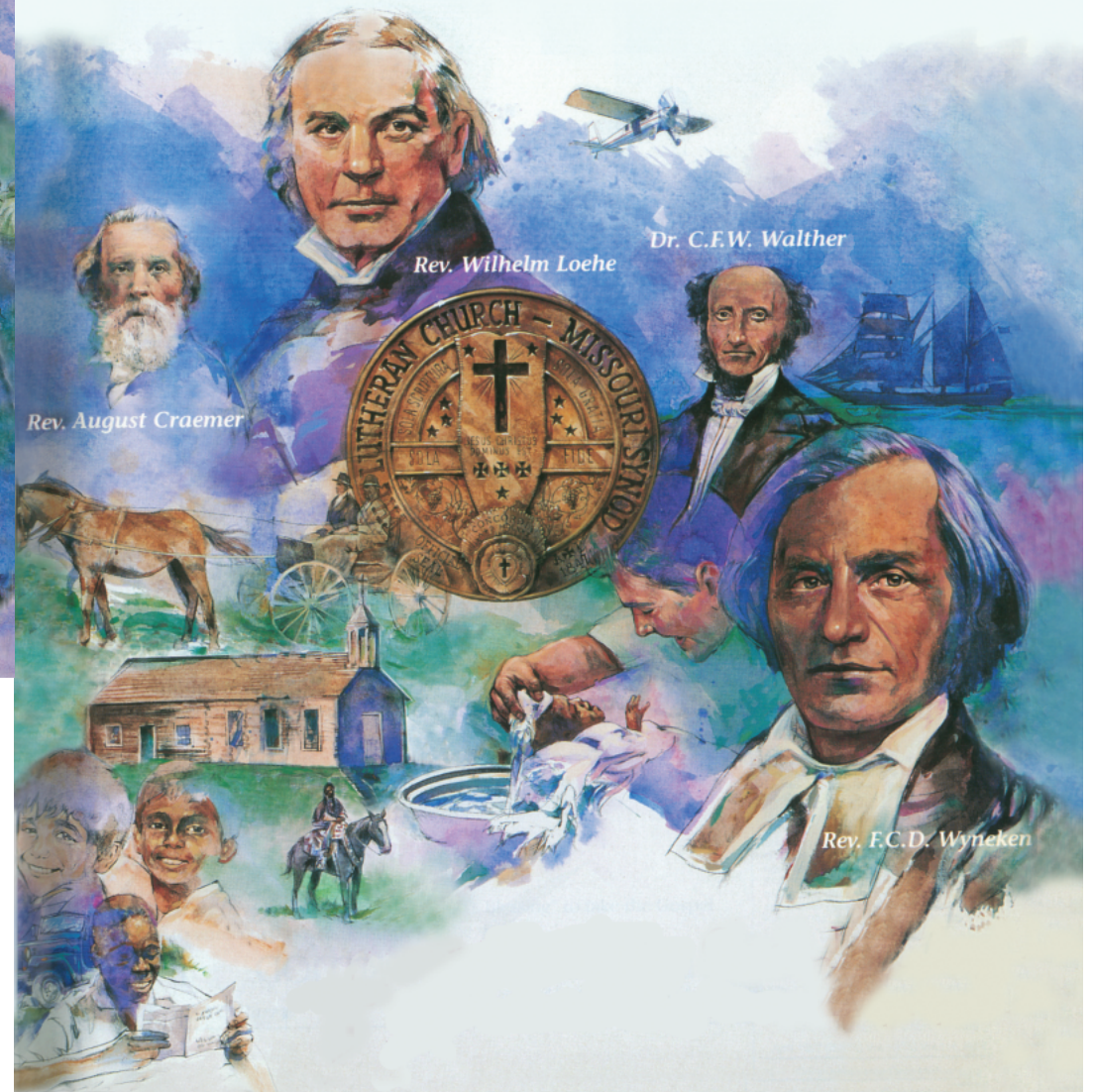




AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—  
 MISSOURI SYNOD**



Concordia  
 Publishing House  
 www.cph.org  
 1-800-325-3040

**CONCORDIA TRACTS**

© 1994, 2009 Concordia Publishing House  
 3558 S. Jefferson Avenue  
 St. Louis, Missouri 63118-3968  
 Printed in USA 10-1788



# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LUTHERAN CHURCH— MISSOURI SYNOD

## PREFACE

Nearly two thousand years after the birth of Christ, His life and teachings continue to form the foundation for the religious identity of millions, even billions, of people from every corner of the world. According to the best statistics available, about one-third (2.1 billion) of the world's 6.6 billion people are identified in some sense as Christian. Islam has 1.5 billion followers. The third-largest grouping of people by religious identity may be referred to as those who claim no religion (such as atheist, agnostic, secular humanist), numbering just over one billion. Hinduism embraces slightly less than one billion adherents. Judaism is the twelfth-largest world religion, with 14 million followers, and there are approximately 400,000 Buddhists in the world today.

Just over one billion of the world's Christians are Roman Catholic. About 11 percent claim adherence to the orthodox faith. Anglicans, with approximately 80 million members, and Lutherans, with slightly over 70 million, each represent about 3 percent of the world's Christian population.

The world's 70 million Lutherans belong to approximately 250 different Lutheran denominations. Not surprisingly, about half of all Lutherans find their home in northern Europe, where the Lutheran tradition has its sixteenth-century roots. There are 12.7 million Lutherans in Germany (where Lutheranism began), 6.9 in Sweden, 4.6 in Finland, 4.5 in Denmark, and 3.9 in Norway.

Today, the Lutheran Church is growing most rapidly in Africa and Asia. In fact, there are now more Lutherans in Africa—over 15 million—than in either Germany or North America. Asia has more than 8 million Lutherans, and that number is also increasing at a rapid pace.

In North America, there are 8 million Lutherans belonging to 12 different Lutheran church bodies (not counting a number of other very small, locally organized bodies). The largest is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with 4.8 million members. This church body originated in 1988 as the result of a merger between the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), with 2.4 million baptized members, ranks as

the second-largest Lutheran church body in North America and the thirteenth-largest Christian denomination in the United States. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has 400,000 members and is the third-largest Lutheran Church in the United States.

The purpose of this booklet is to present: (1) a brief overview of the history, mission, and ministry of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod; (2) a discussion of the foundational Lutheran beliefs as held and taught by the Missouri Synod; and (3) the Missouri Synod’s understanding of the nature and mission of the Church and its relationship with other Christian denominations.

# THE HISTORY, MISSION, AND MINISTRY OF THE LCMS

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod traces its origin to 750 German immigrants who came to Missouri in 1839 seeking freedom from the religious and political pressures and constraints of nineteenth-century Germany. Under the leadership of young Pastor C. F. W. Walther, these Saxon immigrants joined with a number of other German pastors (sent to America by Wilhelm Loehe from Bavaria) to form “The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States.”

The constitutional convention of the new synod was held in Chicago from April 25–May 6, 1847. Twelve pastors, with their congregations, adopted a constitution. Ten other pastors added their signatures as advisory members because their congregations had not yet voted to join. Of these twenty-two pastors, four served congregations in Missouri, six in Ohio, five in Indiana, three in Illinois, two in Michigan, and two in New York. The twelve original congregations that formed the Missouri Synod comprised a total membership of about 3,000 persons. Dr. Walther was elected to serve as the first president of the new synod. One hundred years later, in 1947, the synod officially changed its name to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod remained largely German in its make-up, and even in language, until the end of World War I. The Synod grew dramatically during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1897, fifty years after its founding, the Synod reported a membership of 685,000. During the next fifty years, it more than doubled in size. The LCMS currently has a membership of 2.4 million members belonging to 6,150 congregations throughout the United States and Canada. The International Center, the central office of the LCMS, is located in the St. Louis suburb of Kirkwood, Missouri. Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, the twelfth president of the Synod during its 160 years of existence, has served in this position since 2001.

