

What is a Lutheran?

In one sense, the Lutherans are a reluctant denomination. They never wanted to be a church independent from the one, holy catholic and apostolic church. The reformers were interested in reform, not starting a new denomination. In one way, then, the reformers saw themselves as a part of a reform movement within the church catholic, and not a separate church. Martin Luther got upset whenever the term "Lutherans" was used. However, when the hoped-for reforms didn't happen, the Lutheran movement reluctantly began a process of denominational institutionalism. In many Lutheran minds, the formation of the Lutheran church signaled a failed reform attempt. The hoped-for renovations in the household of faith did not materialize.

The Lutheran church in Canada is not a large church. Yet despite its small size in Canada, the Lutherans have some distinct strengths and distinguishing characteristics which they bring to the community of faith. Perhaps the most consistent characteristics are their strong emphases on Christ, God's grace, and a practical, "down to earth" theology. These traits are reflected in the 5 sola's (sola is Latin for "alone") of Lutheranism.

The Five "Solas"

One of the simplest ways to describe the Lutheran tradition is through their emphasis on Christ alone, scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, and the cross alone. Now, this doesn't mean that Lutherans can't add (although it does seem funny to talk about 5 "alones"!). Rather, they succinctly state where Lutherans stand. For example, to say that a person is saved by grace alone does not mean that faith is ruled out. Rather, it means that a person is saved by grace alone. Works or good deeds cannot be added to the formula. It is grace alone.

Christ alone

The main theme of the Bible is about God's desire to enter into a relationship with people. The question is, how is that done? The answer is through Christ alone. Martin Luther insisted that if a person wants to know what God in heaven is like, all that person needs to do is look to Christ. If a person wants to learn about what God's love is like, all that is needed is to look to Christ. Jesus Christ shows us what God is like. In this sense, the Lutheran church is Christocentric: centered on Christ. This doesn't mean, however, that Lutherans ignore God the Creator, or the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's job is to point people to Christ, and gather people to Christ. In a similar manner, God the creator, although almighty, reveals God's self through Jesus.

Scripture alone

Another question to ask is how is this God in Christ revealed to us? The answer is through Scripture alone. Lutherans have always placed a strong emphasis on scripture. The great number and tradition of Lutheran biblical scholars attest to this. Lutherans have a good reputation in biblical scholarship. They insist on the authority of Scripture alone, rather than the authority of Scripture plus tradition, or Scripture plus experience. Yet Lutherans have generally guarded against the temptation to make Scripture itself as authoritative. That would idolize the Bible, detracting from Christ alone as authoritative. Rather, Lutherans understand the Scriptures as authoritative insofar as they point to Christ. Luther called the Scriptures the "manger which holds Christ." The Christian's focus should be on Christ, rather than the manger he lay in!

Faith alone

What do these scriptures reveal to us through Christ Jesus? Simply that we are brought into a right relationship with God by grace alone through faith alone. This faith is a gift from God. Now faith is not about believing in certain doctrines or things about God and Christ. Rather, it means trust. It is a relationship word. Christians are called to trust in God alone for life, rather than putting their trust in other things or people, or even themselves. This doesn't mean that Christians are not supposed to use reason or logic or common sense. It's just that one's relationship with God is based on trust, not on logic or "proofs."

Grace alone

What do the Scriptures and Christ reveal about living in this faith relationship? Simply, that this trust relationship is made possible by grace alone. The Christian's relationship with God, the ability to stand in the presence of God without sin, and without literally being scared to death, depends totally on what Jesus Christ has done. It is the last thing a person deserves. A relationship with God is an absolutely free gift from God.

The Cross alone

Finally, one must ask, where does this absolutely free gift of grace come from, and how is it made possible? The answer is through the cross alone. Christ's death on the cross makes everything possible. But the cross means more than that piece of wood on the hill. When Luther and the Lutherans talk about the cross, they do not mean only the crucifixion. The cross was a shorthand word, a summary of all of Christ's life and death and resurrection. First, even in his birth, there is the shadow of the cross, with the rejection from the inns, and the attempts by King Herod to get rid of his threat to the throne. Second, the cross also figures in Christ's earthly ministry. He foretells his death and is rejected by many. Third, the cross includes Christ's resurrection. The resurrection was not a mere formality. Without the cross, the resurrection is merely a resuscitation. Without the resurrection, the cross marks only failure. As Luther stated, "the Cross alone tests everything." It tests one's understanding of Christ's birth, ministry, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection.

Christ's cross also tests the Christian, and how one is to live as Christian. The cross alone is the rallying point for what it means to live in this relationship with God, instituted by Christ. To be freely forgiven by what Christ has done for us on the cross means that humanity cannot offer any further sacrifices to God, in order to make God love people more. People cannot get "more saved" by what they do.

