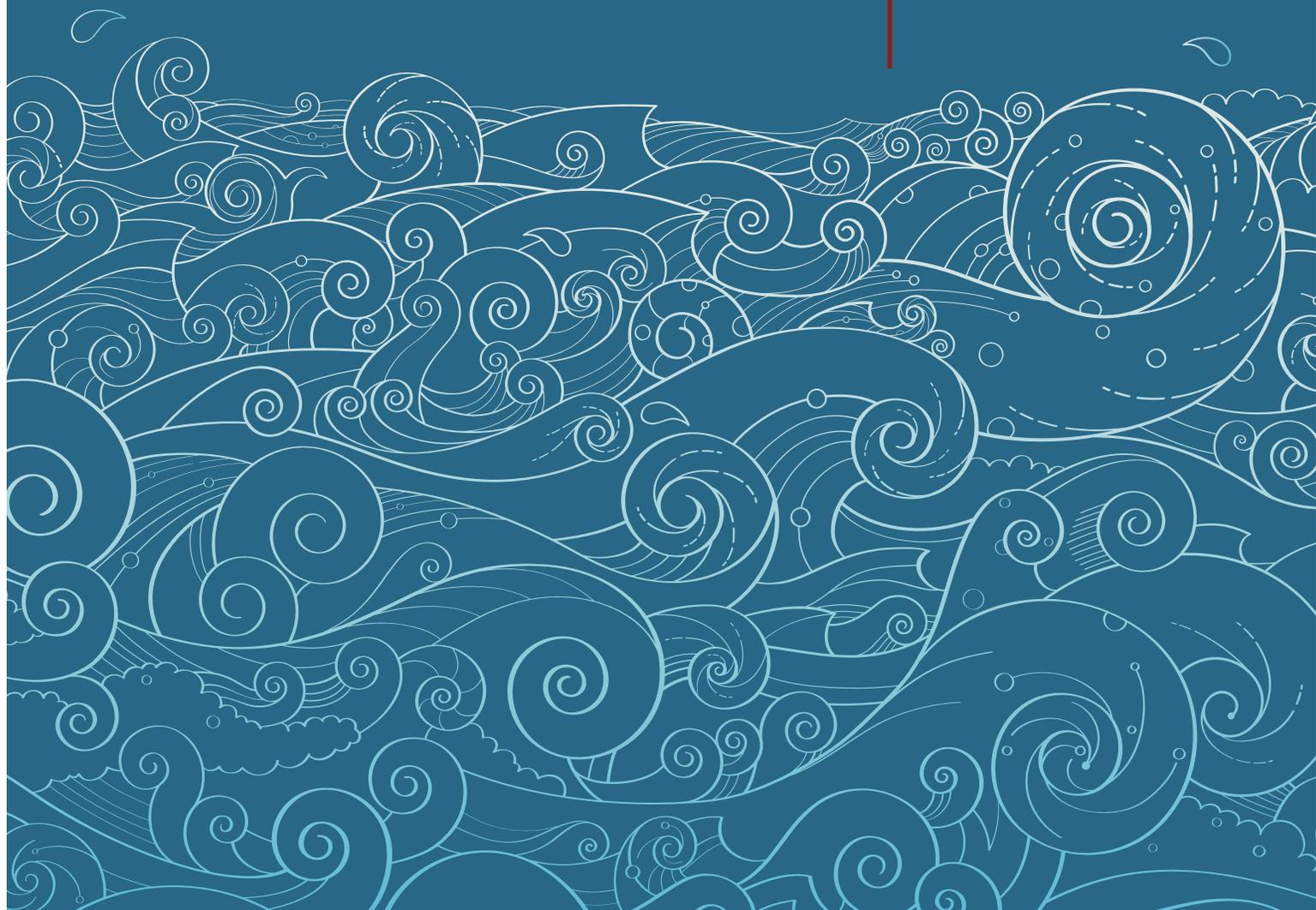


500th
Anniversary

1520-2020

the
Freedom
of a Christian



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

the Freedom of a Christian

July 2020

Dear church,

We are living in uncertain and difficult times. Amid the pandemic of COVID-19 and the ongoing pandemic of racism and xenophobia, our communities and world are ravaged by illness, death and injustice. Fear, grief, anger and strife are within and around us. We are tempted to turn inward in despair.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther wrote a treatise titled *The Freedom of a Christian*. In it, he offered his most compelling summary of the Christian life: In Christ we are completely free and at the same time completely bound in love and service to our neighbors. For Christians such as you and me, this has been our Lutheran way of telling the Christian story for 500 years. At the heart of our Lutheran theological tradition, we find the antidote to our despair.