The Synod owns and operates ten colleges and universities as part of its Concordia University System (CUS), along with two seminaries. The congregations of the LCMS operate more than one hundred high schools and the nation’s largest Protestant elementary school system, with over 1,000 elementary schools and 1,300 preschools. The Synod’s congregations and schools are served by 9,000 pastors and almost 30,000 educators and other full-time workers, such as deaconesses and directors of Christian education. While the Synod holds that, according to the

Bible, women are not to serve as pastors, nearly half of its full-time professional church workers are women.

The LCMS is well known for its emphasis on biblical doctrine and its faithfulness to the historic Lutheran Confessions. At the same time, the Synod has sought to make use of new ways to share the love of Christ in an ever-changing world. The reason for the Synod's existence is summarized in its mission statement: "In grateful response to God's grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacraments, the mission of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is vigorously to make known the love of Christ by word and deed within our churches, communities, and the world."

The LCMS has more than 110 years of experience of proclaiming the Gospel in foreign mission fields. It commissioned its first overseas missionary to India in the 1890s. Today, LCMS World Mission works with partner church bodies and emerging church bodies worldwide. It has active work or mission relationships in approximately 85 countries in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America. The LCMS is strongly committed to the global Lutheran mission movement *Ablaze!*, which has a goal of sharing the Gospel with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the year 2017 (the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation).

In the early 1990s, the LCMS declared the United States itself to be a "world mission field." Through its National Mission Affiliates, the Synod conducts national mission work in many specialized ethnic and cultural contexts, for example, among Hispanics (Latinos), African immigrants, Arabic-speaking groups, Native Americans, Asians, and those of Jewish heritage and background. It also maintains long-standing work in black ministry (over 100 years), ministry to the deaf (also over 100 years) and ministry to the blind (over 60 years). Each month, for example, 800 volunteers in 60 work centers distribute 2,000 braille magazines, 6,500 large print publications, and 1,200 cassettes containing educational and devotional material for the visually-impaired. The Synod's first military chaplain served in 1862 during the United States Civil War. Through its Ministry to the Armed Forces, the LCMS continues to provide military chaplains to serve on the field and in veteran's hospitals, and it works with pastors and congregations to meet the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of their members in uniform.

Since the early 1900s, LCMS World Relief and Human Care has sought to "make a world of difference" in the lives of people who have been touched by need, whether because of war or natural disaster or oppressive poverty. In its human care efforts, the LCMS acts in partnership with a number of other assistance organizations, such as Lutheran World Relief (LWR), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS), Lutheran Services in America (LSA), and Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR). The Synod also works closely with over 60 Recognized Service Organizations (RSOs) that provide specialized mission and ministry for a wide range of needs (for example, Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services, Lutherans for Life, Wheat Ridge Ministries, Lutheran Child and Family Services, Lutheran camps and retreat centers, and so on).

The LCMS was the first denomination in the United States to urge its members (in 1981) to donate body organs at death for transplant. The Synod holds a strong pro-life position and supports efforts calling for constitutional protection of all human life, including the unborn. For this reason it also opposes embryonic stem cell research, even while encouraging other forms of stem cell research (such as the use of adult stem cells) that do not involve the creation and destruction of human life. With regard to the end of life, the Synod believes that the Scriptures teach that Christians are always to care for the dying, but never to aim to kill them. Therefore, the LCMS strongly opposes euthanasia and assisted suicide, but also believes that when the body's ability to sustain itself is no longer possible, and when doctors conclude that there is no hope for recovery, Christians may in good conscience forego the use of life-support systems. While rejecting homosexual behavior as contrary to God's will, the Synod has also prepared resources encouraging and equipping its church workers and members to minister to homosexuals and their families. The Synod holds that marriage, as instituted by God, is to be understood and upheld as a lifelong union between a man and a woman.

The Synod's publishing arm, Concordia Publishing House (CPH), is one of the nation's largest Christian publishers. More than 300,000 adults have spent an estimated 20 million hours in Bible study using its *LifeLight* materials as a means to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures. In order to meet the needs of God's people everywhere, CPH also develops materials in Spanish, Laotian, Russian, Vietnamese, and other languages.

A pioneer in radio and television work, the Synod operates the world's oldest religious radio station, KFUE, headquartered in Clayton, Missouri. Its program *The Lutheran Hour*, produced by the Synod's International Lutheran Layman's League, has been aired in North America since 1930 and is broadcast each week in more than 40 languages in 40 different countries.

