

About This Series

“You Lutherans are just like the Roman Catholics.”

“What? Why do you say that?”

“Your pastors wear robes, baptize babies, and even think they can forgive sins.”

“Well, that’s true. . . .”

“But when your pastors say in the worship service, ‘I forgive you all your sins,’ that’s blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins.”

As Lutherans interact with other Christians, they often find themselves struggling to explain their beliefs and practices. Although many Lutherans have learned the “what” of the doctrines of the church, they do not always have a full scriptural foundation to share the “why.” When confronted with different doctrines, they cannot clearly state their faith, much less understand the differences.

Because of insecurities about explaining particular doctrines or practices, some Lutherans may avoid opportunities to share what they have learned from Christ and His Word. The Lutheran Difference Bible study series will identify how Lutherans differ from other Christians and show from the Bible why Lutherans differ. These studies will prepare Lutherans to share their faith and help non-Lutherans understand the Lutheran difference.

Student Introduction

*“When I urge you to go to confession,
I am simply urging you to be a Christian.”*

This quote from Martin Luther’s Large Catechism is not merely a phrase exhorting pious practice. Nor is it an exaggeration. Confession and Christianity are indeed so intimately entwined that they could be used almost synonymously. For Lutherans, the practice of confession and Absolution as revealed in Scripture stands at the heart of Christian faith and life. Christian confession is not simply a historic practice of the church or a pious ritual; it is a profound summary of the whole Christian faith.

In confession and Absolution the two great emphases of Christianity—man as sinner and God, in Christ, as man’s Savior—are brought sharply and unmistakably into focus. In confession we humbly and sorrowfully admit all that we are: sinners in need of divine mercy. In Absolution, we receive that which God so earnestly desires to give: forgiveness, consolation, and the firm assurance that the death and resurrection of His only Son have overcome our sin.

Given the central place of confession and Absolution in Christianity, it is not surprising that these practices also stood at the heart of the Reformation. As a young monk plagued by the knowledge of his own sinfulness, Martin Luther went to private confession. But Luther found that confession, as practiced by the church of his day, proved as burdensome to the conscience as did the sin for which he sought forgiveness! As a result, Luther turned to God’s Word for help. And in God’s Word he found the glorious and consoling truth: that forgiveness is a free, unconditional gift, won by Jesus Christ on the cross and freely bestowed in His name.

Luther and his fellow Reformers unceasingly proclaimed this good news of forgiveness from the pulpit, in private confession, and even in the home. This good news of Absolution—forgiveness for the sake of and in the name of Christ—remains central to the faith and life of the Lutheran church because when a person is urged to confess his sin and to be absolved, he is simply urged to be a Christian.

An Overview of Christian Denominations

The following outline of Christian history will help you understand where the different denominations come from and how they are related to one another. Use this outline in connection with the “Comparisons” sections found throughout the study. Statements of belief for the different churches were drawn from their official confessional writings.

The Great Schism

Eastern Orthodox: On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert entered the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople just before the worship service. He stepped to the altar and left a letter condemning Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople. Cerularius responded by condemning the letter and its authors. In that moment, Christian churches of the east and west were severed from one another. Their disagreements centered on what bread could be used in the Lord’s Supper and the addition of the filioque statement to the Nicene Creed.

The Reformation

Lutheran: On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X wrote a letter condemning Dr. Martin Luther for his 95 Theses. Luther’s theses had challenged the sale of indulgences, a fund raising effort to pay for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. The letter charged Luther with heresy and threatened to excommunicate him if he did not retract his writings within 60 days. Luther replied by publicly burning the letter. Leo excommunicated him on January 3, and condemned all who agreed with Luther or supported his cause.

Reformed: In 1522 the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland convinced people to break their traditional Lenten fast. Also, Zwingli preached that priests should be allowed to

marry. When local friars challenged these departures from medieval church practice, the Zurich Council supported Zwingli and agreed that the Bible should guide Christian doctrine and practice. Churches of this Reformed tradition include Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

Anabaptist: In January 1525 Conrad Grebel, a follower of Ulrich Zwingli, rebaptized Georg Blaurock. Blaurock began rebaptizing others and founded the Swiss Brethren. Their insistence on adult, believers' Baptism distinguished them from other churches of the Reformation. Anabaptists attracted social extremists who advocated violence in the cause of Christ, complete pacifism, or communal living. Mennonites, Brethren, and Amish churches descend from this movement.

The Counter Reformation

Roman Catholic: When people call the medieval church "Roman Catholic," they make a common historical mistake. Roman Catholicism emerged after the Reformation. As early as 1518 Luther and other reformers had appealed to the Pope and requested a council to settle the issue of indulgences. Their requests were hindered or denied for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally on December 13, 1545, 34 leaders from the churches who opposed the Reformation gathered at the invitation of Pope Paul III. They began the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which established the doctrine and practice of Roman Catholicism.

Post-Reformation Movements

Baptist: In 1608 or 1609 John Smyth, a former pastor of the Church of England, baptized himself by pouring water over his head. He formed a congregation of English Separatists in Holland, who opposed the rule of bishops and infant baptism. This marked the start of the English Baptist churches, which remain divided doctrinally over the theology of John Calvin (Particular Baptists) and Jacob Arminius (General Baptists). In the 1800s the Restoration Movement of Alexander Campbell, a former Presbyterian minister, adopted many Baptist teachings. These churches include the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches) and the Churches of Christ.

