

Why is there a Lutheran Church?

Martin Luther (b. November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany, d. February 18, 1546 in Eisleben) is known as the Father of Protestantism. He had studied to become a lawyer before becoming an Augustinian monk in 1505, and was ordained a priest in 1507. While continuing his studies in pursuit of a Doctor of Theology degree, he discovered significant differences between what he read in the Bible and the theology and practices of the church. On October 31, 1517, he posted a challenge on the church door at Wittenberg University to debate [95 theological issues](#). Luther's hope was that the church would reform its practice and preaching to be more consistent with the Word of God as contained in the Bible.

What started as an academic debate escalated to a religious war, fueled by fiery temperaments and violent language on both sides. As a result, there was not a reformation of the church but a separation. "Lutheran" was a name applied to Luther and his followers as an insult but adopted as a badge of honor by them instead.

Lutherans still celebrate the Reformation on October 31 and still hold to the basic principles of theology and practice espoused by Luther, such as ***Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura***:

- ✚ We are saved by the **grace of God alone** – not by anything we do;
- ✚ Our salvation is through **faith alone** – we only need to believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who died to redeem us;
- ✚ The **Bible is the only norm** of doctrine and life – the only true standard by which teachings and doctrines are to be judged.

Another of Luther's principles was that Scriptures and worship need to be in the language of the people.

Many Lutherans still consider themselves as a reforming movement within the Church catholic, rather than a separatist movement, and Lutherans have engaged in ecumenical dialogue with other church bodies for decades. In fact, the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) has entered into cooperative "full communion" agreements with several other Protestant denominations.

Luther's Small Catechism, which contains teachings on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, Confession and Absolution, Holy Communion and Morning and Evening Prayers, is still used to introduce people to the Lutheran faith, as is the Augsburg Confession. These and other Lutheran confessional documents included in the Book of Concord may be ordered from the ELCA Publishing House at 800/328-4648 or www.augsburgfortress.org.

If you would like to learn more about the Lutheran Church, go to the links page on this web site and select Lutheran Basics to watch the videos..

What do Lutherans believe about the Bible?

The Bible as encounter with the living Word

Lutherans believe that the Bible is the most important of all the ways God's person and presence are revealed to humanity. That is because it is in reading the biblical books that we most reliably hear and encounter the living Word of God, who is the risen Jesus.

The Bible's very name begins to tell us what we have between its covers. In Greek "the Bible" literally means "the books." The Bible that Lutherans use is a collection of 66 books produced over a period of as

much as 1,000 years. Each of these books had a life and use of its own prior to its incorporation into what we know as the "sacred canon."

The Bible contains the story of God's interaction with humankind, first through the understanding of the Jewish people (Old Testament - 39 books), and subsequently to all people through God's self revelation in Jesus (New Testament -27 books).

Lutherans believe that people meet God in Scripture, where God's heart, mind, relationship to - and intention for - humankind are revealed. Through an ongoing dialogue with the God revealed in the Bible, people in every age are called to a living faith.

The Bible's authority rests in God

ELCA Lutherans confidently proclaim with all Christians that the authority of the Bible rests in God. We believe that God inspired the Bible's many writers, editors and compilers. As they heard God speaking and discerned God's activity in events around them in their own times and places, the Bible's content took shape. Among other things, the literature they produced includes history, legal code, parables, letters of instruction, persuasion and encouragement, tales of heroism, love poetry and hymns of praise. The varying types and styles of literature found here all testify to faith in a God who acts by personally engaging men and women in human history.

At the same time, we also find in the Bible human emotion, testimony, opinion, cultural limitation and bias. ELCA Lutherans recognize that human testimony and writing are related to and often limited by culture, customs and world view. Today we know that the earth is not flat and that rabbits do not chew their cud (Leviticus 11:6). These are examples of time-bound cultural understandings or practices. Christians do not follow biblically prescribed dietary laws such as eliminating pork from one's diet (Leviticus 11:7) because the new covenant we have with God has replaced the Old Testament covenant God had with his people. Because Biblical writers, editors and compilers were limited by their times and world views, even as we are, the Bible contains material wedded to those times and places. It also means that writers sometimes provide differing and even contradictory views of God's word, ways and will.

Listening to the living Jesus in the context of the church, we therefore have the task of deciding among these. Having done this listening, we sometimes conclude either that the writer's culture or personal experience (e.g., subordination of women or keeping of slaves) seems to have prompted his missing what God was saying or doing, or that God now is saying or doing something new.