The Lutheran Women's Missionary League (LWML) serves as the Synod's auxiliary for women and has been a leader in supporting missionary outreach for over 65 years. Throughout its history, the Synod has been strongly committed to nurturing and encouraging young people in their faith. In 2007, the LCMS celebrated 30 years of triennial national youth gatherings that, in recent years, have been attended by as many as 35,000 youth and adults.

Unlike many other churches, the LCMS has never been involved in a major merger. It was, however, a member of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. (LCUSA) until the Council went out of existence in 1988 with the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Synod is a member of the International Lutheran Council, a worldwide association of 34 established Lutheran church bodies, which support one another in proclaiming the Gospel on the basis of God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions. The LCMS does not belong to the Lutheran World Federation, the National Council of Churches, or the World Council of Churches, but regularly sends representatives to attend meetings of these organizations as non-member participants.

## WHAT DO LUTHERANS BELIEVE?

Lutheran church bodies, including the LCMS, are creedal or “confessional” churches. Lutherans do not define themselves by organizational structure. Many Lutheran church bodies, such as the LCMS, are basically congregational in polity, but some have a more hierarchical form. Styles of worship vary from strongly liturgical to contemporary, or may be a mix between the two. But all Lutherans subscribe to creeds or confessions that state what they understand the Bible to teach.

The Lutheran Church derives its name from Martin Luther (1483–1546), a German monk of the Augustinian order, whose posting of the Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517, sparked the Reformation. The documents that set forth what Lutherans believe, teach, and confess were assembled and published in 1580 in the Book of Concord. For more than 425 years, these documents have served as a normative statement of the Christian faith as Lutherans confess it. The foundational article of the constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod states that “the Synod and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice” and all the writings in the Book of Concord as “a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God” (Article II, Confession).

Significantly, the first documents included in the Book of Concord are the three ancient creeds compiled during the early, formative years of the Christian era. The Apostles’ Creed (ca. third century AD), the Nicene Creed (fourth century), and the Athanasian Creed (fifth and sixth centuries) are called the “ecumenical” (that is, “churchwide”) creeds because they set forth what all Christians have believed, taught, and confessed since the earliest days of the Christian Church. In addition, the Book of Concord includes Luther’s Small Catechism (1529), the Augsburg Confession (1530), and five other sixteenth-century statements, including Luther’s Large Catechism and the Formula of Concord.

Luther and the other writers of these confessions did not want to be doctrinal innovators. They, along with their contemporary descendants, have maintained that Lutherans believe and teach nothing more and nothing less than what the Scriptures themselves teach and what Christians through the ages have always believed. Therefore, we Lutherans consider ourselves to be catholic (small “c”), which means universal. At the same time, we have always thought of ourselves as “evangelical” Christians. In some countries, in fact, the Lutheran Church is still referred to as simply the Evangelical Church. We consider ourselves “evangelical”

because it is the *evangel*—the Gospel, the Good News of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world—that lies at the heart and core of everything we believe, teach, and confess. In this sense, Lutherans can rightly be regarded as evangelical catholics. Standing firmly in the tradition of the trinitarian and Christological confessions of the fourth and fifth centuries, we believe that sinners are justified (declared right) with the Creator God by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), on the basis of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). These three great “Reformation *solas*” form a concise and useful outline of what Missouri Synod Lutherans believe, teach, and confess.

## GRACE ALONE

At the heart of what Lutherans believe is the conviction that salvation is the free gift of God’s grace (undeserved love and mercy) alone for the sake of Christ alone. “Since the fall of Adam [Romans 5:12], all who are naturally born are born with sin [Psalm 51:5]” (Augsburg Confession II 1). This “disease and original vice” (Augsburg Confession II 2) makes it completely impossible for anyone to *earn* God’s love and forgiveness. If salvation were dependent on human initiative and effort, there would be no hope for anyone. But God forgives our sins, says Luther, “freely and without condition, out of pure grace” (Large Catechism III 96).

