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## Lutheranism 202

*Reading the Augsburg Confession, we delve into the meaning of faith*

cover story

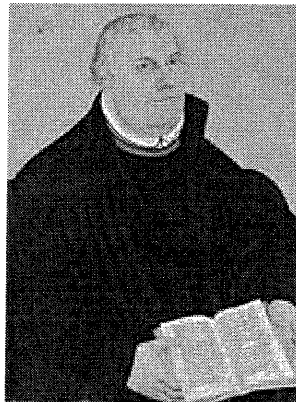


STORY BY  
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Martin Luther (1483-1546) didn't intend to start a new church. A priest and a university professor, Luther believed there was only one Christian church. His study of the Bible and his personal faith experience led him to propose changes in the church's teaching and practice, to re-form the church so it more clearly reflected the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. This "reformation" was rejected by the leaders of the church in Rome, and Luther and his followers were excommunicated.

A major part of this reformation movement was an emphasis on the living, life-giving word of God. Luther's academic

training was as a biblical scholar. He translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German, the language of the people. He published sermons and commentaries to help communicate God's word in ways that people could understand. Most of all, Luther encouraged people to read and hear the Scriptures for themselves, expecting to receive in the inspired words God's gracious promise for their lives.



PORTRAIT OF MARTIN LUTHER, 1530,  
BY LUCAS THE ELDER CRANACH (1472-1553)/  
ART RESOURCE, NY

Luther's ideas gained the support of many German church leaders and politicians. In 1530 these leaders presented a formal statement of their beliefs to the authorities. This statement is called the Augsburg Confession—the confession of faith made in the city of Augsburg.

In 1555 when Lutheranism finally received legal recognition within the Holy Roman Empire, it wasn't identified as "Lutheran" (followers of Martin Luther) but as "those who accept the Augsburg Confession." It was the faith, not the founder, that mattered. Still today, in countries including Poland and Slovakia, the Lutheran church doesn't have the word "Lutheran" in its name but is called the Church of the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession highlights Luther's central insight that sinners are justified by faith:

*It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven, and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.*

The point is not just that we have faith, since one can have faith in anything—a friend or family member, one's own ability, a sports team. Christians aren't justified by the strength or sincerity of our belief but by the One in whom we believe. Only faith in Christ restores our relationship with God because such faith trusts the promises God has made—and kept—in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“By grace, for Christ's sake, through faith”—this is so central to the way Lutherans think about the Christian faith that it has been called “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

Such faith

But justification by faith alone is not the last word that Luther and the Confessions have for us. It's only the beginning of the Lutheran understanding of Christian life. Faith in Christ isn't just about what happens when we die. It's about how we live. And it's about how we live not just for ourselves but for and with others.

One way of thinking about what Lutherans believe is to visualize justification by faith alone as the center of a flower, from which all the petals unfold, or as the hub of a wheel, from which the spokes radiate out. Without the center, without the hub, all you have is a bunch of disconnected parts. With the right center, everything else falls into place. Everything else in the Augsburg Confession—sin, the sacraments, worship, married clergy, the role of bishops—everything else is developed in relation to the core belief of justification by faith alone.

When we look at other parts of the Augsburg Confession, we see clearly how this interrelationship unfolds. Immediately following Article IV on justifying faith, Article

V (The Office of the Ministry) tells us where “such faith” comes from and article VI (The New Obedience) tells us what “such faith” does.

*V. To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.*

This assertion challenges the view that faith is simply my own private connection to God. Ever heard someone say, “I can worship God just fine on a golf course on Sunday morning”? It’s true that I can praise God’s marvelous works as Creator when I sit on a mountaintop or watch a sunset or even play golf.

But those experiences tell only part of the story. They don’t communicate the great good news that God in Christ is Savior—my Savior—as well as Creator.

“How Great Thou Art” is true, but it’s incomplete unless I can also sing “Jesus Loves Me.” Lutherans call word and sacrament “the means of grace” because they point to where and how God ministers to us with the promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Worship serves as our response to God only after God’s gracious initiative first reaches out to us.

Luther knew firsthand how easy it is to get trapped in our own mental and spiritual ruts. He insisted that the word of God comes to us from outside ourselves, breaking into our sinful self-centeredness. We hear God’s gracious “for you” most clearly when we hear it in a voice other than our own. We feel God’s gracious “for you” when we are splashed with water from the font. When we taste the bread and wine, we confess that Christ is really present, his own body and blood giving life to ours.