The Bible's authority is interpreted through Jesus

By no means does that human presence in sacred Scripture detract from the Bible's testimony to God. Rather, this human testimony provides layers of faith and insight by those who contributed to the canon. The Bible's reliability lies not in reading it as science or proscription, but as humankind's chief witness to God, reflecting on faith as it is to be lived. Again, ELCA Lutherans judge all Scripture through the window of God's chief act - that of entering human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth - and they interpret Scripture by listening to the living Jesus in the context of the Church. Because Jesus' person, life and witness become the lens through which we read and interpret all Scripture, we can judge slavery as "not of Jesus," yet understand the customs of the time and read Paul's inspiring letter to Philemon, master of the slave Onesimus, as testimony to faith.

On several occasions, Martin Luther suggested that not all books of the Bible have the same value for faith formation. Similarly, as in all of life, ELCA Lutherans ask, "Is what we find here consistent with God's revelation in Jesus?" This is a central question/prescription that provides guidance for acting as moral beings and for calling humankind to justice; it also becomes the authority for our reading Scripture, for it is the Jesus of Scripture, the living Word, who reveals God and judges Scripture, just as he is the

judge for all else in life. Therefore, it is a question that ELCA Lutherans find best answered within the life of the Church in community, for this risen Jesus is Lord of the Church.

Biblical interpretation as scholarly endeavor

ELCA Lutherans understand that the Bible contains various kinds of testimony to God's purpose for humanity. Included in its literary forms are history, story, parable, legal codes, hymns, inspirational and instructive letters, and personal faith testimony.

Some ancient Biblical content precedes the written word and was passed orally from generation to generation. Thereafter, early manuscripts were written fully or in part in a number of languages, principally Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. In order to duplicate and disseminate these manuscripts before the invention of the printing press texts were hand copied. While they are remarkable in their agreement and accuracy, sometimes - though mostly in minor matters - because of a copyist's writing, mistakes or incorporation of margin notes, these texts do not agree among themselves.

Manuscript variances raise questions among scholars concerning the original text's intent or meaning. For instance, did God use ravens or Arabs to feed Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:6)? The two words share the same Hebrew characters, and since the passage predates the use of vowels in the Hebrew language, manuscript translations vary according to which vowels were assigned later by the scribe-copyists.

It may be helpful here to distinguish studying Biblical texts from mining the Bible for devotional material. ELCA Lutherans honor and employ both approaches in faith formation. The distinctions are not clear cut, for elements of each are found in both approaches. Yet some Biblical material particularly lends itself to meditation or reflection on the will of God for faithful living (e.g. Hebrews 11 on examples of faith). There is also the kind of textual study that dissects a passage for deeper meaning or insight. In so doing, one discovers clarification, or understanding that informs and shapes doctrine (e.g. Romans 5 on grace and justification).

ELCA Lutherans understand that the Bible can be read and understood by an individual. We also recommend its being read and interpreted in Christian community, using helps provided by scholarly work for this getting to the heart and meaning of Biblical texts.

Biblical "criticism"

To come to the best understanding of a text's meaning, ELCA Lutherans, together with Roman Catholics and most other churches, respect the light shone on Biblical passages by a number of scholarly methods of scriptural study. These are called "criticisms" in that a critical eye uses one of several methods to analyze texts in an attempt to discover their meaning. The term 'criticism' is not to be understood as being critical of the text. In the example of God providing Elijah food, a highly specialized area of research called "textual criticism" would compare the diverse manuscript copies known to exist, as well as other similar ancient translations of the words in question, to determine the more likely meaning.

Other such helpful "criticisms" used to understand author intent are, to name just a few:

- ✚ Historical (applying knowledge of ancient languages, grammar, idioms, customs, etc.)
- ✚ Form (comparing literary forms used by the author with similar Biblical and non-Biblical literature found in legends, stories, narratives, etc.)
- ✚ Redaction (understanding how writers creatively shaped material they inherit and how, perhaps, they brought nuances from their own context and culture)

ELCA Lutherans and ELCA teaching scholars do not rely on a single critical approach to a text, but find a variety of approaches helpful for understanding the meaning of various passages. These scholarly tools help to inform and strengthen our knowledge, faith and understanding of God's marvelous acts, and point us to God's ongoing action in the world in every age.

