

Together by Grace

Introducing
the Lutherans



*Edited by
Kathryn A. Kleinhans*



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Lutheranism 202

Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Martin Luther (1483–1546) didn’t intend to start a new church. A priest and a university professor, Luther believed there was only one Christian church. His study of the Bible and his personal faith experience led him to propose changes in the church’s teaching and practice, to re-form the church so it more clearly reflected the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. This “reformation” was rejected by the leaders of the church in Rome, and Luther and his followers were excommunicated.

A major part of this reformation movement was an emphasis on the living, life-giving word of God. Luther’s academic training was as a biblical scholar. He translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German, the language of the people. He published sermons and commentaries to help communicate God’s word in ways that people could understand. Most of all, Luther encouraged people to read and hear the scriptures for themselves, expecting to receive in the inspired words God’s gracious promise for their lives.

Luther’s ideas gained the support of many German church leaders and politicians. In 1530 these leaders presented a formal statement of their beliefs to the authorities. This statement is called the Augsburg Confession—the confession of faith made in the city of Augsburg.

In 1555, when Lutheranism finally received legal recognition within the Holy Roman Empire, it wasn’t identified as “Lutheran” (followers of Martin Luther) but as “those who accept the Augsburg Confession.” It was the faith, not the founder, that mattered. Still today, in countries such as Poland and

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Slovakia, the Lutheran church doesn't have the word Lutheran in its name but is called the Church of the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession highlights Luther's central insight that sinners are justified by faith:

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. [AC IV, German text]

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'Out of grace for Christ's sake through faith' . . . has been called 'the article by which the church stands or falls.'
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The point is not just that we have faith, since one can have faith in anything—a friend or family member, one's own ability, a sports team. Christians aren't justified by the strength or sincerity of our belief but by the one in whom we believe. Only faith in Christ restores our relationship with God, because such faith trusts the promises God has made—and kept—in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“Out of grace for Christ's sake through faith”—this is so central to the way Lutherans think about the Christian faith that it has been called “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

Such faith

But justification by faith alone is not the last word that Luther and the Confessions have for us. It's only the beginning of the Lutheran understanding of Christian life. Faith in Christ isn't just about what happens when we die. It's about how we live. And it's about how we live not just for ourselves but for and with others.

One way of thinking about what Lutherans believe is to visualize justification by faith alone as the center of a flower, from which all the petals unfold,

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or as the hub of a wheel, from which the spokes radiate out. Without the center, without the hub, all you have is a bunch of disconnected parts. With the right center, everything else falls into place. Everything else in the Augsburg Confession—sin, the sacraments, worship, married clergy, the role of bishops—everything else is developed in relation to the core belief of justification by faith alone.

When we look at other parts of the Augsburg Confession, we see clearly how this interrelationship unfolds. Immediately following Article IV on justifying faith, Article V (the office of the ministry) tells us where “such faith” comes from, and Article VI (the new obedience) tells us what “such faith” does.

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, when and where he wills, in those who hear the gospel.

[AC V, German text]



This assertion challenges the view that faith is simply my own private connection to God. Have you ever heard someone say, “I can worship God just fine on a golf course on Sunday morning”? It’s true that I can praise God’s marvelous works as Creator when I sit on a mountaintop or watch a sunset or even play golf. But those experiences tell only part of the story. They don’t communicate the great good news that God in Christ is Savior—my Savior—as well as Creator.

“How Great Thou Art” is true, but it’s incomplete unless I can also sing “Jesus loves me!” Lutherans call word and sacrament “the means of grace” because they point to where and how God ministers to us with the promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Worship serves as our response to God only after God’s gracious initiative first reaches out to us.

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Luther knew firsthand how easy it is to get trapped in our own mental and spiritual ruts. He insisted that the word of God comes to us from outside ourselves, breaking into our sinful self-centeredness. We hear God's gracious "for you" most clearly when we hear it in a voice other than our own. We feel God's gracious "for you" when we are splashed with water from the font. When we taste the bread and wine, we confess that Christ is really present, his own body and blood giving life to ours.

We all know the difference between things that operate on battery power and those that must be plugged in. When the battery runs down, you recharge it or get a new one. But while the battery is working, you're good to go on your own.

Christian faith isn't battery operated. We don't just recharge every week and then go out on our own. Faith plugs us in to an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. We have power because his power flows through us.

