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Our New Year's resolutions reformatations
(page 14)

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Study guide

Our New Year's resolutions reformatations

By Robert C. Blezard

We stand at the threshold of another year—365 breathtakingly wonderful days in which to begin new projects, complete old ones, improve ourselves and live our lives differently. But as we set new goals, we might pray and discern that they be directed by our faith and our healthy longing to experience more fully the love, mercy, forgiveness and freedom of Jesus Christ. What are your resolutions? How can you make them into reformatations?

Exercise 1: *Incurvatus in se*

Drawing from the work of Augustine and his study of Scripture, Martin Luther believed that our sinful human condition could be described in the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se*—curved inward on ourselves. Our natural tendency is to be self-interested, self-centered, self-glorifying, living to meet our own needs, wants and desires.

Though *incurvatus in se* is most easily understood in the sins of pride and selfishness, it can also be expressed in our shame, self-doubt and self-hatred—attitudes that arise when we are curved in on ourselves so much that we don't allow God's love and mercy to free us. Discuss the following characteristics and how they can keep us trapped:

- **Guilt.** How do you define guilt? How does guilt work in our lives? How much guilt is “healthy” and why? When is guilt unhealthy? How does unhealthy guilt poison our lives? How much of our actions and attitudes are shaped by the guilt we feel? Can you share? Is our guilt more powerful than God's ability to forgive us? If God forgives us, why do we sometimes still feel guilty? If we can't or won't forgive ourselves, isn't that essentially making ourselves more important than God?

What “reformatations” can you make that would help better to open you to the mercy and forgiveness of God that can free you from guilt?

- **Shame.** It's been said we live in a shaming culture. As the wisecrack goes, in North America “you are never quite young enough, rich enough or thin enough.” Similarly, many people fall into the trap of “keeping up with the Joneses.” In what ways do these old lines ring true for our society? Can you share about a time when you have seen or experienced this?



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Study guide: **Our New Year's resolutions reformations** *continued*

How does shame work to motivate us to strive to do more and be more? In what ways, overt and subtle, does our consumer culture plant seeds of disquiet and dissatisfaction with all that we are and all that we have? What are some of the unhealthy ways we respond to those seeds as they grow?

What "reformations" can you make that would give you a better sense of God's sufficiency and providence, to free you from self-shame?

- **Self-hatred, or self-dislike.** Perhaps because of guilt and shame and countless other pressures, many people suffer from self-hatred or self-dislike, which can lead to, on one end of the spectrum, low self-esteem and self-doubt, and on the other end of the spectrum self-destructive behaviors such as alcoholism, violence, crime, drug addiction, cutting, sexual promiscuity, unhealthy relationships and bad work habits.

Why is self-hatred or self-dislike such a problem? In what ways have you seen self-dislike at work in the lives of people you know? In our world? Yet the central message of Christianity is that God loves us, cherishes us, wants us to live with joy and peace. What Bible passages would support that central message? Looking at a typical Sunday worship service, how many ways is that message of God's love expressed and reinforced? Discuss the ways that our baptism testifies to God's love for us.

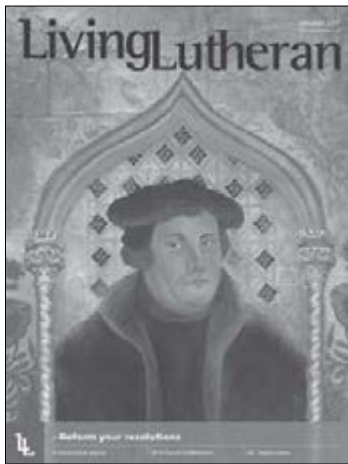
When we hate or dislike ourselves, aren't we saying that our emotions and opinions of ourselves are more powerful than God's emotions and opinions about us?

What New Year "reformations" can we make that would support us in loving ourselves and opening us up to God's almighty love?

