methodist

A METHOD FOR CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

History

Is it possible to gain Christian perfection? What does the Christian life look like? According to John Wesley (1703–1791), Christians can have a perfect love for the neighbor through the work of the Holy Spirit. Throughout his life, Wesley worked on developing, for himself and others, just the right method for making this happen.

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley, an Anglican priest, attended a Moravian service in London during which he read Martin Luther's preface to Romans. The result: He felt his "heart strangely warmed"; later he called this event a sincere conversion to the Christian faith. This experience, along with Wesley's own lifelong attempts to methodically attain Christian perfection, gave birth to a new Christian denomination: Methodism.

Wesley, the movement's founder, spent much of his life seeking sincere devotion to the Christian faith and confirmation of his salvation. Throughout his life, Wesley founded numerous clubs to help sincere Christians desiring to grow in Christian life and holiness. One such club he led during his studies at the University of Oxford was called the "Holy Club," and it eventually received the moniker "Methodists."

Charles Wesley (John's brother) and George Whitefield were also involved in the founding of the Methodist church. Due to theological differences, John and Charles split ways with Whitefield, but not before they brought the Methodist revival to the USA. Methodism caught like wildfire in the New World. Today, nearly 80 million people around the world belong to a Methodist church.

Confessional Documents

While Methodists generally adhere to the doctrinal formulations of the first five centuries of Christianity — the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed and the councils that created these documents — they also typically follow their founder, John Wesley, and claim adherence to one book and one book only: the Bible.

Key Beliefs

Wesley and the Methodists after him taught much that accords with Christian theology. However, a number of Methodist teachings do not align with Scripture.

- ✚ People are free to accept salvation by an act of human will.
- ✚ God predestines some to be saved in view of the faith they will one day have. John and Charles Wesley held this Arminian position in opposition to George Whitefield, who was more Calvinist (see page 16) in his understanding of predestination.
- ✚ Christians should seek an inner confidence or feeling for the blessed assurance that they are saved.
- ✚ A Christian may attain Christian perfection in love toward the neighbor.
- ✚ Christ is present in the Lord's Supper only in a spiritual or symbolic way.

— WE CONFESS —

Even though Luther's preface to Romans "inspired" John Wesley to reform the Anglican church, Lutheran doctrine differs on significant points.

We are not free to accept God by an act of the human will. Rather, Scripture teaches that we are dead in our trespasses and sins; apart from God's work, we cannot do anything to save ourselves (EPH. 2:1-10). God does not predestine us to salvation on the basis of what we will one day believe, thereby making salvation dependent on us, but on the basis of His grace and work in Christ alone (EPH. 1:4). Christians live as both sinners and saints until they pass through the valley of death (ROM. 7:7-25).

Christians find assurance of salvation not in emotion or anything in themselves, but because God has attached His Word of promise to Baptism (TITUS 3:4-7), to the Lord's Supper (JOHN 6:22-59) and to the preaching of His Word (ROM. 10:14-17). Christ gives us His true body and true blood in the Lord's Supper, in, with and under the bread and wine (1 COR. 11:23-32).

Baptist

AN AMERICAN CHURCH

History

Several decades after the Church of England (Anglican church) separated from the Roman Catholic Church, in the early 17th century, English Separatists broke from the Anglican church, believing that its reforms had not gone far enough.

Many of these English Separatists were exiled to Holland. Among these were John Smyth (1554–1612) and Thomas Helwys (d. 1616). In 1609, Smyth and Helwys founded the first Baptist church in Amsterdam.

In 1611, Helwys was allowed to return to England, where he founded the first English Baptist church in London in 1612. The first Baptist congregations were started in America in 1638.

Baptist membership in England reached its peak in the late 1800s, with numbers dwindling especially after World War I. The Baptist church in America grew by leaps and bounds during the First and Second Great Awakenings (in the 18th and 19th centuries). Today, the Southern Baptist Convention constitutes the second-largest religious group in the United States, with 20 million adherents; 15.3% of Americans identify as Baptist.

