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(page 16)

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## Study guide:

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# Then & now

## *Women and the Reformation*

By Robert C. Blezard

Against the backdrop of historical events, including the Reformation, the struggle for women's rights and equality has endured. There has been notable recent progress in developing nations, but violence, injustice and oppression still mar the lives of many of the world's women. As Christians, we can and should speak up.

### Exercise 1: Gospel women

In a time and culture that set strict barriers between the sexes and tended to see women as inferior to men, Jesus had important interactions and friendships with many females, including Mary Magdalene; Mary of Bethany; Martha, the Syrophenician; the woman at the well; the woman who anoints him; and the woman caught in adultery. In these encounters, Jesus often crossed boundaries to engage, defend and affirm women. Discuss:

- Which of these encounters or friendships has the most meaning for you? Why?
- How is Jesus' behavior different from how women have been treated across history (or now in much of the world)?
- What does Jesus' behavior reveal about God's regard for women?

### Exercise 2: Paul and women

In his letters, Paul commends many women, including Priscilla, Julia, Phoebe (whom he calls a deacon), Chloe and Junia (whom he calls an apostle). Paul also says that in Christ there is no male or female (Galatians 3:28). What do these things imply about Paul's opinion on the status of women? About the role of women in the earliest church?

But Paul also advises women to be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34) and to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24). What could explain this tension about the role of women? If the earliest church introduced an elevated view of women that was counter to culture, which view has dominated in Christianity for much of the last two millennia? Why?

### Exercise 3: Modern women

Compared to when our grandmothers were girls, how are things different for women? What has changed in such areas as social status, opportunity, independence, authority, vocation, self-directedness, economics and education?



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*continued*

What's been the biggest change? What accounts for these changes? How has our society benefited as a result?

### Exercise 4: Women voters

In 1920 the 19th Amendment guaranteed the right to vote for all women in the U.S. Across the globe, complete women's suffrage was mostly a 20th-century phenomenon. Consider that South Africa enfranchised all women (not just white) in 1994. Other dates are: Australia, 1902; Germany, 1918; United Kingdom, 1928; Italy, 1945; China, 1947; India, 1947; Switzerland, 1971. What does it mean for a culture when women can fully vote? What does it mean for women? Why did it take until the 20th century for women's suffrage to go global?

### Exercise 5: Women pastors

Women have always served an important role in church and faith but only very recently as pastors. Women's ordination is still controversial, even among many Protestants. The ELCA began ordaining women in 1970, but the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, among other Lutheran denominations, do not. Today women make up about a quarter of all ELCA pastors, and in 2013 Elizabeth A. Eaton was elected as the first woman to hold the ELCA's highest office, presiding bishop.

- What does it say about the ELCA that women hold pastoral office and a woman has the highest office in the denomination?
- What strengths and gifts do women bring to ordained ministry?
- Why are the voices of women leaders important?
- Why are women pastors (and bishops and lay rostered leaders) important role models for young men and women?
- Half of all current ELCA seminarians are women, which means that over time the percentage of women clergy (now at 25 percent) will only rise. What changes can you envision will take place in the church as numbers of women clergy grow and equal male clergy?

### Exercise 6: Clerical equality

- Given the positive experience of women clergy in the ELCA and other denominations, what would you say to a Christian who opposed female leadership in the church as a matter of doctrine?
- If that Christian quoted Scripture (see Exercise 2) to justify that stand, how would you respond?
- How is this an issue of justice?
- As far as women have come in the ELCA and other Protestant denomina-



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### *continued*

tions, how far do they yet have to go?

- How can we help them get there?

#### **Exercise 7: Equal pay**

Women earned about 40 percent less than men in 1963, when the federal Equal Pay Act was passed. More than 50 years later they still earn 22 percent less, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Discuss:

- Is this adequate progress? Why or why not?
- For what reasons should our daughters' earning power be the same as our sons'?
- Why do you think the wage gap persists?
- What do you think and how do you feel to learn that the U.S. ranks 65th of 142 nations in the gender pay gap?
- Should it have been higher or lower, and why?
- What can we do about it?

