

LCMS

Frequently Asked Questions

Denominational Differences –Other Denominations

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Other Denominations

Assembly of God Church

Q: *I was searching for an answer to my question and came across your web site so I will ask you. I have been going to an Assembly of God church for about 10 years. My husband's family is Lutheran and my kids now attend their grandmother's church which is Lutheran. They love it!! I was wondering if you would know what the differences are between the two churches.*

A: Let me first note that there is much that the Assemblies of God and our The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) have in common as Christian churches. Both have a high view of the Holy Scriptures as God's inspired Word, a belief in the doctrine of sin, and the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and His saving work. However, the principal differences between the churches have to do with such teachings as sanctification, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Baptism of the Holy Spirit and tongues), and the end times. It would be difficult adequately to discuss the differences that exist in these areas in brief. I would suggest that you consider attending one of our adult information classes to learn what the Lutheran church believes on the basis of its understanding of the Scriptures. Being familiar with the teachings of the Assemblies of God (and Pentecostalism), you would be in a good position to compare the teachings between our churches. You should not feel under any prior obligation to accept or commit yourself to what is being taught; the purpose of the class is to help you on the basis of the Bible to judge for yourself whether what the Lutheran Church teaches is grounded in all that it teaches.

I have found the [Assemblies of God official website](#) very helpful in summarizing their teaching and if you have not looked at this site, you also may find it helpful.

Finally, let me call your attention to two reports that our Commission on Theology and Church Relations prepared in the 1970s: [The Charismatic Movement and Lutheran Theology](#) (1972) and [The Lutheran Church and the Charismatic Movement](#) (1977). Since Lutherans and Pentecostal churches have differing understandings of the Holy Spirit's work and gifts, you may find these reports useful. For information on the Lutheran view, click [here](#).

Usage: We urge you to contact an LCMS pastor in your area for more in-depth discussion.

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Baptist Church

Q: *What are the major differences in doctrine between Baptist churches and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS)?*

A: While unlike the LCMS, Baptist churches do not require subscription to a creedal statement or "body of doctrine" as such. However, one of the major doctrinal differences has to do with what the Bible teaches about Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Lutherans regard Baptism and the Lord's Supper as divinely instituted sacraments. Our confessional writings describe them as the Gospel in "visible" form. They are, therefore, at the heart and center of the Lutheran faith.

Baptist churches do not regard Baptism as a means of grace through which the Holy Spirit works to create and strengthen faith. Therefore, they reject infant Baptism. They also place great emphasis on the mode of Baptism (immersion required). Likewise, the Lord's Supper is generally regarded by Baptists as merely a commemorative meal, not a sacrament in which the body and blood of Christ is truly present in and with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins.

Baptist churches also typically stress the role of "free will" in conversion, and (accordingly) speak of faith in Christ as being attained through a person's "choice" or "decision." Lutherans, on the other hand, believe that faith itself is a gift of God's grace and is brought about not by the "free will" of human beings but by the power of God's Spirit working through God's means of grace, the Word and Sacraments. (For more information, see [FAQs on Salvation](#).)

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Episcopal Church

Q: *What are the theological differences between the LCMS and the Episcopal Church?*

A: While there are a number of significant theological differences between the LCMS and the Episcopal Church (e.g., the issue of authority in the church, especially as it relates to the doctrine of Scripture as the inspired and inerrant Word of God; the nature of the sacraments as means of grace; the precise understanding of the doctrine of justification; the question of what it means to be a "confessional" church), perhaps the most obvious difference has to do with the Episcopalian view of apostolic succession (which pertains equally to more "conservative" offshoots from the Episcopal church). This difference is summarized as follows in Lewis Spitz's booklet "Our Church and Others":

Episcopalians attach great importance to the theory of the apostolic succession. They insist that the apostles ordained bishops, these in turn ordained their successors, and so down through the centuries, so that the present-day bishops are the successors of the apostles through an unbroken chain. Scripture knows nothing of such a theory. Episcopalians hold that only bishops who have received their authority in this way can properly ordain ministers and that without such Episcopal ordination a minister cannot validly perform the sacraments.

For more information about denominational differences, you may read *Churches in America* by Thomas Manteufel, available from Concordia Publishing House (800-325-3040 or www.cph.org).

