

Charles St-Onge  
Feast of Martin Luther  
February 18, 2004

## **“What is a Lutheran?”**

### Introduction

Churches or faith traditions get their names for different reasons. Some are named for their specific structure. For example, the Roman Catholic church is named for its belief that the teaching of the bishop of Rome is the universal, or “catholic,” teaching of Christianity. The Episcopal Church is ruled by “episcopals,” the Greek word for bishops. The Presbyterians in contrast are ruled by “Presbyters”, the Greek word for elders.

Some churches are named for their central doctrine or belief. Baptists believe that baptism should be reserved for people who’ve already confessed a belief in Christianity. Methodists follow, at least in theory, the method for attaining holiness developed by John Wesley. Pentecostals hold to miracles, like the speaking in tongues that happened at Pentecost, as the sign that someone has been converted.

Very few churches, however, are named for their founding or chief theologian, for good reason. Christians don’t want to give the impression they are worshipping anyone other than Christ! The Mennonites are named for Menno Simons, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic priest who became one of the first Baptists and a pacifist. The Amish are named for John Amman, a follower of Menno Simons who broke away from the Mennonite Church. And then there are the Lutherans, originally called the Evangelicals, who now bear the name of the man who started the Reformation, Dr. Martin Luther. Today we celebrate the 458<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.

Theoretically, Lutherans are the largest Protestant church in the world. In practice few North Americans and Europeans who call themselves “Lutheran” really are. Most hold to the name for historical reasons, but Luther himself wouldn’t recognize the teachings of their church. So who was Martin Luther, and what did he believe, teach and confess? What do we believe, teach and confess as members of the church that bears his name?

### A Brief Biography of Martin Luther

Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany of Hans and Margarethe Luther, copper miners. Luther was obviously quite bright, and his father hoped he would study to be a lawyer. However, during a dramatic thunderstorm from which he believed St. Anne saved him, he dedicated his life to the Church and became a monk.

In 1507 he was ordained a priest of the Augustinian order. As a medieval monk and priest he would have studied the writings of Augustin and other church fathers, and even the writings of secular philosophers such as Aristotle. However he would have read little of the Scriptures.

In 1511 he traveled to Rome on behalf of his Augustinian order, and probably received the same shock that Jesus received coming into the Temple. He discovered that the church had turned the city into place of selling faith, rather than celebrating it. Rather than taking a whip to the tables of priests selling freedom from the temporary punishments supposedly required of God before entering heaven, he returned home, and a year later become a professor at a new university in the backwater of Wittenberg.

There he taught the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms. He also began wrestling with the question of salvation – how is one made right before God? Did Christ really intend to create a church that would sell salvation for so many dollars? Did one have to work one's self into the good graces of God?

The more he studied the Scriptures, the more he kept coming back to a phrase used by Paul in his epistle to the Romans – “the righteousness of God.” That righteousness, Paul wrote, has been revealed in Christ Jesus apart from the law. What did this mean? The more Luther studied not only the Scriptures but the writings of the earliest church fathers, before the dark ages, the more he became convinced that the church had taken a serious wrong turn a few short centuries before his time. Somehow Paul's teachings on righteousness, so eloquently expounded by the namesake of Luther's order, Augustine, had been lost. The righteousness of God is a gift given to all who have placed their trust in Christ Jesus, without any merit on their part. The sale of forgiveness to people and the whole penitential system of the church had obscured Christ's work in forgiving people apart from their works!

As he began to grasp these issues, Luther decided to take a first stand against the sale of forgiveness, or “indulgences.” He tacked up 95 items for debate on the church door at Wittenberg, hoping to start a process of open discussion within the church.

Unfortunately, the authorities of the Roman Church were not much interested in theology. Most of them were not theologians, but princes who had become bishops in order to rule certain territories. The church was more government than religion, and saw the danger Martin Luther's points for debate might cause to their fundraising schemes. So Luther was summoned to Rome.

Everything was pretty much downhill from then on in. Two years after the posting of the 95 theses, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic church. He was protected from certain death at the hands of the Imperial troops who carried out the Pope's orders by his own German princes. He soon began to study and write for the common people what the church REALLY believed, taught and confessed, using the Scriptures as a way of testing his beliefs. Gradually, Luther reclaimed the ancient but forgotten Scriptural understanding of salvation, that we are saved by the merits of Christ crucifixion alone, and by throwing all our trust on him we are declared righteous, not made but *declared* righteous, before God. As a criminal justly deserves to go to prison for her crimes, yet is granted a full pardon by the judge who goes to jail in our place, so are we declared righteous by God for Christ's sake.