Confessional Documents

Baptists believe the Scriptures are the only binding statement of faith. Many Baptist churches and conventions choose to articulate “confessions of faith.” However, these are not considered binding even on members, and the regular revision of these statements is encouraged.

Prominent historical Baptist confessions of faith include the 1611 Helwys Confession (the first full Baptist confession, written in Amsterdam); the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (an early and central English Baptist confession); the 1742 Philadelphia Baptist Association’s confession (which influenced many early Baptists in the United States); the 1833 New Hampshire Confession (another influential confession for American Baptists); and the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message (the Southern Baptist Convention’s confession, revised in 1963, 1998 and 2000).

Key Beliefs

Since Baptists reject binding doctrinal formulations, there are a wide variety of beliefs within Baptist churches. Here are some fundamental beliefs that most Baptists share:

- + Believer's Baptism** — Baptists emphasize full-immersion Baptism, a symbolic act of obedience by adult believers who have made a profession of faith. They reject infant Baptism and the teaching that Baptism saves.
- + Soul competency** — Baptists emphasize that every Christian has free, direct and full access to God. Believers do not need to go through the church or a pastor in order to reach God or be saved.
- + Liberty of conscience** — Baptists reject subscription to human creeds, asserting that each Christian should take Scripture as his only ultimate creed and has the right to form his own convictions based upon it.
- + Congregational autonomy** — Each local congregation is independent and self-governing, though many cooperate with others through state or national conventions.
- + Communion** — Baptists practice Communion as a sign of obedience, which recalls Christ's death.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans confess in accord with Baptists that Scripture is the only true source of divine truth. However, as we find in Scripture, we also confess that God has chosen to give Himself to us through His church: the Means of Grace, that is the Word and the Sacraments.

We have confidence that the Holy Spirit works through Baptism to create faith (MARK 16:16; 1PETER 3:21; ACTS 2:38) and that Christ is present for us in the Lord's Supper (MATT. 26:26–28; 1COR. 11:29).

We also give thanks for our Lutheran Confessions, which we hold to be a clear and faithful articulation of what Scripture teaches us about Christ. These truths do not change. These confessions help us remain faithful to Scripture regardless of cultural changes and pressures, personal egos, geographical distance and the passage of time.

We do not see these things as constraints but as gifts. We confess, in accord with Scripture, that true freedom does not mean complete liberty and autonomy, but to be bound to our God (1PETER 2:16). Knowing our frailty, God has given us the church, the Sacraments, His Word and our pastors who faithfully teach us in order to bind us to Christ, that we might be truly free.

Pentecostal

SWALLOWING THE SPIRIT

History

The Pentecostal movement originated in 19th-century America. With roots in Methodist (see page 20) and Baptist theology (see page 22), it sought a revival in the church through an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, like the one described at and following Pentecost in Acts.

With epicenters in Kansas (Charles Fox Parham [1873–1929] at Bethel Bible College) and Los Angeles (William Joseph Seymour [1870–1922] and the Azusa Street Revival), the Pentecostal movement soon spread through the American South, Midwest and Southwest.

As members and leadership of churches began to embrace this controversial Pentecostal movement, they often left (or were forced out of) their churches and formed new ones with the labels such as “Latter Rain,” “Full Gospel” and “Apostolic” or “Pentecostal.” Many of these churches eventually sought fellowship with others and formed new organizations, such as the Assemblies of God, an association of Trinitarian Pentecostals that today has over 70 million members worldwide.

In the mid-20th century, Pentecostal influence gave birth to the charismatic movement within mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, which sought a revival of the Spirit within these denominations, while at least ostensibly remaining true to their theology. Charismatic strains still exist in many of these churches today.

While exact numbers are impossible to acquire, the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (2020) estimates that there are currently 644 million Pentecostals/charismatics worldwide, roughly 8.3% of the world’s population.