We all know the difference between things that operate on battery power and those that must be plugged in. When the battery wears out, you recharge it or get a new one. But while the battery is working, you’re good to go on your own.

Christian faith isn’t battery-operated. We don’t just recharge every week and then go out on our own. Faith plugs us in to an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. We have power because his power flows through us.

To use a more organic image, Jesus told his followers to abide in him, as branches are rooted in a vine. Cut off from the vine, they wither and die. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” Jesus says, in one of the most frequently quoted passages in the Lutheran Confessions (John 15:5).

Personal, never private

Hearing God’s word preached and sharing in God’s sacraments—these aren’t things we can do on our own, on the golf course or on a mountaintop. Faith requires the gathering of the Christian community, the ministry—God’s ministry to us—of word and sacrament. Christian faith is deeply personal but never private.

Sometimes the Lutheran emphasis on faith alone has led us to avoid talking about works, as if what we actually do as Christians isn’t important. It’s easy to contrast faith and works, as if they were opposites. But that was never Luther’s point. What he criticized was *not* doing good—but rather relying on one’s actions to improve one’s status with God.

According to Augsburg Confession VI:

*It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded; but we should do them for God’s sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God.*

Faith alone—only faith—justifies. But in the Christian life, faith never is alone. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther wrote, “We know indeed that faith is never alone but brings with it love and other manifold gifts.” In his preface to the New Testament, Luther described faith as “a living, busy, active, mighty thing.” He said, “It is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.”

This is what’s “new” about the new obedience. The works done by Christians are an inevitable outgrowth of their faith in Christ. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit. Christians don’t do good works because they are instructed to do so: Christians do good works when they are filled with a living faith in Christ. When we trust God’s gracious promise, serving others is no longer a “got to” but a “get to.”

And if faith is never alone, so, too, the believer is never alone. God's grace turns us outward toward others. Luther describes the relationship between faith and works in context of our relationships with God and neighbor. God deals with us, Luther says, "through a word of promise." We deal with God "through faith in the word of his promise." And we deal with others "on the basis of works." God comes to us, in word and sacrament, in Jesus himself. And through us God reaches out to others.

#### Faith at work

Lutherans have a long, strong history of combining evangelistic outreach and social ministry activity, working both to spread the faith and to make faith active in loving service of others. Wherever they are, wherever they go, Lutherans build schools and establish networks of care.

August Hermann Francke, a pastor and professor at the University of Halle in Wittenberg, Germany, from 1691 to 1727, was an early leader in Lutheran social ministry. Francke founded an orphanage, a school for the poor, a school for girls, a teacher training institute, a medical dispensary and more. Prussian King Frederick William I was so impressed by his visit to Halle that he used Francke's ideas as a model for reform throughout his realm.

Francke also made Halle a center of foreign missions. The first Lutheran missionary ever, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, was sent to South India from Halle in 1706. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg came to Pennsylvania from Halle in 1742 to help organize and strengthen American Lutherans.

In the mid-19th century, Wilhelm Loehe, a pastor in the remote Bavarian village of Neuendettelsau, established a deaconess training program, hospitals and schools to meet the needs of his region, as well as a mission society that sent pastors to North and South America, Australia and New Guinea.

There are similar examples today. I live in Waverly, Iowa, a town of 9,000. Waverly is home not only to two ELCA congregations and the Northeastern Iowa Synod office but also to a Lutheran school (kindergarten through sixth grade), Wartburg College, Lutheran Services in Iowa and Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community. In previous generations an orphanage and a Lutheran insurance

company also were located here. When Lutherans came to Waverly, they didn't just build a church. Over the years they built a community infrastructure that still remains.

When record-breaking floods ravaged the Midwest this summer, Lutheran Disaster Response was here, working in cooperation with Lutheran Services in Iowa—just as it had been in the aftermath of spring tornadoes. Wartburg College stepped forward to offer space as a Red Cross shelter and to coordinate volunteer cleanup efforts.

Why? Because Lutherans practice what we preach—putting faith into action in servant love of neighbor. “Such faith” in Christ prompts us to reach out to our neighbors, known and unknown.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (43:2).

When literal waters did overwhelm many of us, living waters reminded us of our baptism. When wildfires threatened others, the flames of the Spirit strengthened us. For we believe that nothing can finally overcome those who are joined together in the body of Christ. Such faith, nurtured through word and sacrament, bears fruit in God's word.

As the ELCA so powerfully puts it: “God's work. Our hands.” Thanks be to God!

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