#### **Exercise 8: Women in poverty**

What do you think and feel when you read these statistics: The U.S. rate of poverty is higher for women (14.5 percent) than for men (11 percent), according to the National Women's Law Center. The poverty rate is particularly high among women of color: African-American (25.3 percent), Latina (23.1 percent) and Native American (26.8 percent).

Among families with children, the poverty rate is highest for families headed by women (39.6 percent), compared to families headed by men (19.7 percent) or married couples (7.6 percent). Among families headed by women of color the rates are: 43.6 percent for African-American, 46.5 percent for Latina and 52.8 percent for Native American.

Acknowledging the prevalence of poverty among women and children, the 1999 ELCA social statement titled "Economic life" observes: "Systemic racism and sexism continue to be evident in the incidence of poverty." It calls on Lutherans to work to fight poverty—as well as sexism and racism through specific actions. Looking at the list of actions, which can you and your congregation get behind?

#### **Exercise 9: Women in power**

As chancellor, Angela Merkel holds the highest office in Germany, but women in such roles are rare, especially in the U.S. What do the following statistics reveal: we have never had a female president or vice president; 20 of 100 (20 percent) current U.S. senators are female, as are 84 of 435 (19 percent) U.S. representatives and six of 50 (12 percent) state governors? Worldwide, 22



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*continued*

percent of parliament or congressional representatives are women, according to the U.N. What are the consequences when men dominate in the most powerful political positions? What are the chances that women and women's issues will be given fair and adequate treatment? Why would it be important to have a balance of men and women?

### Exercise 10: Women in the world

Though statistics for the U.S. may seem discouraging, women in the developed world are far better off than many in the world whose governments and cultures tolerate rape and violence against women, marital cruelty, legal and political discrimination, economic oppression, neglect and lack of education or occupational opportunity.

"Violence against women is rooted in a global culture that discriminates against women and denies them equal rights with men," according to Amnesty International. "This global culture of discrimination against women denies women their fundamental human rights and legitimizes the violent appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends."

Shouldn't women's rights just be human rights?

## Women and the Reformation:

# Then & NOW

By Kathryn A. Kleinhans

How did—and does—the Reformation affect the lives of women? If this relationship was documented on Facebook, the status might be “it’s complicated.”

The Old Testament tells us that both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Paul writes that in Christ distinctions of class and gender no longer matter (Galatians 3:28). Reformer Martin Luther insisted that all Christians, not just some, share by faith in the same spiritual priesthood. Nevertheless, the Reformation had mixed results for women.

At the beginning of the 16th century, women’s life choices were limited. Living as a single, independent woman was simply not acceptable. Most women transitioned from being under the authority of their fathers to that of their husbands and then, if they outlived their spouses, that of their eldest son.

Some women joined convents, but this was often their parents’ choice rather than their own. For example, 12th-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen was the 10th child in her family and her well-to-do parents gave her to the convent as a tithe (10 percent of their assets given to God). Katharina von Bora, Luther’s wife, was sent to a convent at age 5 when her father remarried after her mother’s death.

During the Middle Ages the celibate life of a nun, monk or priest



**Argula von Grumbach** was a noblewoman and advocate for reform based on her study of the Scriptures. Her first publication was a letter in defense of a university student who had been imprisoned for possessing illegal pamphlets promoting Reformation theology.

### The Reformation recognized and celebrated the value of women’s status as wives and mothers.

was seen as a “higher calling” than the married life of ordinary people. The reformers rejected this idea. Instead, they praised both marriage and parenthood as worthy callings for all Christians.

For centuries the church had taught that the primary purposes of marriage were reproduction and providing an acceptable outlet for sexual desire. Reformers like Luther and John Calvin promoted a new understanding of marriage as loving, faithful companionship.

The good news in this is that the

Reformation recognized and celebrated the value of women’s status as wives and mothers. At the same time, by closing convents the reformers eliminated the option that had provided some women the opportunity to receive an education, exercise leadership and live in a supportive community of other women.

