

# Denominationalism, Religious Cults and World Religions

## Lesson 5

### The Lutheran Church

#### Introduction:

The establishment of the Lutheran church gave rise to religious denominationalism throughout the world. Denominationalism is properly defined as the division of one religion into separate groups, schools of thought or sects. The Lutheran church became the first Protestant<sup>1</sup> religious denomination – a church that was formed by the followers of Martin Luther who broke away from Roman Catholicism. This term is not used by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches since they believe they are the one true church which claims to trace its heritage to the first century AD.

Today, denominationalism is an ideology that views some or all Christian groups as being, in some sense, versions of the same thing regardless of their distinguishing labels. In reality, however, denominationalism is just another synonym for division.

All denominational churches generally trace their origins to the teachings of the leading religious reformers of the fourteenth century – primarily Martin Luther (1483-1546), Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), and John Calvin (1509-1564). This is true of the Lutheran church which traces its origin to Martin Luther and his followers. Luther initially intended to reform Roman Catholicism. He sought to work within the Roman Catholic Church to correct many of the corrupt doctrinal teachings and practices of the church. However, his followers felt a complete break from the Roman Catholic Church and from Papal authority was the only way to reform the church. However, in their efforts to break from Catholicism, Luther and his followers continued with many of the erroneous doctrinal teachings and practices of the Catholic Church.

In 1530 the Augsburg Confession was adopted by Luther's follower, and it became the official creed for all Lutherans. This marked the beginning of the Lutheran church as a full-fledged denomination. Although it was clear a new church was being formed by Luther's followers, Luther pleaded: "I pray you leave my name alone and do not call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians" (Michelet, *Life of Luther*, p. 262).

The first permanent Lutheran settlers in America arrived in 1623. One of the first

---

<sup>1</sup> *Protestant* is defined as anyone who is not an adherent of a Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Eastern Orthodox Church, but is an adherent of any of those religious bodies that separated from the Church of Rome during the Reformation, or of any group descended from them. The Bible does not use the term protestant but simply calls those who have been added by the Lord to His one true church *Christians*.

recorded Lutheran congregations in America was in New York in 1649. Over the next 250 years thousands of Lutherans from Europe settled in America. By 1870 Lutherans were the fourth largest religious group in the United States. Today there are an estimated 14.5 million Lutherans in America and more than 70 million worldwide. Lutherans usually are difficult to convert to New Testament Christianity because of strong tradition, family ties, and acceptance of authority in addition to the Word of God.

## I. The Origin and History of Lutheranism:

- A. Martin Luther (1483-1546) entered the University of Erfurt (Germany) at the age of 18 and devoted himself to a study of philosophy.
  - 1. As a devoted Catholic, Luther decided to enter the priesthood at the age of 24 in 1507. However, through his own independent study of the Scriptures Luther soon began opposing the traditional Catholic teaching that salvation was achieved through works of merit (essentially earning ones salvation through good works). He concluded that salvation was achieved by grace through faith alone, without works of any kind.
  - 2. Luther also became an outspoken critic of the Roman Catholic practice involving the sale of indulgences,<sup>2</sup> and outlined his objection to indulgences in his *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.*
    - a. On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed this document to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg.
  - 3. Eventually, Luther was formally excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church (1521), and began to openly oppose papal authority, monasticism and many of the fundamental teachings of Catholicism.
  - 4. In 1530 many of Luther's followers met in Augsburg, Germany to draw

---

<sup>2</sup> Indulgence, according to Roman Catholic theology, is the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due for sins which have already been forgiven. Although God forgives sins, the Catholic teaching concerning indulgences is that the church (namely the Pope) retained the right to impose temporal punishment as a means of penance. An indulgence would lessen or shorten that punishment. Initially the Catholic Church granted indulgences based on certain good works (meritorious works). However, by the late Middle Ages, indulgences began to be sold as a commodity by the Catholic church to anyone who had enough money to purchase them. The scope of certain indulgences was also broadened during this time to include the absolute assurance of eternal salvation and freedom from hell. The sale of indulgences became a primary means of raising money in the Catholic Church for expensive projects, such as funding crusades and building cathedrals like the Sistine Chapel (1473-1483), and Saint Peter's Basilica (1506-1626) in the Vatican in Rome.

up what has become known as "The Augsburg Confession." This document has become the primary confession of faith for all members of the Lutheran church.

## II. Doctrinal teachings of Lutheranism:

### A. Truths taught by Lutherans:

1. They teach truth concerning the triune nature of the Godhead – that the Godhead consists of three persons (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) who are coeternal, and possess the same essence and power.
2. Most believe in the plenary verbal inspiration<sup>3</sup> of the Scriptures.
3. Lutherans believe in the priesthood of all believers.
4. Lutherans teach that the Bible should be the sole authority in Christianity.

