

Lutheranism 101: Culture or confession?

By [Kathryn Kleinhans](#) May 15, 2007



What does it mean to be Lutheran? For many in the ELCA who've grown up Lutheran, religious identity is intertwined with a sense of family and cultural traditions: beer and brats for some, lefse and lutefisk for others, familiar liturgy and hymns for all. But the shape of Lutheranism is changing.

While the majority of Lutherans worldwide still live in Northern Europe, Lutheranism is growing rapidly in other parts of the world, according to the Lutheran World Federation. Today there are almost as many Lutherans in Asia and the Middle East (7.4 million) as there are in North America (8.1 million), and there are more Lutherans in Africa (15 million) than there are in Germany (13 million).

So what does it mean to be Lutheran, beyond cultural heritage or geographical location?

During the 16th century, Martin Luther challenged the teachings, practices and structures of the Roman Catholic Church. He insisted that the central message of Christianity is the good news that sinners become reconciled to God by grace through faith because of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

It's important to remember that Luther didn't intend to start a new church. He wanted to reform the existing church so the gospel message was communicated clearly and so the life of the church reflected that gospel center. Lutherans organized into a separate church only after the Roman Catholic Church repeatedly rejected Luther's views.

'Lutheran' as insult

The word "Lutheran" actually began as an insult used by Luther's opponents. Luther later tried to discourage his supporters from calling themselves Lutherans since they really follow Jesus Christ, not Martin Luther.

"What is Luther?" he once wrote. "After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone."

It was the gospel message that remained central for Luther, not his leadership. In a sermon preached in Wittenberg shortly after his return from Wartburg Castle, Luther insisted: "I simply taught, preached and wrote God's Word. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

If not “Lutheran,” how did Luther and his supporters identify themselves and their reform movement? They tended to use the term “evangelical,” which means simply gospel or good news.

As “evangelical” Christians, they understood themselves in light of the gospel, in contrast to “papal” Christians whose identity was rooted in their relationship with church structures and authority centered in Rome, especially the pope.

One important result of this commitment to communicating the gospel clearly was that Lutherans quickly translated the Scriptures and the worship service from the church’s official language, Latin, into the language used by the people.

While Luther’s ideas and writings were at the heart and core of this evangelical reform movement, Luther worked collaboratively with other pastors and teachers. His views also received support from civic leaders within the German territories who were interested in promoting a Christian church that was German, not Roman.

As the evangelical reform movement grew, certain writings were adopted as essential statements of Lutheranism. One of the most influential documents is the *Augsburg Confession*, which was written by Luther’s colleague Philipp Melancthon and presented at a meeting with the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1530. It was signed by seven territorial rulers and by the mayor and council of two cities.

In 1580, after both Luther’s and Melancthon’s deaths, evangelical leaders gathered the statements of faith they considered normative for Lutheran Christians and published them as *The Book of Concord*. This collection was signed by 51 territorial rulers and by 35 city councils.

This act of signing one’s name to a statement of faith is called confessional subscription. The phrase may sound odd, but actually the idea of a magazine or newspaper subscription is a helpful comparison. There are many, many periodicals available. The ones we subscribe to are those we want to receive and to be engaged with regularly. To this day, Lutheran pastors and other rostered leaders promise to preach, teach and fulfill their duties in accordance with the Lutheran confessions.

Core Lutheran themes

What are the most distinctive themes of Lutheran theology?

Justification by grace through faith for Christ’s sake

This, for Lutherans, is the heart of the gospel. Stated concisely in the fourth article of the *Augsburg Confession*, it’s so central that it has been called “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics believed God's grace was essential for salvation, but they had different understandings of the way grace works.

Relying on Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, Luther insisted that faith is key. His understanding of faith isn't primarily intellectual (having the right knowledge about God) or emotional (how hard or how sincerely one believes). Instead, faith is relational: It's a form of trust. We are justified through faith because faith alone trusts God's promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake.

Law and gospel

Lutherans have a distinctive way of reading the Scriptures, based on Luther's insight that God's word comes to us in two forms—law and gospel. The law as command tells people what they should do. The gospel as promise tells us what God in Christ has already done for us.

God's law functions in several ways: It structures human life by protecting and promoting good and limiting and punishing wrong. The law also functions theologically, as a mirror, or as a doctor's diagnosis, to show us our sinfulness and our need for God's grace in Christ.

Because we are sinners, God's law always accuses us; only the gospel frees us. As Luther puts it: "The law says, 'do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done."

Means of grace

The *Augsburg Confession* describes word and sacrament as the "means of grace." The word "means" refers to how things actually happen. We refer to different means of communication, means of transportation, etc. By calling word and sacrament means of grace, we are saying: "This is how and where grace happens." When the good news is preached, when someone is baptized, when we receive the Lord's Supper, grace happens.

This means that worship is vitally important for Lutherans. It forms our identity as Christians. The Augsburg Confession even defines the Christian church as the assembly of believers around gospel and sacrament.