To use a more organic image, Jesus told his followers to abide in him, as branches are rooted in a vine. Cut them off from the vine, and they wither and die. "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus says, in one of the most frequently quoted passages in the Lutheran Confessions (John 15:5).

Personal, never private

Hearing God's word preached and sharing in God's sacraments—these aren't things we can do on our own, on the golf course or on a mountaintop. Faith requires the gathering of the Christian community, the ministry—God's ministry to us—of word and sacrament. Christian faith is deeply personal but never private.

Sometimes the Lutheran emphasis on faith alone has led us to avoid talking about works, as if what we actually do as Christians isn't important. It's easy to contrast faith and works, as if they were opposites. But that was never Luther's point. What he criticized was *not* doing good but rather relying on one's actions to improve one's status with God.

According to Augsburg Confession, Article VI:

It is also taught that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded for God's sake but not place trust in them as if thereby to earn grace before God. [AC VI, German text]

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Baptism at Bethany Lutheran Church, Crystal Lake, Illinois.

Faith alone—only faith—justifies. But in the Christian life, faith never is alone. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther wrote, “We know indeed that faith is never alone but brings with it love and other manifold gifts.” In his preface to the New Testament, Luther described faith as “a living, busy, active, mighty thing.” He said, “It is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.”

This is what’s “new” about the new obedience. The works done by Christians are an inevitable outgrowth of their faith in Christ. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit. Christians don’t do good works because they are instructed to do so; Christians do good works when they are filled with a living faith in Christ. When we trust God’s gracious promise, serving others is no longer a “got to” but a “get to.”

“
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”

And if faith is never alone, so, too, the believer is never alone. God’s grace turns us outward toward others. Luther describes the relationship between

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faith and works in the context of our relationships with God and neighbor. God deals with us, Luther says, “through a word of promise.” We deal with God “through faith in the word of his promise.” And we deal with others “on the basis of works.” God comes to us, in word and sacrament, in Jesus himself. And through us God reaches out to others.

Faith at work

Lutherans have a long, strong history of combining evangelistic outreach and social ministry activity, working both to spread the faith and to make faith active in loving service of others. Wherever they are, wherever they go, Lutherans build schools and establish networks of care.

August Hermann Francke, a pastor and professor at the University of Halle in Germany from 1691 to 1727, was an early leader in Lutheran social ministry. Francke founded an orphanage, a school for the poor, a school for girls, a teacher-training institute, a medical dispensary, and more. King Frederick William I of Prussia was so impressed by his visit to Halle that he used Francke’s ideas as a model for reform throughout his realm.

Francke also made Halle a center of foreign missions. The first Lutheran missionary ever, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, was sent to South India from Halle in 1706. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg came to Pennsylvania from Halle in 1742 to help organize and strengthen American Lutherans.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Loehe, a pastor in the remote Bavarian village of Neuendettelsau, established a deaconess training program, hospitals, and schools to meet the needs of his region, as well as a mission society that sent pastors to North and South America, Australia, and New Guinea.

We have similar examples today. I live in Waverly, Iowa, a town of nine thousand people. Waverly is home not only to two ELCA congregations and the Northeastern Iowa Synod office but also to a Lutheran school (kindergarten through sixth grade), Wartburg College, Lutheran Services in Iowa, and Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community. In previous generations an orphanage and a Lutheran insurance company were located here. When Lutherans came to Waverly they didn’t just build a church. Over the years they built a community infrastructure that still remains.

When record-breaking floods ravaged the Midwest in the summer of 2008, Lutheran Disaster Response was here, working in cooperation with

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Lutheran Services in Iowa—just as it had been in the aftermath of spring tornadoes. Wartburg College stepped forward to offer space as a Red Cross shelter and to coordinate volunteer cleanup efforts. Why? Because Lutherans practice what we preach—putting faith into action in servant love of neighbor. “Such faith” in Christ prompts us to reach out to our neighbors, known and unknown.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Isa. 43:2). When literal waters did overwhelm many of us, living waters reminded us of our baptism. When wildfires threatened others, the flames of the Spirit strengthened us. For we believe that nothing can finally overcome those who are joined together in the body of Christ. Such faith, nurtured through word and sacrament, bears fruit in God’s word.

As the ELCA so powerfully puts it: “God’s work. Our hands.” Thanks be to God!



