

Introduction

It is impossible to talk or understand Luther and Lutheran theology without understanding the context from which both grew. Martin was born November 10, 1483 just 9 years before Columbus sailed west in a bold attempt to find India in the East (challenging the common held theory that the earth was flat). Luther lived at the beginning of the Renaissance, that period of transition between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age. It was a time of awakening of art, literature, philosophy, science, and theology. It was also a time of political unrest and challenge both within the Holy Roman Empire, and outside its borders.

The first and greatest misconception of those outside Lutheranism (and some within) that must be countered is the false statement that Luther ever intended to break away from Rome or found a new church or a different religion. Luther always was and always remained a Priest of the One Holy Catholic Church. And Lutherans are part of the Western Rite of the Church Catholic. There were radical reformers both within Luther's circle and outside who wished to break with Rome, but Luther always fought against them as being divisive to Christ.

Primary Issue

The primary concern (that in all likelihood would have remained an academic debate had it not been for political unrest and the invention of the Printing Press that allowed the general population to be part of the process for the first time) had to do with how we are in relationship with God. After years of introspection and study, Luther came to see that (and this is the prime statement of the Reformation) "We are Justified before God by a gift of God's grace through faith." That means our relationship with God has nothing to do with any work we may do. It is totally free. Luther pointed to Romans 3 as the basis for his enlightenment to this understanding, but says this is the foundational understanding of what God is about in the whole witness of scripture. It was this foundational understanding that put Luther at odds with the Medieval Church in many of its practices concerning penance and such things as the selling of indulgences (used to free the souls of those caught in the sins in this life and the next). Luther and Lutheran theology has no room for buying a relationship with God. (It is noteworthy to say neither side of the argument fully represented the other or was willing to compromise their opinion to find middle ground).



Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone

Growing from this theological perspective we Lutherans talk about three things our authority and life of faith are based on. They are scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. All authority in the church is based on and built upon scripture alone. For most of the history of the church, tradition growing from scripture has been given weight sometimes even greater than that of

scripture. For us, we attempt to base our authority on scripture as the clear revelation of God's love and salvation in Christ. The scripture is the written Word which is Christ and so is the primary authority for the church.

Grace is God's gift of love given freely to us in Christ made most clearly manifest and real in the cross. His love requires no other action than that which Christ has already done. He did it all when he died and defeated death and the devil. And so, our salvation is made complete by God's gift of love—his grace alone.

That is given to us through faith. Now faith is not something we do with our heads. Instead, faith resides in our hearts. It is trust. It itself is a relationship—a relationship of mutual sharing that binds us together as one. Here, too, God is the initiator. He implants in us the hope and the will to put our trust in him alone.

Priesthood of All Believers

Being brought into relationship with God through the gift of God's grace, we are called to a life of service. The visible sign of our call, and the act by which God declares us his own is the sacrament of Baptism.

Baptism is a sacrament because it is commanded by Christ – “Go and Baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28), and has attached to it a promise (the recipient receives forgiveness, the presence of Christ, and participation in the Body of Christ, the Church). This Word is attached to the element of water.

And beyond that, the baptized are called to a task—they are given a job. In our baptism we are ordained priests, and so, the phrase “the priesthood of all believers” applies to all of us. We are given the task by God of going out to make disciples of all people—proclaiming the love of Christ in our words and in our actions, and teaching all that Jesus has commanded (also from St. Matthew). We are to do in our lives what the specially ordained are called to do in their public ministry.

Being a member of the church is not about having one's name on a list in a church office. It is about working for Christ. That is serious work. In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about everyone having different gifts. No one is without a gift to use. It takes all the different gifts to make the church—to make the church whole. It takes each other to make us whole. God intended it that way.

Finally, we are not sent out to do this work alone. Jesus also says in Matthew “I will be with you always to the end of the age.” But it is sometimes hard to find him along the way, so he tells us where to look. “Where two or three are gathered in my name I will be in the midst of them.”

And on the night he was betrayed he took bread, gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, “This is my body.” When we gather at this table, Jesus is here. When he says “This is my Body; this is my Blood,” he means it. The pastor does not make the bread and wine the body and blood of Jesus, but none the less they are the body and blood of Christ. They are His body and blood

because he promises it to be so, and when Jesus (when God) makes a promise, He keeps it. And where Jesus is present there is forgiveness, and the fullness of God's love.

Perhaps the most important words spoken in this sacrament are the words "for you." Jesus gives himself once again for each of us—to give us strength, and hope, and love for this day and the next, and to remind us that we have a future with God—and that we can trust because God's promises are true.

And in the end, knowing that is the center of Lutheran Theology.