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Study guide

A living tradition

The Reformation was meant to be continued

By Robert C. Blezard

Lutherans can point with pride to our spiritual founder, Martin Luther, who is credited with sparking the Protestant Reformation more than 500 years ago. Lutheran congregations mark the Sunday closest to Oct. 31 as Reformation Sunday. The Reformation marked a turning point, opening the way for diversity and vitality of expression not only in Western Christianity but also in politics and social life. For Lutherans, we know that the work of reforming the church and world is always underway with the guidance of the Spirit. What's next?

EXERCISE 1: ONE CHURCH

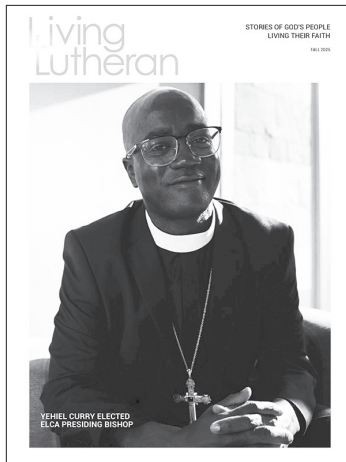
The 16th century dawned in a Western Europe that had only *one* Christian church: the Catholic Church of Rome. For centuries it maintained its dominant position through rigid theology and intolerance of dissent.

Theologically, the Roman church taught doctrines that, critics argue, kept people fearful and spiritually bound to the church. Among the teachings:

- There was no salvation or pathway to heaven outside of the Catholic Church. Anybody who was not a Catholic in good standing went to hell. No exceptions.
- To get to heaven, Catholics in good standing would have to die in a “state of grace” rather than a “state of sin.” Folks entered a “state of grace” only by confessing all their sins to a priest and receiving absolution. How long would the “state of grace” last? When the next sin in thought, word or deed was committed, the “state of sin” would return.
- Salvation could be achieved only by a combination of faith and good works.

Discuss:

- For three essential reasons, it may be hard for us to imagine the spiritual place of Christians before the Reformation. One, we have many religious options available to us today. Two, our culture has ingrained in us the notion that we have individual freedom to choose whatever we desire. Three, there is no longer a stigma surrounding the choice of any faith option, or even the choice of no religion. What elements of the pre-Reformation formula for salvation seem oppressive to you? Controlling? Rigid?
- How would your faith life change if you were told (and you believed) your salvation depended on being an obedient member to the only church in existence? Moreover, how would your faith life change if there were no voices in your culture speaking in opposition to that church's doctrines and practices?



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- Day by day, how confident would you be of your salvation if you were taught (and you truly believed) that you had to die in a “state of grace” to go to heaven, and the path to a “state of grace” was extremely narrow?
- An overly conscientious Christian, Luther was at times so fearful that he would die in a “state of sin” that he might go to confession multiple times in a single day. This anxiety may have driven him toward some of his key theological and spiritual breakthroughs. Luther taught that Jesus gave us the gospel in order to give all of us “sinners” comfort and strength, not fear and weakness. Do you agree?
- Some Christian churches today profess its members to be the only “true” followers of Christ. Some, as the Catholic Church of Luther’s day, claim that all others outside of their organization do not receive God’s grace or a place in heaven. In Luther’s day, this claim infused people with fear, anxiety and unease. Not so much today. What’s different?

Before the Reformation, dissenters to Catholic doctrine or practices were persecuted, punished and, in some cases, even executed. For example, in 1406, Czech priest and theologian Jan Hus was burned at the stake after refusing to denounce his “heretical” teachings and writings. Many of Hus’ ideas were similar to those Luther would espouse about a century later.

Though Luther was persecuted for his teachings, he escaped Hus’ fate largely through a combination of favorable political winds and a game-changing technological advancement. Luther received protection from his powerful prince-elect, Frederick the Wise of Saxony. And the printing press, newly developed in the 16th century, allowed his writings to be spread widely and quickly across Europe. For Rome, there was no containing Luther’s “contagion”—or that of an emerging chorus of opponents to the Catholic hegemony.