In this treatise, Luther describes a “happy exchange” wherein Christ sets us free by taking upon himself humankind’s sin, pain and judgment, and in return giving us his liberating life. In that exchange, we are free from the clutches of sin, from the forces that try to tear us apart and from any condemnation. We are empowered in turn to use our freedom to serve our neighbors, whoever they may be. This message remains timely when voices that marginalize certain people, or preach contempt, hatred and violence, dominate our public discourse. How do we hear and trust this word from God today, and continue to serve God’s life-giving work?

I invite you to read, study and reflect on *The Freedom of Christian* using this study guide, ably written by the Rev. Dr. Carmelo Santos, director for theological diversity and ecumenical and interreligious engagement, in consultation with others. As you engage with this 500-year-old text, a series of case studies he has curated at ELCA500.org will help you to encounter the diversity of voices that represent the vitality of the Lutheran movement today.

Luther wrote, “Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor.” Today, as in Luther’s day, our faithful response to the uncertainty and death-dealing forces in our world is to proclaim that which is sure and life-giving for all. Freed in Christ, we resist the temptation to turn inward in despair by turning outward in love and service to the world. Siblings in Christ, rejoice! We are no longer captive, but free.

In Christ,



The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton
Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

the *Freedom* of a Christian¹:

A Study Guide for Martin Luther's Treatise,
Marking the 500th Anniversary of Its Publication

The Christian [person]² is a completely free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian [person] is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all (Freedom, 10).

Christian[s] ... do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God; likewise through love they fall down beneath themselves into the neighbor – remaining nevertheless always in God and God's love. (Freedom, 32).

Introduction

This is a resource for individuals and congregations to study Martin Luther's influential 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*. You can find the full text of Timothy Wengert's translation³ at ELCA500.org/. It has been made available free of charge for the duration of 2020 thanks to the generosity of 1517 Media. The original version of the treatise included a letter to Pope Leo X. This study guide will not deal with that letter because its tone and theological content are very different from that of the treatise itself. It deserves a study of its own. However, in order to maintain the integrity of the original work, the letter is included in the PDF on the website.

This study includes case studies, available on the website. They are videos or short essays reflecting on what the freedom of a Christian looks like in different settings. Among the themes explored in the case studies are care of creation, immigration, religious diversity, white privilege and gender identity. More case studies will be added in the future. If you are interested in sharing a case study, please contact us through the website. In addition to case studies we are also calling for drawings, paintings, poetry, stories, articles and any other creative interpretations of Luther's treatise. The works selected will be exhibited on the website as part of the ELCA's ongoing observance of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

This study guide was developed by the Rev. Dr. Carmelo Santos, director, theological diversity and ecumenical & inter-religious engagement, Office of the Presiding Bishop in consultation with the members of the Theological Discernment, Racial Justice, and Ecumenical & Inter-Religious Relations team.

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How to Use This Guide

The purpose of this guide is to help you study *The Freedom of a Christian*. Luther believed that this treatise summarized the whole Christian life. Therefore, to study this treatise is to study what it means to be a Christian. It is an opportunity to remember who we are and to explore what gives meaning and purpose to our lives as followers of Christ. This study must be an affair of the heart as much as of the head.

The key question, then, is not “What did Luther mean when he wrote this or that?” The key question is “What does this mean for me now? What is God saying to us today through this text?” What Luther meant is important. But what God means to tell us is infinitely more important. We don’t just want to learn about the concept of freedom in Luther’s work. We want to taste the freedom that Christ offers us in the gospel and experience the joy of using that freedom to work for the well being of our neighbors and all creation.