Confessional Documents

The Pentecostal movement has no official statements of faith besides the Bible — with a particular emphasis on the Book of Acts and on the descriptions of “spiritual gifts” in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

However, many of the thousands of Pentecostal denominations have developed statements of faith, such as the Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths adopted in 1916.

Key Beliefs

While teachings vary widely among churches that have come out of the Pentecostal movement, here are a few of the movement's core emphases:

+ **Baptism in the Spirit** —

Salvation is experienced as a felt, two-stage process. The first stage, regeneration, is the initial work of the Holy Spirit to remove the Christian's old nature, giving him a "new birth." After regeneration, however, the Christian awaits a second experience, known as Baptism in (or of) the Spirit. This pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Christian (as at Pentecost) equips him and sends him out for service.

+ **Gifts of the Spirit** —

Pentecostals believe that this Baptism in the Spirit will be accompanied by certain spiritual gifts. These include speaking in tongues (glossolalia), interpretation, faith healings, prophecy and miracles.

+ **Continuationism** —

Pentecostals believe that various gifts of the Holy Spirit that were given to the apostles as recounted in the Book of Acts (including speaking in tongues, divine healing and prophecy) are still being distributed to Christians today. Thus, they look for these gifts as signs of the presence of God.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans insist that our confidence must not be placed in ourselves — whether our works, our thoughts, our feelings or our experiences. We do not look for God's presence or salvation by awaiting an emotional experience or by taking stock of our own abilities or gifts. In emphasizing these things, Pentecostals look to and place their confidence in their own feelings rather than in Christ. This is a dangerous foundation of faith.

We also do not chase down the Holy Spirit to give us new and flashy signs of His presence with us. We do not covet the astonishing ways in which He worked through His apostles at His first pouring out or dare to insist that if He does not do the same with us, He is no longer present. Instead, we affirm that He has been with us all along as Christ promised, and we lean on and cherish those signs that He has continued to give the church throughout the millennia, namely, His Word and Sacraments. We believe there is one Baptism in which a person also receives the Holy Spirit.

Amish & Mennonite

CHRISTIAN PACIFISM

History

In some parts of the United States, it is not uncommon to see a horse-drawn buggy on the street or to encounter a group of people wearing old-fashioned clothing. These people may be Amish or Mennonite — two distinct groups that have shared roots.

The Mennonites came out of the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century, which clashed with Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli and the Zurich council's mandate on infant Baptism. The Anabaptists did not believe in infant Baptism and thought the church should only include those who had made a public confession of the faith. The Mennonites were named after Menno Simons (1496–1561), a Dutch priest who became an influential Anabaptist leader. In the late 17th century, division arose again when Mennonite leader Jakob Ammann (1644–circa 1730) stressed the importance of shunning those who had been excommunicated from the church from social life as well. This led to the rise of a new — but related — sect called the Amish.

In the mid-1600s, the Mennonites began immigrating to the United States to preserve their faith and escape militarism. The Amish followed a few decades later, and a large Amish settlement still remains in Pennsylvania.

Confessional Documents

Both believe that the Holy Bible is the Word of God. Some groups in the U.S. and Canada speak English in their worship and daily life, while others continue to use their traditional German dialect.

Key Beliefs

Although these groups have many differences, a key belief they share is pacifism. Followers generally oppose war and object to military service — a position they base on Jesus' life in the New Testament. Those who belong to a more traditional church may also avoid voting or serving on jury duty.

Mennonite groups vary widely in their integration into modern society and their use of technology. The Amish, however, are

dedicated to remaining separate. They may use technology in limited ways, but they seek to avoid being assimilated into the dominant culture or influenced by its vices. Instead, they choose to live and dress simply and work hard, following their commitment to humility and the traditional ways of the community. Each community has its own *Ordnung*, or set of rules that dictates what is allowed.

