

# About Lutherans

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Luther is one of those historical figures well-educated people have strong opinions of but don't necessarily know anything about. He often serves as either an angel or devil depending on one's enthusiasms or antagonisms; and Luther is credited with championing beliefs he actually spoke strongly against.

The significance of Martin Luther for Lutherans is also widely misunderstood. While Lutherans revere Luther and closely identify with his personal story as mirroring their own spiritual journey, very few regard him as a "saint." Indeed, any attempt to put Luther on a high moral pedestal misses the point. Luther's value derives precisely in part in the fact that he was an ill-tempered and intemperate man who was given to dark moods, made grave mistakes, and fell far short of what we expect from "saints."

"Lutheranism" suffers from similar misconceptions. For many, Lutheranism is a "generic" Protestantism from which all other Protestant Churches improvise and elaborate their own theologies. As a matter of academic theology and history, this is patently false. Lutherans are not "Protestants". Most other denominations left the Catholic Church or dissented from other Protestant bodies at different times for much different reasons. Many Protestants view Lutheranism as the "next thing" to Catholicism. This is closer to the truth, for most Confessional Lutherans view themselves as a reforming movement within the Catholic Church—although most Catholics would be bewildered by such a depiction.

The central doctrine by which the Lutheran Church "stands or falls" is "justification by Grace through faith alone". By "central," it is meant that all other doctrine and theology are subservient and guided by it. If this doctrine is "false," then the whole Lutheran movement is mistaken.

Most Protestants claim the same doctrine as their own as well; but they are positively averse to what it actually means, by declaring their will as involved in their own salvation. Modern Catholicism accepts "justification by Grace through faith alone" as doctrine; but elaborates that it is one doctrine among many and so must be harmonized by "the rule of faith" and add in the necessity of works. Thus, both "Protestants" and "Catholics" approach "justification by Grace alone" in ways totally antithetical to its authentic meaning. This is complicated by the fact that some Lutherans in the pews themselves misunderstand it.

Many Lutherans tell personal stories of laboring for years under mistaken understandings of the Gospel and then having sudden epiphanies or "Luther experiences" to what "God's Grace" means as if hearing it for the first time after years of worship, sermons and instruction. This has led some to remark that Lutheranism is actually a special form of Christian mysticism. But Lutherans reject any suggestion that it is like the perennial heresy of Gnosticism in which salvation requires a special, esoteric knowledge. Instead, they assign human resistance to God's message of "justification" to the deviousness of man's heart. Moreover, Lutherans are quick to assert, God's saving accomplishment does not depend on human understanding.

Another signpost to understanding Lutheranism is that it is "Christo-centric". What is meant by this is that the secret of life is not a special wisdom, a set of ethics or a mysterious knowledge. The secret of life is a person and that person is Jesus Christ—God Himself. All men and women do not naturally want to believe this. To the extent we take Jesus seriously, we want to believe that Jesus was pointing to "something" beyond Himself and He came to reconcile mankind to "that." All the descriptions of Jesus being a "teacher" and "example" are true but misleading by themselves apart from the certainty that Jesus is the purpose of life. More astonishingly, Lutherans claim that everything we really know about God was revealed to us on the Cross.

Where Lutherans separate themselves most from both Evangelicals and Catholics is in the area of salvation. Lutherans hold that Christ is the One who saves—in no measure does the individual save himself.

One cannot “choose” to follow Jesus because one cannot and will not do any such thing (Romans 9:16). Instead, it is God who breaks in and pulls the person to Himself.

Similarly, with Heaven’s demand “you be perfect as your Father is perfect,” men and women are incapable of fulfilling this requirement. As a means of salvation, “right living” is doomed before we begin because by committing the single smallest sin one commits all sins for all time.