How do Lutherans view God?

Trinity - Holy Trinity

God's three faces

The term *Trinitas* (Latin) was coined by the early church theologian Tertullian (A.D. 160-225) and probably first used in the sense of the coexistence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the unit of the Godhead by Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch in Syria (A.D. 169-177). While not a biblical term, The Trinity represents the crystallization of New Testament teaching. In writing his first letter to the Corinthians in about A.D. 55, just two decades after Christ's death and resurrection, St. Paul correlates Spirit, Lord and God (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). There is a similar correlation in the benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 and in the trinitarian baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19.

The church's confession of faith originated as a baptismal formula. "In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit asserts that God reveals himself in a threefold manner because he is a triune God. The doctrine is founded on the events of revelation in which the living God has disclosed himself to the world and manifested his determination to establish communion with humankind" (Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church).

Creation, redemption, reconciliation

"When the church, on the basis of the prophetic and apostolic witness, confesses one God it confesses its faith that the creator at the beginning of time and the re-creator at the end and the redeemer at the center of time is one God. And again, when the church, in obedience to the same witness, worships this one God by three distinct names, it recognizes and acknowledges the difference between creation, reconciliation, and redemption, and it confesses in the one God the three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church).

God as God is

ELCA Lutherans believe that God reveals who God really is to us. Therefore the Christian church must confess its faith in the essential Trinity. God is one God, revealed in three persons. Article 1 of the Augsburg Confession affirms the doctrinal decisions of the fourth century that deal with the oneness of the divine substance which is God, and the difference of the three persons (sometimes spolen of by their functions as Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier), declaring them fundamental for the faith of the Reformation. ELCA Lutherans fully subscribe to these confessions presented by the reformers to Emperor Charles V in 1530 in Augsburg, Germany.

Of the Godhead Article 1 of the Augsburg Confession says, "We'unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the Council of Nicea, that there is one divine essence which is called and which is God, eternal, incorporated, indivisible, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the maker and preserver of all things, visible and invisible. Yet there are three persons, of the same essence and power, who are also co-eternal: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, together with the other 135 Lutheran World Federation* member churches, therefore, are Trinitarian churches, understanding that God has chosen to reveal God's self in triune fashion so that we might better know, understand and witness to God's activity in the world. With Western Christian churches, we celebrate the Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday.

* Lutheran World Federation Churches span 76 countries, with approximately 65,388,000 members

How do Lutherans view prayer ?

Conversation with one's loving parent

Prayer is simply, yet profoundly, human communication with God. It is God's invitation, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to keep lines of communication open between creature and creator.

The Biblical witness provides numerous examples of God responding to the faithful's prayers -- even to changing God's intended course of action (e.g. Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:22-33, and, at Moses' plea, God spares those who worship the golden calf in Exodus 32:11-14). Thus, prayer can be a kind of conversion experience for both

God and humankind. It is an act of stewardship and a way in which we join God as co-creators of the future. Stewards, after all, are appointed agents to supervise/manage/administer another's property or affairs.

ELCA Lutherans believe that as God has and continues to speak intimately to us through

- ✠ Jesus
- ✠ Scripture
- ✠ the Sacraments
- ✠ the Holy Spirit
- ✠ his created order
- ✠ other people,

so it is through prayer that we may respond to, initiate and continue conversation with God.

Abba/Father

When Jesus' disciples approached him asking, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples," (Luke 11:1) he responded, "When you pray, say, 'Abba'...."

In that single word, Jesus changed humankind's understanding of prayer and our approach to God.

The word *Abba* can be translated by the familiar slang -- daddy or papa. At the same time, *Abba* reflects much more of a loving, doting parent who wants to hear the thoughts and feelings of a child. In Jesus' understanding, God is not to be seen as a distant, inapproachable judge waiting to condemn. Instead, we are invited to approach God in prayer like a child who speaks to a loving parent. And, like a loving parent who listens to a child, God hears us. ("[Prayer 101](#)" by Robin McCullough-Bade) Martin Luther wrote, "Here God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father." (Martin Luther's Small Catechism, introduction to The Lord's Prayer)

