

Martin Luther and the Reformation

Bible Text: Matthew 16:13–20; Luke 4:18–19; Romans 3:21–26; Ephesians 2:8–9

Lesson Focus: Christians continually reform the church to spread the good news to every generation and culture.

Big Question: Who is Martin Luther and what does it mean to be a Lutheran?

Key Words: MARTIN LUTHER, REFORMATION, CATHOLIC, THESIS, RECANT

Prepare

QUICK PREP

- As a young man Martin Luther struggled with choosing a career and searching for spiritual fulfillment and meaning. He came to realize that God's love is unconditional. God loves and forgives us because of Jesus Christ, NOT because of anything we do.
- Luther recognizes that sin is VERY real. We are simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). Our sinful self needs daily drowning, in the context of God's love and forgiveness given through our baptism. Maturity toward Christlikeness is an ongoing process.
- The three *solas*—*sola scriptura* (scripture alone), *sola fidei* (faith alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone)—are central to Luther's teaching and the Reformation.
- Martin Luther made the Bible and worship accessible to every Christian by translating them into the language the people spoke and encouraging public education so that they could read.
- All people have the duty to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, not just pastors. This is called the "priesthood of all believers." All useful work serves God, not just what pastors do. All vocations, or callings, are honored by God.
- The imperfect church continues to be imperfect. The Christian church is continually changing—evaluating what has been done in the past and learning to adapt to new times and cultures.

DEEP PREP

A View of Reformation History

Europe had seen some devastating events during the medieval era. Life in the 15th century included some startling realities—the average life expectancy was about 40 years. Childbirth often resulted in the death of the baby or the mother or both. A simple infection or virus often caused death; the bubonic plague killed more than one-third of Europe's population. There was no public education. Democracy as we know it did not exist anywhere. Most people lived in absolute poverty and had no means to work their way out of their miserable situation.

During this time, people could not even choose their own faith. The religion of the ruler determined the religion of the region where he ruled. The Latin phrase *cujus regio, jus religio* is used to refer to this fact of life. Anyone who rejected the power and authority of the ruler in this matter suffered terribly at the hands of that ruler. For those who lived in territory ruled by a Christian, there was only one Christian church—the Roman Catholic Church. Political leaders were in many ways religious leaders, because they determined what would and would not be

taught in their territories. The Bible existed in its original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek versions and had only been translated once—into Latin. This meant only the priests could read it. Because manuscripts had to be copied by hand, there were not a lot of copies to go around, either. The people had to depend on their priests to tell them what the Bible said. Worship was the same. It was conducted in Latin, so most believers could not fully understand what was being said—and many did not understand it at all!

In the midst of these conditions, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. For the first time in history, manuscripts did not need to be copied by hand. This made it possible for information to be reproduced quickly and to spread widely for a relatively small cost. It also opened the door for ordinary people to acquire printed materials, which in turn increased the need for education for all people so that they could read these printed materials.

Martin Luther was born on the heels of the medieval era. As a young man, he planned to be a lawyer and began to study toward that goal. In the midst of a nasty storm, as he dodged lightning bolts, he bargained with God. He promised that if God would save him, he would become a monk. He survived the storm and began studying to become a priest. He spent part of his life as a monk—living in a community with others who had the sole purpose of worshipping and praising God with their lives.

Throughout Luther's ministry, he struggled with what it meant for someone to be "right with God." His main question was, "What does it take to please God and attain righteousness in God's eyes?" While studying the Letter to the Romans, he was smacked over the head with the realization that no one can do enough to be right with God AND that God has already solved the problem by making us righteous through Jesus Christ. This idea led to other new insights and the recognition that the Roman Catholic Church needed to change. Luther began to point out practices that he felt went against what the Bible said about God, and he called on the church leaders to make changes. Making use of the newly invented printing press, he circulated pamphlets featuring his ideas and eventually posted "95 Theses" for debate on the door of the church in Wittenberg.

News of these Theses reached the highest leaders of the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in debates and hearings and even trials. These trials, or diets as they were called at the time, pitted Luther against other leaders. At a diet that took place in Worms in 1521, Luther was asked to recant—to take back what he had been saying. Luther refused. His famous words, "Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by the clearest reasoning, unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted, and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen," were spoken at this trial. The church/political leaders responded to Luther's continued refusal to change his words and his ways by excommunicating him and putting a price on his head. Once labeled a criminal, Luther went into hiding, where he spent much of his time translating the Bible into German.

While we Lutherans tend to focus on Martin Luther and what he did and said, there were many other reformers both before and after Luther. Some were executed as heretics because of their teachings. Some were more successful in their work, as Luther was. These other reformers also fought for change, and as a result of their work, the Bible was translated into other

languages—including English.

