

## BEING LUTHERAN

**THE THREE ONLIES.** The Reformation slogan was called the “three onlies:” They are “Bible only, Grace only, and Faith only.” (The reformers of the 1500’s saw these as the areas where they differed from the Roman Catholic church. The Catholic church in the mid-1500’s rejected anyone who would say “that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone.” The “three onlies” therefore are at the core of the reformation.)

**BIBLE.** The Bible is foundational. By saying “Bible only,” the reformers asserted that the Bible is the only authority for Christian teaching, and rejected the idea that authority should also be given to tradition, experience, logic, and church teachers.

**GRACE.** By saying “grace only,” the reformers admitted that humans do not merit salvation. When speaking of salvation, the reformers used “grace” to mean “God’s attitude toward us of unconditional love,” not a power God gives to us by which we can become worthy.

**FAITH.** By saying “faith only,” the reformers affirmed that simple trust in Jesus is the hand that receives that unconditional love: there are no additional conditions. Therefore salvation is not lost by one’s degree of Christian growth, since salvation was never based on one’s degree of Christian growth in the first place. In comforting fellow Christians who feel the burden of guilt, we do not say “here is how you can get close to God,” but rather “God is already close to you, because of Jesus; therefore there is no need to delay repenting and trusting.”

**THE TRIUNE GOD.** Confessing that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reminds us that Lutherans were clarifying the biblical historic faith, not inventing a new religion. Therefore the Augsburg Confession (the document of 1530 that explained the Lutheran approach to the Emperor) begins by affirming the three historic creeds. The Lutheran approach was to maintain the historic teachings as long as they were not in conflict with scripture. For example, Lutherans continued the historic view that the “millennium” stands for the time we are now living in. The Lutherans allowed continued usage of the European church service outline, simply removing any reference to Holy Communion as a Sacrifice.

**GOD THE FATHER.** Jesus said, “The Father himself loves you.” (John 16:27) It’s not that Jesus talked the Father out of punishing us, but rather that our salvation was part of God the Father’s plan: “God loved the world so much that He sent his only begotten son.” (John 3:16) Going out into the world to announce the gospel is the “mission of God.” The creeds also bring up creation in the section on God the Father. Material things are part of God’s plan: “by faith we understand that the universe was formed from God’s command (Hebrews 11:3).” Therefore we don’t despise the material part of our nature: we don’t assume that “being spiritual” means that the body is bad. (Rather, both spirit and body are affected by sin, and both share in the “new life.”) We stress that Jesus was truly material, and that his “real presence” is in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus had a bodily resurrection, and so will we.

**GOD THE SON.** Besides the “three onlies,” a fourth is often mentioned: “Christ only.” For Luther, the key thing about the Bible is that it is the “cradle of Christ.” We approach the Bible not to find secret knowledge or merely interesting facts, not even to find “laws to live by,” but to find more about Christ. For Lutherans, understanding a Bible passage means “relating it to Christ.” Yes, there are “laws,” but they first of all show us how much we need the sacrifice of Jesus: as we get insights into why we have not kept God’s laws, we then get insight into our need for Christ, and how precious his death is for us. God the Son rose from the dead, and he “lives to make intercession for us.” (Hebrews 7:25) We go into the world to announce the gospel because Christ said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” Paul prays in Ephesians 3:17 “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.”

**GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT.** The Holy Spirit applies the Love of the Father and the Work of Jesus to us. Luther sums up in his explanation of the third article: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel ...” The Holy Spirit is the source of the Christian life, as prophesied in Ezekiel 36:27, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to obey my commands.” The Holy Spirit is also the source of our guilt and our desire to repent when we disobey those commands. Jesus said about the Spirit, “and when He comes, he will convict the world of sin.” (John 16:8) Going out into the world to announce the gospel happens because “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses.” (Acts 1:8). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.”

**JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH.** This phrase was the rallying cry of the Lutheran reformation. Note Romans 5:1: “Now that we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Lutheran theology is careful to reject any teaching that would diminish this concept. The following paragraphs show how “justification by grace through faith” impacts the way that Lutherans view other topics.

**CHRIST’S DEATH IS FOR ALL (UNIVERSAL ATONEMENT).** Christ’s death has paid for everyone’s sins. This gives us a positive approach in witnessing. It is not, “decide to believe in Christ, and then he will pay for your sins,” but rather an announcement of Good News: “Christ has already died for your sins.”

**LAW/GOSPEL CLARITY.** The announcement of who Jesus is and what He has done is called the gospel, because it is good news. Nothing is left over for human beings to do to earn salvation. People come to faith where the gospel message is announced: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.” (Romans 1:16). God’s law is not optional, but its function is not to save: “No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law: rather, through the law, we become conscious of sin.” (Romans 3:20) We do not present salvation as laws to be followed, but as the forgiveness from our disobedience to the laws. We do not let gospel sound like a law, but like a gracious invitation. After you are saved, your new life naturally keeps God’s laws; your old life naturally wants to misuse God’s laws, whether

by breaking them or by regarding law as a way of salvation. Luther showed how some parts of the Bible threaten us, and others bring us promises: he used the labels “law” and “gospel” for these two biblical functions. Keeping these functions straight prevents people from looking to themselves for salvation and points them to Christ.

**VISIBLE/INVISIBLE CHURCH.** All believers are part of the “body of Christ, the Church.” Since we cannot see inside someone’s heart, we accept them on the basis of their confession of faith. Those who claim to trust Christ, we treat as brothers in Christ. The visible church has divided into denominations. The LCMS teaches that Christians can be found in other denominations. Lutherans relate to other denominations based on their public teachings, and so they proclaim “altar and pulpit fellowship” with groups that subscribe to the public teaching of the Lutheran confessions.