In Jesus' name

ELCA Lutherans direct their prayers to God in Jesus' name only. Jesus' prayer instructions tell us that we need no other intermediary. We believe that, inspired by the Holy Spirit, our prayers move from our hearts to God's, and that God truly listens and responds. Furthermore, to pray in Jesus' name means more than making sure our petitions reach the right destination. It means to pray as Jesus would - to ask that his longings and desires for the world become ours. Prayer in Jesus' name is asking God to convert us more deeply into the mind and love of Christ. Jesus tells us in Luke 11:9-10 to persevere in our prayer, to "ask and it will be given you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you." If we persevere - even when we experience what appears to be silence or rejection - Jesus' promise is that God's word will come to us as a response to our prayers. However, we know that response may not always be what we want or think we should hear. It may not come on our timetable, may be puzzling and even unwelcome sometimes. Even when we choose to tune out God's response, we have Jesus' promise that God has heard our prayers and will open doors that answer them - occasionally showing us paths beyond those we have imagined, leading to where we would not have ventured.

Private and corporate

ELCA Lutherans pray alone and with others. We give God thanks in prayer, and offer God our joys, hurts, wonderment, confusion, disappointment and all that we experience in this life. We offer our burdens and ask forgiveness, pray for daily needs, friends and loved ones, the poor and dispossessed, peace and prosperity, mission, and world leaders. We pray for ourselves and offer prayers of intercession for others. All these things and more are proper for daily prayers of silent devotion, as well as public prayers offered in full voice and joined with believers of every country and denomination.

Our prayers may be

- ✠ rambling or come in cries
- ✠ extemporaneous or written in books and beautifully phrased
- ✠ spoken or sung
- ✠ of our own creation or that of the worshiping community
- ✠ immediate in time, or centuries old - as ancient as the prayer Jesus taught (Luke 11:2-4, "The Lord's Prayer")

When prayer is addressed to God and prayed from the depths of our hearts, it is communication with God.

Listening and acting

ELCA Lutherans believe that it is good to set aside times daily to pray privately, and that it is equally important to pray with others corporately in various contexts, including our homes and in worship. We believe that it is good to begin and end the day with prayer, offer prayers of thanksgiving and intercession at meals, and pray for guidance before making important decisions.

Because in prayer we are being held and guided by the Holy Spirit, we believe that our prayers take the form of actions. As our lives are to be interwoven with prayer and prayer interwoven in our lives, so a loving touch, a helping hand, an act of mercy; advocacy, witness or justice can come before God as fragrant incense (Psalm 141:2 "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice." [The lifting of one's hands, palms open toward the heavens, is the traditional ancient posture for prayer, and remains so for many Christians today.]

Our prayers - in silence, in the company of others or as actions - need to incorporate time to listen and meditate. Since we believe in prayer's power to sustain and change life, and to influence God's action in the world, it is good to surround our prayers with reflective listening so that we may discern God's response. For ELCA Lutherans this praying, listening, discerning dialogue with God provides guidance for faithful living in Christ.

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What do Lutherans believe about Baptism?

Baptism

In Holy Baptism, God liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Born children of a fallen humanity, in the baptismal waters we become God's reborn children and inherit eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church, which is Christ's body. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love and obedience to God's will.

ELCA Service of Holy Baptism (paraphrased),
Lutheran Book of Worship pg 121.

God's act, Jesus' command

In this beginning of the ELCA baptismal service, we acknowledge first that Baptism is God's act, God's initiative and God's gift. It connects us to Jesus, the Church and eternal life. That is fundamental to ELCA Lutherans' baptismal theology.

Lutherans baptize in response to Jesus directing his disciples to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). We believe that this Great Commission is the motivator for Christian Baptism, as distinct from the baptism of John the Baptist. (See "[Why was Jesus baptized?](#)")

The Church and infant baptism

ELCA Lutherans believe that Baptism is the Church's entry rite. Baptism brings us into the Church, Christ's living body on earth. As the First Century church baptized whole families, including infants, so do Lutherans. In fact, usually ELCA Lutherans bring their infants to the baptismal font within the first months – even weeks – of a child's life. "The fact that circumcision (which occurred on an infant's eighth day) was replaced by Baptism in Jewish-Christian circles may indicate that infant baptism was assumed from the first" ("Baptism" by Martin Marty).

ELCA theologian Martin E. Marty says that our view of Baptism "... is not only compatible with but actually draws strength from the practice of infant baptism. If baptism is part of what God does, not of what we do, if it is God's word that shapes, creates, reforms, reaches out, acts and enacts, then the priority does not fall on what we consciously bring. Logically and chronologically the gift of God in Baptism precedes what we take out of it. In Baptism it is Christ who brings the child, holds it in his arms, and receives it as a member of his body. ..."