Some Central Theological Points of the Reformation

1. God's love is unconditional. Luther taught that God loves and forgives us because of Jesus Christ, NOT because of anything we do. The righteousness of God is what God gives to us for the sake of Christ, not something that we do in order to be right with God. The Roman Catholic Church had many teachings about what people needed to DO in order for their sins to be forgiven and for them to be right with God—the purchasing of indulgences was the most notorious of those teachings.

2. Sin is VERY real. Luther taught that we are simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). Our sinful self needs daily drowning, in the context of God's love and forgiveness given through our baptism. There is not an immediate and total transformation of a person from sinful to sinless, godless to godly, etc. Luther spoke about "both/and" situations. We are both forgiven by God, made right in God's eyes, totally saints—AND sinners, to be judged by God, worthy only of condemnation. It is a paradox, and we struggle against the power of sin in our lives every day. It is only through God's grace that we can trust in God's promise that we have been saved.

3. The three solas—*sola scriptura* (scripture alone), *sola fidei* (faith alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone)—are central to Luther's teaching and the Reformation. These are often quoted as "the key" to Luther's teaching. Scripture alone and the plain meaning of scripture attained through clear reasoning constitute the only base that is acceptable for creating doctrine and other teachings of the church. Faith alone, and not works, is what is needed to be forgiven and to receive eternal life. Grace alone is how God gives the gift of faith that results in forgiveness and eternal life.

4. We are saved by grace through faith. Faith means "trust"—that we trust what Jesus said, that we trust God's love, that we trust God's grace, etc. Faith is not something we "do"; it is something we act upon. Luther taught that good works do not bring us into favor with God, nor do they bring us into eternal life. God gives eternal life as a gift because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. God gives people the Holy Spirit through baptism and the Holy Spirit brings people to have faith in God—to trust God and the promises God has made. Faith is not something we DO. Faith is a gift.

5. We are saved by grace, not works. No amount of good works will earn someone a place in God's house for eternity. That place is a gift. Good works are the result of being saved by grace. Once God has given the gift of eternal life, we respond by doing good works, because we desire to please God, who has been so generous and loving and merciful toward us.

6. All people have the duty to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, not just pastors. This is called the "priesthood of all believers." All useful work serves God, not just what pastors do. All vocations are honored by God. A vocation is a "calling" or something that God has called a believer to do. Luther taught that a person did not need to become a priest in order to do God's work. All believers in all walks of life can, and should, tell others about God's grace. And all believers in all walks of life are serving God with the work they do. Being a priest or a monk does not make a person more blessed than other people in other vocations.

7. The imperfect church continues to be imperfect. Luther taught that the church is a human institution. It makes mistakes and it needs to be continually learning and reforming. When the Christian church is faithful to God, it is continually changing—evaluating what has been done in the past and learning to adapt to new times and cultures.

ADOLESCENT CONNECTION

Who is Martin Luther and what does it mean to be a Lutheran?

Some youth may be keenly aware of "the difference between Sunday and Monday." They may be troubled by radical differences that they see in their world. The teachings of the church and even people's behavior while they are "at church" may be radically different from what they hear and see from these same people during the rest of the week. They may even feel pulled toward believing that this is how "church" works—that it's irrelevant to their daily lives. At best, "church stuff" is pulled out for a few hours on the weekend; at worst, it is useless and should be abandoned entirely. Those who have tried to live out their faith during the week may be persecuted, teased, and alienated by their peers. They may be wondering if "church" is worth all the pain and frustration.

Fortunately, most youth are not yet jaded by their culture. Many hold very idealistic hopes and dreams of how the world could be. Help them to explore their ideals, hopes, and dreams and to identify things they are truly passionate about. Encourage them to look for God's work in the world around them—perhaps in creative ways that did not catch their attention at first glance. Encourage them also to work for changes in their congregation, community, and world. Martin Luther and the other reformers were young men who were concerned about wrongs that they saw in their world. They worked for change, and we are the beneficiaries of their work. These youth can have an impact on their world. When they trust in God and follow God's ways, they can reach their hopes and dreams.

BAPTISMAL CONNECTION

In the Rite of Affirmation of Baptism, a five-part question addresses each confirmand's intent to continue in the covenant God made with them in Holy Baptism. Here We Stand resources help students—with support from parents, leaders, and the entire congregation—prepare to answer this question as they continue in their lifelong faith journey.

Today's lesson focuses on the clauses "to live among God's faithful people" and "to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed" (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, page 201; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 236).

While many of their values were formed when they were small children, youth are beginning to explore what it means to live out their values in their own lives—in particular their Lutheran Christian values. They are learning to be independent of their parents, they are learning to express themselves, and they are learning what it is like to experience the heavy load of peer pressure. What they may not realize is that "peer pressure" will become "cultural expectations" when they are adults making their own way in the world. Carefully choosing what community—what peers

and values—they want to live with will be very important for their future. Living and growing within a Lutheran Christian community will help them to bring the good news into a world that may not share their values, hopes, and dreams. As Luther himself experienced, God's word can become their "rock and castle" for bringing God's love and grace into that world.