In order to get the most out of this study, you should set aside enough time. Beware of haste; it is the enemy of spiritual practices. This guide can be used for individual study, but group study is preferable. It gives participants the opportunity to learn from each other’s insights and questions. It also creates a space where people can share their testimonies of how they have experienced in their own lives the things being studied in the text. What laboratories are to science, lived experience is to faith. Our daily lives are where we learn what it means to trust God and love each other. Whether meeting in person, or online, a group setting provides participants with the opportunity to care for and pray for each other. This study guide can be used in many ways. Here is one possibility:

Each participant should have: (1) a copy of the treatise, (2) this study guide, (3) something for notation and (4) a Bible if possible.

First (introductory) meeting

Open with prayer.

Participants get to know each other.

Find out why participants are interested in studying *The Freedom of a Christian*.

What do they already know about the treatise and about Luther?

What questions or concerns do they bring with them?

Allow time for participants to peruse the study guide and read the introduction on their own. Then ask if there are any questions.

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First (introductory) meeting (cont'd)

Exercise: How would you define “freedom”? How many different definitions of freedom can you come up with?

How is Christian freedom different from other kinds?

Review the “Note on Freedom” on pp. 7-8 below. Invite participants to form small groups and discuss their reactions to that understanding of freedom.

Return to the plenary session and survey the groups.

Ask participants to read the synopsis of the treatise before the next meeting.

Suggest that they keep a journal with their insights and questions. Some people find it helpful to have an online platform where they can chat with other participants about questions and insights from the readings and from each session.

End with prayer.

The other meetings can correspond to the sessions listed in the study guide.
(If necessary, the three sessions of Unit 1 can be consolidated into one class).

Before Session 1 (Unit 1):

Read Appendix 4: “Synopsis of *The Freedom of a Christian*” on pp. 50-53.

Write down any questions or insights in your journal.

Make note of words and concepts that are unfamiliar to you, but don’t get stuck on them – just keep reading. There is a glossary in Appendix 2.

Before each session, participants should read the portions of the treatise assigned.

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During each session
Go over the commentary provided.
Invite open conversation and questions.
(Optional) Use one of the case studies available on the website.
Set aside time for individual reflection and journaling, using the questions provided at the end of each session.
Divide participants into small groups to discuss their journal entries.
Ask each small group to report back to the large group.
Practice! Think about concrete ways you can apply what you have learned to your daily life, and do so.
Begin and end each session with prayer. Let the Holy Spirit touch your life through this study!

Overview

In addition to the main body, this study guide includes:

- Endnotes (Appendix 1) to clarify confusing or overly technical concepts. The endnotes also suggest books, articles and websites for further reading.
- A glossary (Appendix 2) for quick reference. Note that the glossary defines words as used in Luther’s treatise or in this study guide. The same words may have different meanings in other contexts.
- A bibliography (Appendix 3) with a list of all works cited in the study and other materials for further reading.
- A synopsis (Appendix 4) summarizing the main points of the treatise.

On the website you can find:

- Case studies exploring what the freedom of being a Christian has meant to people living out their vocations in different settings.
- Other resources, such as art and essays, produced to commemorate the 500th anniversary of *The Freedom of a Christian*.

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A Note on Freedom

We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone (ELW, 95).⁴

At the heart of *The Freedom of a Christian* and of the gospel itself is the idea that Christ has the power to set us free. But how can we accept the gift of freedom if we don't even know that we are captive? And how can we recognize our captivity if we misunderstand what freedom is really about? We live in an era when freedom is lifted up as a flag for many causes but seems to be poorly understood. In a time of pandemic, freedom has been embraced by those resisting local governments' restrictions on public gatherings or free movement. Many seem to view freedom as the ability to do whatever they want without any restrictions or accountability. That is a tragic misunderstanding. It leads to deeper captivity, not to greater freedom, and that is definitely not what the freedom of a Christian is about.

The freedom of the Christian is liberation from forces that distort our basic humanity. It is freedom from inner and outer compulsions that make us act in ways that harm others, hurt ourselves and damage the rest of God's beautiful creation. It is freedom to love ourselves and our neighbors as God loves us. It is freedom to dedicate ourselves to the well-being of our neighbors, whoever they may be, and to the flourishing of creation. It is freedom to challenge and transform any system that robs people of their daily bread and their dignity. And it is the power to participate in God's great work of bringing about healing and wholesomeness to creation.

