

# What does it mean to be Lutheran?

Back in 1938, as the church in Germany was being thrown into confusion by the Nazi war machine, Lutheran pastor and theologian Herman Sasse wrote a book called **Here We Stand**. It asked the question, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?"

We're asking a similar question today: What does our unique confession of faith mean as we travel in a chaotic culture that is both indifferent about and hostile toward the church? What does it mean to be Lutheran as we relate to one another within our church?

Is Lutheranism about morality and politics? How about traditions and customs? What about a veneration of Martin Luther or a celebration of European ethnic heritage? These are some of the questions Sasse asked and they are questions worthy of consideration today.

Let's look at the moral/political question: Does our confession focus on correcting the serious moral issues of the day?

That is a tempting option — especially when the culture departs from a Judeo-Christian ethic and radically espouses values that are completely counter to the way God shaped life, relationships, sexuality and the stewardship of His creation.

In such circumstances, you may want to shout, "Stop! Before we get to the precious message of Christ crucified and risen, let's focus on getting our act together about what is right and wrong."

But that's where we can easily go astray. Sasse noted: "The church does not live by morals, by the knowledge and observance of God's law. Nor does it live by religion, by lofty experiences of the divine and an awareness of the mysteries of God. It lives solely by the forgiveness of sins" (69).

"Hence reformation does not consist...of an ethico-religious correction, of a moral quickening and a spiritual deepening throughout the church. It consists, rather, according to its own peculiar nature, of the revival of the preaching of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake" (69-70).

In **The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel**, C.F.W. Walther noted Luther's caveat: "While it is indeed necessary to preach against gross vices, yet that is not what is meant by forcibly preaching the Law. Such preaching produces nothing but Pharisees" (124).

Sasse notes: "It is in this sense that the Apology to the Augsburg Confession speaks of Justification as 'the chief topic of Christian doctrine' (Apology, II, V)." (70) Justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ: this is the main thing. This is what Lutherans bring to the table.

Being Lutheran does not mean giving primary attention to moral/political issues or agendas. True Lutheranism means resisting that temptation and, instead, steadfastly and robustly lifting high the cross of Jesus Christ — the cross that brings people to repentance and reveals the wonder of forgiveness and eternal life in Him.

Next month we'll tackle the question of traditions.

**Rev. Michael W. Newman**  
President

## Question for reflection...

**Read John 8:1-11.** How does this episode in Jesus' ministry guide you and your congregation to proper attitudes and priorities as you deal with a fallen world?

**Prayer starter:** Bring your specific concerns about morality and politics to Jesus in prayer, asking Him to address those needs as you and your congregation shine the light of His Good News.



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## Part Two (For the first installment, please see August's issue)

I'll never forget the first time I read Herman Sasse's **Here We Stand**. It offered remarkable clarity about what it means to be Lutheran.

Last month, we saw that Lutheranism is not centered on morality or politics. But what about traditions? Sasse asks if the Reformation was a heroic and historical episode that enshrined tradition as the key identifier of Lutheranism. Are rites, ceremonies and traditions the focus of true "Lutheran Identity?"

Sasse answers succinctly: "The unity of the historical church is not achieved through conformity in rites and ceremonies, nor through identical organization and life-patterns, nor even through uniformity in theological thought-forms and opinions. **Such unity is only achieved when, in the joyful assurance of our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we are one in our understanding of what His saving Gospel is, and one in our understanding of what He gives us in His Sacraments.** 'For the true unity of the church, it is enough,' the Augsburg Confession states." (186-187)

Sasse is referring to AC VII, "For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere."