### B. What Lutherans teach contrary to the Bible:

1. They look to Martin Luther as the founder of Lutheranism, which gave rise to the Lutheran Church, rather than see Jesus Christ as the only head of the church (Matt 16:18).
2. While Lutherans believe in the Scriptures as the sole authority in the church, they also follow the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Nicene Creed*, the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Athanasian Creed*, the *Smalcald Articles of Faith*, and the *Formula of Concord*, instead of the Bible alone (2 Tim 3:16-17; Jude 3).
3. The Lutheran church has a clergy system (the Ministry of the Teaching of the Gospel) which, according to most Lutherans, was ordained by Christ, and who are the only ones ordained to administer the *Holy Sacraments*,<sup>4</sup> despite the fact that every Christian, as a priest, is to offer

---

<sup>3</sup> Plenary (full and complete) verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is the belief that the Holy Spirit inerrantly conveyed divine truth in the form of commands, examples and inferences through the process of divine inspiration to certain men by employing their intellect, education and personality to speak or record what God wished to convey to mankind.

<sup>4</sup> Lutheran sacraments include: *Baptism* (which may be administered to infants or adults by sprinkling or pouring water, and is necessary but not essential for salvation); the *Eucharist* (the "Holy Communion" during which one partakes of bread and wine in which the body and blood of Christ are present in some mysterious way through

up spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Pet 2:5-9), and that we are a "kingdom of priests" (Rev 1:5-6).

4. Lutherans call themselves "Lutherans" rather than just "Christians" (Acts 4:12; 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16); and refer to their church as "The Lutheran Church" rather than call the church by the name of the One who build the church (Matt 16:18; Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 1:2; John 10:30).
  - a. Luther actually pleaded with his followers: "I pray you leave my name alone and do not call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians." (Michelet, *Life of Luther*, p. 262).
5. Lutherans believe the Ten Commandments are still binding today although the New Testament teaches they have been "nailed to the cross" (Col 2:14-17; 2 Cor 3:7-11; Gal 5:1-4; Rom 7:1-4).
6. They teach that Sunday is the "Christian Sabbath" and observe numerous "holy days" such as "Lent, Easter, Christmas," etc., contrary to Biblical teaching (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 22:18,19; Exo 20:8-11).
7. The Lutheran Church teaches that the Lord's Supper is a Sacrament through which forgiveness of sins can be received, (*Lutheran Catechism*, p. 159), whereas the Bible teaches that the Lord's Supper is a "memorial" (1 Cor 11:24-26).
8. They teach the bread and fruit of the vine contain the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, while the New Testament teaches they are representative of the body and blood of Christ (Matt 26:26-28).
9. Lutherans teach salvation is by "faith alone" (*solo fide*) through "grace alone" (*solo gratia*) without any acts of obedience (*Catechism*, p. 104.).
  - a. "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." (Lutheran website: elca.org)
  - b. "We are saved by the grace of God alone, not by anything we do." (Lutheran website: elca.org).

---

*consubstantiation*). These sacraments are administered only by those who are of The Ministry of Teaching the Gospel, or the Holy Ministry (the clergy).

- c. The phrase "faith only" occurs only once in the Bible (Jas 2:24), but it teaches just the opposite of what Lutherans teach.
  - d. The phrase, "grace alone," never occurs in the Bible; nor does the concept of salvation by grace alone. The Bible teaches that we are saved by grace through an obedient, working faith (Eph 2:8-10).
  - e. Luther added the word "*alone*" to Romans 3:28 in his translation of the New Testament, despite the teaching of James that we are not justified by "*faith alone*" (Jas 2:14-26). This led Luther to question the inspiration and canonicity of the book of James. Luther was also frustrated by the complexity of the book of Revelation and challenged its canonicity by saying it should be "thrown into the river."
10. Lutherans practice infant baptism. Concerning infants, Lutherans teach:
- a. "They have inherited a sinful heart, and the germ of sin in them will soon grow" (*Lutheran Catechism*, Stump, p. 146).
  - b. "Christ has commanded that little children should be brought to him and we obey his command by baptizing them and teaching them" (Stump, *Catechism*, p. 146).
  - c. However, the Bible teaches:
    - (1). Children are innocent, safe (Ezek 18:20; 1 John 3:4; Mark 10:14).
    - (2). Baptism must be preceded by hearing and believing the gospel, repentance of sins, confession of Christ, and then one can be baptized (Rom 10:17; Mark 16:15,16; Acts 2:38; Rom 10:8-10).
    - (3). In the New Testament "men and women" were baptized (Acts 8:12).
11. Lutherans practice sprinkling and pouring for baptism:
- a. "One *mode* is just as good as another (Stump, *Catechism*, p. 147).
  - b. However the Bible teaches that baptism is a burial (immersion) only (Mark 1:9-11; Col 2:12; Rom 6:4; Acts 8:36-39).

