

The Lutheran

OCTOBER 2008
www.thelutheran.org
\$5.00

Lutheranism 202

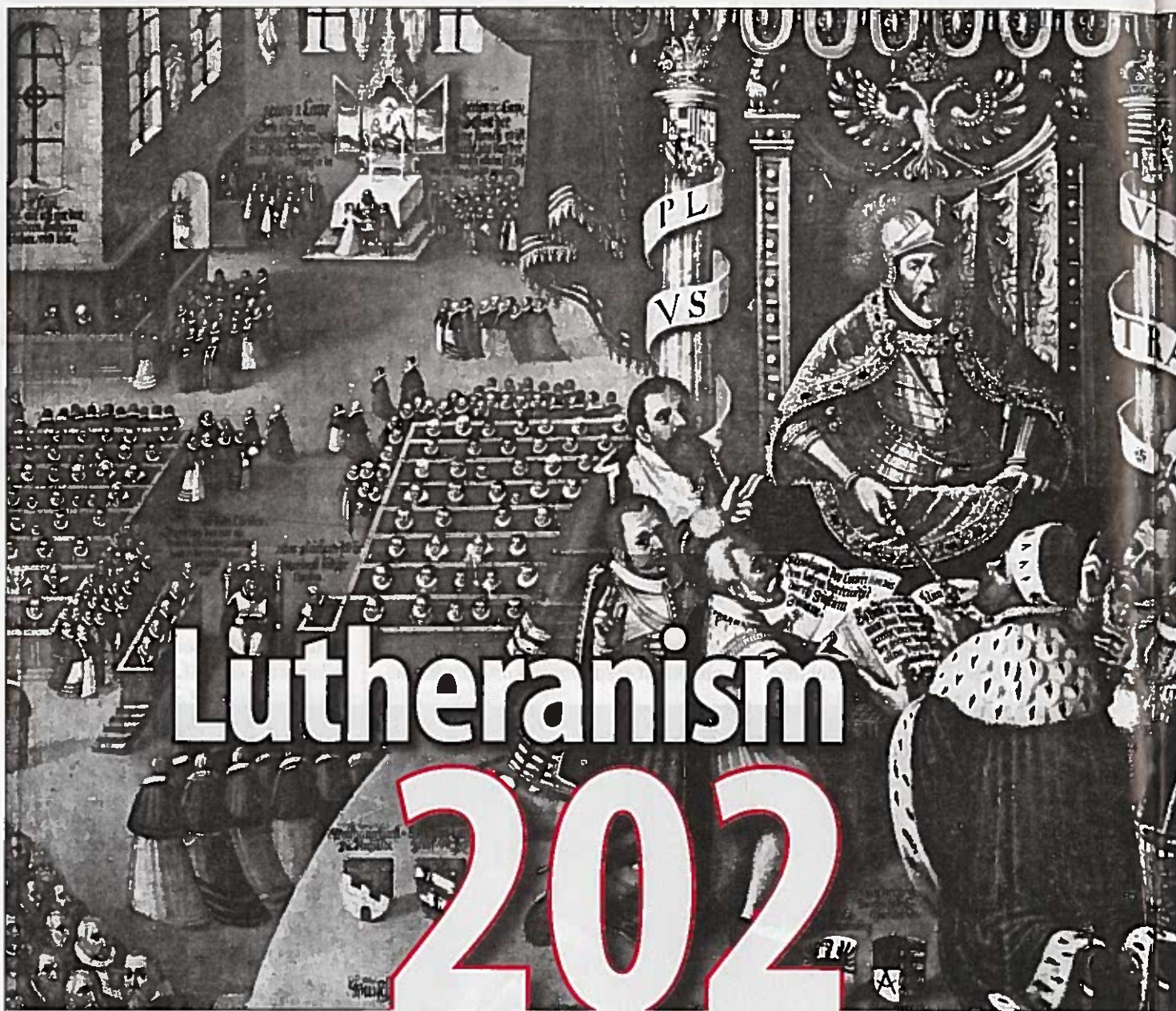
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GERMAN PROTESTANT PRINCES CONFESS THEIR FAITH TO CHARLES V AT AUGSBURG/FOTO MARBURG/ART RESOURCE, NY

Lutheranism 202

Reading the
Augsburg
Confession, we
delve into the
meaning of faith

By Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Martin Luther (1483-1546) didn't intend to start a new church. A priest and a university professor, Luther believed there was only one Christian church. His study of the Bible and his personal faith experience led him to propose changes in the church's teaching and practice, to re-form the church so it more clearly reflected the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. This "reformation" was rejected by the leaders of the church in Rome, and Luther and his followers were excommunicated.