Exercise 2: *Excurvatus ex se*

If the sinful nature of humanity can be characterized by *incurvatus in se*, curved in on ourselves, then a life of discipleship can be characterized by the opposite—*excurvatus ex se*, a life curved away from ourselves and toward God and the world. How is that consistent with the church's mission and vision? What might such a life look like? What would it mean for us as disciples? How is such a life more open to the possibilities and opportunities for service, evangelism and relationship?

- When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment, he responded with an interrelated pair: Love God with all we have, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Read Mark 12:28-33 and discuss how Jesus' response fits into a life of *excurvatus ex se*—turned away from self and toward others. In what ways would this open us up to the love, mercy and forgiveness of God, as well as to opportunities for right relationship with your neighbors? Discuss how this is the life that God



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Study guide: **Our New Year's resolutions reformations** *continued*

wants us to live. What other Bible verses support this understanding?

- What New Year's "reformations" would support you in a life of *excurvatus ex se*?

Exercise 3: Your resolutions

- Do you make New Year's resolutions? If so, why? If not, why not?
- For those who make New Year's resolutions, list the ones you made last year. Were they realistic? How well did you fulfill them? Are you pleased or displeased with your experience? What did you learn?
- Looking back, how might you have rephrased your "resolutions" to be "reformations"? What difference might it have made in your fulfillment and experience of them?
- **For action:** Make some New Year's "reformations" for 2017. As you are comfortable doing so, share them with other members of the study group. Covenant with one another to offer support and encouragement as 2017 unfolds—perhaps establishing pairs of accountability partners. Check in periodically with one another to see how you are doing.

Exercise 4: Reforming faith

- Do you want to have a living faith and a closer relationship with God? If a deeper faith and better walk with God seems hard or impossible, is the problem with us or with God? How do we, despite our best intentions, sabotage our efforts to have deeper faith? What attitudes or predispositions get in the way of our faith life?
- The old phrase "Let go and let God" has been cited as a formula for deepening faith. What wisdom do you find in it? How would it work in your life?
- Given the lessons of the article in *Living Lutheran*, formulate some New Year's reformations that might help you experience God's mercy and love more fully.

Our New Year's ~~resolutions~~ reformatations

Living Lutheran in 2017

Text by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni
Illustrations by Melanie Hall

Wherever January finds us—among city lights, frozen fields or sun-drenched palm trees—it brings the promise of a new year. With eager anticipation or weary relief, we turn the page on our calendars and look ahead to the future yet to be written. Many of us also make New Year's resolutions, setting out our hopes and plans for what might be different from and better than the past. Yet the past stays with us and, if we pay attention, we may find that our history has insights that still matter for our lives.

This year Christians worldwide will observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. To mark the anniversary, ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton has encouraged congregations and individuals to study Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Luther intended this short volume, containing his explanations of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the sacraments, along with daily prayers and Bible verses, to be used by ordinary people in churches and households.

"The catechism is built on the experience of a God who loves us," said Kirsi Stjerna, professor of Lutheran history and theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif. She said that experience was, first and foremost, Luther's own: "Luther was so burdened ... he felt like an utter failure. Then he read the word and felt free from the burdens of his conscience. He was able to see himself in a new light as someone who is free, and he wanted to share it."

Luther described the burden of sin as being *incurvatus in se* (curved in on the self). That inward curve can be marked by pride and selfishness, but Luther found that sin is also manifested in the ways we focus on ourselves with anxiety or shame. We know "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), but often we don't stop there: we pile on the ways we have fallen short of our expectations and those of others. Whether we curve in on ourselves in self-righteousness or self-deprecation, the more inward our focus, the more isolated we become.

Even our well-meaning New Year's resolutions can contribute to the inward curve. Commitments to lose weight, save more money or try to make the world a better place are not, in and of themselves, unhealthy choices. But it's worth asking: Why do we make resolutions? Are *we* the problem we are trying to resolve? Resolutions focused on making ourselves better often arise from the deep fear that we aren't good enough. This fear is reinforced by a commercial culture that profits from our feelings of inadequacy, promising that freedom lies in the right diet, the right look, the right product.

