

Reformation 2024
Five-Session Bible Study



**The Heart of the
Reformation: Grace, Faith,
and Our Call to Reform
Today**



Kaufman Resource Center
Northeastern Ohio Synod

Introduction

The Reformation, sparked by Martin Luther over 500 years ago, was a pivotal moment in Christian history, reshaping the Church's understanding of faith, grace, and the role of Scripture. Luther's bold challenge to the status quo brought forth key principles—justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the authority of Scripture—that remain central to the Lutheran tradition and continue to inspire transformation in both the Church and society.

However, the Reformation is not simply a historical event confined to the past. It was the beginning of an ongoing process of renewal, a reminder that the Church is “always reforming” (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). Today, as we navigate a rapidly changing world, we are called to reflect on how these Reformation ideals can guide us in responding to contemporary challenges—whether through addressing social injustices, advocating for inclusivity, or caring for God's creation.

This resource invites you to explore the theological heart of the Reformation while engaging in meaningful conversations about what reformation looks like today. Through study of Scripture, reflection on core Reformation beliefs, and discussions on how these principles call us to action in the present, you will discover how God's grace continues to shape our faith and mission. As we honor our Lutheran heritage, we also embrace the call to live out this legacy by working for justice, inclusion, and renewal in our communities and the world.

All scripture passages are from the NRSVue Bible, but participants are welcome to follow along with the Bible of their choice.*

**The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue) Bible is a result of dedicated efforts by a diverse committee of scholars who aimed to incorporate the latest advancements in biblical scholarship. This updated edition adheres to the tradition of revising the translation based on new discoveries in ancient manuscripts and developments in biblical languages. The NRSVue seeks to balance fidelity to the original texts with clarity, readability, and inclusivity in language, making it a valuable resource for both personal study and academic research.*

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Session 1: Justification by Faith – Grace as Gift and Challenge

The heart of the Reformation lies in Martin Luther's transformative understanding of justification by faith alone. This radical shift reoriented Christian life from the pursuit of earning salvation through good works to the acceptance of God's grace as a free and unearned gift. Luther emphasized that salvation is not something we achieve but rather something we receive through faith, which liberates us from striving for God's favor and instead calls us to live in the assurance of His unconditional love. This session explores how the doctrine of justification by faith shapes our understanding of grace and challenges us to extend that same grace to others, particularly those who may feel marginalized or unworthy.

Romans 3:19-28

19 Now we know that, whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. **20** For no human will be justified before him by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Righteousness through Faith

21 But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, **22** the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, **23** since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; **24** they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; **26** it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. Through what kind of law? That of works? No, rather through the law of faith. **28** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Reflect Upon

- What does it mean to live out faith knowing that we are justified by God's grace alone?
- How can the assurance of God's grace empower us to extend grace to others, particularly those marginalized in society?
- In what ways might we still be tempted to "earn" God's favor today, whether through church involvement, good works, or moral behavior?

Consider writing a "Grace Testimony" where you reflect on how your understanding of grace has impacted your faith journey. Share your testimony with the group as a way to celebrate the transformative power of God's grace in your life.

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Session 2: The Priesthood of All Believers

– Empowering Everyone for Ministry

The Reformation introduced a powerful shift in how we understand the role of believers within the Church, emphasizing the *priesthood of all believers*. This concept breaks down the traditional hierarchy of clergy and laity, affirming that all baptized Christians are called to ministry and service, not just ordained leaders. Luther's belief in this principle invited every believer to actively participate in God's work in the world, using their unique gifts to serve others. In this session, we will explore how the priesthood of all believers empowers us to take an active role in ministry today and consider ways we can uplift and support each other in our shared calling to serve.

1 Peter 2:9-10

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, [a] in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

*10 Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.*

Reflect Upon

- How do you live out your calling as part of the *priesthood of all believers* in your daily life, at work, or in your community?
- Are there barriers within the Church today that prevent all believers from fully using their gifts? How might these be addressed?
- How can the church empower lay members to take leadership roles in faith formation, outreach, and service?