A major part of this reformation movement was an emphasis on the living, life-giving word of God. Luther's academic

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training was as a biblical scholar. He translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German, the language of the people. He published sermons and commentaries to help communicate God's word in ways that people could understand. Most of all, Luther encouraged people to read and hear the Scriptures for themselves, expecting to receive in the inspired words God's gracious promise for their lives.

Luther's ideas gained the support of many German church leaders and politicians. In 1530 these leaders presented a formal statement of their beliefs to the authorities. This state-

ment is called the Augsburg Confession—the confession of faith made in the city of Augsburg.

In 1555 when Lutheranism finally received legal recognition within the Holy Roman Empire, it wasn't identified as "Lutheran" (followers of Martin Luther) but as "those who accept the Augsburg Confession." It was the faith, not the founder, that mattered. Still today, in countries including Poland and Slovakia, the Lutheran church doesn't have the word "Lutheran" in its name but is called the Church of the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession high-

lights Luther's central insight that sinners are justified by faith:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven, and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.

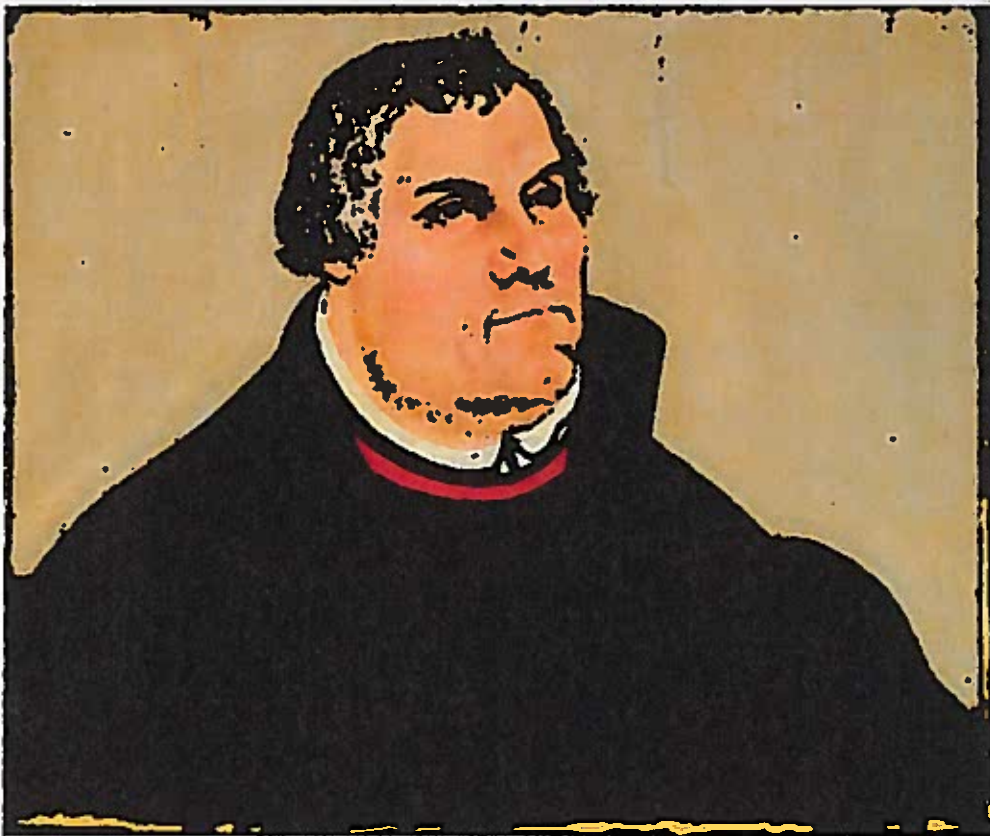
The point is not just that we have faith, since one can have faith in anything—a friend or family member, one's own ability, a sports team. Christians aren't justified by the strength or sincerity of our belief but by the One in whom we believe. Only faith in Christ restores our relationship with God because such faith trusts the promises God has made—and kept—in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

"By grace, for Christ's sake, through faith"—this is so central to the way Lutherans think about the Christian faith that it has been called "the article by which the church stands or falls."