- c. This is why John the Baptist was baptizing where there was "much water" (John 2:23).
12. Lutherans teach that baptism replaced circumcision:
    - a. Circumcision was received by children as a token of the covenant - "so now children are to be baptized and receive the token of the new covenant, the seal of the righteousness of faith." (Luther's *Small Catechism*, question #335.)
    - b. However, the Bible teaches that circumcision of the flesh was a shadow of circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:28-29).
  13. Lutherans use instrumental music in their worship, even though Luther was originally opposed to it because of its Roman Catholic origins.
    - a. Luther said, "The organ in the worship is the insignia of Baal. The Roman Catholics borrowed it from the Jews." (Martin Luther, *McClintock and Strong's Encyclopedia*, Vol. VI, p. 762)
    - b. The Bible teaches that the only form of music that was authorized in the New Testament church was signing (vocal music) (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16-17).

### **III. Organizational structure of the Lutheran church:**

- A. The structural organization of the Lutheran church varies between different groups within Lutheranism. While some groups are independent and practice a certain degree of autonomy, the structure of the Lutheran church is generally as follows:
  1. Lutheran World Federation: Most Lutheran churches are affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, Switzerland. This Federation is governed by an "Assembly" that meets once every six years, and by a "Council" that meets every 12 to 18 months.
  2. Bishops: In European countries Lutherans are led by Bishops in the same manner as Roman Catholic Bishops.
  3. Synods: Many Lutheran churches are joined by affiliation with a particular Synod, presided over by a Synodical President, such as the

Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) in the United States.

4. Districts: The LCMS is divided into 35 districts, while some Lutheran churches are more independent. Each district is presided over by an elected District President who may also serve as a congregational "pastor."
  5. Circuits: A subdivision of districts.
  6. Congregations: Congregations are served by full-time pastors who are selected and appointed by each congregation independently.
- B. The Bible teaches that the organizational structure of the Lord's church is completely different:
1. Jesus Christ is its Head (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18; Matt 28:18).
  2. The New Testament – the Word of God, Gospel of Christ – is its sole source of authority (Mark 16:15; Gal 1:6-9; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Rev 22:18-19).
  3. Each congregation is autonomous (Acts 14:23; Phil 1:1; 1 Pet 5:1-2).
  4. Elders were appointed to oversee local churches (Acts 14:23).
    - a. They were also called bishops or overseers (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7).
    - b. They were also called shepherds or pastors (Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 5:1-4).
    - c. Elders had to meet specific qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
  5. Deacons were appointed as servants of the church (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-13).
  6. Evangelists, ministers of the Word, were preachers of the gospel (Acts 21:8; Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 4:1-5).

**Conclusion:**

**I. There are several reasons why being a Lutheran is not compatible with being a Christian as defined by the Bible in the New Testament.**

**A. Reasons for not being a Lutheran:**

1. The Lutheran Church has a human founder, Martin Luther, rather than Jesus Christ (Matt 16:18).
2. The Lutheran Church began at the wrong time and place to be the Christ's church (Acts 2).
3. Lutherans follow such things as the Augsburg Confession, the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Smalcald Articles of Faith, and the Formula of Concord instead of the Bible alone (2 Tim 3:16-17).
4. Members of the Lutheran Church refer to themselves as "Lutherans" rather than "Christians" (Acts 4:12; 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16).
5. Lutherans also have the wrong name for the church (see Matt 16:18; Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 1:2; John 10:30).
6. Lutherans hold that the Ten Commandments are binding today, even though those commandments were "nailed to the cross" (Col 2:14-17; 2 Cor 3:7-11; Gal 5:1-4; Rom 7:1-4).
7. Lutherans teach that Sunday is the "Christian Sabbath," and observe numerous "holy days" such as "Lent, Easter, Christmas," etc. (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 22:18-19; Exo 20:8-11).
8. Lutherans have retained many Roman Catholic ideas and practices.
9. Lutherans also err in the form of government they practice (Phil 1:1; Eph 1:22-23; Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 3:1-13).



**Study Questions:**

1. Who is the founder of the Lutheran Church? What was his early life and background?
2. What are some of the doctrines Luther emphasized?
3. When do Lutherans become a full-fledged denomination?
4. What is wrong with wearing the name of Luther? Did Luther want his followers to call themselves after him (Lutherans)?
5. Were Martin Luther's original motives concerning reformation within the Catholic Church good? What would have been the best approach?

6. Is salvation by grace alone through faith alone? Use Scriptures to explain why, or why not.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. How did Martin Luther view the book of James and why did he view it this way?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Did Martin Luther approve of instrumental music?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What do Lutherans believe about the Ten Commandments? Is this correct? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What is the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper? How does it differ from the Catholic view?

