Romans 3:28 – Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Titus 3:5-6 – Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit…

Grace for All

John 1:29 – The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

2 Cor. 5:19 - God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

2 Peter 2:1 – …there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them… [Note that the Lord "bought" unbelievers also.]

Means of Grace

Romans 10:6-8 – "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach).

Acts 2:38-39 – "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children…"

Luke 22:20 – "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you." [See Jer. 31:31-34 and Heb. 9:13-17 for the meaning of this covenant.]

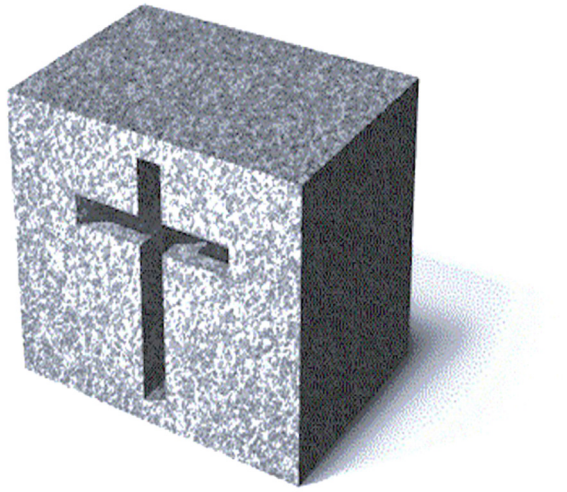
Word Alone

John 10:35 – The Scripture cannot be broken.

1 Tim. 6:3-4 – If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing...

Mat. 23:9-10 – Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.

Foundations of Our Faith



Does it Really Matter That I Belong to a Confessional Lutheran Church?

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Information on various churches was gathered from their websites, from the *Lutheran Cyclopedia,* www.cyclopedia.lcms.org, and from "Handbook of Denominations in the United States," 13th edition, Atwood, Mead, and Hill. © 2010 by Abingdon Press.

- **Heart of the Gospel** – Jesus died as our Substitute for sin.
- **Grace Alone** – Salvation is God's completely free gift in Christ.
- **Grace for All** – Every sinner has been redeemed by Christ.
- **Means of Grace** – Forgiveness is delivered in Word and Sacrament.
- **Word Alone** – God's inspired and inerrant Word cannot fail.

Only a confessional Lutheran church stands firmly on what the Bible says in all these areas, as well as the other teachings of Scripture. That is what the *Church of the Lutheran Confession* (CLC) is all about. It is far from a perfect church, for it is made up of sinners, but they are sinners who are redeemed and who bow to the authority of the Word of God in every question that arises.

God's Word is our great heritage, and shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way, in death it is our stay.
Lord, grant, while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure,
Throughout all generations!

(TLH #283)

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More Passages on the Foundations

(These are examples – many more can be cited.)

Heart of the Gospel

Romans 4:25 – [Jesus] was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.

1 Peter 2:24 – [Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness–by whose stripes you were healed.

1 Peter 3:18 – For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

Grace Alone

Romans 3:23-24 – For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

"Behold, I am against the prophets," says the LORD, "who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets," says the LORD, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says.'" – Jer. 23:31

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. - Romans 16:17-18

Room for Disagreement?

The topics covered here have to do with some of the foundations of Bible teaching, but these are not the only teachings that God wants us to confess and defend. ALL of the Bible's teachings are important. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20, He instructed them to continue *"teaching them to observe **all** things that I have commanded you."* That's why the faith that we express is based on agreement concerning all of the Bible's teachings. God's Word is clear in what it teaches, and all of its doctrines are important:

Ps. 119:105 – Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

2 Peter 1:20-21 – No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

To compromise any of the Bible's teachings would dishonor God and His Word. It would also be the start of a dangerous process that would eventually threaten the foundations of our faith. The Bible compares any false teaching to yeast that grows in bread dough (Gal. 5:9), and cancer that spreads throughout the body (2 Tim. 2:17). That is why it is our goal, by God's grace, to guard carefully all of God's teachings for generations to come.

Conclusion

The question is asked in the title of this booklet: *"Does it really matter that I belong to a confessional Lutheran church?"* The answer is *"Yes – it really matters!"* There is only one kind of church that stands firmly on the Word of God when it comes to these foundations of the Christian faith:

An Honest Question

"Hey Pastor! Last week I attended my friend's non-denominational church, and what I heard there didn't sound any different from what's taught here. It sounded like a Bible-centered message to me. Is it right for us to stay separate from others who say they sincerely believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior? Are there really any important differences between us and other Christian churches, or are we just fighting about smaller matters of teaching when we should really all be working together?"