A Witness of a Lutheran Christian Dalit Woman in India

Nelavala Gnana Prasuna

Untouchability, subordination, marginalization, disparities, exploitation, deprivation, and discrimination are the common features of Dalit life, especially for Dalit women. The Dalits are those regarded as “untouchable” in the Hindu caste system. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Christian missionary activity helped provide education and employment opportunities that increased their status and identity in society.

Story of the South Andhra Lutheran Church

Like many other churches in India, the South Andhra Lutheran Church (SALC) came into existence through missionary intervention. The Rev. August Mylius, from the Hermannsburg Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Germany, arrived in Andhra Pradesh in 1865 and baptized a man named Rangayya along with his two children. This was the beginning of what would become the South Andhra Lutheran Church, which now has a history of 150 years. The SALC was under the Hermannsburg Evangelical Lutheran Mission from 1865 to 1914, under the Ohio Evangelical Lutheran Mission from 1920 to 1929, and under the American Lutheran Church from 1930 to 1941.¹ Only after Indian Independence in 1947 did the church come to be independent and known as the South Andhra Lutheran Church.

1. The gap between 1914 and 1920 was due to the interruption of German missionary activity by World War I. American Lutherans took up many of the overseas missions the Germans were forced to abandon at the end of the war.

Voices and Places

Missionaries (forty-seven male and twenty-eight female) have done tremendous work toward the transformation of the community of Dalits. They established schools, hostels, orphanages, old-age homes, hospitals, industrial schools, and Bible training schools for men and women. As a result of this missionary work, Dalit Christian men and women in the southern parts of the state

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of Andhra Pradesh had access to education that paved their way for employment and thus have the benefit of a better status when compared to Dalit people of other religions. My story is a witness to that transformation.

My story

I am a third-generation Christian woman born into a home that was rooted in Lutheran Christian faith. I was raised in a middle-class socio-economic setting as my parents are teachers. Currently, I am married and I have two sons. Both my spouse's education and my own allow us to lead a fairly middle-class lifestyle.

My experience as a Dalit Christian Lutheran woman is essential for how I do theology.

My great grandparents were “no people.” But a drastic shift from “no people” to Christian community took place with the conversion of my grandparents. My grandmother, my father's mother, was not able to bear a child even after ten years of her marriage. She heard the gospel and believed in Christ, and on one fine day she was surprised to find that she had conceived. She delivered her firstborn son and named him Devashayam, which means “God's help.” She then received baptism, and her entire family also received baptism. My mother's parents, cousins of my father's parents, also converted to Christianity, and when they gave birth to a baby girl they named her Devadanamma, which means “God's gift.” Since then a great change happened in their lives and in their villages as well, as their children were sent to mission schools and were educated and acquired a more dignified level of existence.

Being teachers, my parents rented houses in the main villages, and we lived among the caste people—those who had status in the Hindu caste



The Rev. Dr. Nelavala Gnana Prasuna, a Lutheran, is academic dean of Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College in Telangana, South India. She is shown here posing with a tree planted in the Luther Garden in Wittenberg, Germany, by the Mennonite World Conference.

system. Thus, to a great extent we escaped the stigma of untouchability that is the customary attitude toward Dalit Christians. Christmas and birthday celebrations were great occasions for us to invite our neighbors to dine together and also to share the gospel. At the same time, we were also invited by them to participate in their special ceremonial celebrations.

My parents were government employees, so we enjoyed relatively improved economic status. We are four in our family, and all of us were well educated. In the whole SALC, only two men and two women have earned doctorates in theology, and my sister Nelavala Surekha and I are among those four! That is witness to the transformation that took place for Dalits in the SALC.

Most of my childhood was spent in rural villages where the caste system was predominant. As there were no churches in villages, our home would be turned into a church, as my parents conducted Sunday worship services. As children we were nurtured in Christian faith. We used to have regular family prayers both in the morning and evening. Our parents taught us to have regular personal devotions. My early childhood experiences of faith, of confrontation with the caste system, and of improved socioeconomic status have been significant for me in my self-understanding and in articulating theology. However, it is clear that my story is not the story of many women in Indian society and the church. Women continue to face violence and suffer disadvantages and live underprivileged lives. Too many Christian women still suffer due to traditional and oppressive interpretations of the scriptures and theology.