As a group, identify an area in your congregation or community where lay leadership could be more fully embraced and empowered. Brainstorm practical steps you can take together to support and encourage lay members in using their gifts for ministry and service.

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Session 3: The Authority of Scripture – Grounded in God’s Word

At the heart of the Reformation was the principle of *sola scriptura*—the belief that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority for faith and life. Martin Luther’s insistence on grounding the Christian faith in the Bible challenged the reliance on church traditions or hierarchical structures, encouraging believers to engage directly with God’s Word. Scripture, as inspired by God, provides guidance, instruction, and wisdom for living a faithful life. This session focuses on the importance of grounding ourselves in Scripture today and how we can allow it to shape our faith, our decisions, and our understanding of the world around us.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

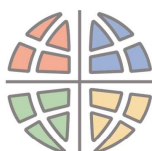
16 All scripture is inspired by God and is[a] useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Reflect Upon

- What does it mean for you to rely on Scripture as the ultimate authority in your faith and life?
- How does Scripture continue to speak to us in fresh ways, particularly as we face modern-day challenges and issues?
- Are there parts of Scripture that you find difficult to reconcile with today’s context? How can we engage with these passages faithfully?

Commit to a practice of engaging Scripture more deeply in your daily life. Try a new method, such as Lectio Divina or a daily devotional, and reflect on how God’s Word speaks to you in your current life circumstances. Share with the group how Scripture has shaped or challenged your faith during this time.

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Session 4: Reformation 2.0 – What Needs Reforming in the Church Today?

The Reformation was not just a historical event—it was the beginning of an ongoing process of renewal within the Church. Luther's reforms addressed the spiritual and societal challenges of his time, but the work of reform is never finished. Today, we are called to reflect on the areas in our Church and society that need transformation. Issues like racial justice, gender equity, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship challenge us to continue the work of reformation. In this session, we will explore how the Church can be a leading voice for change, seeking God's justice, mercy, and humility in our world today.

Micah 6:6-8

What God Requires

6 *“With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Reflect Upon

- What aspects of the Church or society today do you think are in need of reformation?
- How can the Church more fully embody God's call to justice, inclusion, and care for creation?
- What steps can we take as individuals or as a congregation to address these issues and contribute to meaningful change?

As a group, choose one area that you believe the Church needs to address more directly (e.g., social justice, environmental care, inclusivity). Develop a practical plan to raise awareness or take action, such as organizing a community event, starting a discussion series, or participating in advocacy efforts related to the chosen issue.

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Session 5: Living Reformation – Grace in Action

The Reformation was not just a historical event—it was the beginning of an ongoing process of renewal within the Church. Luther's reforms addressed the spiritual and societal challenges of his time, but the work of reform is never finished. Today, we are called to reflect on the areas in our Church and society that need transformation. Issues like racial justice, gender equity, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship challenge us to continue the work of reformation. In this session, we will explore how the Church can be a leading voice for change, seeking God's justice, mercy, and humility in our world today.

James 2:14-17

Faith without Works Is Dead

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Reflect Upon

- How does God's grace inspire and empower you to take action in your daily life?
- In what ways can we as a congregation or community embody "grace in action" through service, justice, and love?
- How do you balance faith and action, ensuring that your work in the world is a response to grace, not an attempt to earn it?

Write a personal or collective "Reformation Manifesto" where you outline how you feel called to live out your faith through action. Identify specific ways you or your congregation can put grace into action in your community, whether through outreach, advocacy, or service. Share these manifestos with the group and use them as inspiration for ongoing efforts to live out God's grace.

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Supplemental Materials

To enrich your discussions further, consider incorporating ELCA Social Statements for contemporary perspectives on Reformation work. You can also explore books, podcasts, videos, and sermons that align with the teachings of Martin Luther, the Reformation, and the role of the Church in society today.

May the spirit of the Reformation inspire you to live boldly in faith, seeking justice, peace, and renewal. May God's grace empower you to be a light in the world, transforming hearts and communities in His love.

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