



Bible Study and Discussion Guide for Leaders

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Bible study is to introduce The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Reformation 2017 theme. The theme and logo underscore the central teaching of the Holy Scriptures, that the Gospel is the “promise of forgiveness of sins and of justification for Christ's sake” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, paragraph 43). This teaching was Luther's core belief as well as the chief reason for his complaint against the church of his day. The Synod's logo reflects this saving focus, with the crucified Christ at the center of the Luther rose.

OPENING

Blessed Lord, You have caused Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so learn them, read, mark, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your Holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may want to sing or read selected stanzas of one of the following hymns:

“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (*LSB* 556)

“If Your Beloved Son, O God” (*LSB* 568)

INTRODUCTION

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation of the Christian Church. Should the Christian Church celebrate this event? One can only answer the question rightly if there is understanding as to the reason for the Reformation. What would cause a little-known Augustinian monk, pastor, and university professor not only to post

his Ninety-Five Theses for a church discussion but also in a few years to stand and confess before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V? Why was there such a fuss over *these* theses and not over the ninety-seven theses he posted weeks earlier—September 1517—where he hoped to reform the method of scholarly thought and study of theology?

THE FUNDAMENTAL CONCERN: PASTORAL CARE

On the very day that Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses—October 31, 1517—he also wrote a letter to Cardinal Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz. Luther's words unveiled a pastoral concern, as he had been pastor of St. Mary's congregation since 1515. Instead of gaining the forgiveness of sins by the purchase of an indulgence paper, Luther argued that only the Gospel of Christ forgives sin.

Evidently the poor souls believe that when they have bought indulgence letters they are then assured of their salvation. They are likewise convinced that souls escape from purgatory as soon as they have placed a contribution into the chest. Further, they assume that the grace obtained through these indulgences is so completely effective that there is no sin of such magnitude that it cannot be forgiven. (*Luther's Works* 48:46)

And then, Luther states the proper way:

The first and only duty of the bishops, however, is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ. For on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached, but he forcefully commanded the gospel to be preached. (*Luther's Works* 48:47)

Twenty years later, in 1537, John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, commissioned Luther to prepare articles as a clear confession of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. It is here that Luther writes, as he states, the “first and chief article”:

Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 4:24–25).

He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works or merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23–25). (Smalcald Articles, Part II, paragraphs 1–3).

And then, Luther writes:

Upon this article everything that we teach and practice depends, in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the whole world. Therefore, we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine. (Smalcald Articles, Part II, paragraph 5)

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

(Note: Questions only are found in the student section.)

Q1. According to Luther's letter to Albrecht of Mainz, what was his core concern as a pastor both for his congregation and for the Church?

A1. Luther began his pastorate in 1515, while his service as professor at the University of Wittenberg began in 1508/1509. His care for souls, namely, the preaching of Christ as the only Savior from sin, was the reason for his letter to Albrecht. He also attached a copy of the Ninety-Five Theses to it, but it was not the main reason for his letter. The Theses were posted on the door of the Castle Church in Latin as a way to initiate a scholarly debate. This letter reveals Luther's pastoral concern for right preaching, namely, that salvation or justification comes wholly from God and becomes man's wholly by reception. The Scriptures do not require man to pay any kind of penalty, in part or whole. God's sheep only trust God alone to justify (cf. Romans 4:5).

[Note to Leader] You may want to spend a few moments as to the possible reason(s) for the success of the Ninety-Five Theses and not the ninety-seven theses. The first threatened the financial plan of the pope, who was to receive half of the proceeds for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The other half went to Albrecht of Mainz to pay off his debt, which he incurred with the purchasing of his pallium, a proper vestment for his new position. Greater detail may even lead to the discussion of Christ as the sole power to save and not through the power of the priesthood and their control over the Mass. Further reading may include Luther's "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (*Luther's Works* 36:3–126). Fundamentally, Luther advocated a very different and exclusive way of God saving sinners, completely apart from any additions by the pope or church councils. Additionally, the University of Wittenberg was a very young school, only established in 1502. Luther was an unknown Augustinian monk from a noninfluential town. For a delightful read, see Kurt Aland, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004).

Q2. How does Luther's concern deal with one's conscience? See Hebrews 9:9, 14; 10:22; 1 John 1:7b.

A2. While not specifically naming Baptism and Holy Communion, the words in these Bible passages, such as "hearts sprinkled," "bodies washed" (Hebrews 10:22), and "blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us" (1 John 1:7b), point to no other acts than Jesus' use of Word, water, bread/body, and wine/blood as His cleansing tools in the Divine Service. God interacts with sinners with the intent to purify and cleanse through divine blood.