Such faith

But justification by faith alone is not the last word that Luther and the Confessions have for us. It's only the beginning of the Lutheran understanding of Christian life. Faith in Christ isn't just about what happens when we die. It's about how we live. And it's about how we live not just for ourselves but for and with others.

One way of thinking about what Lutherans believe is to visualize justification by faith alone as the center of a flower, from which all the petals unfold, or as the hub of a wheel, from which the spokes radiate out. Without the center, without the hub, all you have is a bunch of disconnected parts. With the right center, everything else falls into place. Everything else in



ART RESOURCE, NY/MICHAEL D. WATSON

the Augsburg Confession—sin, the sacraments, worship, married clergy, the role of bishops—everything else is developed in relation to the core belief of justification by faith alone.

When we look at other parts of the Augsburg Confession, we see clearly how this interrelationship unfolds. Immediately following Article IV on justifying faith, Article V (The Office of the Ministry) tells us where “such faith” comes from and article VI (The New Obedience) tells us what “such faith” does.

V. To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.

This assertion challenges the view that faith is simply my own private connection to God. Ever heard someone say, “I can worship God just fine on a golf course on Sunday morning”? It’s true that I can praise God’s marvelous works as Creator when I sit on a mountaintop or watch a sun-

‘It is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire!’

set or even play golf.

But those experiences tell only part of the story. They don’t communicate the great good news that God in Christ is Savior—my Savior—as well as Creator.

“How Great Thou Art” is true, but it’s incomplete unless I can also sing “Jesus Loves Me.” Lutherans call word and sacrament “the means of grace” because they point to where and how God ministers to us with the promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Worship serves as our response to God only after God’s gracious initiative first reaches out to us.

Luther knew firsthand how easy

it is to get trapped in our own mental and spiritual ruts. He insisted that the word of God comes to us from outside ourselves, breaking into our sinful self-centeredness. We hear God’s gracious “for you” most clearly when we hear it in a voice other than our own. We feel God’s gracious “for you” when we are splashed with water from the font. When we taste the bread and wine, we confess that Christ is really present, his own body and blood giving life to ours.

We all know the difference between things that operate on battery power and those that must be plugged in. When the battery wears out, you recharge it or get a new one.

But while the battery is working, you’re good to go on your own.

Christian faith isn’t battery-operated. We don’t just recharge every week and then go out on our own. Faith plugs us in to an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. We have power because his power flows through us.

To use a more organic image, Jesus told his followers to abide in him, as branches are rooted in a vine. Cut off from the vine, they wither and die. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” Jesus says, in one of the most frequently quoted passages in the Lutheran Confessions (John 15:5).

Personal, never private

Hearing God’s word preached and sharing in God’s sacraments—these aren’t things we can do on our own, on the golf course or on a mountaintop. Faith requires the gathering of the Christian community, the ministry—God’s ministry to us—of word and sacrament. Christian faith is deeply personal but never private.

Sometimes the Lutheran emphasis on faith alone has led us to avoid talk-

ing about works, as if what we actually do as Christians isn't important. It's easy to contrast faith and works, as if they were opposites. But that was never Luther's point. What he criticized was *not* doing good—but rather relying on one's actions to improve one's status with God.

According to Augsburg Confession VI:

It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded; but we should do them for God's sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God.

Faith alone—only faith—justifies. But in the Christian life, faith never is alone. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther wrote, "We know indeed that faith is never alone but brings with it love and other manifold gifts." In his preface to the New Testament, Luther described faith as "a living, busy, active, mighty thing." He said, "It is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire."

This is what's "new" about the new obedience. The works done by Christians are an inevitable outgrowth of their faith in Christ. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit. Christians don't do good works because they are instructed to do so: Christians do good works when they are filled with a living faith in Christ. When we trust God's gracious promise, serving others is no longer a "got to" but a "get to."

And if faith is never alone, so, too, the believer is never alone. God's grace turns us outward toward others. Luther describes the relationship between faith and works in context of our relationships with God and neighbor. God deals with us, Luther says, "through a word of promise." We deal with God "through faith in the word of his promise." And we

deal with others "on the basis of works." God comes to us, in word and sacrament, in Jesus himself. And through us God reaches out to others.