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Methodist Church

Q: *What are the main differences between the Methodist and Lutheran denominations?*

A: This is a difficult question to answer in the abstract, for several reasons:

1) There are dozens of denominations of "Methodist" background and character which differ greatly from each other in theology and practice, from "holiness" churches to "Pentecostal" churches to "mainline" Methodist churches;

2) Even Methodist churches of the same denomination often differ to some degree in their theology and practice, since Methodist churches, as a rule, tend to be more concerned with "deeds" than "creeds." Therefore, one might say that the most fundamental difference between Lutheran and many Methodist churches is that the Lutheran church is a confessional church (i.e., it binds itself and its member congregations to a specific, formal confession of faith) while the Methodist church, in its varied forms, tends not to be as concerned with formal "confessions" of faith to which its congregations must subscribe.

The primary differences between Lutheranism and "classical" Methodism rooted in the theology of John Wesley center in Wesley's doctrine of salvation. Wesley taught, contrary to Lutheran theology, that 1) man is free not only to reject salvation but also to accept it (free salvation) by an act of human will; 2) all people who are obedient to the Gospel according to the measure of knowledge given them will be saved (universal salvation); 3) the Holy Spirit assures man of his salvation directly, through an inner "experience" (sure salvation); 4) Christians in this life are capable of Christian perfection and are commanded by God to pursue it (full salvation). Wesley also held to a "symbolic" view of the sacraments in contrast to the Lutheran view of the sacraments as real and powerful means of grace.

For more information, you may wish to check the following sources:

Lutheran Cyclopedia, edited by Erwin Lueker, [Concordia Publishing House](#) (CPH), page 154, on "Methodist Churches"; American Churches: Beliefs and Practices, by F. E. Mayer, CPH, 1956; The Religious Bodies of America by F. E. Mayer, CPH, 1961.

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Mormon Church

Q: *Are Mormons generally regarded as Christians, and how do their beliefs differ from those of the Missouri Synod?*

A: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, together with the vast majority of Christian denominations in the United States, does not regard the Mormon church as a Christian church. That is because the official writings of Mormonism deny fundamental teachings of orthodox Christianity. For example, the Nicene Creed confesses the clear biblical truth that Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, is "of one substance with the Father." This central article of the Christian faith is expressly rejected by Mormon teaching- thus undermining the very heart of the scriptural Gospel itself. In a chapter titled "Jesus Christ, the Son of God: Are Mormons Christian?" the president of Brigham Young University (Rex Lee, *What Do Mormons Believe?* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992] summarizes Mormon teaching by stating that the three persons of the Trinity are "not... one being" (21), but are "separate individuals." In addition, the Father is regarded as having a body "of flesh and bone" (22). Such teaching is contrary to the Holy Scriptures, destructive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and indicative of the fact that Mormon teaching is not Christian.

For more information about beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints read this [document](#) prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

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Pentecostal Churches

Q: *What are the main differences between the Missouri Synod and the Pentecostal churches?*

A: Perhaps the main difference between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Pentecostal churches is that Pentecostal churches tend to emphasize the importance of personal and spiritual "experiences" (such as "baptism in the Holy Spirit" and speaking in tongues), while the LCMS emphasizes the importance and centrality of the word and promises of God in Holy Scripture, which remain true and valid regardless of our personal "feelings" or "experiences." To learn more about the LCMS view of Scripture and its most important teachings, see [What Do Lutherans Believe](#) and [What About...the LCMS?](#)

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Presbyterian Church (2 pages)

Q: *How does the Missouri Synod differ from the Presbyterian Church?*

A: As is the case with most mainline denominations today, there are specific issues such as the ordination of women, abortion, homosexuality, etc., that divide the distinct Presbyterian church bodies (for example, the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) and the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)). Such differences typically stem from more fundamental differences concerning the authority of Scripture itself. Having said this, the major theological differences between historic Lutheranism and Presbyterianism (and other churches of Calvinistic background and theological orientation) include the following:

