

Confirmation 2020-21
Session 8 – Luther and the Reformation
November 1, 2020

Background Information

Martin Luther was a man who lived in Germany more than five hundred years ago. He was a friar, meaning that he was a member of a religious order of men, and he lived in a monastery. Luther's vocation was that he was a priest and professor of Bible and theology at the University of Wittenberg. In Luther's day, the only denomination that existed in western Europe was the Roman Catholic Church, and his preaching and teaching led to conflict that we know of today as the Reformation which earned him excommunication. Excommunication meant that he was kicked out of the church catholic and sentenced to death. And they would have killed him as a heretic had they caught him, but he was kidnapped and taken back to Germany.

At many key moments in Luther's life, he came up against the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, but the central conflict came about when he nailed his "95 Theses" to a church door on October 31, 1517. Luther stated in these theses that there was no biblical basis for believing that the church dispensed grace, that God's salvation was, instead a free gift given through Christ and grasped only by faith. His writing against the practice of indulgences spread like wildfire throughout Europe. His movement is called the Reformation (and that is why we celebrate Reformation Sunday right around Halloween).

Luther's teaching and preaching always begins with Christ, and what his death and resurrection mean for us:

- We can't help ourselves and need a savior.
- God comes to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus.
- Christ's death on the cross alone frees us from sin.
- The resurrection is God's promise of eternal grace, mercy, and love.

Luther spent the rest of his life teaching, preaching, and working to understand how to lead the churches that were becoming “Lutheran” – committing themselves to his theology of grace.

What you need to know

Luther began by making specific arguments about his particular time in history. He was appalled by the abusive practices that had taken hold of the Roman Catholic Church. His concerns were informed by his personal experience of guilt, and by the philosophies and theologies he had been taught. Luther brought himself, all that he had learned, his friends and family, and God into his deep exploration of what the Gospel truly means. It’s based in a certain time, but speaks to us too.

For Luther, the words of the Bible can be read in two ways: as Law and Gospel. The Law serves two purposes: First, it creates civil laws and order (like the commandment against murder). Second, the Law reveals how far short we fall from the glory of God (Like the commandment against idolatry – anytime we put our trust in anything but God, we’ve missed the mark). This is where the Gospel breaks in: the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, who gives us what we can’t provide on our own. It’s not about what we do or don’t do, but about what God has done for us in Christ. This is where we get the classic Lutheran phrase taken from Galatians 2: “We are justified by faith in Christ Jesus apart from the works of the law.”

Luther’s theology is centered in paradox. Grace is a gift we don’t deserve – a mystery in itself – but Luther takes it even further. Our response to that gift is good works. While good works are not necessary to “earn” our salvation, he did argue that they would flow freely from a believing heart. And yet we are still bound by our sinfulness; we never “get better” at being human. Each day is a new beginning. This is why we are all, as Luther said, *simul justus et peccator* – simultaneously saint and sinner.

Into the Story

Luther lived in a time that was perfect for him. The printing press had been invented in Germany in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg and this invention started the printing revolution. By the time Luther rose to prominence in the early 1500's he was able to print and disseminate his writings relatively quickly and inexpensively. However, his study of scripture and theology led him to write and publish his 95 thesis, his grievances with the Roman Catholic Church. This led to him being put on trial as a heretic. Had he not been kidnapped by his own lord and sent into exile, the Pope would have had him put to death as a heretic. However, because of his stubborn tenacity and his brilliant intellect, he survived and his writings became even more popular and his movement to reform the church swept the known Christian world.

Into the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

There is a lot of good stuff on Luther in the LSB beginning on page 1521. Skim through it, and read whatever strikes your interest. There is an interesting Chronology of Luther's life on page 1529.

Into Luther's Small Catechism (2018 500 Years of Reformation edition)

Essay Questions

Answer each of the following questions using about 100-150 of your own words.

1 "Works" is an important concept within Lutheran theology. Works are the good things we do. Before Luther and the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that one had to perform enough good works to earn one's place in heaven. But in his study of scripture, Luther discovered that that is not true at all. Turn to Ephesians 2:8-10 and read it.

- According to Paul, is our salvation the result of doing good works, or is it something else?
- What then is the purpose of good works.

- Should good works be avoided?
- Is this your experience of the world – in your home, your school, your associations?

2 In Luther's day there were two expressions of the Christian faith; the Roman Catholic Church centered in the papacy in Rome, and the Eastern Orthodox Church center in the patriarchy in Constantinople. Basically, they were both Christian denominations. After Luther's Reformation, people felt liberated to interpret and live out their faiths as they saw fit (more or less). Read 1 Corinthians 11-13. Today it is easy to name the separations in the Body of Christ – different denominations and so on.

- Where do you see the various expressions of Christianity coming together?
- What continues to hold us apart?

3 There are 2.2 billion Christians in the world, and about 70 million of them are Lutheran – but,

- What does it mean to be Lutheran?
- Are Lutherans followers of Jesus, or Martin Luther, or both?
- Do you think that it is confusing to have your church named after a mere mortal?

4 It's easy to conclude that the Reformation is about tearing down the Roman Catholic Church. It's not. Luther and the other reformers did not intend to start something new. They wanted to fix the church they loved and “reform” it into something more closely expressed in scripture.

- That didn't happen, or did it?
- Was the Reformation a good thing or a bad thing?
- Is the resultant denominationalism a good thing or a bad thing?
- How do you think Luther would answer that question?

5 In the last several years, Lutherans of the ELCA have been trying to work out our differences with the Roman Catholic Church. Interestingly

enough, Lutherans of various branches of Lutheranism don't even get along with each other.

- Do you have any hope for unity? And that just takes into account ELCA Lutherans and the RCC.
- What effect will that have with the many denominations that exist?
- Do you think unity is necessary or important?

6. You probably have friends that are Catholic or another protestant tradition.

- If Luther was right about grace and sin and salvation, does that mean non-Lutherans are wrong?
- If you have gone to church with a non-Lutheran friend, tell me about it. What was different? What was the same?

Email your answers back to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, November 8.