Sin is the name Christians have given to those forces keeping us captive and denying us the free and wholesome lives God wants for us. There is not just one way to experience the forces of sin in our lives. Different people experience the chains of sin in different ways:

SHAME. One of the most common experiences of captivity to sin comes in the form of immoral cravings. They are like waves that crash against our souls until our defenses are overwhelmed by them and we give in, even against our will. Like the apostle Paul, we find ourselves crying, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."⁵ These cravings can take many forms, including greed, lust, envy, hatred and self-deprecation.⁶ The tragedy of shame is that it makes us forget how precious we are to God and to our loved ones.

GUILT. Another common way we experience our captivity to sin is through our guilt over bad decisions, reprehensible behaviors or habits, and negative actions. But there is also another form of guilt – the guilt of privilege. How hard it is to recognize and accept the ways we benefit from the misery and exploitation of others. My cheap produce comes at the expense of many farmers losing their farms. The prosperity of my nation came from slaves, indentured servants and Native Peoples who were displaced from their ancestral lands and forced to work for the enrichment of others. I may have worked very hard to earn what I have, but

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my skin color, my sexual orientation, my gender, my ethnicity, my citizenship status, my (dis)ability status and many other factors may also have played a part in where I am now. There is a collective and intergenerational dimension to sin. The biblical authors knew that very well.⁷

OPPRESSION. Tragically, sin does not hurt only those responsible for the sin. The innocent often have to bear the consequences of our sin. Similarly, we can be harmed by the sins of others, including sins from previous generations. Social institutions and practices bear the marks of that sin and can often perpetuate injustices and the oppression of certain groups. Think, for example, of slavery; lynching;⁸ Jim Crow laws (past and present); mass incarceration⁹ of Black and Brown people;¹⁰ violent removal of Indigenous people from their original lands;¹¹ massacres and genocides; gender-based violence; abuse and discrimination against women, girls and sexual minorities;¹² and pollution of the environment¹³ resulting in the extinction of species and ecosystems and threatening the well-being of communities. The freedom of a Christian is not just freedom for the sinner but also liberation for the oppressed.

FRAGILITY. Death and broken health can be experienced as serious threats to our sense of freedom and well-being. They should not be understood as punishments for sin, though some Christians interpret them this way.¹⁴ Death and sickness are just natural parts of our finitude. Only God is immortal. As creatures vulnerable to sickness and death, we are naturally finite and mortal. Where sin comes in is in our incredulity. Sin is not trusting Christ's promise that, despite our finitude and mortality, we are of infinite worth to God and that the Holy Spirit promises us resurrection and eternal life, which involves the healing and final fulfillment of our being in eternity. The freedom that Christ offers us does not remove those things; it gives us the courage to live fully and joyfully despite them.

SELF-DEPRECATORY FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS. We know we sin in treating other human beings poorly and robbing them of their dignity. But we often forget that this also applies to ourselves. If the most important commandment is to love God and others as we love ourselves, then loving ourselves is a presupposition of all the commandments. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista theologians for uncovering that dimension of sin. We sin when we fail to value ourselves as God values us. In fact, the freedom of a Christian comes from knowing ourselves as passionately loved, completely accepted and fully forgiven by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

One last word

May this study guide serve you as a resource to better understand Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*. And may your study of that text bring you joy and a deeper clarity of what it means to be free in Christ, free to love and serve.

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Unit I: Background

This unit provides background information to clarify key concepts in *The Freedom of a Christian*. It might be helpful to study this unit before reading the treatise. Reading theological works can be like listening to one side of a telephone conversation: we get only a partial understanding of what we have heard, and often what we think we heard isn't quite correct. To avoid serious misunderstandings of Luther's work, we must explore the circumstances that moved him to write it. Hence, we begin this unit with a session on the historical background that motivated Luther to pen *The Freedom of a Christian* and why he dedicated it to Pope Leo X. The other sessions will clarify some of Luther's ideas and assumptions when writing the treatise that might not be as obvious to us as they were in his times.

