

A Primer in Lutheran Theology

By Chris Lake

How this whole thing got started was like this you see...

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was Roman Catholic. He was nine years old when Columbus made his famous voyage in 1492. His father saved and saved so that Luther could become a lawyer. In 1501, at the age of 19, he entered the University of Erfurt. Four years later he earned a Master's degree. He enrolled in law school that year, but dropped out almost immediately, feeling drawn to philosophy and theology. Later that year, traveling on horseback in a terrifying thunderstorm, he prayed to St. Anne and vowed to become a monk.

Being a monk meant a vow of poverty, so his parents, who expected him to support them in old age, were not pleased. He joined the Augustinian order. In July 1505, he entered a closed friary, never to be seen again, or so he thought. In 1507 he was ordained, and in 1508 began teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg. In 1512, he was awarded a Doctorate in Theology, at the age of 28. He would spend the rest of his career as a professor at Wittenberg.

In 1517, Johann Tetzel was sent to Germany to sell indulgences (a piece of paper announcing papal forgiveness of sins). The money would be used to repay the Pope the money promised by Albert of Mainz for the position he had purchased (bishop of Mainz and Magdeburg). The Pope would use this money to repay the Fugger Bank for the loan taken out to finance the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther opposed the sale of indulgences, as bilking the poor and theologically indefensible. Luther wrote 95 Theses, or points for scholarly debate. His Theses primarily dealt with indulgences, and was originally written in Latin. Someone translated them into German, and thanks to the recently invented Guttenberg printing press, within two weeks, there was not a village in Saxony that did not have a copy of these Theses. They sparked what is now referred to as The Reformation.

In time, Luther was brought up on trial for the 95 Theses and other writings, and was told to recant. When he would not, he was excommunicated. It is important to remember that Luther did not leave to start his own church. He was kicked out.

Luther felt the church had grown corrupt. It had made law out of human traditions. He sought to return theology and ecclesiology to an earlier, more pristine form, with two sacraments, not seven. Primarily, he argued that salvation did not come through penance, masses or obeying church demands, but rather through faith in Christ alone.

Some Key Theological Principles

1. Justification by grace through faith. You are not made holy by being a good person. We are made holy by being in relationship with Christ. No one is perfect. There is nothing you can *do* to make your relationship with God right. You cannot get right with God. We believe God bridges the gap. It is a free gift. God loves you with an everlasting love. Like a loving parent, teacher, adult, not an angry judge looking to teach you a lesson.

So what does this mean? When we encounter other people who are broken, hurting, abused, feeling guilty we offer them absolution when we treat them with kindness, compassion and honor no matter their story. God did not call people to judge but instead call people to show them God's forgiveness in our words and actions.

2. Worship in the language of the people. Worship is the place God's words are heard. Luther did sermons in the language of the people and translated the Scriptures into the language of the people making God's word more execrable than it had ever been before.

What does this mean? We continue to find ways to worship in ways that reflect and connect with those around us. Worship needs to be contextual and relevant to those who gather for it so that God's word can be better heard and experienced.

3. The priesthood of all believers. Luther: "Every baptized Christian is a fully ordained priest, bishop and Pope." Vocation: Everyone is called.

What does this mean? In baptism, everyone has a call from God. God's mission is carried out through a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5) as God inspires, empowers, and blesses the work of the church in its many manifestations, both organizationally and individually. Such mission is ultimately global in vision and impact, for Jesus calls us the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-14). We further acknowledge that our mission constitutes but one part of God's saving activity in the world. We affirm the work of God wherever it is found, trusting that God is active in and through other churches and, indeed, in and through everyone and everything that God has made. (From the ELCA.COM)

4. Theology of the cross. A theology of glory says God exists to make me happy. A theology of the cross says that God calls me to serve and sacrifice. "If any would be my disciples, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." Discipleship is a challenging, risky adventure. Luther didn't play it safe.