The cross is also, in a strange way, a sign of great hope. Christ's willingness to go through the experience of the cross for humanity tells all people that God in Christ is not afraid to enter any relationship or situation. Nothing can be so bad as the cross. If God can handle that, God can handle anything. No matter how many struggles or problems a person has, it doesn't shock God. As a result, people are all equal at the foot of the cross! All are sinful on their own power. All are saints because of God's actions in Christ. And all are called to be involved in ministry -- of caring for people and God's creation.

In terms of discipleship, the "cross alone" also means that the Christian can expect "crosses" in their own life. These crosses or struggles are not to "prove" one's loyalty to God, or one's worthiness. Rather, when a Christian dares to live in this kind of trusting relationship with God, Satan will constantly try to cause doubts about this relationship based totally on God's grace. The temptor always wants people to do something, to add something, to assist Christ in some way, for their salvation.

The "cross alone" suggests that because Christians are free from worrying about their own salvation, since Christ won it for us on the cross, they are free to live just as Christ lived. This means that Christians are free to enter into the struggles and trials and "crosses" of those around them. This is what discipleship is all about. The cross of Christ constantly calls Christians to the crosses and struggles of others. And there, the Christian meets Christ. If a person wants to find Christ, go to where there are some crosses. This is important to note, then: Christians don't "bring" Christ to such situations – Christ is already present. Evangelism, then, is not about "bringing Christ to people." Instead, it is helping people to see God already present in their midst. It is the Christmas story all over again!

Finally, the Cross alone reminds the church that one of the common themes running all throughout scripture is that faithfulness to God does not guarantee success. The Christian faith is not a religion of success, where if someone trusts God enough, or does enough for God, they will be rewarded with financial success or prosperity. The cross also rejects the notion that if a person does not do enough for God, they will be punished. That is not how God operates. When people looked at Jesus on the cross, they did not see it as a success story. Instead of the realm of God breaking in on the world, it appeared as if the realm of God was chased from the world. When Jesus talked to people, he did not guarantee them success. All he promised was an abundant life. And an abundant life is not the same as an affluent life.

A "down to earth" approach
These are some of the distinct characteristics of the Lutheran perspective. What do these theories mean in daily life, though? For one thing, because of Christ alone, faith alone grace alone and the cross alone, Christians are free to care for their neighbors. The desire to earn God's favor is still strong today. But instead of worrying about what requirements one has to meet in order to enter God's realm, and what God must be like in heaven, The Christian is free to care their neighbors and the world which God created. In that sense, Lutheranism strives to be a "down to earth" Christianity. The greatest "religious" things people can do is to get involved in the world as Christ did. This is the priesthood of all believers, which Luther so strongly emphasized.

Learning from other Christians and faiths
The trick, of course, is to practice what we preach. Lutherans haven't always been very good at being concerned and helpful neighbors. The Lutheran churches in Canada began as ethnic communities, often more intent on ministering to their own members than on reaching out beyond their ethnic borders. Lutherans are predominantly a middle-class church, and have often stayed to themselves. Sensing this weakness,

Lutherans have come to appreciate those denominations which have reached out beyond ethnic and economic barriers to proclaim and live the gospel. The Salvation Army and other churches involved in street ministries remind Lutherans of what "down to earth" Christianity really involves. The emphasis on justice, by the Mennonite and United Church traditions, for example, is also appreciated by the Lutherans. They prick the conscience about what it means to live the gospel. These are needed reminders. Lutherans need reminders that a good, solid theology and good preaching does not automatically lead to good practice. One Lutheran bishop recently commented that the Lutheran church has think "tanks" and action "thimbles." With the help of others, Lutherans are rediscovering what it means to be disciples. Amongst many churches and people of other faiths, Lutherans see people living committed lives.

Lutherans are also in the process of rediscovering the gift of church order from the Anglican and Catholic traditions. In the early years of the reformation, the Lutheran tradition was often so caught up with theology and reform, that it never focused much on how a church should be organized. This weakness becomes more apparent as dialogues with other church bodies take place.

In these dialogues, Lutherans are stubborn about not giving up the principles of the five "solas." They will disagree until the cows come home about what the structure of the church should be like. Things like this are considered "adiaphora" -- not essential items to agree on for the gospel to be proclaimed.

The largest Lutheran Church in Canada the ELCIC - Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, has committed itself to working ecumenically wherever we can. Other churches have so much to offer Lutherans, and they are able to do things in ways far better than Lutherans have done them. It is a new era for the Lutheran church, to move beyond ethnic and middle class ghettos. But they do not want to journey alone. They realize they cannot journey alone. Lutherans would like to walk with the whole church, for their sake, the world's sake, and for God's sake.

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