The hope of the Christian lies in standing before the throne of God clothed in Christ’s own righteousness. This means that Christ’s righteousness is credited or imputed to the believer. Thus, to the enormous question “how do you know you are saved?” the response is not “because I lived a good life”, “because I did many good things for others” or “because I have great faith”. The answer is “I know I am saved because God Himself said so and God cannot lie.”

Lutherans do stress becoming more like Christ and doing acts of love in His Name. But this comes under the subject of “sanctification” which Lutherans hold to be totally apart from “justification” by necessitated by it. As important as it is to perform charitable acts and become more like Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, these things are not a means of salvation. Salvation is solely the work of God. One of the great works that Luther wrote was ‘The Bondage of the Will’, which drives a stake in the heart of man’s free will.

All the above is a lot to digest in such a short space. The life of the Christian consists of continually hearing God’s Word and being reminded of His saving work again and again. Because the desire to save ourselves on our own terms never goes away, we must be confronted with the Gospel often and every day. The Christian lives his whole life finding out what all this means. Yet whether one is the simplest child or the wisest sage, a moral exemplar or “the worst of sinners”, one’s hope and certainty is Christ Jesus.

There are whole libraries of excellent books on Lutheranism; yet many Lutheran texts only became available in English within the last 100 years. The following is my own selection of some of the best. Some of it is pretty heavy going if you are new to the faith so I have broken this list into categories. But don’t let these get in your way. Even the simplest passage can teach much and the driest text can suddenly come to life years after it is read.

“When Christ calls a man, He is calling him to die.” If not today, may you someday greet these words with joy.

## **INTRODUCTIONS TO LUTHERANISM AND THE LIFE OF FAITH**

Lutheranism 101 by Concordia Publishing House

God for Us by David Strelan

'The Hammer of God' by Bo Giertz

'A Graceful Life: Lutheran Spirituality for Today' by Bradley Hanson

'The Lutherans: Student Edition (Denominations in America, 9)' by L. DeAne Lagerquist

'How to Believe Again' by Helmut Thielicke

'I Believe; The Christian's Creed' by Helmut Thielicke

'Life Can Begin Again: Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount' by Helmut Thielicke

'The Waiting Father' by Helmut Thielicke

'My Conversations with Martin Luther' by Timothy F. Lull

'True Faith in the True God: An Introduction to Luther's Life and Thought' by Hans Schwarz

## **DEVOTIONAL**

'By Faith Alone' by Martin Luther

'Jesus, Remember Me: Words of Assurance from Martin Luther' by Martin Luther, Barbara Owen

'To All Eternity: The Essential Teachings of Christianity' by Edward Grube

'Keeping Company With Jesus' by Jackie L. Smallbones

'Steadfast in Your Word: Daily Reflections from Martin Luther' by Martin Luther

## **BIOGRAPHIES OF THE REFORMER**

'Luther: Biography of a Reformer' by Frederick Nohl

'Martin Luther: A Life' by James A. Nestingen

'Martin Luther: A Penguin Life (Penguin Lives)' by Martin E. Marty

'Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther' by Roland H. Bainton

## **ORIGINAL SOURCES**

'Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation With Study Questions' by Martin Luther

'The Bondage of the Will' by Martin Luther

'Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings' by Martin Luther

## **DEEP THEOLOGY**

'Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther' by Bengt Runo Hoffman

'A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters (Overtures to Biblical Theology)' by Charles B. Cousar

'Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life' by Gerhard O. Forde

'On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 (Theology)' by Gerhard O. Forde

'Theology Is for Proclamation' by Gerhard O. Forde

'Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-To-Earth Approach to the Gospel' by Gerhard O. Forde

'Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther' by Brian A. Gerrish

'Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings' by Eric W. Gritsch

'Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough' by Alister E. McGrath

'The Theology of Martin Luther' by Paul Althaus

'Luther in Context' by David C. Steinmetz

'Luther's Theology of the Cross' by Walther von Loewenich

'Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel' by C. F. W. Walther

'The Structure of Lutheranism (Concordia Classics Series)' by Werner Elert