

What Lutherans Believe

"Do Lutherans believe theirs is the only true religion?"

This question was once put to the late Dr. Elson Ruff, editor of *The Lutheran*. His answer was, "Yes, but Lutherans don't believe they are the only ones who have it. There are true Christian believers in a vast majority of the churches, perhaps in all."

What is it, then, that Lutherans believe and practice? Here are some brief answers to questions often asked. Before answering the questions, however, it is well to remember that not all Lutherans express their beliefs in exactly the same way. Within Lutheranism there is room for differences in interpretation and understanding, but on issues central to the faith there is, with few exceptions, common accord.

Who is Jesus Christ?

Jesus is God's son, chosen by God to become human like us. In his life and being he broke through the prison of sinfulness and thus restored the relationship of love and trust that God intended.

The man, Jesus of Nazareth, lived and died in Palestine during the governorship of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate; and we believe him to be the Messiah chosen by God to show love for the world. He is God, yet with all the limitations of being human. His relationship to God, however, was not one of sin but rather of perfect obedience to the God's will. For the sake of a sinful world, Jesus was condemned to death on the cross.

But death could not contain him. On the third day after his execution, the day Christians observe as Easter, Jesus appeared among his followers as the risen, living Lord. By this great victory, God has declared the good news of reconciliation. The gap between all that separates us from our Creator has been bridged. Thus, Christ lives today wherever there are people who faithfully believe in him, and wherever the Good News of reconciliation is preached and the Sacraments administered.

How Do Lutherans Look upon the Bible?

To borrow a phrase from Martin Luther, the Bible is "the manger in which the Word of God is laid." While Lutherans recognize differences in the way the Bible should be studied and interpreted, it is accepted as the primary and authoritative witness to the church's faith. Written and transcribed by many authors over a period of many centuries, the Bible bears remarkable testimony to the mighty acts of God in the lives of people and nations. In the Old Testament is found the vivid account of God's covenant relationship to Israel. In the New Testament is founding the story of God's new covenant with all of creation in Jesus.

The New Testament is the first-hand proclamation of those who lived through the events of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection. As such, it is the authority for Christian faith and practice. The Bible is thus not a definitive record of history or science. Rather, it is the record of the drama of God's saving care for creation throughout the course of history.

What Do Lutherans Believe About Creation?

Lutherans believe that God is Creator of the universe. Its dimensions of space and time are not something God made once and then left alone. God is, rather, continually creating, calling into being each moment of each day.

Human beings have a unique position in the order of creation. As males and females created in God's image, we are given the capacity and freedom to know and respond to our creator. Freedom implies that we can choose either positively or negatively to respond to God. Doubtlessly, this is God's most generous gift to humankind.

"Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice," an ELCA Statement on caring for God's creation, is available for [download from the ELCA website](#).

Where Do Lutherans Stand on the Question of Sin?

Lutherans believe that all people live in a condition which is the result of misused freedom. "Sin" describes not so much individual acts of wrongdoing as fractured relationships between the people of creation and God. Our every attempt to please God falls short of the mark. By the standard of the Law, of which the Ten Commandments are a classic summary, God expresses just and loving expectations for creation, and our failure to live up to those expectations reveals only our need for God's mercy and forgiveness.

What Sacraments Do Lutherans Accept?

Lutherans accept two Sacraments as God-given means for penetrating the lives of people with grace. Although they are not the only means of God's self-revelation, Baptism and Holy Communion are visible acts of God's love.

In Baptism, and it can be seen more clearly in infant Baptism, God freely offers grace and lovingly establishes a new community. In Holy Communion -- often called the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist -- those who come to the table receive in bread and wine the body and blood of their Lord. This gift is itself the real presence of God's forgiveness and mercy, nourishing believers in union with their Lord and with each other.

Do Lutherans Believe in Life After Death?

While there is much we do not and cannot know about life beyond the grave, Lutherans do believe that life with God persists even after death. Judgment is both a present and future reality, and history moves steadily towards God's ultimate fulfillment.

This, of course, is a great mystery and no description of what life may be like in any dimension beyond history is possible. Anxiety for the future is not a mark of faith. Christians should go about their daily tasks, trusting in God's grace and living a life of service.

What Must a Person Do to Become a Lutheran?

To become a Lutheran, only Baptism and instructions in the Christian faith is required. If you are already baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it will be necessary only to attend a membership class in a Lutheran congregation and thus signify your desire to become a part of its community. Active members of other Lutheran congregations usually need only to transfer their membership.