Nevertheless, the reformers promoted education for all boys and girls, which was astonishing for the time. Education had been available only for boys of higher social or economic status. The Lutheran emphasis on reading the Scriptures for oneself sparked an emphasis on literacy *for everyone*. Luther encouraged communities to establish and support schools and urged parents to send their children—boys and girls—to school rather than keep them at home to work.

But education for girls was much less extensive than for boys. Girls attended school fewer hours a day than boys and for fewer years, with skills geared toward reading the Bible, managing a household and teaching the faith to their children.

In short, we can see some progress for women in the Reformation of the 16th century, but not as much as we might like. Yet the vision for an educated laity did benefit women. By the second generation of the Reformation, more than 90 percent of pastors’ wives were literate.



Today we could say things are still complicated for women in the U.S. and around the world.

Depending on which statistics you accept, women in the U.S. still earn only two-thirds to three-fourths as much as men for the same work. According to the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report of the Geneva-based World Economic Forum, the U.S. ranks 65th of 142 countries in terms of wage equality. The same report found that girls and women have equal access to education in 25 of 142 countries.

Seventy-seven percent of the church bodies in the Lutheran World Federation ordain women. But women in those countries report that female pastors often don't have equal access to decision-making roles or to higher education opportunities beyond a theological diploma.

Since October 2014, I've led a series of ELCA seminars in Wittenberg, Germany, for women from Lutheran churches in the "global south" (Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia) and the former Eastern bloc. The theme of the seminars is "The Reformation and the Empowerment of Women."

Most of the participants, pastors and laywomen, report gender-based discrimination not only in their countries but also in their churches. Lindie Kanyekanye, a pastor in Zimbabwe, said "a real woman gives birth to boys." If she doesn't, the man is likely to take another wife.

The Malagasy participants agreed: in Madagascar, sons are valued because of their own worth; daughters are valued because of the bride-price they will generate for the family. Nima David from India knows a man who says he has no children—in fact, he has five

LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER WORKSHOP, 1529.



**Scholars today describe** Katharina von Bora, Martin Luther's wife, as a housewife and the manager of a mid-sized business, feeding family, student boarders and frequent guests by purchasing land, raising crops and livestock, and handling all the household finances.

### Katie's Fund

Women of the ELCA chose to name its endowment Katie's Fund. In the spirit of Katharina (Katie) von Bora Luther, the organization receives and manages money to support ministry in three areas: leadership development, global connections and living theology. Katie's Fund is now more than \$1 million.

Learn more at [www.welca.org/katiesfund](http://www.welca.org/katiesfund).

**Fatima Bass Thomas:**

# Contemporary reformer

By Alix Matzke

Nine-year-old Fatima Bass Thomas had a dream. As the oldest of eight children born to peasant farmers in Gambia, she knew her likely future would consist of getting married, doing domestic work and raising children. But even at the age of 9, she dreamed of something more—the opportunity to go to school.

“Going to school was seen as a successful route to a brighter future for everyone,” Bass Thomas said. “School helped me be who I am today to serve my country, church and community, both locally and globally.”

Two years later, after overcoming family challenges, she had her chance.

After completing primary school, Bass Thomas went on to teacher training college and was placed at a school a few hours from her village. It was there that she met her husband, Samuel Thomas, a pastor and fellow Anglican in a country of 95 percent Muslims. Motivated to serve Christ, both left their teaching jobs in 2000 to establish the Evangelical Lutheran Church of The Gambia.

Today the growing church has 2,500 members making up five parishes (regions) and nine congregations. Bass Thomas serves as the sole pastor, while her husband is the church’s bishop.

Through their leadership, the couple has influenced the outreach priorities of the Gambian church, which is committed to helping give children, girls in particular, access to primary schooling. Bass Thomas, the bishop and other leaders believe in the equality of men and women, an idea that might seem radical to others in their country.

As the church grows, women will have an opportunity to be ordained, and “if a woman is not qualified to take a position [within the church], all efforts will be made to educate and help that woman become qualified,” Thomas said.

Last April, Bass Thomas joined others from around the world at the “Lutheran Women at the Crossroads of the Reformation” seminar hosted by the ELCA’s International Women Leaders program.

