



Participant Handout for *Lutheran Identity: A Classical Understanding* By Frank C. Senn

Opening Prayer

Holy God, we thank you for bringing us together for this conversation and for promising to be with us when we gather in your name. We ask that as we learn about your church, we will be inspired to walk more closely with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Points to Ponder

Frank Senn identifies several teachings and practices that have traditionally defined who Lutherans are:

- Historical roots in the Reformation of the 16th century in Europe
- The Bible as the “rule and norm” for doctrine and teaching
- Doctrine expressed in the ecumenical (shared by other Christians) creeds
- Doctrine expressed by the Lutheran Confessions in *The Book of Concord*
- A liturgy (form of worship) shared by congregations of Western Christianity
- A commitment to social ethics

1. Which, if any, of the teachings and practices on this list are you familiar with? How would you explain them to a friend who asks you what Lutherans believe? Which do you want to understand better?

Roots in the Reformation

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was an Augustinian monk and a professor at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany. Like other spiritual people in medieval times, he saw a need for reforms in church practices, but the impact of his teaching was especially great.

2. Read Habakkuk 2:4 and Romans 3:28. What do these verses mean to you? (For Luther, they meant that the church of his day was placing too much emphasis on selling “indulgences,” a form of penance in which people made a financial contribution or performed a religious work and then received pardon for sin for themselves or a soul in purgatory.)
3. In what ways today are we Christians tempted to worry about whether we can do enough good to “earn” God’s grace? How does the message that we are “justified by faith” help you? How does it inspire you to do good works?
4. Because Luther’s reforms started with one man teaching in Germany, those reforms spread through a particular part of the world—northern Europe, where it was politically and socially attractive in many areas. People from this part of the world then brought Lutheran teaching and practices to North America. Which, if any, members of your group have ancestors from Germany, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Latvia, or Estonia? What cultural practices or values from these places influence the way we do things here? What cultural practices or values have we added—or do we want to add—from other parts of the world?

Grounded in the Bible

5. Pastor Senn writes, “As far as Luther was concerned, what is important about the Bible is that it conveys Christ” (p. 25). When you read or hear the Bible, do you more often see rules and moral advice, or do you more often see Jesus? What is it like (or would it be like) to see Jesus when you read or hear the Bible?
6. Read Psalm 22:1-5. How does this passage point you to Jesus?
7. The lectionary (Bible readings assigned by the church for worship) combines Old and New Testament passages aimed at pointing us to Christ. For example, read this pair of lessons: Proverbs 9:1-6 and John 6:51-58. How do these passages together show us Jesus? How does the message you get from reading them together differ from the message you get from reading them one at a time?
8. If we focus on looking for Jesus in the Bible, how can the Bible guide our daily life in our modern world? How can it serve as a “rule and norm” for what is true?

The Creeds and Confessions

9. Just as Lutherans and Roman Catholics share the same Bible, both groups accept as true expressions of faith the words of the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed. Which of these creeds do you recite at worship? Why might it be important for us to recite the same statement(s) of belief as Christians from ancient times and around the world? Should there (also) be time for people to state their personal viewpoints at worship? Why or why not?
10. In contrast to other Christians, Lutherans also have statements of faith known as the Lutheran Confessions. For a brief summary of one important document, the Augsburg Confession, read the quotation and the final paragraph on p. 49 of Pastor Senn’s book. Which, if any, of these points have been important to your own faith experience? Which would you want to emphasize if you were explaining to a friend what a Lutheran believes?

A Liturgy for Worship

11. Since the Reformation, Lutherans have used a liturgy (order of worship) based on the Roman Catholic Mass, with some modifications to focus on Holy Communion being a gift of God’s grace, rather than our work. How does your own experience of Christian worship compare with this description? If you have worshipped in different congregations and denominations, how do the worship services compare? How much do you value the link to ancient traditions?
12. What are some advantages of different congregations using the same hymnal and/or order of worship? What are some drawbacks?

Closing Prayer

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. Amen.

Source: Frank C. Senn, *Lutheran Identity: A Classical Understanding* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).