God’s grace *alone* gives hope to sinful human beings. And the sole basis for God’s grace is the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. We believe, as Luther says in his explanation of the Apostles’ Creed, “that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature. . . . He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death” (Small Catechism, Second Article, p. 329).

We Lutherans believe the Bible’s teaching that God’s grace in Christ Jesus embraces all people of all times, ages, races, and places. There is no sin for which Christ has not died. “We much in every way hold strongly and firmly to this truth: just as the preaching of repentance is universal, so also the promise of the Gospel is universal, that is, it belongs to all people. . . . ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29)” (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord XI 28). There need be no question, therefore, in any sinner’s mind whether Christ has died for each and every one of his or her personal sins.

## FAITH ALONE

While God’s grace is universal and embraces all people, this great gift can be received by sinful human beings only through faith (Romans 4:16). This is where Luther, through his study of Scripture, broke decisively with the teaching about salvation that had generally prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages.



A thousand years before the Reformation, St. Augustine (AD 354–430) had fought strongly against the errors of a monk named Pelagius who taught that sinners could contribute to their salvation by their own efforts, apart from God’s grace in Christ. Relying on St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Augustine held that Adam’s fall into sin had so corrupted human nature that the human will was completely depraved and enslaved to sin and to the devil. But Augustine believed that sinners, following their conversion and infused with renewing grace by means of Baptism, begin to be healed. They are then empowered by God’s grace to do what is truly good and pleasing to God. Christians, according to Augustine, continue to commit some sins, but they are gradually justified by God as the Holy Spirit enables them to do more good things and fewer bad things.

Luther ultimately rejected Augustine’s understanding of justification as a gradual process of being “infused” with God’s grace. But it was of great help to him at the beginning of his search for the truth of the Gospel, as he fought against crass forms of works-righteousness (such as buying indulgences to secure God’s favor). Try as he might, however, Luther’s troubled heart would give him no rest. Despite his best efforts, he could not find in himself that pure love that Augustine said Christians were capable of manifesting following conversion. After years of struggle over this question, Luther finally discovered Scripture’s teaching that sinners are saved through faith *alone* (Romans 3:28). God’s grace is the sole basis of salvation for the sinner only when it is appropriated solely through faith.

Luther had learned from Augustine that only the grace of God could save him. But Luther’s rediscovery of the Gospel in all its clarity took place when he came to understand that he did not first have to *do* something to merit God’s saving grace. Philip Melancthon, Luther’s colleague at the University of Wittenberg, writes: “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5])” (Augsburg Confession IV 1–3).

The implications of salvation “through faith alone” permeate everything we Lutherans believe and teach. We believe, for example, that the conversion of sinners is a gift of God and not the result of any human effort or decision. Therefore, we confess in the words of Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel” (Small Catechism, p. 330).

We Lutherans are by no means anti-intellectual. We thank God for the gift of human reason. We use it to seek to understand the wonders of God’s creation and to present and defend what we believe the Bible teaches. We do reject, however, all suggestions that scientific evidence or rational arguments can prove Christian truth claims. Similarly, we uphold the importance of emotion and feeling in the life of

the Christian, but we steadfastly repudiate any reliance on conversion experiences or “charismatic gifts” for the certainty of salvation. We believe that, according to Scripture, the sole object of saving faith is Jesus Christ and His resurrection. We believe that a true Christian can declare, “I believe” only by the miraculous power of God the Holy Spirit. Faith is not a human work but a gift from God.

“Through faith alone” also implies that it is only through the proclamation of the Gospel—in Word and Sacrament—that the Holy Spirit gives the gift of faith. The proclamation of the Gospel in public preaching therefore occupies a central place in Lutheran theology. Missouri Synod Lutheran churches are preaching churches. But they are also sacramental churches, for the sacraments—Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—are the Gospel made visible.

Lutherans believe that Baptism has God’s command and promise. Baptism is “God’s Word in the water,” Luther taught (Smalcald Articles III V 1). We believe that it is precisely in the Baptism of infants, who are included in Christ’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20), that we can see the full meaning of “through faith alone.” We believe that those who deny that God gives faith to infants through Baptism also deny (perhaps without intending to do so) salvation by *grace alone*. God’s action in Baptism, apart from any human initiative, creates and bestows the gift of faith through which the Christian is “born again” and receives the gift of God’s grace.