Instead of Sacraments, Mennonites have “seven ordinances,” which include Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and foot washing, among others. However, Mennonites and the Amish do not see Baptism and Communion in the same way that Lutherans do. To them, Baptism (what they call “believer’s baptism”) is a public commitment to the faith that happens once a person becomes an adult. Similarly, they view Communion as only a remembrance of Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans are not pacifists or separatists. We know we are citizens of two kingdoms — an earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom — and we recognize that God gives the government the authority to “bear the sword” to punish wrongdoing here on earth (ROM. 13:1-4). In his pamphlet “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” Martin Luther takes up this issue and assures his readers that military service can be an honorable and God-pleasing vocation, even though we serve an imperfect government.

Lutherans also take a different view of the Sacraments, recognizing that, together with the Word, they are the means by which God delivers His abundant grace to believers. Baptism “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe” (Small Catechism), and Jesus commands it to be given to “all nations” (MATT. 28:19) regardless of a person’s age.

Likewise, the Lord’s Supper is not just a remembrance; “it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself” (Small Catechism). Each time a Christian receives Communion worthily, it is “a participation” in the body and blood of Christ (1 COR. 10:16) that imparts forgiveness, life and salvation.

Non-Denominational

A NEW TREND

History

“Is Christ divided?” St. Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 1:13. A perusal of this booklet or of the Wikipedia page of Christian denominations makes the church appear divided, does it not? And yet, St. Paul’s point still stands: Christ is not divided; His Body is one. Then why do we have so many different denominations?

The non-denominational churches of the 19th and 20th centuries attempted to remedy this situation by creating churches built on the simple affirmation of faith in the Bible alone. Denominational labels, doctrinal assertions and creedal confessions, in this perspective, hinder belief in a simple, pragmatic faith.

Key leaders of the first wave of the non-denominational movement, known as the Restoration Movement, were Barton Stone (1772–1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788–1866). Both men, former Presbyterian ministers, became disillusioned with Calvinist doctrines such as the total depravity of men, unconditional election and the doctrine of predestination (see “Reformed,” page 13). Instead, they offered a stripped down, simplified version of the Christian faith that appealed to the pragmatic, practical people of the American West. Every movement requires structure at some point, however. This first movement of non-denominationalism eventually led to the formation of three new denominations: the Churches of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the independent Christian Church, also known as the Church of Christ.

These and subsequent non-denominational congregations waxed and waned into the 20th century when the non-denominational movement expanded again into a multiplicity of strains. Two of the many strains were the Calvary Chapel Association and Lakewood Church.

In 1965, Pastor Chuck Smith, trained and ordained into The Foursquare Church, left that denomination and founded Calvary Chapel. The congregation reached out to those who did not fit the typical category of churchgoers and exploded in size. By the time of his death in 2013, Calvary Chapel had become an association of churches. Even though Smith rejected the label of denomination,

he did place theological requirements on congregations that desired to join the association, which now includes over 1,800 congregations.

Another strain took the form of Lakewood Church. In 1959, John Osteen founded the congregation, which is currently cared for by his son, Joel. Originally founded as a charismatic congregation for Baptists, it quickly disaffiliated from the Baptist tradition and embraced non-denominationalism. This strain of non-denominationalism tends to grow around the personality of a particular pastor. Joel Osteen is particularly well known for teaching a false prosperity Gospel.

The growth of the non-denominational movement remained steady into the late 1990s, but the movement benefited from the growth of the Nones (those who do not affiliate with a particular denomination but still believe in the existence of some sort of god) beginning in the early 2000s. This trend has become so prevalent that many denominational congregations will downplay their affiliation to appeal to this demographic.

Confessional Documents

Non-denominational churches often claim no authoritative text but the Bible. At the same time, these churches often post clarifying statements (which might also be called confessions) on their websites explaining their beliefs on topics such as the authority of Scripture, the Sacraments and so on. Typically — though each congregation is unique — the larger the association or fellowship, the more explicit their statement of belief.

Key Beliefs

Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell began the Restoration Movement out of a rejection of human creeds, requirements for fellowship and church authority, and upon a plea for church union. At the same time, the basic teachings of the movement were a form of Arminianism (see “Reformed,” page 13). They required immersion for Baptism to be effective and confessed that it was only an affirmation of faith. They also rejected predestination.