1. The centrality of the Gospel. Presbyterian churches tend to emphasize the "glory" or "sovereignty" of God as the central teaching of Scripture, while Lutherans believe that the central teaching of Scripture--and the key to understanding and interpreting the Bible--is the Gospel: the Good News of Salvation for sinners by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
2. The nature of Christ's atonement. Lutherans believe that when Jesus died on the cross He atoned for the sins of all people of all time--even those who have not or will not come to faith in Christ and will spend eternity in hell. Some Presbyterian churches teach a "limited atonement" of Christ, i.e., that Christ's death on the cross atoned only for the sins of "the elect"--those who have been predestined from eternity to believe in Christ and will spend eternity with Him in heaven.
3. Predestination. Most Presbyterian churches teach a "double predestination," i.e., that some people are predestined by God from eternity to be saved and others are predestined by God from eternity to be damned. Lutherans believe that while God, in his grace in Christ Jesus, has indeed chosen from eternity to save those who trust in Jesus Christ, He has not predestined anyone to damnation. Those who are saved are saved by grace alone; those who are damned are damned not by God's choice but because of their own sin and stubbornness. This is a mystery that is incomprehensible to human reason (as are all true Scriptural articles of faith).
4. The authority of Scripture. A fourth difference has to do with the proper use of reason and its relationship to the authority of Scripture. Lutherans look to Scripture alone as the source of all Christian doctrine, and hold to the teachings of Scripture even when they are incomprehensible to human reason. Some Presbyterian churches tend to place human reason alongside Scripture as a source of doctrinal authority, and seek to bring seemingly paradoxical Scriptural truths into harmony with human reason in ways that (in our view) undermine the truthfulness and authority of Scripture.
5. The Sacraments. Most Presbyterian churches (to a greater or lesser degree) view the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper merely as "signs" or "symbols" of God's grace. Lutherans believe that Baptism and the Lord's Supper (which is the true body and blood of Christ in, with, and under bread and wine) are actual means of God's grace through which the Holy Spirit works to convey and/or strengthen faith.

A more detailed discussion of the differences between Lutherans and Calvinist churches may be found in *Churches in America* by Thomas Manteufel, available from Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis (800-325-3040 or www.cph.org).

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Reformed Churches (2 pages)

Q: What are the major differences between the Missouri Synod and Reformed churches?

A: Just as there are many significant differences in theology and practice between Lutherans of varying denominations, the same is true when it comes to different churches within the Reformed tradition. Differences exist among Reformed churches even regarding such fundamental issues as the authority of Scripture and the nature and centrality of the doctrine of justification.

Historically, however, most Reformed churches adhere to the five points of Calvinist theology commonly summarized by the acrostic "tulip" as these were set forth at the Synod of Dort (1618-19). On page 41 in his book, *Churches in America*, Dr. Thomas Manteufel reviews these five points and explains how they compare and/or contrast with what Lutherans believe regarding these matters.

T (Total Depravity) The Calvinists rightly teach that all descendants of Adam are by nature totally corrupt in spiritual matters. People do not have freedom of the will to turn to God in faith or cooperate in their conversions (Eph. 2:1; John 3:5-6; Rom. 8:7).

U (Unconditional predestination) Scripture does teach that it is by grace that God has predestinated the elect to eternal salvation and given them justifying faith. It is not because of any condition fulfilled by them (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:4-6; Phil. 1:29). However, the Bible does not teach, as do the Calvinists, that some are predestined for damnation. God wants all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

L (Limited atonement) It is true that Christ died for the church and purchased it with His blood (Eph. 5:25; Acts 20:28). Furthermore, His atoning death does not mean that all people are saved (1 Cor. 1:18). However, Jesus died for all (2 Cor. 5:15).

I (Irresistible grace) We agree that God makes us alive by His mighty power, without our aid (Eph. 2:5; John 1:13). But Scripture warns that we can resist God's gracious call (Matt. 23:37; Acts 7:51; 2 Cor. 6:1). And some people do resist God's grace, or all would be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Furthermore, God warns us not to resist His grace (2 Cor. 6:1; Heb. 4:7).

P (Perseverance in grace) We affirm with Scripture that those who are predestined to salvation cannot be lost but will continue by God's power to a blessed end (Rom. 8:30; 1 Peter 1:5). Scripture does not teach, however, that those who come to faith cannot lose that faith (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-29; Ps. 51:11). God urges His people not to continue in sin but to live in repentance and faith (Rom. 6:1-4).