The Confessions add: "As soon as Christian freedom is weakened and human traditions are forced on the Church with coercion, as though it were wrong and a sin to omit them, the way is already prepared for idolatry. In this way, human traditions are multiplied and regarded as divine worship, not only equal to God's ordinances, but even placed above them." (FC SD X 15)

I recommend reading the complete article X of the Formula of Concord. It closes: "So the churches will not condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them." (FC SD X 31)

Sasse brings the answer home: "The Lutheran Reformation, in its essential nature, is nothing else than a **rediscovery of the Gospel.**" (68)

What does that mean? "The rediscovery of the Scriptural truth concerning the justification of the sinner by grace alone, through faith alone, is nothing less than the rediscovery of the Gospel." (69)

Always the Gospel. Many rites, liturgies and customs are beautiful and beloved. They can assist in conveying God's Word. But Lutheran identity is always in Christ alone, the cross and empty tomb, His expected return, and His grace-born-and-bestowing gifts for the world. "Lutheran Identity" always fades into our baptismal "Christ Identity."

Lutheranism means having the Gospel at the center — justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (AC IV). And if secondary things try to rise up and rival that central truth, the Gospel — received, lived and shared — always prevails. Otherwise, we're not Lutheran.

Next month we'll tackle the question of ethnic heritage.

Rev. Michael W. Newman

## Question for reflection...

**Read John 4:1-26.** How did Jesus redirect the woman to the Gospel and away from customs? What does this mean for you and for your congregation?

**Prayer starter:** Ask Jesus to use you to share His Good News — just as He did with the woman in John 4 (read verses 28-30 and 39-42).



# What does it mean to be Lutheran?

**Part III (For the first two installments, please see the August and September issues.)**

Over the past two months, we've been asking what it means to be Lutheran, taking a look at Hermann Sasse's book, **Here We Stand**. His third question asks if Lutheranism is focused on the veneration of Martin Luther and a celebration of European/German ethnic heritage.

Sasse's answer was an emphatic "No." In fact, Sasse added, "It is only when the Evangelical Lutheran Church is in a manifest state of decline that such an extravagant veneration of Luther asserts itself." (34)

Sasse understood that Lutheran identity meant Gospel identity — a tenacious and bold declaration of Scripture alone, faith alone and grace alone. Even as the Lutheran church in Germany was under pressure in 1938 to veer from its Gospel focus, Sasse proclaimed, "Here we stand" — not on morality, not on traditions, not on human opinions, not on Luther and not on German ethnicity, but only on the free gift of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake through faith.

Sasse noted that in the Reformation era, "men did not have the slightest interest in **Luther's teachings** as such; their whole interest was in **the teaching of the Gospel**. Luther's teaching was not accepted because it came from him, but because it agreed with the Gospel." (79)

And what about a Germanic/European ethos? Sasse — a German by birth — spoke humbly about the true nature of the Lutheran church: "The Lutheran Reformation was not trying to establish a German Christianity; it was not interested in a German church...it was interested in the one, the true, the only church of Christ." "Never and

nowhere does the Lutheran Church inquire after what is German, but it inquires after what is true—the saving truth of God for all." (58)

That is our Lutheran identity. Our goal is not to laud Martin Luther or to preserve western customs. The unique beauty of Lutheranism is that it transcends human debates and desires, lifting high the cross of Jesus Christ to the world.

Sasse noted, "[The Lutheran Reformation] had a very real appreciation for the fact that prominent characteristics of each nation express themselves in the life of the church all the way from outward forms to inner piety." (58)

Today in Texas we rejoice in African, Asian, Latino, European and American outward forms and inner piety in our LCMS family. This is not a risk to Lutheran identity; it is the expression of true Lutheran identity. As Sasse emphasized, "There is only one Gospel for all nations, just as there is only one Christ for all men." (59)

In this Reformation month, it is important to remember that our identity in Christ is what Lutherans stand upon. Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. This is what the world needs to hear from us and see in us. This love, this self-sacrifice, this attentiveness to how the Gospel meets our generation — this is where we stand.

**Text "join" and your email address to 512-638-8458 to become a mission prayer partner.**

**Rev. Michael W. Newman**  
**President**



## Questions for reflection...

**Read Acts 10:27-43.** What did Peter learn? How does his insight help you and your congregation understand your mission?

**Prayer starter:** Ask Jesus to help you share the Gospel with a new group of people in your community.