Many pastors have heard questions like this. No doubt there are many church members who have wondered the same things but were hesitant to ask. The purpose of this booklet is to show that the reasons why we are separate from other churches are not about our own interpretations of "less important" Bible teachings. In fact, many reasons for being separate are about the foundations of our faith – the heart and center of Scripture truths. First, some important notes:

- A "confessional" Lutheran church is one that confesses (proclaims) the Bible to be God's Word, inspired word-for-word without error, and teaches according to this standard. There are many liberal Lutheran churches that no longer do this.
- To be brief, each section will quote only a few Bible passages. A longer list on each topic is included at the end.
- There certainly are other foundations of faith which are not mentioned in this booklet, because most Christian churches affirm them. These include the Bible's teaching on the Trinity, the fact that Jesus is true God and true Man, His resurrection from the dead, and others. The focus here is on foundational Bible truths that many non-Lutheran churches deny or obscure.
- This booklet is going to name names. It is important to identify churches that teach something other than what is in the Bible on these topics. This is NOT to say that the members of these churches are all unbelievers, or that the only way to get to heaven is to belong to a confessional Lutheran church. The question is not *"What kind of church organization does a person have to belong to in order to get to heaven?"* Heaven belongs to all those who trust in Christ alone as their Savior from sin. Instead, the question is *"What kind of church does God want me to attend, have fellowship with, and support?"*

With that, let's look at some of these main foundations of Bible teaching that we simply cannot do without and dare not compromise.

HEART OF THE GOSPEL

What it means: The "heart of the Gospel" is the meaning of what happened on Jesus' cross. The Bible clearly shows that the suffering and death of the Son of God were required to pay our debt of sin, and that Jesus did fully pay that debt in our place. This is sometimes called the *vicarious atonement* – that is, Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice for all sinners:

Isaiah 53:5 – He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.

Matthew 20:28 – "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

2 Cor. 5:21 – For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Why it's important: God is love, but He is also a completely fair and impartial judge. Because of the first sin of Adam and Eve, and all those we've committed ourselves, God has pronounced a just sentence of eternal death on all sinners. There would be no escape, except for the fact that Jesus was willing to pay the price by suffering death in our place. Because He did that, God has declared all sinners to be innocent. Those who place their trust in this Savior are given the gift of eternal life instead of damnation. This vicarious atonement is the "heart of the Gospel."

Who says otherwise: Many people are unaware that liberal protestant denominations (such as the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church-U.S.A., the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ) have a completely different idea of what happened on Jesus' cross. Called the *moral influence theory*, it claims that God did not need a payment for breaking His Law, and that the death of Christ was only an example of how much God loved us, which should inspire people to live better lives. Any church that denies that Jesus' death was a complete payment for our sins is preaching a different gospel than the Bible does (Galatians 1:8).

About "Interpretations"

When comparing the teachings of different churches, it is often claimed that the differences are just a matter of interpretation. It is true that there are some Bible passages that are difficult to understand, and some which we'd like to have more information about in order to be certain of their meaning. In nearly every case, though, disagreements about the Bible's teachings are a result of someone simply dismissing what the Bible plainly says. Consider these false statements which are widely held, even in many Christian churches:

- "There are many ways to heaven apart from faith alone in Christ." (But see John 5:23, John 14:6, Acts 4:12.)
- "God created the world by means of evolution, over many millions of years." (But see Gen. 1:5, 8, 13 etc., Exo. 20:11, Mat. 19:4.)
- "God does not impart the forgiveness of sins in baptism." (But see Acts 2:38-39, Eph. 5:25-27, Col. 2:12-13, Titus 3:5.)
- "As far as God is concerned, there is no need for practicing homosexuals to repent of this sin and turn away from it." (But see Rom. 1:21-27, 1 Cor. 6:9-11, Eph. 5:2-6.)
- "There is no reason why women should not be pastors of Christian churches." (But see 1 Tim. 2:11-14, 1 Tim. 3:1-3.)

These statements are not *interpretations* of what God says in the Bible. Each of them is a *denial* of what the Scriptures actually say. A person may ask "How is it possible for Christians using the same Bible to come to opposite conclusions on these things?" This should not be a surprise, since so many churches in our day no longer teach that the Bible is inspired, word-for-word, by God. Others dismiss Bible teaching when it contradicts their flawed reason and human logic. But we must not presume to pick and choose which of the Bible's teachings we will accept as true and which make sense to our human reason. In His Word God says what He means and means what He says. The Lord Himself tells us what He thinks of those who misrepresent Him, and what we should do about it:

WORD ALONE

What it means: There is only one way to know what God's truth is, and that is to follow what He says in His book, the Bible. It was written over the course of 16 centuries by about 40 human writers, but their writing was guided, word-for-word, by the Holy Spirit. Because it is God's truth, anything that adds to or takes away from what the Bible teaches is false.

Prov. 30:5-6 – Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.