Once you finish the sessions in this unit, please read the entire text of *The Freedom of a Christian*, available [here](#), before proceeding to the next unit.

SESSION 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*I am I and my circumstance*¹⁵ (José Ortega y Gasset).

*In conclusion, so that I might not approach you, Holy Father, empty-handed, I offer this little tract, published under your name, in the prospect of an established peace and good hope. In it you can get a taste of the kinds of studies with which I could and would occupy myself far more fruitfully It is a small thing with respect to its size, but (unless I am mistaken) it contains a summary of the whole Christian life, if you understand its meaning ("Letter to Leo X," *Freedom*, 9).*

To understand *The Freedom of a Christian* we must understand the circumstances that led Luther to write it. We must also take into consideration the assumptions he made. His intellectual frame of reference and the categories he used came from a world very different from our own. Keep in mind that Luther lived and wrote before the scientific revolution and the psychological and medical discoveries we now take for granted. His understanding of politics, social structures and gender relations was also shaped, and in many cases constrained, by the medieval world in which he lived. Yet his creativity, his staunch honesty regarding the human condition, the depth of his analysis of the Holy Scripture, and his openness to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have made him relevant for 500 years. Even today his writings speak to us in powerful and liberating ways.

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However, not everything he wrote was helpful. Sometimes his thinking was distorted by the prejudices of his day – for example, against Jews and Muslims. His treatment of some of his fellow reformers was unnecessarily vitriolic, and when German peasants rebelled against the abuses of the nobility, Luther tragically sided with the nobles, calling for unrestrained violence against his fellow Germans even though he had originally backed their claims as legitimate. In many things Luther was wrong. For the harm that has been done in his name, we, the ELCA, have apologized¹⁶ and are trying to make amends. Nonetheless, it is also true that many of Luther's insights have proved to be life-giving and revolutionary in their own right, liberating and empowering many. Luther was not a prophet nor an angel; he was a teacher of the gospel and a very human one at that. He discovered in the gospel a power that liberated him from the weight of sin and decided to dedicate his life to spreading the living word of the gospel so that others could experience that same freedom.

The importance of Luther lies in the fact that he pointed us in the direction of Christ, the living word of God that sets us free.

The Freedom of a Christian was one of Luther's earlier writings, but it was a hit from the moment it was first published in September 1520. It was so popular that, according to Luther scholar Timothy Wengert, "Including the original Latin and German versions published in Wittenberg, there were between 1520 and 1526 thirty printings: nineteen in German, one in the dialect of the German lowlands, and eight in Latin, along with translations of the Latin into German (!) and English." The original Latin version, longer and meant for a more academic audience, also included an appendix that did not appear in the original German version.

The Freedom of a Christian was a last attempt at reconciliation to prevent the fracturing of the church.

The purpose of the treatise was to present to Pope Leo X the core of Luther's teaching about the Bible and the Christian faith. Three years had elapsed since Luther's publication of the 95 Theses. A split was looming between Luther and the official church.¹⁷ For that reason, Luther included a dedication letter to Pope Leo X.

The version of the treatise being made available for users of this study guide includes that letter to preserve the integrity of the original work. However, because the tone of the letter was very different from that of the treatise, this study guide will set aside the letter.



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Luther did not want to divide the church or start his own denomination. What he wanted was to free the gospel so that it could continue to free humanity. He felt that the simple truth of the gospel was being obscured by innumerable religious practices (or “good works”) and beliefs that, in the end, were more harmful than helpful. In some cases, such as the selling of indulgences, they placed unnecessary and unfair burdens on the poor, robbing them of the little money they had to provide for themselves and their families. This was not strictly a religious issue but also a justice and pastoral issue. In that sense, Luther’s protest was not new; he was following the tradition of the prophets of Israel. Remember, for instance, Isaiah’s harsh words against the religious and power establishment of his time:¹⁸

I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you, even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:13c-17).

When Luther writes against “good works,” he is not talking primarily about works of justice and service to the neighbor. He is talking primarily about prescribed practices and rituals performed to earn merit before God. The freedom Luther discovered in the gospel was not a freedom that liberates us from the responsibility to perform works of justice and service to the neighbor but the freedom to genuinely care for the well-being of others and joyfully dedicate ourselves to their service.

