

Why I believe the Lutheran Church

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Introduction

The Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church teaches [the only message that brings eternal life](#), the message “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This message is good news because all who believe it, trusting God’s promise to forgive them, are saved from their sins (15:1-2; Galatians 3:2; John 3:16). To varying degrees, non-Lutheran churches add false teachings to that message. For example, some say believing is not enough, but good works must be added to merit eternal life. Others say saving faith is not a gift of God, but comes by human decision. Still others say believers cannot be assured of God’s forgiveness without examining their inner motives or perceptions of the Holy Spirit within them.

Why does it matter if the message about Jesus is diluted a little bit? Adding some water to juice makes it less nutritious, but isn’t watered-down juice still good for you? Indeed, adding water is no cause for alarm; adding poison is a different matter entirely. Adding false teaching to the true teaching of the Bible produces a poisonous message that endangers those who hear it (Galatians 1:6-9; 4:9-11; 5:2-4). For although some listeners will believe the good news, that their sins have been completely paid for by Christ’s death, others will believe the false teaching, that they must add something because Christ’s death is not enough. Doing so keeps them from receiving God’s forgiveness and eternal life. For the Christian, nothing has greater value.

Background

When I was member of baptistic churches from 1987 to 1997, my faith became more and more Calvinistic, first with regard to predestination, and eventually with regard to the sacraments and the end times. Consequently, I have been a member of denominations in the North American Council of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches from 1997 to 2005, serving as an elder in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church for about two years. All of these churches, including the Baptist churches that taught an Arminian view of election, may be described as Reformed in the sense that their roots go back to the Reformation of Zwingli and Calvin. The next section summarizes what convinced me that the Reformation of Luther and Chemnitz clings much closer to the words of the Bible.

How the Lutheran Church differs from the denominations

The church of the Lutheran confessions, hereafter called *the Lutheran Church*, strictly believes the New Testament's teachings on the good news (gospel) of salvation and on the Lord's Supper. This church includes, but is not limited to, its Missouri Synod. Other churches, hereafter called *the denominations*,* deviate from both doctrines in various ways, usually to make them more reasonable by human standards. These deviations in teaching result from human attempts to interpret and clarify the Bible, whereas the Lutheran Church does not attempt to interpret God's word, but allows the Bible to interpret itself. This is done by simply believing the passages that are clear, and then using those clear passages to bring understanding to the rest of the Bible. Thus, Lutherans do not attempt to clarify or interpret the Bible because they believe it is already clear. The perfect clarity of God's word makes possible the complete unity of faith emphasized by the Athanasian Creed: "Whoever wished to be saved must, above all else, hold the true Christian faith. Whoever does not keep it *whole and undefiled* will without doubt perish for eternity" (*Book of Concord*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 2000, emphasis added).

Differences in teaching on the gospel and the Lord's Supper demonstrate that the Lutheran Church simply accepts the teaching of the Bible, whereas each denomination substitutes its own interpretation of what the Bible really means. Specifically, the Lutheran Church, in simple faith that God's word never deceives, consistently echoes these teachings of Christ and his apostles:

1. *The good news of God's kingdom is that he loved the world so much that he sent his Son to die to pay the penalty of everyone's sins, to be buried, and to be resurrected; all have eternal life who believe that good news as God's promise that their sins have been forgiven (John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 1:16; 4:1-16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Galatians 3:2; 1 Timothy 2:1-6; 1 John 2:2).* On the other hand, for eternal life and forgiveness of sins, the denominations require Christians to depend on their sanctification, their decision, their faith, their perception of the Spirit within, or something else inside themselves. As a result, those who consistently follow denominational teachings either needlessly lack assurance that they have life and forgiveness or put their confidence not only in Christ as offered in the good news but also in something about themselves, in something that cannot save them in the end. | [Example: Calvinistic and Arminian denominations](#)
2. *All who partake of the Lord's Supper eat and drink not only bread and wine, but also his crucified, risen body and blood, which sustain eternal life in those who believe the promise of forgiveness offered in the sacrament (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-25; John 6:22-71).* In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church denies the presence of bread and wine, does not require faith for the beneficial reception of the sacrament, and teaches that Jesus is sacrificed again at each Mass. At the opposite extreme, most Protestant denominations deny the oral reception of his body and blood.

| [Is the Bible unclear?](#) | [The relevance of John 6](#) | [The relevance of Jesus' miracles](#)

To overcome the ever-present temptations to rely on human wisdom, on uncertain interpretations of unclear passages, or on clear passages taken out of context, Christians may simply quote the above passages prefaced by, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). God's word will never mislead.

“Choose this day whom you will serve”

Even those not called to authoritatively teach the Scriptures have a responsibility to make sure that they are not taught human opinions in place of God’s word (Matthew 7:15-20; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Timothy 6:3-5). This describes what I experienced in my own struggles with those opinions, the teachings of the denominations:

There is a sharp and clear distinction which must be observed between those who err in regard to Baptism and/or the Lord’s Supper as a result of *ignorance* and those who err... as a result of *unbelief*. For example: It is possible for Christian to hold a false view of the Lord’s Supper, but only if he does not realize that his view is false; that is, a believer can be inconsistent and make mistakes in doctrine which do not immediately overthrow the foundation of his faith. This false belief will play havoc with the person’s faith and militate against his trusting Christ and his certainty of salvation whenever he begins to compare the false with the true. But once the error has been discovered and pointed out by Scripture, there’s no longer any room for “felicitous inconsistency.” The believer is then confronted with a choice between correction by that Word or rejection of that Word. Once ignorance of the error has been removed, the person is faced with the ultimatum: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” He will either knowingly remain with the doctrine and god of his own making or he will be corrected and thankfully respond: “You have the words of eternal life.” [Bischof, J.C. *John 6 and the Lord's Supper*; Concordia Seminary: St. Louis, 1999, pp. 120-121.]

For those interested in learning more, I put together and annotated [a list of books](#) that pointed me this year to the saving message of the clear word of God.** That message may also be heard from one of Christ’s appointed spokesmen in the worship services of [a confessional Lutheran congregation](#).

* As the term is used here, the denominations include churches that may not consider themselves denominational, for example, independent congregational churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and churches that bear the Lutheran name without consistently teaching the message of the Lutheran confessions. Of course, the denominations have many individuals who believe the gospel, all of whom are members of the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church: they all share the same Lord, faith, and baptism (Ephesians 2:5). Nonetheless, divisions in the universal Church caused by false teachings remain harmful (1 Timothy 6:3-5).

** Many of these books are available from [Concordia Publishing House](#). Public libraries can often find these books from other libraries and lend them free of charge.