Wesleyan: In 1729 John and Charles Wesley gathered with three other men to study the Scripture, receive communion, and discipline one another according to the “method” laid down in the Bible. Later, John Wesley’s preaching caused religious revivals in England and America. Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals form the Wesleyan family of churches.

Liberal: In 1799 Friedrich Schleiermacher published *Addresses on Religion* in an attempt to make Christianity appealing to people influenced by rationalism. He argued that religion is not a body of doctrines, provable truths, or a system of ethics but belongs to the realm of feelings. His ideas did not form a new denomination but deeply influenced Christian thinking. Denominations most thoroughly affected by liberalism are the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Unitarianism.

Lutheran Facts

Lutheran churches first described themselves as “evangelische” or evangelical churches. Opponents of these churches called them “Lutheran” after Dr. Martin Luther, the 16th century German church reformer.

Lutherans are not disciples of Dr. Martin Luther but disciples of Jesus Christ. They proudly accept the name Lutheran because they agree with Dr. Luther’s teaching from the Bible, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism.

All who worship the holy Trinity and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are regarded by Lutherans as fellow Christians, despite denominational differences.

Although all Christian churches use the Holy Scripture, Lutherans emphasize that the Scripture is the final and only certain judge of doctrine and practice (*sola scriptura*)—not human traditions, reason, or churchly authority.

Lutherans confess the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian) as correct summaries of biblical teaching.

Lutherans form the largest family of Protestants, numbering more than 60 million worldwide.

Today, Lutheran churches are growing fastest in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Papua New Guinea.

Among Protestant denominations, Lutherans tend to have greater unity. For example, there are 14 Lutheran denominations in North America. In contrast, other denominational families (Reformed, Anabaptist, Baptist, etc.) have at least twice that number.

To prepare for “Repent!,” read Matthew 3:1–12.

Repent!

*With a convulsive motion,
He tore away the ministerial band
from before his breast. It was revealed!*

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

Hawthorne’s desperate character, Rev. Dimmesdale, spends his life hiding his sin of adultery. He abandons his love, Hester, to a life of shame while he pretends he has done nothing wrong. As a result Dimmesdale dies young, revealing his sin only moments before his death.

“I’m sorry. I was wrong.” We rarely enjoy speaking these words. Nobody likes to admit being wrong or doing wrong. Even when we know it’s true, admitting blame and saying “I’m sorry” can humble us and make us feel uncomfortable. In fact, for some, confession means weakness. Saying “I’m sorry” means playing the sap.

1. What excuses do you sometimes give for not admitting a wrong and saying you are sorry?

Living Repentance

2. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus’ ministry of forgiveness. Read Matthew 3:1–12. How would you describe the ministry of John? What was his central message?

3. Read Matthew 4:17 and Luke 13:5. What does Jesus say about repentance? What motivation for repentance do you find in these passages?

4. Both John the Baptist and Jesus speak with a sense of urgency. Read Romans 3:10–20. Why, according to Paul, is repentance such a pressing need?

5. In light of the above, read Proverbs 28:13 and 1 John 1:8–9. What do these passages say about the motivation for confessing one's sin?

6. Compare Psalm 51:3–5 and Psalm 19:12. What type of sin or sins does the psalmist confess and ask for forgiveness?

7. Compare Psalm 32:5, James 5:16, and Acts 19:18. To whom are sins confessed in each instance?

Welcome Relief

Though confessing one's sins can be an uncomfortable experience, God does not intend it to be a burdensome task. Quite the opposite!

8. Rather than being a burden, how might confession provide you with welcome relief?

9. The Divine Service provides the opportunity for corporate and public confession of sin. Why might this be beneficial, especially in the context of worship?

Facing the Mirror

Just as a morning look in the mirror reveals our outward flaws, a look into God's Word reveals our flaws in thought, word, and deed. We may hate to say, "I was wrong." But God's law shows just how wrong, how sinful, we are. The good news, however, is that God responds to our confession, "I was wrong" by declaring clearly and surely, "You are forgiven."

In his famous ninety-five theses Martin Luther wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (Lutheran Cyclopedia, p. 764).

10. Read Matthew 6:11–12. How do these verses demonstrate that confession or repentance is part of daily Christian life? How might you make repentance and confession part of your life each day?

11. How can you daily express your thanks to God for hearing your confession and forgiving your sin?

Comparisons

Penance: A Sacrament for the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics. When someone repents, they must feel sorrow for sin, confess, and perform certain works to amend their lives ("make satisfaction" for Roman Catholics). The penitential system developed from the early Christian practice of counseling people after confession and Absolution. For example, if a man stole a sheep, the pastor would counsel him to return the sheep.

Daily repentance: Lutherans teach that repentance is not an occasional action but should be part of daily Christian life and prayer. Worship usually begins with confession and Absolution. Lutherans expect people to repent before receiving the Lord's Supper.

Crisis repentance: For many Protestants, repentance is something done once or only occasionally, when one experiences a spiritual crisis. During the religious revivals of the 1800s, many intro-

duced the practice of an “altar call” by which people are encouraged to commit or recommit their lives to Christ.

Point to Remember

“Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Matthew 6:11–12

To prepare for “Absolution ,” read John 20:19–23.