What does this mean? Everyone hurts and pain is real. Divorce. Abuse. Neglect. Grieving. There is an ocean of hurt in the world. We believe God is present in suffering. Where God seems to be most absent is where God is usually most present. It's not all about me. Therefore the ministry of the Lutheran church needs to be focused outwards on inwards.

5. We are both Saint and Sinner: We are all at the same time good and bad. Conversion doesn't mean all your problems go away.

What does this mean? We live in a complex world. We always have. As a Lutheran we believe that we live in tension between several dichotomies. i.e.... What should be and what is, Law and Gospel, reality and hope, joy and sadness. Because of this tension we believe that a person's life will not be magically all better if they start attending worship or belong to a church. However it also means that there will be disagreement among those in the faith and that is acceptable and expected as discerning God's will is not always easy.

6. The Bible:

We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God but we do not use the word infallible to describe the word of God.

What this means: Luther said the Bible is like the manger that holds the Christ child. You have baby and you have straw. You have to learn to tell the baby from the straw. Gospel=Baby. Law=Straw. Because of this distinction between Law and Gospel we don't weigh every part of the Bible equally for instance some books like Romans have more authority than the book of Revelation. We also don't interpret the Bible literally on every verse. (e.g. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off...") We honestly acknowledge that we don't do everything that the Bible says we should do.

7. God.

God is the Source of all that is.
Sin is trusting other gods.

What does this mean? Your god is whatever you put your trust in. In a world that is as broken it is easy to find other god's to trust in. We believe when we give ourselves to other gods, bad things happen. This includes treating the Bible as God or ourselves as God. God is God, not the book that tells us about God or the people that read it.

8. Baptism

Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it."

Mark 10:15.

Denominations that practice infant baptism include the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodoxy, Armenian Apostolic Church, Assyrian Church of the East, the Anglican churches, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, some Church of the Nazarene, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Canada, the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the Continental Reformed.

Groups that reject the ancient practice of infant baptism include the Baptists, Apostolic Christians, Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ, most Pentecostals, Mennonites, Amish, Plymouth Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists, most non-denominational churches, and other Arminian denominations. Infant baptism is also excluded by Jehovah's Witnesses, Christadelphians, and Latter Day Saints.

Irenaeus (c. 130–202) speaks not only of children but even of infants being "born again to God" and three passages of Origen (185–c. 254) mention infant baptism as traditional and customary. Tertullian (c. 155–230) mentions that it was customary to baptize infants, with sponsors speaking on their behalf. The Apostolic Tradition, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (died 235), describes how to perform the ceremony of baptism; it states that children are to be baptized first, and if any of them could not answer for themselves, their parents or someone else from their family was to answer for them. At a Synod of African Bishops, St. Cyprian stated, "God's mercy and grace should not be refused to anyone born".

Lutherans practice infant baptism because they believe that God mandates it. They cite biblical passages such as Matthew 28:19, Mark 10:13-15, 16:16, John 3:3-7, Acts 2:38-39 in support of their position. We believe that baptism is God's claiming of us, not an adult's act of obedience. We believe infants actually have faith, if faith is indeed trusting God. Jesus says that we should all have the faith of a child.

8. Communion

We believe that all Christians are welcome to the table for **Holy Communion**. The Lutheran Church proclaims the presence of Christ in the elements as being in with and under the bread and the wine. We practice communion every time we get together for worship because we believe it strengthens the Church as the body of Christ and is just as important as any sermon.

What does this mean? We have communion every time we get together for worship. Everyone is welcome to participate.

9. Love

The Great Commandment. Love God. Love your neighbor.

What does this mean: Luther said if we could keep first commandment we could ditch the other nine.

10. The Great Commission. Make disciples.

What does this mean: You are shaping faith for the next generation.

Conclusion: Jesus became a victim of this world's violence and hatred. Yet he did not resort to violence and hatred. His death and resurrection point to God's future, that death is not the end of the story. God will redeem all creation and has the final word. That word appears to be Love.