Churches in America by Dr. Thomas Manteufel; p. 41 (St. Louis: CPH, 1994).

For more information about the Reformed Church as well as other denominations in the United States, you may contact Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis at 800-325-3040 or www.cph.org and ask for *Churches in America*, by Thomas Manteufel, stock no. 22-2522.

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Roman Catholic Church (2 pages)

Q: *What are the main theological differences between the theology of the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church?*

A: At the risk of oversimplification, and keeping in mind that individual Lutheran (and Catholic) theologians would undoubtedly disagree about the success of recent Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues in lessening or even "resolving" historic doctrinal differences between these two churches, listed below are what the LCMS would regard as some of the major theological differences between the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church:

1. The authority of Scripture.

Lutherans believe that Scripture alone has authority to determine doctrine; the Roman Catholic Church gives this authority also to the pope, the church, and certain traditions of the church.

2. The doctrine of justification.

Lutherans believe that a person is saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The Roman Catholic Church, while at times using similar language, still officially holds that faith, in order to save, must be accompanied by (or "infused with") some "work" or "love" active within a Christian.

3. The authority of the pope.

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans do not believe that the office of the papacy as such has any divine authority, or that Christians need to submit to the Pope's authority to be "true" members of the visible church.

4. Differences remain about both the number and the nature of the sacraments.

Lutherans believe that Christ's body and blood are truly present in the Lord's Supper, but they do not believe, with Catholics, that the bread and wine, are permanently "changed into" Christ's body and blood [transubstantiation].

5. Differences remain about the role of Mary and the saints.

Unlike Catholics, Lutherans do not believe it is proper or Scriptural to offer prayers to saints or to view Mary as in any sense a "mediator" between God and human beings.

While Lutherans believe that any doctrinal error has the potential to distort or deny Scripture's teaching regarding salvation, we also believe that anyone (regardless of denominational affiliation) who truly believes in Jesus Christ as Savior will be saved.

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Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory

Q: *What's the Lutheran response to the Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory?*

A: Lutherans have always rejected the traditional Roman Catholic teaching regarding purgatory because 1) we can find no Scriptural basis for it, and 2) it is inconsistent, in our view, with the clear teaching of Scripture that after death the soul goes directly either to heaven (in the case of a Christian) or hell (in the case of a non-Christian), not to some "intermediate" place or state.

What Scripture teaches concerning the death of the Christian is summarized as follows by Lutheran theologian Edward Koehler in his book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*:

In the moment of death the souls of the believers enter the joy of heaven. Jesus said to the malefactor: "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Stephen said in the hour of death: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Whoever dies in the Lord is blessed "from henceforth" (Rev. 14:13).

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Salvation of Catholics

Q: A non-Lutheran Christian friend of mine recently stated that he believes that Catholics are not saved and should not be considered Christians. What is the Synod's belief regarding the salvation of Catholics who adhere to Roman dogma?

A: The LCMS recognizes all Trinitarian church bodies as Christian churches (in contrast to "cults," which typically reject the doctrine of the Trinity and thus cannot be recognized as Christian). In fact, a primary "objective" listed in the Synod's Constitution (Article III) is to "work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies"—which explicitly assumes that these "other church bodies" are "Christian" in nature. That does not lessen the Synod's concern for the false doctrine taught and confessed by these churches, but it does highlight the Synod's recognition that wherever the "marks of the church" (the Gospel and Sacraments) are present—even where "mixed" with error—there the Christian church is present. Such a church is a heterodox church, that is, a church that teaches false doctrine.

Of course, personal salvation is not merely a matter of external membership in or association with any church organization or denomination (including the LCMS), but comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone. All those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior are recognized as "Christians" by the Synod—only God can look into a person's heart and see whether that person really believes. It is possible to have true and sincere faith in Jesus Christ even while having wrong or incomplete beliefs about other doctrinal issues.

This explains why former Synod President A.L. Barry called members of the Roman Catholic Church "our fellow Christians" in his statement *Toward True Reconciliation*, which at the same time identifies and laments the false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The great danger is that believing things contrary to God's Word can obscure and perhaps even completely destroy belief in Jesus Christ as one's Savior. We pray that this will not happen to those who confess Jesus Christ as Savior and yet belong to heterodox church bodies, including fellow Christians in the Roman Catholic Church.