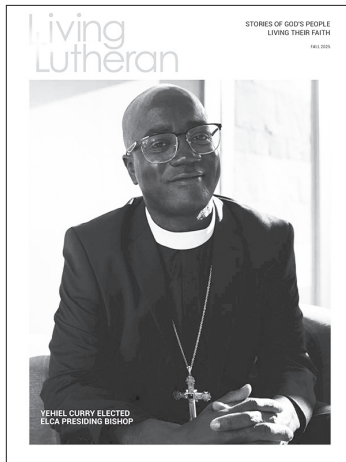
Discuss:

- What ideas strike you as most shocking in this (very) brief overview of Western European religious life before the Reformation? Explain and explore.
- Imagine you disagreed with something your church was professing or practicing. How willing would you be to speak out if you know it might lead to ostracization, persecution, punishment or potentially even your death?
- In any organization, how does such a punishment-reward system keep everyone in line? At what cost?
- Though they lack the power to punish dissent and opposition, what Christian groups today discourage or ostracize those who question group teachings and practices? What are the costs or consequences of suppressing differing beliefs?

EXERCISE 2: THE REFORMATION

The 95 Theses

Historians agree that Luther sparked the Reformation by disseminating his 95 Theses



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that argued against the Catholic Church's practice of selling "indulgences"—essentially granting forgiveness of sin in exchange for money. As a theologian and Bible scholar at Frederick the Wise's recently established University of Wittenberg in Saxony, Luther could find no biblical basis for the selling of indulgences. He was highly disturbed by the practice and its effects on everyday Christians. In response, Luther drafted a document detailing 95 propositions against the selling of indulgences. On Oct. 31, 1517, Luther sent one copy of the 95 Theses to his bishop and nailed another copy to the church door in Wittenberg. By way of the printing press, the 95 Theses were quickly distributed throughout Europe and ignited a firestorm of debate.

The backlash began immediately. The church began efforts to silence and coerce Luther to disavow his ideas. Instead of being quiet and keeping a low profile, he continued to study and attack other church practices and doctrines that he saw as anti-biblical and harmful to faith.

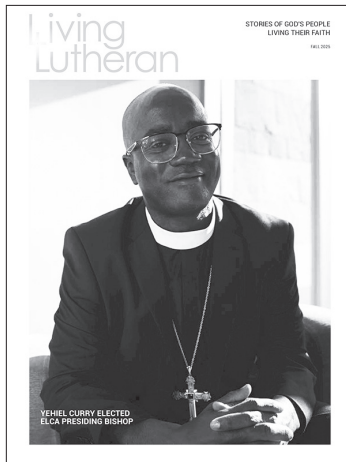
After efforts to persuade (coerce) Luther to recant, the Catholic Church excommunicated him in 1521. More than just expulsion from the church, at the time excommunication meant being officially cut off from God's grace and mercy—effectively a condemnation to hell. Though a bounty was placed on his head, Luther enjoyed the protection of Frederick the Wise and lived for another 25 years. Casting aside his earlier vow of celibacy, he married Katharina von Bora, had children, and continued teaching, speaking and writing. His collected works today span many volumes.

Luther paved the way for other Reformers who emerged concurrently with him or later, each with their own ideas on Christian faith and practice. Many of today's churches are indebted to the teachings of these reformers, such as John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Knox, William Tyndale and Menno Simons.

Lutheran insights

Luther's insights radically changed religious thinking. His ideas include:

- ***Sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola gratia* (grace alone).** Contained in these twin related insights is the single most important theological advancement of the Protestant Reformation. They hold that we are "justified"—made right with God or saved—because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ, *not* by our efforts. And we receive justification because of God's grace. Luther came to these conclusions after studying the writings of Paul, including Romans 1:17: "In it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"
- ***Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone).** The Catholic Church had held that the doctrinal decisions of the pope and other officials and gatherings were authoritative, even if they clashed with Scripture. Luther asserted that any religious doctrine or practice should be rooted in Scripture. The ELCA today holds that Scripture is the "source and norm" of our life together.
- **Priesthood of all believers.** It was held in Luther's day that priests and others



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who had taken religious vocations were actually in a higher spiritual class than the rest of us. Their occupation, it was thought, was holy work and made them a cut above others. Luther held that we are all the same before God, and each of us does holy work in our occupations.