The English word *conscience* occurs in the Book of Concord over 330 times. Our Lutheran forefathers were concerned greatly over the comfort and care of the baptized. The following citation is a fine example:

But just as justification would be uncertain if it depended upon the condition of our works or the law and were not freely received on account of Christ through mercy, so also hope would truly be uncertain if it depended upon our works, because the law always accuses consciences. Nor can consciences find peace, unless they grasp mercy by faith. Nor can the hope of eternal life exist unless the conscience obtains peace. For a doubting conscience flees the judgment of God and despairs. (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, p. 167 in K-W)

You may want to read the following sentence and discuss: “A troubled conscience does not need moral instruction or lessons in Christian ethics but the forgiveness of sins” (John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2013], p. 48).

Q3. Luther refers to the Gospel as the “first and chief article,” for it is this doctrine upon which the Church is either standing or falling. Consider what the Lord says to the serpent in Genesis 3:15, purposely within earshot of Adam and Eve. Discuss how Jesus’ preaching relates to Luther’s descriptive phrase and how both relate to pastoral care.

A3. God Himself moves toward the two now spiritually incapacitated sinners and preaches. He speaks to them and His words do the work (Genesis 3:15–19). The content of what He preaches is of the exclusive way in which He would defeat the devil and save Adam and Eve and all their offspring, through one male Seed. This text is the paradigm for proper preaching content, that is, the Gospel. The Gospel is the “first and chief article” of all of Holy Scripture. The indulgence preachers were violating God’s preaching and, therefore, undermining and distorting God’s exclusive way of saving sinners. Anything added to Christ dilutes and distorts the Gospel (see Galatians 1:6–9).

As to seeing Jesus as the preincarnate God operative in the Old Testament in a temporary visible form, Luther writes: “Likewise, it is He who gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. . . . Yes, Jesus of Nazareth, who died for us on the cross, is the God who says in the First Commandment, ‘I am the Lord your God.’ How the Jews and Mohammed would rant if they heard that” (*Luther’s Works* 15:313–14). See also Jude 5; see as well Horace Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), pages 64–68.

Consider in the discussion Dr. Francis Pieper’s words as he lectured to the students at Concordia Seminary in 1891:

Preaching must have this content: God forgives sins through grace for the sake of Christ, His Son. Justification and salvation do not rest wholly nor by a half nor by a thousandth part on man’s works and worthiness. In other words, God is rightly glorified alone through preaching the doctrine of justification. If you rightly preach the doctrine of justification, then you will be serving God truly to His glory, (O. Marc Tangner, trans., *The Church and Her Treasure: Lectures on Justification and the True Visible Church* [St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2007], p. 17).

Q4. Consider the Synod's Reformation celebration theme. Why is it *still* all about Jesus?

A4. It's still all about Jesus because He is the Father's exclusive way to save all of humanity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all witness to the Son. The Reformation is not about Luther; he himself did not want the church to be named Lutheran.

So the entire Holy Trinity—God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—directs all people to Christ, as to the Book of Life, in whom they should seek the Father's eternal election. For this has been decided by the Father from eternity: whom He would save He would also save through Christ. (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article XI, paragraph 66)

In Synod's Reformation 2017 logo, the crucified Jesus is placed in the center of Luther's rose—which symbolizes joy and comfort—and on top of a heart. Luther was asked in a letter, dated July 8, 1530, as to whether his seal (his rose) had turned out correctly, rightly interpreting his theology. He comments: "There is to be first a cross, black [and placed] in a heart, which should be of its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. For if one believes from the heart he will be justified" (*Luther's Works* 49:358).

Q5. Your neighbor asks: "You mentioned your church is celebrating a reformation. What is that all about?" How would you respond?

A5. Considering the Synod's logo, theme, and Luther's words about his own seal, what would be a simple way to respond?

REFLECTION

On February 15, 1546, three days before his death, Luther preached in his last sermon of hearing Jesus, Jesus only; his text is Matthew 11:25–30:

If you want to teach Christ to me, I shall gladly listen to you, otherwise not, even if you were an angel from heaven, as St. Paul says in Gal. 1[:8]. "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." (*Luther's Works* 51:391).

Quite amazing is the fact that Luther is preaching the sweet Gospel even in the throes of weakness and near death! Weakness and death have a way of clearing out all the clutter of the fabricated idols to which one clings: it's only Christ, Christ only. And this is why the Reformation is still all about Jesus. You may even point out Paul's wonderful words in 1 Corinthians 15:1–2, where he emphasizes the Gospel that was preached to the Corinthians. That very same Gospel not only causes them to stand (perfect tense, meaning that they stand ongoing) but also causes the Corinthian Christians to be saved continually (passive voice and present tense)! Faith continually needs the Gospel in order to enliven the Christian. It really is still all about Jesus, in our preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.

CLOSING

Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above, that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in the steadfast faith we may serve You and, in the confession of Your name, abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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## FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Luther, Martin. *A Simple Way to Pray*. Translated by Matthew C. Harrison. St. Louis: Concordia, 2012.

Aland, Kurt, ed. *Martin Luther's 95 Theses*. Saint Louis: Concordia, 1967.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# REFORMATION 2017 It's *Still* All About Jesus

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