Dr. Marty goes on to say that because of the rich promise associated with Baptism, and because of what God's inspiring Holy Spirit would surely know about an obedient church's response to such a gift, one would almost expect biblical strictures against baptizing little children if the promise of baptism were not intended for all

people of all ages in all nations to be baptized and thereafter walk in their Baptism. Upholding the ancient church's practice of baptizing infants, Luther argued that if, "... Baptism is made dependent on faith, we (would) scarcely ever arrive at the assurance of having sufficient faith and thus at the validity of our Baptism. ... Baptism ... points to the fact that salvation comes only from God."

Sacramental baptism – Word and water

Baptism is one of the two sacraments that mark Lutheran theology and practice, the other being The Eucharist (or Holy Communion). We believe both to have been instituted by Jesus.

Martin Luther defined sacraments as actions whose outward signs point to God's command and promise. They contain two things:

- ✚ the Word of God that makes the action or elements a sacrament
- ✚ an outward sign - which in Baptism is the primordial element, the 'stuff' of life, water

Luther said, "... when the Word accompanies the water, Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute Baptism, but receives it."

ELCA theologian Joseph Sittler has said, "A person is drawn to water - to an ocean, a river or a stream - because there is something in him that knows that this is from whence he came. One thinks of the percentage of water in our bodies, the need for water to sustain earthly life, water's cleansing properties, and the Genesis 1:2-3 account that at creation "a wind from God swept over the face of the water. Then God said, 'let there be light; ...'" (Personal notes from a conversation with Joseph Sittler at a Lutheran Council in the USA staff retreat.)

Dr. Marty says, "Just as the whole language of Calvary presupposes the Old Testament sacrifice of a lamb with blood, so the whole language of Baptism presupposes a biblical interest in water. The Christian says: Baptism is my departure out of chaos into the order of the forgiven life. It is my visitation by the Spirit which broods over the water of life. ... In this water I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, sharing his living water."

"Word meant the activity and voice of God in the Old Testament. ... The Word, says Luther, is everything. Without it - and no Christian would deny this - the water is nothing and Baptism does not exist. ... Connection with the Word thus means that Baptism relates a person to the whole plan of God. ... This is why the ancient baptismal commands are of considerable importance to moderns who stand in the same need. ... 'In the name of the Father' relates Baptism to the whole of creation - and its water; 'in the name of the Son' calls to mind the whole personal relation of the baptized community to God in Christ; and 'in the name of the Holy Spirit' means that God takes the initiative, turning the (Word) into Spirit and creating the church."

Forgiveness of sin and salvation

Luther's Large Catechism (IV, 83) instructs that Baptism "overcomes and takes away sin." Marty suggests that the water of the old creation and the Word of the new achieve the new creation in human beings. Sin is washed away, the sinner is 'drowned,' the old self is shattered, "helpless as a crying infant with empty hands and uninformed head and no report card at all." This time, newness comes not by the breath of God, as at creation, but by the death of Christ. "Once this is seen ... the center of Baptism has been properly located. The forgiveness of sins becomes the glowing core, the center out of which the full Christian life will flow. At baptism the sign of the cross is made over the person; he is invited to enjoy the fellowship of the resurrection and to share the burden of Christ's suffering."

ELCA Lutherans believe that baptism addresses itself to the question of salvation. In God's gift of Baptism we are assured the forgiveness of sins to live a free, responsible and joyful life - in order that we might be saved

everlastingly. With Luther we can say that, "No greater jewel ... can adorn our body and soul than Baptism, for through it we obtain perfect holiness and salvation, which no other kind of life and no work on earth can acquire." Baptism is truly God's gift, drawing us into Christ's church and bestowing upon us forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. In it, we are marked by the cross of Christ forever. (ELCA Service of Holy Baptism, Lutheran Book of Worship, pg 124, "... child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.")

What do Lutherans believe about Holy Communion?

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther said "The sacrament of Holy Communion is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given with bread and wine." Holy Communion is instituted by Christ himself for us to eat and drink. It's for this reason, Lutherans consider Holy Communion to be a sacrament. Luther drew his ideas about Holy Communion from the bible. All four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John give an account of the meal Jesus and his disciples ate the night before he was crucified. During the meal, Matthew's Gospel tells us that while they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.