Theology of the cross

The theology of the cross refers not just to the events of Good Friday. It also refers to a cross-centered approach to theology that stands in opposition to a "theology of glory" focused on the power and majesty of God abstracted from God's action in history.

A theology of glory looks up and says, "God's in heaven and all's well with the world." A theology of the cross, in contrast, keeps its feet firmly planted on our broken Earth and says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to God." The incarnation witnesses to a God who puts aside divine characteristics to become human, to suffer and to die.

The God who chooses to come down from heaven chooses not to come down from the cross. The theology of the cross is a constant critique of human expectations. While the cross is a scandal to nonbelievers, Christians confess that God's saving power works precisely through such weakness ([1 Corinthians 1:23-25](#), [2 Corinthians 12:9](#)).

Saint and sinner

Luther described Christians as “simultaneously saint and sinner.” Some religious traditions distinguish between “saints,” who obey God's will, and “sinners,” who disobey. Lutherans cling to a both/and understanding of Christian identity that redefines the word “saint”: a saint is a forgiven sinner.

Our dual identity as saints and sinners reminds us that our righteousness always depends on God's grace, never on our own religious behavior. At the same time, our recognition that sin, while forgiven, remains a powerful force in the world and in ourselves gives us a realistic ability to confront cruelty and evil, confident that God will have the last word.

As Luther once wrote to Melancthon, “Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world.”

Vocation

The term “vocation” literally means “calling.” Until Luther's time it was used primarily to refer to those with a special religious calling to be a priest, monk or nun. Luther expanded the idea to include all Christians.

First, Luther affirmed that all Christians are priests. This “priesthood of all believers” doesn't mean that we each have an individual pipeline to God but that we all have a responsibility to teach and to pray for others.

Second, Luther affirmed that all human work is a calling from God if done in faith and for the service of neighbor. According to Luther, God doesn't need our good works, but people do. Christian faith, then, should express itself in how we live in our professions, in our family relationships and as citizens, since these are all arenas for the service of neighbor.

Contextual theology

The Greek word *diakonos*, often translated in the New Testament as “minister” or “servant,” can also refer to a waiter. This image reminds us how essential it is for the food to reach the hungry diners at the table. No matter how exquisite the chef or the food, it's no good if the meal stays in the kitchen. Similarly, the church needs to deliver the goods.

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther insists that it's not enough simply to acknowledge that Christ is Christ. Instead, the purpose of preaching is to make the connection, to deliver the goods so Christ may “be Christ for you and me.”

From the beginning the Reformation was committed to delivering the goods, to continuing the work of Pentecost by allowing people to hear the good news firsthand. Luther was fluent in several languages. Even more important, he had fluency with several different populations: He wrote in Latin to reach academics and church leaders, but he wrote in German to reach regular people.

Already during Luther's lifetime, Lutheranism spread to the Scandinavian countries. Just as Luther had translated the Scriptures and the worship service into German, Scandinavian evangelicals translated these—along with Luther's *Small Catechism*—into their languages.

As Lutherans came to North America, they faced several significant challenges. One was the transition away from the European model of a state-supported church. The idea of individual freedom of religion is relatively modern. After the Reformation, church and state were still integrated: The difference was that some states remained Roman Catholic while others were now Protestant.

In places where the Lutheran confession of faith was embraced, churches became national churches rather than regional branches of the Roman church.

The pluralism of the American denominational context challenged Lutherans who were used to being part of an established church. While more recent denominations like Baptists and United Methodists grew through evangelism, Lutheran church growth was largely the result of new waves of immigration from Germany and Scandinavia.

Another challenge was the issue of cultural translation. Lutherans in the U.S. organized according to shared language and culture but soon found themselves asking, "What does it mean to be an American Lutheran?" What's the relationship between Lutheran confession and culture? This question shaped the self-understanding of individual communities but also affected their relationships with other Lutherans.

American Lutherans eventually overcame most of the cultural, structural and practical issues that separated them. The ELCA is the result of a process of focusing increasingly on what the *Augsburg Confession* identifies as the core criteria for the church and its unity: the assembly of believers around word and sacrament. It's not the beer and brats or the lefse and lutefisk that unites us or divides us—it's the good news of God's grace for us in word, in water, and in bread and wine.

This focus on the core also shapes our ecumenical relationships with other Christian denominations. We aren't abandoning our identity as Lutherans. Rather, rooted in our common understanding of the gospel we are free to worship and work together with other Christians.

Unfortunately, while American Lutherans have moved beyond our ethnocentrism, we haven't been as successful in overcoming the legacy of our state-church heritage. Lutheran church membership in the U.S. is in a slow decline. Ironically, a church that was born "evangelical" hasn't been as intentional or effective as other denominations about actual evangelism.

We can learn much from Lutherans in other cultures. What are the Lutheran churches in Tanzania and Ethiopia and elsewhere doing right? Their astonishing growth suggests they're communicating the gospel message persuasively rather than perpetuating the northern European subcultures we've too often equated with the name "Lutheran."

Lutherans should welcome the opportunity to be multilingual and multicultural, to reach out actively and clearly to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that invite other people to hear, trust and respond to the same promise that we have received.



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