We also believe the Scriptures teach that the bread and the wine in the Lord’s Supper are the true body and blood of Christ. Although we do not presume to understand how this takes place, we confess that in, with, and under the earthly elements, God gives the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. In public worship, therefore, Missouri Synod Lutherans emphasize both the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and God’s grace made “visible” in the Sacraments. It is only through these Means of Grace that sinners are brought to faith in Jesus Christ and preserved in it.

Finally, to say “through faith alone” means, to use a phrase Luther made famous, that Christians are both sinners and saints at the same time (*simul justus et peccator*). Justification is a gracious act of God, a divine declaration. It is not a process. Through faith in Christ, and only through faith, sinners are declared to be forgiven and perfectly right with God. This declaration is whole and complete, totally independent of any inherent goodness in us sinners. In short, because of God’s act on the cross received through faith, we sinners are declared to be perfect saints in God’s sight. This does not mean, however, that forgiven sinners do not continue to be sinners when viewed and judged in the light of God’s Holy Law. Lutherans are not perfectionists. We do not teach that Christians, following their conversion, reach a point where they stop sinning. As Luther says, “we are never without sin [Romans 7:23–24]” (Large Catechism II 54).

Because of our emphasis on justification through faith alone, we Lutherans have sometimes been understood to advocate, or at least to condone, what the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer condemned as “cheap grace.”

Some might say that Lutherans simply take sin for granted and are not concerned with striving to live a holy life. But such notions are a serious distortion of what we believe. “Love and works must also follow faith,” writes Melancthon, “because of God’s command and for the exercise of faith.” Our love and good works toward others become our confession and invitation toward godliness (Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV 74 and V 68). In other words, Lutherans believe that good works are necessary—but they are not necessary for salvation.

Because we believe that salvation is both by grace alone and through faith alone, we Lutherans refuse to give a logically satisfying answer to the age-old question of why some people are saved and others are not. We disagree with those (such as the reformer John Calvin) who teach that since salvation is God’s free gift, the damnation of those who do not believe must be proof that God does not want everyone to be saved. In opposition to this view, we maintain that the Scriptures clearly teach that God desires “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). Yet we also disagree with those who answer the question “why some and not others” on the basis of something that human beings do or possess, as if the ultimate cause of a person’s salvation is striving or cooperating or “deciding” for Christ. The Scriptures teach that all people by nature are “dead in . . . trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1), utterly incapable of contributing anything to their conversion or salvation. If sinners, therefore, come to believe in Christ, this is the result of God’s power at work in them through the Means of Grace (Word and Sacrament). If they continue to reject the Gospel, this is their own fault. We do not regard this response as a cop-out but simply as faithfulness to what the Scriptures themselves teach about the doctrine of election. This brings us to the final *sola*, “Scripture alone.”

## SCRIPTURE ALONE

Luther’s insight that salvation comes by *grace alone* through *faith alone* cannot be divorced from “on the basis of *Scripture alone*.” His rediscovery of justification by grace alone through faith alone came as a direct result of his commitment to Scripture alone. Along with his contemporaries, Luther held that the Bible is the Word of God and that it does not mislead or deceive us. But unlike his opponents in the Roman Catholic Church, Luther rejected the notion that an infallible magisterium of the church is necessary for the right interpretation of the Bible. Scripture alone, said Luther, is infallible. The institutional church and its councils, as well as its bishops and teachers (including the office of the papacy) can and do err. But Scripture, says Luther, “will not lie to you” (Large Catechism V 76).

As Missouri Synod Lutherans, we maintain a deep appreciation for the catholic or “universal” Church. But we believe that Scripture *alone*—not Scripture and tradition, Scripture and the Church, Scripture and human reason, or Scripture and experience—stands as the final standard for what the Gospel is. At the same time, we believe that confidence in the reliability of the Bible is not possible apart from

faith in Jesus Christ. Christians believe what the Scriptures teach because they first believe in Jesus Christ. Christ is the object of saving faith, not the Bible. Inverting this order, we believe, undermines the principle of Scripture alone and ultimately results in futile attempts to “prove” that the Bible is true. We do not believe that human efforts to verify or demonstrate the Bible’s truthfulness and reliability—for example, by discovering a piece of Noah’s ark—can provide a foundation for faith in the Gospel. The Bible remains a dark book apart from faith in Christ, for He is its true content. But when sinners are brought to faith in Him, Christ points them back to the writings of the prophets and apostles as the sole authoritative source for all that the Church believes, teaches, and confesses.