After returning from Wittenberg, Germany, she convened 54 women, six from each of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in The Gambia’s nine congregations, for a weeklong gathering during which she shared what she had learned from the seminar.

“I pray the Holy Spirit can touch the women of our church to be active like the women of the Reformation,” she said. □

## Author bio:

*Matzke is marketing communications manager for Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA.*



**Fatima Bass Thomas** is sole pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in The Gambia. The church is committed to helping give children, girls in particular, access to primary schooling.

daughters, but to him they don’t count.

## Strong women from the past

How can learning about the Reformation make a difference? It’s useful to consider not only the impact of the Reformation on women’s lives but also the impact of women on the Reformation. Reflecting on these past leaders can help us draw information and inspiration for our lives today. (See page 14.)

We can’t pretend that Luther shared our views about the equality of men and women. His writings show some ambivalence. In his commentaries on Genesis, for example, Luther sometimes describes the subordination of women to men as part of God’s created order. At other times he identifies subordination as the result of sin.

Nevertheless, for his time Luther was remarkably progressive. While he married for practical reasons, he came to love and respect his wife, Katharina, very much. Also known as Katie, she was one of the nuns Luther had helped escape from their convent after they wrote to him ask-

**The ELCA’s International Women Leaders seminars**, titled “Women at the Crossroads of the Reformation,” were funded by gifts to Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA. Forty-six women from the ELCA’s companion churches have participated. Learn more at [www.elca.org/campaign](http://www.elca.org/campaign).



ing for assistance.

Scholars today describe Katie not just as a housewife but as the manager of a midsize business. To feed a household consisting of family, student boarders and frequent guests, she purchased land, raised crops and livestock, made beer and wine, and handled all the household finances.

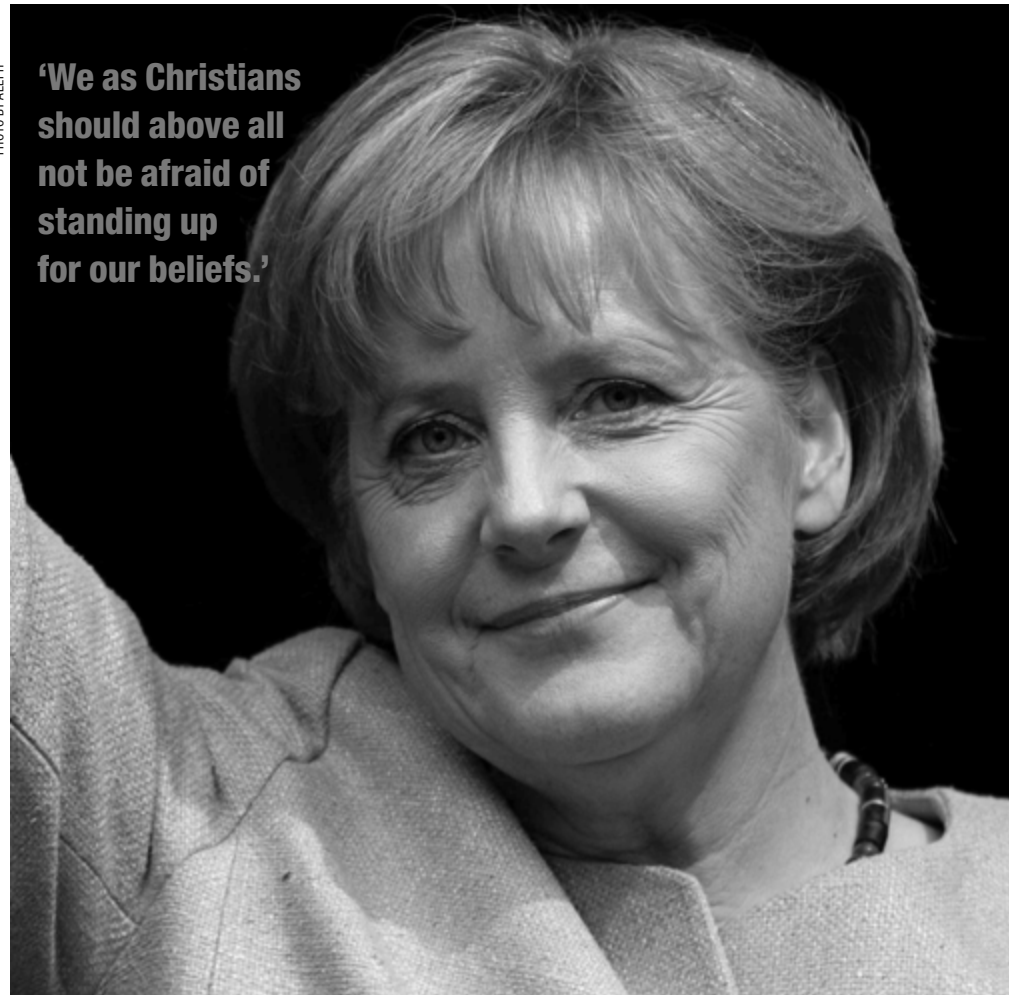
The seminar participants are inspired by Katie's strength and accomplishments, but they don't see her as unique. Julinda Sipayung, a pastor from Indonesia, said, "This is just like the women in our country. When the men don't make enough money to provide for the family, the women go out to work too."