**MEANS OF GRACE.** The word “means” is defined as “method of transmission.” God of course can do anything He wants to, but to us He has given two methods to transfer His salvation to others: Word and Sacrament. By saying that the Word and Sacraments are the “means” by which God comes to us, we are freed from looking to other means, such as spiritual experiences, works of merit, meeting a behavior standard, or having a certain feeling. Just the opposite: when we share the word and provide the sacraments, we have the promise that God works. God does show Himself in other ways; for example, “the heavens declare the glory of God.” But we do not see God’s salvation in his creation; it is a means, but not a means “of grace.”

**GOD’S WORD.** When we say “word,” we don’t overlook that different “words” of God have different effects. The “law” is a Word of God, but it condemns. The gospel is the word of God that brings salvation. The term “Word” means the biblical revelation and the proclamation of this revelation.

**BAPTISM.** Many scripture verses list the promises connected with baptism. For infants, baptism may be the first “means of grace” encountered, and God comes to the baby through this means. We don’t know of any other scriptural way for God to come to a baby. As the child grows up, the Word strengthens and fills out the understanding of what has happened. For an adult who was not baptized as an infant, typically the “word” would be the “means” by which God first comes to the person, and the baptism will follow. That doesn’t mean baptism is powerless; baptism brings the same Jesus that the word brought, thus strengthening faith and adding to assurance.

**COMMUNION.** Holy Communion is also effective at bringing strength and assurance. Jesus said “this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:28) Lutherans accept the word “is” at face value, confessing that Jesus is present in the bread and wine.

**HIDDEN GOD.** For unanswered questions like “why do the innocent suffer,” Luther did not try to fill in beyond what God has already told us. God is larger than we can comprehend, and so we focus on the truths God has revealed to us. We don’t need to feel that as witnesses we should have an answer to everything; we share what God has

told us, rather than succumb to the temptation to conjecture. What God has revealed to us is sufficient for salvation. At our level of understanding, sometimes two teachings that are equally true don't seem to mesh with one another. We accept both and are content to live with the paradox.

**PASTORAL HEART.** Our purpose in talking with others is not to put them down, but to aid them. Our main concern is not “how can I win the argument” but “how can God help the person.” Luther approached topics with this approach. A famous example is the subject of predestination. Luther used the verses about predestination not to speculate about whether “God has decided to save some, and God has decided to damn others,” but to use these verses as ways to comfort believers.

**TWO KINGDOMS.** In Romans 13:4, Paul tells us that government is from God, and is authorized to use force; yet in another place, Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. Rather than calling this a conflict, Lutherans see these as different teachings for two different kingdoms: one is civil society, and the other is the kingdom of grace and faith. Both are under God, and we inhabit both at the same time. In one kingdom, we get what we deserve; in the other, God forgives us and so we do not get what we deserve. This distinction goes back to the saying of Jesus, “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's (i.e. taxes) and unto God the things that are God's.” In the church of Luther's day, the two kingdoms had become mixed together, and so Luther emphasized that the church should not use coercion or physical power, but only the message of forgiveness. These two approaches also appear in each individual Christian. In my civil role as a parent, I must allow my children to experience the “logical consequence” of their disobedience – and I must be willing to be the agent of that logical consequence by administering that punishment. At the same time, as a Christian, I also want my children to know that God forgives them, and I do too. As a teacher, I must give an F if it is earned, but still love and help the person.

**VOCATION (which means “calling.”)** In Luther's time, it was assumed that those who had “callings” were the clergy and the monks, and that they, due to their calling, could be closer to God than the ordinary person. Luther strongly affirmed that each station in life is a calling, and that in each calling a Christian is serving God and is close to God. Just as a farmer is a tool of God to fulfill God's promise to take care of people, someone who teaches English is a tool of God in helping people's intellectual needs. It is just as biblical to be engaged in The Great Command “love your neighbor as yourself” as in the Great Commission, “Make disciples.” We all do both. While affirming the spiritual worth of all callings, the calling to be a pastor was not downgraded. Lutherans respect the particular biblical status of someone who is in the “Office of the Public Ministry.”

**PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS.** In Luther's time, it was thought that a human mediator was needed between people and God, as had been true in Old Testament times. Luther restored the New Testament principle of the priesthood of all believers. Every Christian can approach God directly without a human mediator, every

Christian can be a channel of God's word to others, and every Christian can be a channel of prayer for others toward God.

**CHRISTIAN LIFE – Sanctification based on Justification.** Growing in a life of trust and obedience is not done in our own strength. Justification and Sanctification always are present together, though they have different definitions. Justification not only brings us into God's family in the first place, but continues as the solid basis for our sanctification day by day. If I have a moral failure, it is not that I must do something so that God accepts me again, for God's acceptance of me in justification was never based on my moral qualities. Because my justification stands firm, I not only can be sure of forgiveness, but that God is on my side as He works in me to combat my moral weak points. I am always "justified saint" and "undeserving sinner" at the same time. Imagine a vertical line intersecting a horizontal line. The vertical line is my relationship with God: I am passive, and God makes me righteous as a free gift. The horizontal line is my resulting relationship with the people around me. I am active in doing righteous things toward them, not in order to be saved, but as an expression of my new life. Both usages are found in Ephesians 2:8-10. 10: "By grace are you saved, through faith, and that not of yourself, it is a gift of God, *not of works*, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, that God has ordained beforehand for us to do."

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