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What about the anti-Semitic statements made by Luther? (2 pages)

Q: *What is the Missouri Synod's response to the anti-Semitic statements made by Luther?*

A: While The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod holds Martin Luther in high esteem for his bold proclamation and clear articulation of the teachings of Scripture, it deeply regrets and deplors statements made by Luther which express a negative and hostile attitude toward the Jews. In light of the many positive and caring statements concerning the Jews made by Luther throughout his lifetime, it would not be fair on the basis of these few regrettable (and uncharacteristic) negative statements, to characterize the reformer as "a rabid anti-Semite." The LCMS, however, does not seek to "excuse" these statements of Luther, but denounces them (without denouncing Luther's theology). In 1983, the Synod adopted an official resolution addressing these statements of Luther and making clear its own position on anti-Semitism. The text of this resolution reads as follows:

WHEREAS, Anti-Semitism and other forms of racism are a continuing problem in our world; and

WHEREAS, Some of Luther's intemperate remarks about the Jews are often cited in this connection; and

WHEREAS, It is widely but falsely assumed that Luther's personal writings and opinions have some official status among us (thus, sometimes implying the responsibility of contemporary Lutheranism for those statements, if not complicity in them); but also

WHEREAS, It is plain from scripture that the Gospel must be proclaimed to all people--that is, to Jews also, no more and no less than to others (Matt. 28:18-20); and

WHEREAS, This Scriptural mandate is sometimes confused with anti-Semitism; therefore be it

Resolved, That we condemn any and all discrimination against others on account of race or religion or any coercion on that account and pledge ourselves to work and witness against such sins; and be it further

Resolved, That we reaffirm that the bases of our doctrine and practice are the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and not Luther, as such; and be it further

Resolved, That while, on the one hand, we are deeply indebted to Luther for his rediscovery and enunciation of the Gospel, on the other hand, we deplore and disassociate ourselves from Luther's negative statements about the Jewish people, and, by the same token, we deplore the use today of such sentiments by Luther to incite anti-Christian and/or anti-Lutheran sentiment; and be it further

Resolved, That in our teaching and preaching we take care not to confuse the religion of the Old Testament (often labeled "Yahwism") with the subsequent Judaism, nor misleadingly speak about "Jews" in the Old Testament ("Israelites" or "Hebrews" being much more accurate terms), lest we obscure the basic claim of the New Testament and of the Gospel to being in substantial continuity with the Old Testament and that the fulfillment of the ancient promises came in Jesus Christ; and be it further

Resolved, That we avoid the recurring pitfall of recrimination (as illustrated by the remarks of Luther and many of the early church fathers) against those who do not respond positively to our evangelistic efforts; and be it finally

Resolved, That, in that light, we personally and individually adopt Luther's final attitude toward the Jewish people, as evidenced in his last sermon: "We want to treat them with Christian love and to pray for them, so that they might become converted and would receive the Lord" (Weimar edition, Vol. 51, p. 195).

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Why are there so many denominations?

Q: *I am confused regarding so many denominations that exist. Appreciate if you could provide advice regarding the Biblical and theological teaching for the following: "Some say that the existence of denominations within Christ's church is a tragedy caused by sin and immaturity; others claim that denominations are a blessing, since they produce diversity within the body of Christ." What do you think?*

A: Since apostolic times visible Christendom has been divided. Although there are historical, cultural, and sociological factors that have contributed to such division, departure from God's truth revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures must be regarded as the principal cause for such division. The apostles themselves foresaw and had to deal with such division within early Christian communities (see, for example, Acts 20:25-31). While the Scriptures are the inerrant source and norm of all doctrine and while God's Truth is one, sinful human beings can and do err. Hence, division occurs in visible Christendom.

The same can be said for modern denominationalism. While there are historical, cultural and sociological factors involved in the formation of denominations, disagreement regarding the understanding and application of biblical doctrine remains the fundamental reason for division between and among them. We hold that there can be only one Truth, and that denominations exist because some Christians have departed from what is faithful to biblical doctrine. In spite of the divided state of Christendom, we in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod remain committed to the quest for external unity in the church based on agreement in doctrine. We believe that this is not an option, but is God's will.

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