The key to understanding Scripture properly, we believe, is the careful distinction between the Law and the Gospel. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the LCMS, wrote a classic book on this critical issue called *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. The Law tells what God demands of sinners if they are to be saved. The Gospel reveals what God has already done for our salvation. The chief purpose of the Law is to show us our sin and our need for a Savior. The Gospel offers the free gift of God’s salvation in Christ. The whole Bible can be divided into these two chief teachings. When Law and Gospel are properly distinguished, the purity of the Gospel is preserved, and the three *solas* of grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone are united.

Doctrinal differences among Lutherans today are rooted primarily in disagreements about the meaning and implications of this third *sola*. While all Lutheran church bodies profess allegiance to Scripture alone, they do not all agree on what this means in practice. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believes that Scripture alone is compromised when the inerrancy of the Bible is denied, and this in turn endangers both “by grace alone” and “through faith alone.” In discussions with the ELCA and its predecessor bodies, the LCMS has expressed serious disagreement with methods of interpretations (called “historical criticism”) that presuppose that the Bible is not necessarily without error in matters of history and science. This view of the Bible has direct implications for other points of difference between the LCMS and the ELCA, such as the ordination of women to the pastoral office, official positions on moral issues such as abortion and homosexual behavior, and the understanding of the basis of church fellowship.

# THE LCMS UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

## THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In addition to the three *solas*, we Lutherans believe that there is “one holy Church” on earth (Augsburg Confession VII 1), which is made up of all believers in Jesus Christ wherever they may be found. This one Church, which is not to be identified with any institution or denomination, is present wherever the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments administered. All Christians are members of this one Church, and they are all members of the “royal priesthood” of all believers (1 Peter 2:9–10). At the same time, Lutherans believe that God has instituted the office of the public ministry (the pastoral office) for the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments on behalf of and with accountability to the Church. Rankings and distinctions among those holding this office (between pastors and bishops, for example) are of human, not divine, origin.

The primary mission of the Church, we believe, is the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. The government, on the other hand, has the divinely-given mandate to provide for the temporal peace and tranquility of its citizens. So we advocate a certain institutional separation but functional interaction between church and state as two distinct “realms” through which God works to provide for people’s spiritual and temporal needs.

Congregations, pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers who have signed the constitution of the Synod make up the official membership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The polity of the LCMS might best be described as a modified congregational structure. We speak of congregational autonomy. Congregations call their pastors, but as members of the Synod they agree to call only pastors certified for ministry on the pastoral roster of the Synod who will honor and uphold the doctrinal position of the Synod.

In order to carry out its mission, the Synod has divided itself into thirty-five districts, all but two of which are geographical. The two non-geographical districts are the English District, which takes its name from the late nineteenth-century beginning of a transition from the German language to English, and the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Church, which joined the LCMS as a district in 1971. The congregations of each district are organized into some 600 circuits throughout the Synod, with each circuit including eight to twenty congregations.

Meetings of synodical members take place in a three-year cycle. During the first year, convocations of circuit congregations are held. These meetings are largely inspirational and informative. Conventions of districts, to which each congregation sends one voting lay member and one voting pastoral delegate, are held in the second year of the cycle. Each district elects its own officers, including a district president, vice presidents, and a board of directors. National assemblies, called synodical conventions, take place every third year. Each electoral circuit selects one lay person and one pastor to serve as voting representatives to these national assemblies. The synodical convention is the highest governing body in the Synod. It elects the synodical president to renewable three-year terms, along with five vice presidents, the members of the board of directors, and the members of other various boards and commissions.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

Despite all of the external divisions in contemporary Christendom, we Lutherans believe that there is, properly speaking, only one Church in heaven and on earth. St. Paul describes this unity of the Church most beautifully in his Letter to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4–6). We join Christians of all ages, therefore, in confessing in the words of the Nicene Creed (AD 381) that we “believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church.” This one Church is “the congregation of saints [Psalm 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (Augsburg Confession VII 1). This true spiritual unity of the Church transcends space and time. It binds together all believers in Christ, wherever they may be, in a relationship that “will remain until the end of the world” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession VII and VIII 9).