Anyone who has ever made New Year's resolutions knows that these often fail. Even when they succeed, our best efforts can't free us from the trap of *incurvatus in se*. We can't free ourselves—but then again, we don't need to. This is what God does for us through Jesus Christ.

For Luther, this was the gospel and the good news was more than just news. As Timothy Wengert, emeritus professor of Reformation history at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, remarked, "The gospel is not just information, but an experience of God's mercy."

The catechism, then, offers not a new "to-do" list but an experience, a new posture of freedom. In Christ, God gently reaches into our hearts to liberate us from self-focused anxiety and turns us outward so we may recognize how we are called and gifted to serve our neighbors. "What are you free for?" Stjerna asked. "You're never free for your own sake, but for others."

In that spirit of freedom, this article explores how insights from Luther's Small Catechism might "reform" some common resolutions, creating "New Year's reformatations" for living Lutheran in 2017.

~~Lose weight~~ Lose shame

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties (Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed).

“If I really believe I am God’s beloved creation, then what is the mirror God holds up to me? There’s no shame in that mirror”



"I wrote the word *acceptance* on my hand yesterday," said Elyssa Salinas. A graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Salinas is now pursuing a doctorate, studying connections between body image and Luther's theology of creation. Like Luther, her theological interests are intertwined with personal experience. "I've had my own body issues this year and it's been very difficult," Salinas admitted.

Weight loss often tops the list of goals for the new year—and the root of this resolution is often not just health but feelings of shame about our bodies. "This voice of pain says, 'You're not enough,'" she said. "[Losing weight becomes] a constant ladder, these constant stairs you're never going to get up."

Losing shame, Salinas finds, begins when we remember that we were made by God. "You weren't just created; you were created with purpose," she said. "It is so profound to consider your body as something purposefully made—as art."

This liberating word allows Salinas to accept her body "as it is today," to share her struggles with others who love her and to continue a journey focused on health, not weight.

"If I really believe I am God's beloved creation, then what is the mirror God holds up to me? There's no shame in that mirror," she said.

~~Meet your #goals~~ Meet your grace

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. What does this mean? We are to fear and love God, so that we do not try to trick our neighbors out of their inheritance or property or try to get it for ourselves ... but instead be of help and service to them in keeping what is theirs" (Luther's explanation of the Ten Commandments).

The hashtag "#goals" is often used in social media to comment on someone else's accomplishments or possessions. Though mainly employed as a compliment, this practice also reflects the human temptation to compare our lives to others. When our "#goal" is someone else's life, we're coveting—a practice that can lead to envy, resentment and isolation.

Grace offers the antidote, freeing us from coveting others. Vitor Westhelle, professor of systematic theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, said God's grace enables "the capability of a person just to be herself, [to say] 'This is what I am; this is good enough.'"

Whatever your goals in a new year, Westhelle insisted that "you do not need to pretend to be who you are not."

Mary Joy Philip, assistant professor of Lutheran global theology and mission at Waterloo (Ont.) Lutheran Seminary in Canada, finds that focusing on grace rather than goals also builds relationships: "When I talk about goals, it comes from a place of control and power. It implies that I can by my abilities and power make things happen. But when I am not in that place, I have to rely on another [and] be vulnerable and open to grace, and that is precisely what makes for community."

~~Find more in your budget~~ Find enough

Give us today our daily bread. What does this mean? In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving. What then does daily bread mean? Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies ..." (Luther's explanation of the Lord's Prayer).

Earn more, save more, pay down debt—financial and material concerns dominate New Year's resolutions. Far from chastising people for desiring worldly things, Luther expanded the definition of daily bread to include not only food and drink, clothing and shelter, and family, but also "good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."