Darwita Purba, a pastor from India, agreed, as do participants from Tanzania and Gambia. Despite traditional beliefs that women belong in the home rather than the workplace, these women's experiences confirm the reality that, in practice, the line between domestic and economic responsibilities is often blurred.

Katie was such a good provider that Luther chose to leave everything to her in his will, a move that was unheard of at a time when it was assumed that a widow needed a guardian to act on her behalf. While the authorities, including Luther's friends, refused to honor his wishes, Luther's desire to make his wife his heir is remarkable.

We can also take inspiration from Katharina Schütz Zell, another 16th-century woman. Even as a child she believed a woman could live a holy Christian life without joining a convent. At first Katharina opted to live as a single woman in her family home. Later she chose to marry her pastor, Matthias Zell, who was one of the first preachers of reform in Strasbourg, a city on the border between Germany and France.

But Schütz Zell wasn't the typical pastor's wife since much of her min-



**German Chancellor Angela Merkel** was raised as a Lutheran pastor's daughter in the former East Germany. Merkel has been ranked by *Forbes* as one of the most powerful women in the world for nine of the last 10 years.

istry took place outside the home. She was incredibly active in social ministry: visiting the sick and imprisoned and arranging for housing and support for hundreds of refugees. For her this wasn't just a personal expression of her faith but a public ministry of the church. Although a laywoman, her husband referred to her as his assistant minister.

Schütz Zell also wrote extensively, even corresponding with Luther. One of her earliest published

**All Christians, including women, had the responsibility to stand up for the truth and defend their neighbors from slander. Keeping silence in the face of injustice, she wrote, wasn't acceptable.**

writings was a defense of the marriage of pastors. Zell's marriage at a time when priests were required to remain celibate had prompted gossip and threatened to undermine the credibility of his preaching. Schütz Zell insisted that she wasn't writing as a wife in defense of her husband but as a Christian in defense of another Christian. All Christians, including women, had the responsibility to stand up for the truth and defend their neighbors from slander. Keeping silence in the face of injustice, she wrote, wasn't acceptable.

By today's standards, Schütz Zell's theology is classified as Reformed rather than Lutheran, but she resisted such labels. To her mind, all Protestants were working together for reform. A shared commitment to the gospel and the authority of the Scriptures was more important to her than doctrinal differences.



She even preached at the funeral of two women whom no Christian pastor in Strasbourg would bury because they supported believers' baptism rather than infant baptism.

Fast forward to 2011, when the magazine of the Women of the ELCA changed its name from *Lutheran Woman Today* to *Gather*. Why? The organization's leadership learned that other Christian women were also reading and benefiting from the magazine, especially those in churches that are full communion partners of the ELCA and don't have women's magazines of their own. *Gather*, together with its tagline "For faith and action," would have pleased Schütz Zell.

