

ON THE MEANS OF GRACE

How Are Lutherans Different from Other Protestants?

The One Difference Behind All the Others

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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If you grew up in the broad world of American evangelicalism and then wandered, curious or weary, into a confessional Lutheran church, you would notice the surface differences right away. There is a liturgy, and people seem to know it by heart. Babies are baptized. Communion happens often, and something serious is clearly believed to be going on at the rail. The pastor pronounces forgiveness as though he had the authority to do it. It can all feel, at first, like a different religion. But it is not the ceremonies that mark the real divide. Underneath every one of those differences runs a single question, and once you see it, the whole Lutheran world clicks into focus: *Where does God hand His grace over?*

Almost everything that distinguishes Lutherans from other Protestants is an answer to that one question. Get the answer, and the liturgy, the baptisms, the frequent Supper, the confident absolution all stop looking like strange customs and start looking like the only sensible thing to do.

Two Answers to One Question

Where do you go to get grace? Where does forgiveness actually change hands from God to you?

Much of Protestantism—especially the revivalist stream that shaped modern evangelicalism—answers by pointing *inward*. Grace arrives, on this view, through your response: the moment you decide for Christ, the sincerity with which you pray the prayer, the depth of your surrender, the reality of your experience. The sacraments become symbols that illustrate a grace received elsewhere, chiefly in the heart. Preaching becomes an appeal aimed at producing that inner response. The decisive transaction happens *in you*, and the outward things—water, bread, wine, words—are pictures of it.

Lutherans answer by pointing *outward*. God has attached His grace to external things He has appointed—the Word preached and read, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the spoken word of absolution—and it is *there*, in those means, that He delivers the goods. We call them, plainly, the *means of grace*. They are not illustrations of a grace you got somewhere else. They are the somewhere else. They are the loading dock where heaven's forgiveness is unloaded into time and handed to sinners.

The Augsburg Confession states it about as directly as it can be stated: to obtain saving faith, God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments, and *through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith where and when He wills in those who hear the Gospel*. Through these means. Not alongside them, not independently of them—*through* them. That little phrase is the hinge on which the whole Lutheran difference turns.

Why This Changes Everything

Watch how nearly every other distinctive falls out of that one commitment.

Why do Lutherans baptize infants? Because if Baptism is a means through which God actually gives grace—if, as Peter says, *baptism now saves you* (1 Peter 3:21), and as Paul says, God saved us *by the washing of regeneration* (Titus 3:5)—then it is God’s work, not a testimony to ours. And an infant can receive a gift as easily as an adult, precisely because it is a gift and not a decision. Where grace flows through your inner choice, an infant obviously cannot qualify; where grace flows through God’s appointed means, the infant is exactly the sort of helpless recipient the Gospel loves.

Why the real presence in the Supper, and why so often? Because the Supper is not a memorial aid to jog an inward devotion but a means through which Christ delivers His body, His blood, and the forgiveness they won. If that is what it is, you want it constantly, the way a hungry man wants bread.

Why does the pastor forgive sins out loud? Because the spoken word of absolution is a means of grace too—the Gospel applied to *you*, by name, through the mouth of a called servant. It is not the man’s opinion of your standing; it is Christ’s word placed in your ears.

And why the liturgy at all? Because if the service is the place where God serves *you*—handing over His gifts through Word and Sacrament—then its shape should be built to deliver those gifts, not to manufacture a mood. Lutheran worship is not primarily something we offer up to God; it is chiefly something God does *to* and *for* us. The Latin word for the historic service, *Divine Service*, runs in both directions, and the primary direction is God’s service to sinners.

Where Assurance Comes to Rest

This is not a dispute about mechanics. It is a dispute about where a frightened conscience finds solid ground, and that is why it matters more than any other single thing.

If grace is finally located in your inner response, then your assurance is located there too—and that is a terrible place to have to stand. For you can never be entirely certain your decision was sincere enough, your surrender complete enough, your experience real rather than worked-up. On your low days the whole foundation trembles, and you find yourself doing it again: another rededication, another prayer, another attempt to feel it more truly this time. This is the private exhaustion of a great many earnest evangelical Christians, and it is not a failure of effort. It is the natural result of building assurance on a foundation inside yourself, where the ground is always shifting.

The means of grace move the foundation *outside* you, and set it on rock. Your baptism happened; it is a fact in the world, God's act done to you, and you can return to it every morning of your life—*I am baptized*—no matter how you feel. The word of absolution was spoken; Christ's body was placed in your mouth; the Gospel was preached into your ears. None of it depends on the temperature of your heart today. Faith itself, Lutherans confess, is not a work you generate but a gift the Spirit creates *through* these very means—*no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit* (1 Corinthians 12:3), and *faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17). Even your believing is something God gives you from outside, through the Word. So there is nothing left in the whole transaction for you to have done well enough. That is the point. That is the rest.

An Invitation, Not a Boast

None of this is said to sneer at other Christians. There are godly, Christ-loving believers across the whole Protestant landscape, and Lutherans gladly own them as brothers and sisters. The differences here are real and they matter, but they are set down not to win an argument. They are set down for the sake of the weary—for the one who has decided for Christ so many times he has lost count, who has surrendered everything he can find and still lies awake unsure, who has been told the trouble must be that he has not tried hard enough, or believed hard enough, or felt it deeply enough.

To that person the Lutheran difference comes as almost unbelievable good news. You do not have to reach up and generate a grace from within. God has already reached down and attached His grace to things you can actually receive—water, word, bread, wine—things outside you that cannot be undone by a bad day or a cold heart. The whole weight is lifted off your inner life and set on Christ's finished work, delivered to you through means He chose precisely so that you could be sure. That is the one difference behind all the others. And it is, in the end, simply the Gospel—kept outside of you, on purpose, where it is safe.