Faith at work

Lutherans have a long, strong history of combining evangelistic outreach and social ministry activity, working both to spread the faith and to make faith active in loving service of others. Wherever they are, wherever they go, Lutherans build schools and establish networks of care.

August Hermann Francke, a pastor and professor at the University of Halle in Wittenberg, Germany, from 1691 to 1727, was an early leader in Lutheran social ministry. Francke founded an orphanage, a school for the poor, a school for girls, a teacher training institute, a medical dispensary and more. Prussian King Frederick William I was so impressed by his visit to Halle that he used Francke's ideas as a model for reform throughout his realm.

Francke also made Halle a center of foreign missions. The first Lutheran missionary ever, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, was sent to South India from Halle in 1706. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg came to Pennsylvania from Halle in 1742 to help organize and strengthen American Lutherans.

In the mid-19th century, Wilhelm Loehe, a pastor in the remote Bavarian village of Neuendettelsau, established a deaconess training program, hospitals and schools to meet the needs of his region, as well as a mission society that sent pastors to North and South America, Australia and New Guinea.

There are similar examples today. I live in Waverly, Iowa, a town of 9,000. Waverly is home not only to two ELCA congregations and the Northeastern Iowa Synod office but also to a Lutheran school (kindergarten through sixth grade), Wartburg

College, Lutheran Services in Iowa and Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community. In previous generations an orphanage and a Lutheran insurance company also were located here. When Lutherans came to Waverly, they didn't just build a church. Over the years they built a community infrastructure that still remains.

When record-breaking floods ravaged the Midwest this summer, Lutheran Disaster Response was here, working in cooperation with Lutheran Services in Iowa—just as it had been in the aftermath of spring tornadoes. Wartburg College stepped forward to offer space as a Red Cross shelter and to coordinate volunteer cleanup efforts.

Why? Because Lutherans practice what we preach—putting faith into action in servant love of neighbor. "Such faith" in Christ prompts us to reach out to our neighbors, known and unknown.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (43:2).

When literal waters did overwhelm many of us, living waters reminded us of our baptism. When wildfires threatened others, the flames of the Spirit strengthened us. For we believe that nothing can finally overcome those who are joined together in the body of Christ. Such faith, nurtured through word and sacrament, bears fruit in God's word.

As the ELCA so powerfully puts it: "God's work. Our hands." Thanks be to God! □

Kleinhans is professor of religion and department chair, Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa. She will lead the ELCA Wittenberg Center 10th anniversary tour to Germany April 14-27, 2009. See www.elca.org/wittenberg.

Angry man of the 16th century

By Mark U. Edwards Jr.

By his own admission, anger was Martin Luther's special sin—and a useful one. It helped him, he said, to write well, to pray and to preach: "Anger refreshes all my blood, sharpens my mind and drives away temptations." He was aware that some were offended by his harshness and anger.

But he had an explanation: "I was born to war with fanatics and devils," he wrote in 1529. "Thus my books are very stormy and bellicose. I must root out the stumps and trunks, hew away the thorns and briar, fill in the puddles. I am the rough woodsman, who must pioneer and hew a path."

How did that anger manifest itself in his writings, sermons and letters, and how did the targets of that anger respond?

- Luther branded the papacy as anti-Christ and the whore of Babylon. The Roman Catholic Church responded with equal vehemence and scurrility.
- Luther acknowledged the justice of peasant grievances and urged lords and masters to treat them fairly. But once peasants took up arms in the name of gospel freedom, he urged their bloody suppression. Thousands of peasants died in the resulting slaughter.
- Luther berated Protestant opponents, called them "fanatics" and, because of disagreements on the Lord's Supper and other issues, accused them of believing nothing sincerely. Some replied in kind. Most acknowledged Luther's key role in initiating reform

We shouldn't follow Martin Luther into the 21st century in some things. Here's why.

even as they complained bitterly about his treatment of them.