Although this spiritual unity (the unity *of* the Church) is a present reality, external unity (unity *in* the Church) most certainly is not. Already in the New Testament, Jesus warned His disciples about those who would “lead many astray” with their false teachings (Matthew 24:5). St. Paul in his letters warned his readers to be on guard against “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13). He also warned against sinful divisions (1 Corinthians 1:11–12), admonishing the Corinthians “that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Seeking to be faithful to what the Scriptures teach about both the unity *of* the Church and unity *in* the Church, the Lutheran Confessions hold that the way to achieve external unity in the Church is to confess the truth and to expose error. “For thorough, permanent unity in the Church, it is necessary, above all things, that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form of teaching. The common doctrine must be brought together

from God's Word" (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Rule and Norm, 1).

The LCMS seeks to be faithful to what the Bible says about the spiritual unity *of* the Church and external unity *in* the Church as it relates to other Lutherans and to other Christian Churches. On the one hand, we believe that divisions in Christendom ultimately stem from sin and are contrary to God's will. Therefore, the first objective of the Synod sets forth the goal of working "through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies" and of providing "a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy" (LCMS Constitution, Article III, 1). As one way of striving toward this objective, the Missouri Synod has taken part in all of the Lutheran bilateral dialogues held in the United States to this date, beginning with the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue in 1965, and including official discussions with the Orthodox, Reformed Churches, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, and conservative Evangelicals.

At the same time, we as LCMS Lutherans teach that the way to external unity in the Church is by confronting differences in doctrine and resolving these differences, not by ignoring them or by agreeing to disagree. We believe that, according to Scripture, external unity in the Church is a matter of right confession of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We therefore hold that church fellowship or merger between church bodies in doctrinal disagreement with one another is not in keeping with what the Bible teaches about church fellowship. For this reason, the LCMS representatives to the third round of discussions between Lutherans and Episcopalians in the U.S.A., as well as to the discussions between Lutherans and Reformed church bodies, did not join in with ELCA representatives in recommending full altar and pulpit fellowship with these churches. We believe that genuine unity in the confession of the Christian faith exists only where there is agreement in the confession of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its articles.

## CONCLUSION

At its 2004 convention, the Synod heartily endorsed the theme of “One Mission—One Message—One People” as set forth by its current president, Gerald Kieschnick, as a way of summarizing the Synod’s reason for existence. In the words of President Kieschnick:

We are called to be a Synod with **One Mission** . . . The Great Commission. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20). Accomplishing the mission of the church to disciple, baptize and teach the nations of the world is and must continue to be Job One among us!

We are called to be a Synod proclaiming **One Message** . . . the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified . . . the message of sins forgiven . . . the message of the free gift of eternal life. For, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting mankind’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). We have the greatest message in the world!

We are called to live and act as **One People**. St. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, acknowledges “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:5–6). We have a long way to go in this regard, yet I implore you, in the words of St. Paul to the Philippians, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . . stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27). We need to work together—as one—to meet the challenges before us!<sup>1</sup>

Simply stated, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believes, teaches, and confesses that in Christ alone is there salvation: by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Scripture alone. To share this message with the world is the mission of the Church and the reason for its existence.

<sup>1</sup> Gerald B. Kieschnick, *The State of the Synod: A Presidential Perspective*, September 25, 2002.



Written by Dr. Samuel H. Nafzger

All rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The quotations from the Lutheran Confessions in this publication are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, second edition; edited by Paul McCain et al., copyright © 2006 Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Cover artwork: This artwork was commissioned for the 150th anniversary of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and previously appeared on the covers of the April and May 2007 issues of *The Lutheran Witness*.