

**The Great Beyond:
Where Do We Go when We Die and How Do We Get there?
Interfaith Symposium - April 22, 2010**

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Lutherans don't generally put a lot of emphasis on heaven and hell and what they are like. We believe there is a heaven and a hell. But the emphasis of our teaching and preaching is focused more on salvation, eternal life, and the Kingdom of God.

Here's our basic doctrine about salvation:

Lutherans believe, like all Christians, that God created the heavens and the earth and then created human beings in His own image and likeness, and that everything God created was very good.

God gave human beings the ability to be in loving relationships with one another and with God — that's what is meant by being in God's image. But right from the start, human beings chose to disobey God and thereby sin entered the world. Sin is separation from God. Separation from God results in death.

We believe that human beings are born in sin and hopelessly in bondage to it, with no power to overcome sin and repair the relationship with God. We believe that God took the initiative to repair that breach by coming to earth in human form to save us from the consequence of sin, which is death.

God the Father sent God the Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for sin by his own death on the cross. And then, by raising Jesus from the dead, God defeated death forever.

We believe that Jesus' death and resurrection fully and completely paid the price for all sin and provides full satisfaction for all the punishment and condemnation due to human beings for our rebellion against God. Jesus' death and resurrection satisfies God's requirement for the righteousness that is needed to be in a relationship with Him.

All that is required of human beings is to accept God's free gift of forgiveness and eternal life by placing our faith in the work of Jesus Christ. There is nothing we can add by our own work to the promise and covenant God freely offers to us. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy of it. There is nothing we can do after receiving God's gift of eternal life to deserve more or better rewards.

A key passage of Scripture upon which we rely is Ephesians 2:4-9:

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

So that's it — eternal life through faith in Christ. But there is more that can be said **about** this eternal life.

Lutherans focus on the belief that eternal life is not something that we receive **after** we die. It is the life of God that is born within us by the Holy Spirit that begins at our Baptism.

We focus not so much on HEAVEN as something “out there in the great beyond” where we hope to be some day. But on the KINGDOM OF GOD, or the reign of God. By our Baptism, we are made children of God. We RECEIVE the Holy Spirit which means that we share in the life of God even now. We are born again. We are new creatures. We are IN CHRIST. We become citizens of God's Kingdom.

I'm going to say more about God's Kingdom, but first a few words about Baptism, because this is one area where we differ from a large segment of Christians.

Lutherans do Baptize infants because we believe that Baptism is **GOD's work** in us and that Baptism is effective because it is administered according to God's command and promise. We do not see it as merely an external sign that confirms a decision we make. Baptism is not dependent upon a decision of faith made by the one being Baptized, but is

administered in faith that depends on God's promise — the promise of eternal life through faith in Christ.

So we believe that an infant who is baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit becomes a child of God and receives the Holy Spirit and therefore has received eternal life that cannot be taken away. That leads to all sorts of questions:

So ... what if that child does not grow up in the faith and come to understand and apprehend what has taken place in him? Then he misses out on all the benefits of knowing Christ in this world, and he is of no **earthly** good to God's Kingdom, and he will be subject to God's judgment, but his eternal life is not taken away.

Other typical questions are: "What if someone has never been baptized, but does have faith in Jesus? Will she go to heaven? What if someone has never heard of Jesus or had the opportunity to come to faith or be baptized, will he go to heaven?" God is just and fair and God knows the heart and we can trust God with whatever happens in those cases.

But here's the point: anyone who ASKS the question has heard God's Word, so the questioner needs to answer the question: do YOU believe?

Basically, we preach to ALL who hear, baptized or not, saved or not: "Place your faith in Christ. Grow in faith and knowledge of him.

If you haven't been baptized, we say, "Do you place your faith in Christ? Then be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit." If you have been baptized but don't know Jesus or have wandered, we say, "Repent and come back to Christ and place your faith in him for abundant life. Take comfort in the blessed assurance of KNOWING you have eternal life."

As I said, Lutheran's don't focus so much on salvation for the purpose of going to heaven as a reward after you die. We focus on salvation for receiving eternal life that begins now.

God's Kingdom is here already, initiated by Christ and continued in those of us who have faith in Christ who make up the church — the Body of Christ here on earth. God's kingdom is here ALREADY, but NOT YET. It is not yet fully restored. Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God on earth and we are now part of its coming. We participate in God's work of restoring the Kingdom.

In Romans Chapter 8 Paul talks about this:

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

We recognize that things are not as they should be in this world but we live in the hope that one day all creation will be fully restored when Jesus returns.

So we live in this in between time. And we believe that God calls us to WORK to accomplish God's purposes. So, you see, our works are not anything we do to gain entrance into God's kingdom, but they are the result of BEING a part of God's Kingdom through faith in Christ. We cannot help but be part of God's work of restoring, healing and bringing people into relationship with God by proclaiming the gospel to them so that they might come to faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is why Lutherans and other denominations that believe as we do have, over the years, done so much in the arena of health and education and human services. God is about bringing love and healing and knowledge and restoration — to our spirits through faith, but even to our bodies and our minds and our relationships and our emotions and to creation itself as signs of his coming Kingdom. Jesus taught and healed and forgave and cast out demons as signs of God's love and will for us.

So when a child of God who is, say, a nurse, is caring for someone who is ill and is doing so out of a sense of the presence of Christ within him or her — and is extending that love of Jesus and God's desire for our wholeness — then that is a little bit of heaven breaking through right there! This is part of the meaning of praying, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Lutherans do believe in eternal life with God in God's Kingdom, which we receive by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, which gives us strength and love and purpose and abundant life in the here and now and hope for the life to come. We believe in the description of the life to come that is in Revelation Chapter 21, where John writes of this vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

The last two verses of the Bible, Revelation 22:20-21, are also a fitting end to this presentation:

The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! ²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Baptism Related Scriptures

The command is given by Jesus in Matthew 29:19,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And the promise in Mark 16:16,

“The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”

Titus 3:4-8

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. ⁸The saying is sure.

Romans 6:3-5

³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

I Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you — not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.