Luther ended up publishing three booklets outlining his new beliefs. The first was *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In this booklet he reduced the number of sacraments to three: Baptism, Confession, and Holy Communion. He based this change on Augustine's understanding that a sacrament was God's promise of forgiveness attached to a physical element. Marriage, Extreme Unction, Confirmation, and Ordination carried with them no assurance of forgiveness, and so they might be considered "rites," but not sacraments.

His second booklet was *An Appeal to the German Princes*. In it he wrote:

I am carrying out our intention to put together a few points on the matter of the reform of the Christian estate, to be laid before the Christian nobility of the German nation, in the hope that God may help his church through the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent.

Since the Roman church had taken over the secular estate, Luther urged the secular estate to fight back and reclaim its rule, permitting the Gospel to be preached freely by the church. In a sense, Luther pioneered the concept of a separation of church and state.

The third booklet was *The Freedom of the Christian*, written to demonstrate how a Christian should understand the freedom given to him or her in the Gospel. In the booklet Luther expounded on two ideas: that the Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and that the Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. Like all of his theology, Luther saw truth as being best expressed in irresolvable paradoxes, or seemingly contradictory statements that are both true.

Despite many attempts at reconciliation with Rome, including the most notable, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, no peace could be found, and the so-called "Evangelicals" who followed Luther became a separate church from the Roman Catholic faith. Here are four of the more distinctive teachings of the Lutheran faith:

#### 1) Grace alone

This irked the Catholics, and would continue to irk them for quite some time. The question Luther raised, and Augustine raised before him, was to what extent a human could contribute to their salvation? Some said they could choose to follow Jesus, others said that would destroy all of Jesus' words saying only the Father could draw people to himself. Augustine taught that only God could make an unbeliever a believer. His opponents said that would make God the author of evil – it was God's fault that people didn't become Christians and remained in their sins. Luther cut the Gordian knot: God alone can make a believer, but man is free to reject Christ. Another paradox: but the only one that is faithful to the Scriptures. We are condemned by our own sin, but saved by God's grace alone.

#### 2) Christ alone

Theologians taught for generations that there was no salvation outside of the Church. Luther kept the statement, but redefined what was meant by “Church”. It wasn’t membership, faithfulness to the pope, or mere repetitions of rituals that saved you, but remaining in communion with the Body of Christ, gathering together to hear about the cross of Christ and have sins forgiven. The Church was redefined to be radically centered on Christ, his atonement, his teachings, and the forgiveness merited by his death.

### 3) Scripture alone

It is true that Luther took his stand on the Scriptures. But it is false to say that the Scriptures were the only source of Luther’s theology. Neither was it the only source for the other evangelical theologians who worked with him, like Philip Melancthon and Martin Chemnitz. The Scriptures were, however, elevated to the first source and final arbiter of all doctrine. Nothing could be taught or practiced in the Church of Christ that the Scriptures flatly contradicted. At the same time, no one could interpret the Scriptures in such a way that they completely contradicted every tradition and practice of the church. On one side, Lutherans reject the Catholics’ dogmatic insistence on tradition; on the other side they reject the Protestant idea that anybody can pick up the Scriptures and interpret them anyone they’d like.

And lastly,

### 4) The Cross alone

At the time of Luther, starting in the Middle Ages, it was thought that much could be learned about God from nature and by human reason. Luther returned to the early view of the Church that nothing can truly be known about God apart from Jesus Christ. Anything we learn about God from nature, from our conscience, or anything outside the Scriptures is suspect. Luther championed St. Paul’s view that only in the death of Christ can we understand God’s desire to save us. The Gospel is not about money, success, healing, or glory: it was about dying to live. It is about grace present in suffering. It is about good triumphing in the midst of and through terrible pain. Lutherans ever since have resolved to know and preach and teach nothing but Christ and him crucified as the source of true knowledge about who God is and what his will for us is.

### Conclusion

The movement Luther started continues today. The successors of Luther, who in turn was a successor of Augustine, Ambrose, Athanasius, Ignatius, Paul, and Peter, continue to preach the Good News of the salvation won for us by the crucifixion of Christ. We preach in the face of prosperity and adversity, in the face of successes and failures, knowing that if we are faithful, Jesus is more faithful still, and that one day we shall rise from the dead to join Luther, his wife Catherine, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, Paul, and Peter before the throne of the Lamb of God. We are beggars, it is true, but Christ gives us all the riches we will ever need, by trust in his work alone. Amen.