But pastors' wives weren't the only women who contributed to the Reformation. Argula von Grumbach was a strong advocate for reform based on her study of the Scriptures. Astonishingly for the time, her parents had given von Grumbach her own copy of the Bible when she was 10. Her first publication was a letter in defense of a university student who had been imprisoned for possessing illegal pamphlets promoting Reformation theology.



**None of them thought of herself as heroic. Each was simply living out her faith as she felt called to do, within her own circumstances.**

A woman from a noble family, von Grumbach attended several imperial assemblies at which the cause of reformation was discussed. She was a prominent enough figure that when Luther mentioned her in letters to other reformers, he used only her first name. Unlike the two Katharinas, von Grumbach didn't have a supportive husband. In fact, he lost his position as a government official because he couldn't keep his wife quiet. But his disapproval of her activities didn't stop her.

We can praise women like these as exceptional figures, but none of them thought of herself as heroic. Each was simply living out her faith as she felt called to do, within her own circumstances.

### **Strong leaders in the present**

How does this legacy of strong women of the Reformation live itself out today? Faith continues to empower women leaders around the world.

Paulina Hlawiczka, a pastor who serves two congregations of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, said in her native Poland, Katie Luther is used as an example against women's ordination. "Why don't you marry a pastor?" she was told. Convinced that God was calling her to be a pastor rather than to marry one, Hlawiczka needed to leave Poland to be ordained. Today she prays and works for change in her home country and church.

German Chancellor Angela

**Paulina Hlawiczka** is pastor of two congregations of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain, but works for reform in her home country, Poland, where women can't be ordained.



**Julinda Sipayung** is a pastor from Indonesia who attended the ELCA's International Women Leaders seminars.

Merkel, whom *Forbes* has ranked the most powerful woman in the world for nine of the last 10 years, is also a Lutheran. She was raised as a pastor's daughter in the former East Germany, where being a Christian typically had educational and political disadvantages. As a teen she chose to be confirmed despite the social pressure in East Germany to go through the alternative communist "youth dedication" rite instead.

Merkel doesn't speak much about her faith in public, but it clearly motivates her. In response to questions from a theology student on a blog in November 2012, she wrote: "I am a member of the Evangelical Church. I believe in God, and religion is also my constant companion and has been for the whole of my life."

Merkel described belief as a framework for her life and how she sees the world. "We as Christians should above all not be afraid of standing up for our beliefs," she said.

In a very different part of the world, Liberian Lutheran Leymah Gbowee was one of three women awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 "for their nonviolent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work."

In 2003, Gbowee organized a group of Christian women—and then built a coalition with Muslim

**Nobel laureate and peace activist** Leymah Gbowee is a member of the Lutheran Church in Liberia and participated in the ELCA's International Leaders program, completing a master's degree in 2007.

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women—to protest against Liberia's corrupt government and end its long civil war. Gbowee's faith motivated her courageous action, she told the Women of the ELCA Triennial Convention in 2011, and that same faith should motivate all of us to rise up, get out of our comfort zones and work for justice in God's world. "The God we serve is not a God of halfway [but] a God of wholeness," she said, and "[God] who called you will equip you."

Back in Wittenberg, Kanyekanye, the pastor from Zimbabwe, echoed this sentiment: "We have a voice that is more powerful than we can imagine."

Some of the participants in the women's seminars were not raised Lutheran or even Christian. They became Lutheran in response to the good news that they encountered in word and action through the global Lutheran church. These women are living testimony that the gospel continues to create faith and transform lives even 500 years after the beginning of the Reformation.

The powerful message of God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ is not "old news." It is a life-giving treasure that we have received and are called to share. As ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton reminds us: "We are church, we are Lutheran, we are church together, and we are church for the sake of the world."

That "we" is all of us—women and men, clergy and lay, young and old. Maybe it's not so complicated after all. □

**'We are church, we are Lutheran, we are church together, and we are church for the sake of the world.'**

**'The God we serve is ... a God of wholeness. [God] who called you will equip you.'**



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