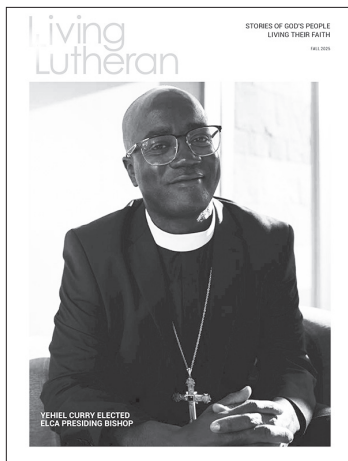
- ***Simul justus et peccator* (at the same time both saint and sinner).**

Christians are always going to be sinners because we have an innate sinful nature that we can't overcome (as we say in a Lutheran prayer of confession, we are "in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves"). But at the same time, we are also "saints" because we are declared free of sin through the saving work of Jesus. Knowing that we are always sinners, Christians live in humility. Knowing that we are nonetheless justified through the grace of God, we live in gratitude and strive to have our lives bear the spiritual fruit of love, mercy, kindness and peace.

The aftermath

The Protestant Reformation had a profound impact on not only the religious landscape of Europe but also on its politics, arts and culture, education, literacy and sociology.

- **The Catholic Church:** In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church underwent a process of self-examination and change. The resulting Catholic Counter-Reformation led the church to clarify, correct or abandon some of its doctrines and practices. It also led to renewal movements within the Catholic Church.
- **Engagement of ideas:** No longer facing the threat of persecution, Christian thinkers were free to bring their beliefs and observations to the marketplace of ideas. Theological disagreements, clashes and fights (sometimes violent) did occur, but differences were nonetheless brought to the light of day and debated.
- **Diversity of religious expression:** New churches arose, generally gathered around the insights of a leader (such as a reformer). For the first time, faithful Christians in the West had options to explore different religious ideas and to belong to a church whose beliefs and practices they aligned with.
- **Rise of secular states:** Secular leaders who previously were allied with the Roman church broke ties. As independent authorities, they nationalized church assets and consolidated power.
- **Education and literacy:** The Protestant Reformation not only encouraged ordinary Christians to read the Bible but promoted the practice by publishing Scripture in the language of the people. Previously, the Bible had been available only in ancient languages accessible to only the most educated. This led to a boon in education and literacy.
- **Views about authority:** The principle of *sola scriptura* undercut the authority of the pope—and all religious leaders, actually—to rule by personal preference and declaration. Moreover, with access to the Bible, people were unshackled to think for themselves and question religious and secular leaders alike.



About the study guide author:

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Discuss:

- The root of the word “reformation” is “reform.” What are the most significant religious “reforms” brought about by the Reformation in religious life? In civic and social life? Which of them do we take for granted today?
- Comparing the “one church” Christian culture in Western Europe before the Reformation to the “Christian marketplace” culture we have today, what do you see as the most beneficial?
- Luther sparked the Protestant Reformation by questioning and challenging established religious authorities and religious norms. What are some consequences when religious questions and challenges are suppressed or summarily dismissed (as they often were before the Reformation)? By contrast, how do thoughtful questions and challenges help to “reform” and improve religious beliefs and practices?
- Do you believe wholeheartedly with every belief and practice your church espouses? How are you able to express them? Does raising questions or challenges cause you any anxiety or fear? What religious beliefs and practices are being or need to be questioned and challenged today in your congregation, your synod or our denomination? Why? How can we do it?
- How can a culture of free speech and open debate in a church help questioning and challenging to be civil, respectful and fruitful? Does that culture exist in your congregation, synod or denomination? Why or why not? What, if anything, can we do to create a more open culture?
- The Reformation was an epochal event not only for Christianity but also for Western civilization. So, on Reformation Sunday, what should we as Christians be remembering? What should we be celebrating?
- How can, or how should, the significance of the Protestant Reformation be taught and remembered in our churches? Since Luther had a foundational role in the Reformation, why do Lutherans have a particularly strong cause to celebrate and remember? How can we do that?
- Many Protestant churches display red paraments on Reformation Sunday. It’s the same color that is displayed on Pentecost Sunday, when we remember and celebrate the Spirit’s arrival on the faithful with a rush of wind and tongues of flame (Acts 2). Why does tradition call for red paraments on Reformation Sunday?
- “Always being made new” was the name and slogan for an ELCA emphasis that was active around the time of the 500th anniversary of when Luther posted his 95 Theses, thus starting the Protestant Reformation. What did this name signify for us as a church? Why was it an especially appropriate name? How are we, both Lutherans and Christians generally, “always being made new” by God’s Spirit?
- Looking at the legacy of the Protestant Reformation, how can we as Lutherans and Christians not only remember what happened but participate in God’s ongoing work of reforming and renewing the church?