Modern varieties of non-denominationalism are quite distinct; each congregation or church has its own unique perspective on Christian theology and practice, often reflecting the attitudes

of the founding pastor. The primary “uniting” characteristic of these congregations is their rejection of denominational labels. They believe that denominational labels hinder the proclamation of the Gospel.

In their perspective, these labels promote divisive doctrine, which they perceive as extra-biblical inventions of men and therefore contrary to a simple faith in Scripture. The churches often oppose a sacramental view of the Scriptures, treating Baptism as merely a personal affirmation of faith and denying Christ’s physical presence in the Lord’s Supper.

The aversion to doctrine has practical consequences as well. Non-denominational churches tend to use popular means to attract people to services. Not only do non-denominational pastors often eschew formal education, but they also tend to forgo the use of vestments during worship in favor of suit and tie in formal congregations and T-shirts and jeans in less formal ones. These churches often view traditional dress and liturgical worship as restrictive to the full and free expression of the faith and as a hindrance to a complete “encounter” with God in His Word.

— WE CONFESS —

Lutherans confess a belief in the *una sancta*, that is, the “one, holy, catholic (Christian) and apostolic church.” The *una sancta* is undivided; it is the Body of Christ, of which He is the head (EPH. 4:15-16). Even when the visible church deals with controversy and false doctrine, such as the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Reformation, the *una sancta* remains even though she is hidden from sight by false teaching and error.

The *una sancta* spans time and space. She is not limited to one particular denomination, but wherever the Gospel is taught and proclaimed in its entirety and the Sacraments are rightly administered, there she dwells; there the people of God are found. Lutherans also deplore unbiblical division. When Christians disagree over matters unrelated to doctrine, this grieves the Holy Spirit, and He calls Christians to repent of these divisions and live together in unity.

But Lutherans also confess that, at times, division is necessary. Lutherans do not glory in

division, but agree with St. Paul who taught the Corinthians that “there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 COR. 11:19). The appeal to unity issued by non-denominational churches, the desire for everyone to share the same confession and unity, is indeed a good and godly desire. At the same time, such unity does not exist where churches are not united around the teaching of God’s Word.

As such, Lutherans confess the faith once handed down to the saints. The Holy Spirit caused this faith to be written in the Old and New Testaments. The three ecumenical creeds and confessions of the church — the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Lutheran Confessions — further explain and clarify these teachings. And Lutherans pray for and long for the full unity of the church in the confession of Jesus, a unity all believers in Christ will one day experience with Him in eternity.

Conclusion

JUSTIFICATION, THE ARTICLE UPON WHICH THE CHURCH STANDS OR FALLS

The Fourth Article of the Augsburg Confession contains the simple truth:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4). (AC IV)

If you have read this booklet up to this point, then you have learned about 11 other Christian church bodies and their differences in doctrine and teaching. Each article ended with "We Confess," in which we explain what the Scriptures teach about issues within each of these denominations. In truth, we could have simply said, "Here's what the Bible teaches about justification."

Our Lutheran forefathers called the doctrine of justification the "doctrine upon which the church stands or falls." The errors seen in other church bodies result, ultimately, from a failure to comprehend justification.

This failure puts all doctrine askew. For example, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that justification begins by Christ's love and grace, but is perfected and completed by the good works of Christians. Thus, the priest and the Roman Catholic participates in the sacrifice of the Mass, thereby thinking they can earn God's favor by the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass for their sins. They have substituted their own work for God's.

Justification by grace through faith on account of Christ stands as the fundamental distinction between Lutherans and every other Christian denomination. Any failure to build upon the work of Christ and Him alone, any failure to give Him all honor and responsibility for saving mankind, results in a theological house of cards, ready to fall with the slightest wind.

But for the one who trusts in Christ and Him alone, justification is the sweetest comfort and greatest joy, the heart and soul of our theology and our hope. For it describes how "God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight."

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