

Who Are Lutherans

Lutherans Are Sinners...but they are forgiven. Lutherans may identify themselves as students or senators, Texans or Tanzanians, children or senior citizens. But when they consider their religious beliefs, they will confess what you would soon find out: they fall short of God's expectations.

They will go on to tell that this same God, a loving God, forgives them. They believe that it is God acting for and in them, and not their own acts, that brings forgiveness. Lutherans call this "justifications by grace through faith." As a result they are new people who are not haunted by guilt or bothered by worry. They trust God who comes to them in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Lutherans Are Evangelical...and as forgiven people reach out to share the message of God's grace. Evangelical refers to the good news, or gospel, of Jesus Christ. As sinners Lutherans sometimes get caught up in themselves as much as everyone else does. But they try to look beyond themselves to bring the gospel to community life with people of other faiths and those of no faith. They welcome others to worship and work with them.

Lutherans Are Born Again Christians...with their own understanding of what it means to be "born again." Lutherans, like other catholic Christians, baptize infants, believing that God works grace in them. In fact, they believe that every day and in every act of serious return to God they are returning to their baptism. They come forth as new people, which means that they are born again - and again and again.

Lutherans Are Worshipers...who think of worship not as a pastor's performance but as the people's service. They are sacramental. Along with Baptism they celebrate the Eucharist (or Lord's Supper or Holy Communion) frequently. They believe that Jesus Christ is truly present when they gather in faith for this sacred meal.

There is a singing church, and Lutherans have contributed and still contribute much to Christian music.

Lutherans place special emphasis on the word of God. Lutheran worship stresses preaching in the form of a sermon that addresses the needs of sinners and announces the loving activity of God. God is present when humans speak the divine word, so Lutherans gather to hear it together.

They believe God speaks to people through the Scriptures and so Lutherans revere personal bible reading in addition to personal prayer.

Lutherans Are Stewards...which means they believe that all of life and health, all possessions and capabilities are, in a sense, on loan from God the Creator. So they keep on learning - never rapidly enough, or profoundly enough - how to return on God's investment in them.

Lutherans Want to Make a Difference...as people who do well when God works through them. Lutherans take the divine law with utter seriousness, but they are not legalists. They do not think they can please God by following laws nor can they come to perfection. Remember, the first thing to be said about them is that they are sinners who are forgiven. But they believe that they are to make faith active in love. Where there is no love, no generosity, no service to others, they suspect that faith is weak or absent.

Through organized groups and individual action Lutherans are part of public life. They want to work for justice, as biblical prophets and New Testament believers did.

Lutherans also participate in works of mercy and healing, as the name "Lutheran" on so many hospitals, social service agencies and relief projects makes clear. These efforts involve non-Lutheran partners.

Lutherans Are Ecumenical...and learning to be more so. This means they want the church to be as united as Christ prayed it would be. Yet they confess their faith through creeds and statements designed to set forth distinctive

Lutheran understanding about a gracious God. As sinners they do not think of themselves as better than others. As confessors, they do believe all Christians should speak clearly of their understandings of faith.

Lutherans Are Protestants...who are also catholic. As Protestants, they continue the reformation begun in European churches in the 15th century. Being universal, and that they are connected with Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and other Christians who stress their ties to Christ's church everywhere and through the ages.

Lutheran Protestants would not have chosen the name Lutheran; it was acquired accidentally, often from early enemies. The Name refers to Martin Luther, a German monk and an Old Testament professor, who came to renewed understanding of the good news over 500 years ago. Lutherans do not worship Martin Luther, but they do celebrate what God worked through him. Luther's writings called for church reform and led to protests-now known as the Protestant Reformation. His statement of justification by grace through faith, for example, remains a central, distinct characteristic of Lutheran understanding today.

Lutherans Come From Somewhere...and would like to be everywhere. Lutherans originated as people who were involved with church reform in Scandinavia and Germany. They moved from northern Europe first and chiefly to northern North America, which seemed to be a second natural habitat. However, they believe that their message of a God who forgives sinners is for everyone, so Lutherans have moved south from Europe and northern America into all the world.

Most Lutherans believe that the Christian good news knows no racial, ethnic, economic, national or gender-related boundaries. The Evangelical Lutheran church in America is organized to give emphasis to its desire that men and women, white and black, Hispanic and Asian and others, share equally in the benefits and tasks that go with Christian life.

Lutherans Are Congregational...but do not limit their activities to local or regional arenas. Most of the time, their neighbors know Lutherans through the local churches which bear their names. And Lutherans put most of their energies into these local congregations. There they baptize, commune, speak the work of God, reach out with acts of love, become friends, receive challenges, pray for others, and test their responsibilities.

Lutheran congregations are connected by synods and by church bodies like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They pool resources so that together these congregations can better reach out to people in need everywhere.

Together they educate leaders. Lutherans stress learned ministries and cherish skilled professional workers. For this they need jointly supported seminaries and colleges. But their stress on leadership, made possible by the larger church, does not make Lutheranism a priestly movement. Lay Christians as well as ordained ministers make up what Martin Luther called "a priesthood of all believers." All are ministers. Lay people, in teamwork with pastors, take initiatives to help see that Christ is represented among them and in their communities.

Lutherans Are Unfinished Products...though their forgiveness is complete. Aware of human weakness, imperfection, and mixed-up priorities, Lutherans are hopeful people. They respond to God's love by reaching out to others to tell and to demonstrate the good news of Jesus Christ. They believe that with God, anything is possible. They invite others who are not now active in Christian communions to join them in the challenges which a trouble-filled world presents, and to rejoice with them in the promises with which a loving God greets them.

by Martin E Marty