- Luther urged his fellow Germans to war against the Turks. And the Turks continued their attacks on the eastern edge of western Christendom with little care for whether Luther was angry or not.
- Luther vilified the few Jews living within the Holy Roman Empire's borders and urged their expulsion or enslavement. He attacked at great length the rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible, an exegesis that threatened Luther's Christological and Trinitarian interpretation of Old Testament passages. The rabbis and their poor fellow believers, unlike Luther's other opponents, had little opportunity to respond in kind.

How to explain such repellent behavior from a theologian who otherwise showed such penetrating insight into the gospel of Christ? "Can these be the works of a truly religious man?" we ask.



"WHORE OF BABYLON" BY LUCAS THE ELDER CRANACH/PITTS THEOLOGY LIBRARY

The question isn't new. The moderate Roman Catholic, Duke George of Saxony, in his reply to one of the reformer's more pungent attacks challenged Luther's supporters: "Now with what insidious perfidy, lies, screams and bawling [Luther attacks the Catholics] and how often he used the devil's name besides, I shall let others, who are always saying that he is a holy man and possesses the Holy Spirit, offer some explanation."

The reformer's collaborator, Philipp Melancthon answered this challenge in his oration at Luther's funeral: "Some by no means evil-minded persons have complained that Luther displayed too much severity. I will not deny this. But I answer in the language of Erasmus: 'Because of the magnitude of the disorders, God gave this age a violent physician.'"

For Roman Catholics, Luther's harshness constituted persuasive evidence that he was no man of God. For Protestants, Luther's harshness was a necessary response to the spiritual conditions of the age.

What might we briefly add from the perspective of nearly 500 years?

Some of Luther's theological insights may be timeless, but the theologian himself was very much a man of his time—a time that saw things quite differently than we do today. Two brief examples help us understand Luther, but not to excuse him.

A hierarchical world

Luther and his contemporaries believed that the political hierarchy that characterized the 16th century—with its lords and vassals, masters and serfs—was ordained by God and reflected similar hierarchies in heaven (the choirs of angels), in the family (husband ruled the wife; and the parents, the children) and even the human body (head rules the heart; both, the legs and feet). To challenge this hierarchy was to go against nature and nature's God.

When the peasants rose up to challenge their servile status, Luther saw them defying God-ordained order and, what he saw as even worse, justifying their defiance by appeal to gospel freedom. When the peasants paid no heed to his warnings, he told the princes that justice was on their side and urged everyone who could to smite, slay and stab, secretly or publicly, for nothing was more poisonous, harmful or devilish than a rebel. The end of the world was imminent. No devil was left in hell; they had all gone into the peasants.

After the ensuing slaughter, even many contemporaries who shared Luther's view of divinely established hierarchy were appalled with his lack of pity. But horrifying as the conclusions he drew, Luther had only acted according to the severest logic of divinely established political hierarchy.

Luther lived in a world that understood world events through medieval glasses. This largely Augustinian understanding of history had reigned

in the West for more than a thousand years. It would not be successfully challenged for several hundred years more.

As part of this Augustinian view of history, Luther and other contemporaries believed that from the time of Cain and Abel to the current Reformation struggle the "true" and "false" churches had been locked in recurrent combat.

By 1520, Luther had reluctantly concluded that the papacy was the Antichrist foretold in both the Old and New Testaments. As Luther encountered additional opponents, they were slotted into this spiritual contest. Opponents within evangelicism were deemed contemporary false prophets and apostles, like those who had plagued the true prophets and apostles.

The Turks were identified with Gog and the little horn in the book of Daniel. Contemporary Jewry was seen as the remnant of a rejected people suffering under God's wrath for their rejection of the true messiah. They were all members of the false church. And Luther frequently directed his attacks not at his human opponents but at the devil, whom he saw as their master, and, of course, no language was too harsh when attacking the devil.

End-time at hand

Luther was also a child of his time in believing that the events of his age were certain signs that the end-time was at hand. Drawing on the biblical prophecies of the books of Daniel and Revelation, Luther concluded that the appearance of the papal Antichrist seated within the church and the success of the Turks in their attacks on eastern Europe signaled that the apocalyptic drama was approaching its final act.

He believed the true prophets and apostles provided the precedent for the way to treat opponents. When, for

example, he rebuked his age for its failings, it was a prophet like Jeremiah from whom he borrowed his style, his tone, often the language itself. When he blasted the papacy as a wanton whore—and depicted it as such in woodcuts—he was borrowing language from Hosea and Ezekiel.