John 17:17 – "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

2 Tim. 3:16 – All Scripture is given by inspiration of God…

Why it's important: The devil's original temptation in the Garden of Eden began with *"Did God really say…?"* Ever since, human beings have offended God and caused themselves untold harm when they have ignored or contradicted His Word. But when God leads us to see our Savior there, and to put our full confidence in everything the Bible teaches, then Jesus' promise to us is fulfilled:

John 8:31-32 – "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Who says otherwise: The Roman Catholic Church considers the word of its popes and councils to be God's truth, even when they add to or contradict the Bible. Liberal Protestant churches (see page 2) have denied for many years that the Bible is without error, viewing the creation account in Genesis, miracles, and even Jesus' bodily resurrection as myths. Reformed churches (see pages 3 and 4) disagree with Bible teachings that contradict their human reason, such as infant baptism and the real presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Many charismatic churches claim that they receive direct, extra-biblical teachings from God. Whenever a church adds to or takes away from God's Word, that false teaching leads people further away from God and endangers their salvation.

GRACE ALONE

What it means: Salvation by grace alone is the foundational Bible teaching which shows that heaven's doors are open to us, not because of what we do for God, but only because of what Jesus has done for us by dying in our place and rising bodily from the grave. Even the ability to believe in Christ is God's gift through the work of the Holy Spirit. Our salvation is the Lord's work from start to finish:

Eph. 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

1 Cor. 12:3 – No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

Why it's important: There is no work that we sinful human beings can do that measures up to God's perfect standards. The only way to gain heaven is to rely on the perfect and completed work of God. That includes Jesus' holy life, His suffering and death for our sins, His resurrection which proves that the sins were paid for, and the Holy Spirit's work of bringing the lost sinner to faith. If any part depended on the sinner's work at all, it would be doomed to fail. Because of Christ's perfect work, freely given to us by God through the Holy Spirit, we can be sure that heaven is ours.

Who says otherwise: Salvation by grace alone is denied by the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that a person's good works must be added to the work of God in order to gain heaven. Protestant churches that follow Arminian[1] teachings say that becoming a believer is, at least in part, up to you. In other words, it is *possible* to be forgiven if you "make your decision" for Christ. This includes Methodist churches, many Pentecostal holiness groups, the Assemblies of God, some Baptist churches, and many of the non-denominational churches. Any church that adds a requirement to the work of God for salvation is preaching a different gospel than the Bible does (Galatians 1:8).

[1] Named after Jacobus Arminius, 1560-1609. See www.tinyurl.com/tqyn94q

GRACE FOR ALL

What it means: Some churches still hold to the Bible teaching of salvation by grace alone, but nearly all of them that do so deny another foundational Bible doctrine – grace for all (also known as *universal grace* or *objective justification*). This means that Jesus paid the full price for every sinner without exception, that God has already pronounced all sinners to be forgiven in Christ, and that God earnestly calls all people to receive this forgiveness:

1 John 2:2 – And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

Romans 5:18 [comparing Adam and Christ] – *Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.*

1 Tim. 2:3-4 – God our Savior… desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Why it's important: It is vital for a Christian to know that when Jesus died, the full payment was made for all sinners, excluding no one. If He had died only for some, a person could never be certain that God's grace was meant for him or her. Thankfully, the Bible makes it very clear that since Christ died for all, the Lord has declared every sinner to be "not guilty," and urges all to trust in Christ and be saved.

Who says otherwise: Protestant churches that follow Calvinistic[2] teachings say that Jesus paid only for the sins of those who will someday be in heaven. In other words, He did not pay for the sins of those who will be lost, because it was God's will from the beginning that most people would suffer eternally in hell. Those that teach limited atonement (that is, grace for *some*, but not for all) include Presbyterian churches, Christian Reformed churches, the Reformed Church in America, many Baptist churches, and some non-denominational churches. Any church that teaches that Jesus died only for some, and that God wants many people to be lost, is also preaching a different gospel (Galatians 1:8).

[2] Named after John Calvin, 1509-1564. See www.tinyurl.com/qqzeabd

MEANS OF GRACE

What it means: The payment for the sins of all people was completed, once for all, with Jesus' death on the cross, but only those who trust in Christ alone will receive eternal life (John 3:16). The question now is "How does God *deliver* this forgiveness to sinners, so that the Holy Spirit can lead them to faith, and keep them in faith?" The answer is that He does this through His Word in the Bible, and through the promise of His Word in Holy Baptism and in the Lord's Supper:

Rom. 10:17 – Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Eph. 5:25-26 – Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.

Matthew 26:26-28 – "Take, eat; this is My body…Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Why it's important: Faith is the conviction that God is gracious to you because of Christ. You can know this is true because God promises it to you personally in the Bible, poured it out on you personally in your Baptism, and gives it to you personally with Jesus' body and blood which are truly present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. These are the means by which you come into direct contact with Jesus; these are the ways God uses to give forgiveness and eternal life directly to you!

Who says otherwise: Only confessional Lutheran churches offer this certain delivery of forgiveness in the way that the Bible presents it. In the Roman Catholic Church people are offered only a little forgiveness at a time, with strings attached, and only by the pope's authority through a priest. In many Protestant churches it is the individual who has to "make a decision" for Christ; in other words, you are your own means. Prayer is presented as a means of grace, when it is really a response to grace. Many non-denominational and charismatic church-goers strive for a direct connection with God through emotions and supposed miracles; in this way they miss out on meeting Jesus where He is actually found – in Word and Sacrament.