Many of us, even if we receive this daily bread, keep looking anxiously for more that will make us feel safe, rather than recognizing and celebrating what is enough. In contrast, Luther's notion of daily bread echoes the freedom of Jesus' invitation not to worry about what we will eat, drink or wear (Matthew 6:25).

As God frees us from the fear of scarcity, we are opened up to generosity, to sharing daily bread with those who need it. "We pray for 'our' daily bread and not 'my' daily bread," Philip said. "The whole prayer is in the plural, if we only paid attention to that."

~~Go to church~~ Be church

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith" (Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed).

“ For Luther, it’s clear that faith is ‘not something we do but something we experience’ ”



Resolving to make it to church more in 2017? It's not unusual for Christians—and even Lutherans—to assume that attending worship, praying, reading the Bible and other good works will bring us closer to God or make us better Christians. Luther absolutely rejected this notion. Even the faith through which we are saved does not happen by our own “understanding or strength” but by the work of the Spirit, he asserted.

For Luther, it's clear that faith is “not something we do but something we experience,” Wengert said.

Understanding faith as an experience rather than a product of our efforts can liberate our faith practices. Stjerna argues that Luther's instructions in the catechism rest on his belief in “the absolute presence of God in my living ... in the holiness of each life, each person, each location.”

Whether it's in worship, prayer or participation in a church community, Stjerna invites Christians to focus on God's presence inside us. “When you do that, God will speak to you,” she said. “It's the mystical reality of God. We need a tool to be illumined and sensitized and really hear God talking to us.”

It's often said that we don't go to church; we *are* the church. Like a good tree planted to bear good fruit, God makes us holy, and “being made holy means living life, then, for others,” Wengert said.

~~Save the world~~ Serve the world

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true” (Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed).

“Volunteer more” is one of the top resolutions individuals make. And the ELCA's tagline “God's work. Our hands.” speaks of a church that takes seriously its identity and mission to be the body of Christ in the world—whether it's through congregations volunteering in local communities, youth groups engaging in summer service projects or national and international church ministries.

Our work as a church testifies to Luther's belief in the vocation of every baptized person. Wengert explained that in the catechism “Luther says,

‘You're all in holy orders ... in the church, society, the household, all walks of life.’ ”

Yet it's crucial to remember that whatever our vocation, none of us is called to save the world. We are not the Savior—Jesus is. This is the heart of the gospel and of Luther's catechism: not what we do, but what God does for us and for the sake of the world. In Christ, God frees us not only from our sin, but even from unrealistic expectations of our calling that would curve us inward in pride or in panic. In God's liberating grace, Westhelle said, “we turn outward, stretching into the world” toward our neighbors—not to save—to serve.

Conclusion: New Year's reformatations?

God's liberating grace through Jesus Christ, which Luther experienced and passed on to us through the Small Catechism, can reform us as we face a new year. Grace frees us from indulgent self-focus, reminds us that it is God who makes us feel whole and invites us to turn outward in love to our neighbors.

How do we live a Reformation life, in ways that don't just replace one to-do list with another, or turn us back inward to focus on ourselves?

We live in the community of faith.

Through the church, God renews, refreshes and liberates us when we need it. Freed in Christ to serve our neighbors, we, as the church, can do more together than we could ever do alone—stand with the suffering, speak out against evil, help those in need and be continually reformed.

In that hope, Philip offers a final reminder that “living as one created in the image of God, with the freedom to image God and to live life to its full potential [is] not a once-a-year or once-in-a-lifetime thing.” Rather, this freedom is intimately bound to “our baptismal understanding of daily dying and rising. It needs to happen every day—period,” she added.

Just as the church is *semper reformanda* (always reforming) so may we be freed from sin, curved out toward our neighbor and the world, bearing what Luther describes as “a living, daring confidence in God's grace.” **L**

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“Yet it’s crucial to remember that whatever our vocation, none of us is called to save the world. We are not the Savior—Jesus is.”