His great comfort was Paul, who taught that "if ... an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed" (Galatians 1:8).

When Luther attacked Roman Catholics, other Protestants, Turks and Jews, he did so with all the vehemence and rhetorical skill at his command (which was considerable). He believed his opponents were minions of Satan engaged in the final, apocalyptic struggle at the dawn of the end-time. We shall fail to understand Luther if we don't remember that all his writings were conditioned by this fundamental and, to (at least most of) us, quite alien conviction.

Roman Catholics, Protestants and Jews now live in another age, a happily more democratic and tolerant age. We still disagree on significant issues. But we are more willing to recognize the brother and sister in each other. We Christians (Lutheran, other Protestants, Roman Catholic) have become more mindful of the great injury we have done each other in the zealous pursuit of a claimed exclusive truth.

We haven't surrendered our convictions, but we assert them differently than Luther once did. When we turn our gaze on Luther, we recognize that he was a human being conditioned by history, as every human being is. There is much we can learn from him. But there is also much that has no place in our modern world. □

Edwards, professor emeritus, St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn., is special assistant to the dean, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass. He has written several books on Martin Luther, including Luther's Last Battles (Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2004; www.augsburgfortress.org).

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Lutherans have matured and grown since 1530, when Martin Luther's followers and friends gathered to unveil the Augsburg Confession. Yet the confession still serves as the gold standard for Lutheran beliefs. We have also come to understand Luther as a man of his times, whose teachings guide us, but not dogmatically and rigidly so.

Exercise 1: Saved by faith, not works

The Augsburg Confession repudiates theology that makes salvation a reward for good works, avoiding sin or "living right," as in Article II: "[W]e receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us."

- Discuss the problem of works righteousness: If one holds that salvation is a reward for good works, how many does one have to perform to earn salvation? If a reward for sin, how close to "sin free" does one have to be? How does works righteousness lead to doubt and despair?

- Discuss the comfort of salvation by faith: If we are righteous and filled with grace because of our faith in Christ and God's love, how does that inoculate us from despair? How does it comfort us? How does it free us to do good works out of love and not out of a need to earn? Why are good works performed in love better than those performed by compulsion?

Exercise 2: God chooses us; we don't choose God

Our faith comes when we encounter the gospel in word and sacrament, which transforms us, Article V of the Confession says. We don't choose the gospel's transformation. Via the gospel God chooses us by the Spirit, "who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the Gospel."

- What's the difference between attending church and having faith? Why can you choose church but not faith? Is desiring faith the same as having faith? How is desiring real faith a "holy hunger" and gift from God?

- Parents can drag children to church but not make them have faith. Did you dislike church as a child? How did you come to have faith? Why do you now choose to come to church? Describe your faith formation. When and how did you first hear the gospel? How has it made a difference in your life?

Exercise 3: Faith is a gift

Lutherans even believe that our faith is not something we do, but something God does for us and to us.

Article XX of the Augsburg Confession quotes Ephesians 2:8-9, but read verses 4-9 and discuss.

- What is the source of our faith? If faith doesn't come from us, is it something we can choose? If we don't earn faith, can we be proud of our faith? If we can't boast of our faith because it's a gift, what then is the appropriate response to faith?

Exercise 4: Legacy of service to neighbor

Living out Jesus' command to love our neighbor, Lutherans champion efforts to assist those in need in a variety of ways. Lutheran Services in America, a collaboration of the ELCA and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, is the nation's largest human-service provider, reaching one in 50 Americans. We also have more than 1,000 early childhood education centers, hundreds of schools, more than two dozen colleges and eight seminaries. Lutheran development work and disaster relief help thousands the world over. Our 10,448 congregations help those in their communities. Read Mark 12:28-31 and discuss:

- Is love of neighbor only a positive emotion toward them? In what tangible ways do Christians love our neighbors as ourselves? Why is it important to serve our neighbor?
- Using the Internet, phone books and other resources, research and list the Lutheran-affiliated agencies and services in your community and synod. What kinds of people are helped? How does your congregation assist?
- List the service ministries your congregation runs or supports. List the ministries run or assisted by other Lutheran congregations in your area. What people are served, and how many?

Blezard is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Arendtsville, Pa. He has a master of divinity degree from Boston University and did subsequent study at the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.) and the Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia.

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