MY TAKE



What
Needs
Reforming
Today?

A LIVING TRADITION

By Ralen M. Robinson

THE REFORMATION WAS MEANT TO BE CONTINUED

Sunday after Sunday, we play musical chairs in the pews, recite familiar hymns and watch the colors of the paraments change, fading into the background like the holidays they represent. We move to the steady rhythm of the church

calendar, which marks the seasons, honors the saints and pauses for holy times.

On Reformation Sunday, we don our red garments and stand firm in our Lutheran heritage, joining the hymnist in singing “A Mighty

Fortress Is Our God.” But once the service ends and we step outside the church, we tend to forget until the following year. The vibrant red fades, the resounding song lowers in volume and the symphony of daily life begins to blare. We forget to be the church.

We prioritize our to-do lists, routines and other people over God. Those once-holy rhythms slip by unnoticed, crowded out by growing calendars, commitments and a cacophony of concerns. More than 500 years later, the vitality of the Reformation often feels dulled, not because the Spirit has faded but because we’ve grown numb to the call.

This raises an important question: Is the Reformation still relevant more than 500 years later? How does the Reformation continue to impact the lives of people in our church today? How do we view the Reformation not as a holiday that fades into the background but rather as the promise of salvation for all?

Reformation Sunday isn’t just a special day—it should be marked as a holiday. We are called to embody the fire of the Reformation promise, which tells us that God’s radical grace is still accessible. Reformation Sunday is more than a familiar tune—it’s a profound act of religious freedom that allows us all to be in one accord and know that we are loved, not because of our actions but because of who we are.

The Reformation reminds us that we are perfectly imperfect and encompassed by this radical grace that gives us chance after chance, forgiveness after forgiveness, and meets us with love when we feel we aren’t deserving.

More than a day

But the Reformation isn’t confined to a single day in October—it is lived out whenever we proclaim faith alone, Scripture alone and grace alone. It is lived out as we grapple, welcome and question reform within our policies and bylaws to reflect Jesus’ teachings.

When we, as a community, stand up and speak boldly to advocate for change, we become the voice for those silenced by systems. This is the Reformation in everyday life, the reform church that accepts everyone and allows all of us to have accessible faith. It’s in the way we treat our neighbors, advocate for justice and show compassion to those in need.

The Reformation happens in everyday discipleship as we reexamine how Scripture shapes our lives and how we live it out. It occurs in the conversations we have with one another

when we care for them, when we choose love over fear, courage over complacency, truth over deception and grace over judgment. It’s found in the small but mighty faithful choices we make to serve, to forgive, to grow and to lead. That is where the Spirit reforms the church.

All of us, as a community, are responsible for living out these doctrines and our faith so that is the first thing people encounter when they meet us.

The heart of the Reformation isn’t history, to be stowed away as a relic, but should reflect our footsteps as we follow Christ. It can be found in the pattern of our liturgy and the hum of our hymns. It’s woven throughout the folds of our churches.

THE REFORMATION ISN’T CONFINED TO A SINGLE DAY IN OCTOBER—IT IS LIVED OUT WHENEVER WE PROCLAIM FAITH ALONE, SCRIPTURE ALONE AND GRACE ALONE.

I implore you not to let the red fade and the Reformation flame flicker and be extinguished. Let us see the reform of today and know that love extends through our past, present and future. We must embody the same courage as did theologian and forefather Martin Luther, challenging the systems that fail to reflect the church and God’s mercy.

May we see that the reform is in equality, kindness and, most important, care for our neighbor and the way we speak, not one day out of the year but every day. The church is called to be reformed.

The Reformation is not just a passing event. It’s more than a pile of discarded red clothing items lost in the hamper Sunday night or the faint memory of the story of a courageous German theologian guided by God. It was meant to be not just commemorated but continued. It is a living tradition that challenges us to ask what needs reforming today.

Where is the Spirit stirring around you? How do we proclaim the gospel in a way that embodies a liberating and healing now? The Reformation is not a historical event but a living tradition that continues to shape our faith and lives today.

So let us nail truth to every door, knock without fear and be the church, courageous, reforming and alive today. †

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