When the seed of faith has germinated in our lives, it inevitably grows into a tree of love that bears the abundant fruit of good works for the sake of our neighbors.

Christians must do good works, not to appease God or to earn merit in heaven but because our neighbors need them and we honor God through them. Then justice “rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”¹⁹

Another reason Luther was so concerned about good works was that he understood how they can inflate the ego and prevent people from learning to rely on God’s grace alone. Luther had a deep understanding of the human psyche. He knew from personal experience and his pastoral work how people can block themselves from God’s grace. After all, the only way we can accept God’s forgiveness is by admitting that we need it in the first place. Ironically, what leads us to Christ is not our good works but our guilt! The danger of focusing on good works is that they can be used to hide from God. How can God, our heavenly physician, heal the wound of our sin if we keep hiding it behind our merits, good works and accomplishments? Only the sick can be healed; only the guilty can be forgiven.

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QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Why are you interested in studying *The Freedom of a Christian*? What are you hoping to get out of it? What do you think of when you think of freedom? How is the freedom of being Christian the same or different?
2. What questions do you bring to this study? How might your particular circumstances shape your questions and the “lenses” through which you read the text? (Think about your job, academic formation, race, ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, physical abilities and disabilities, political affiliations, etc.).
3. Briefly review the history of the Reformation. We can suggest several books, movies and documentaries to facilitate this review.²⁰ Are there questions you need answered before you can understand this treatise? Where can you search for answers?
4. Which aspects of Luther's teachings do you find life-giving? Which do you find problematic, and why?
5. Can you think of any contemporary equivalents of “good works”? What modern practices and beliefs do people use to earn the approval of God, their peers or even themselves?

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SESSION 2: THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

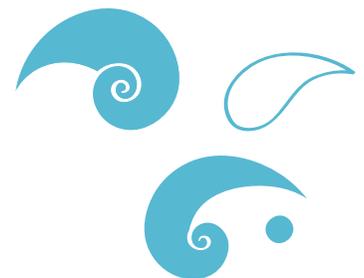
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (Job 42:5).

A person who has not tasted its spirit in the midst of trials and misfortune cannot possibly write well about faith or understand what has been written about it. But one who has had even a small taste of faith can never write, speak, reflect, or hear enough about it. As Christ says in John 4[:14], it is a 'spring of water welling up to eternal life' (Freedom, 10).

Another thing we must keep in mind as we read Luther is that he understood theology to be an existential discipline (about life) and not just an intellectual, scholarly exercise. Existential, in this context, means connected to our existence, to our daily lives. This discipline has to do with that which gives us a sense of meaning and purpose and makes our lives worth living. It is not a matter of mere intellectual curiosity, like asking how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. Moreover, it is not a matter of accepting certain beliefs just because they happen to be in the Bible. In fact, even though the Bible is the word of God, one could read the whole book without ever perceiving the living word of God that speaks directly to our hearts, liberating us for lives of meaning, purpose and loving kindness.

Luther believed that faith is not something that can be learned from books. Faith is learned from experience, from our daily struggles, sufferings, pain, trials and tribulations. Especially in our moments of greatest weakness, we discover in God the power that sustains us and rescues us from the abyss of despair. In the guilt and anguish of our own sinfulness we are surprised by God's amazing grace as the hugs and joyful tears of a loving parent who has long awaited the return of their child, once lost but now found. In the experience of poverty, when circumstances or injustices force us to depend absolutely on God alone for our daily bread, we discover that God is faithful and provides abundantly even in the midst of poverty. In times of sickness and death we discover the power of the resurrection and life everlasting, not as something in the distant future or in a heaven far beyond the clouds but rather as an upsurge of spiritual power and hope that fills us with a peace that surpasses all understanding.

In the midst of such experiences the light of the gospel allows our faith to open its eye and see the invisible God.



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In the midst of such experiences the light of the gospel allows our faith to open its eye and see the invisible God sustaining the world with love, birthing the future with tenderness and redeeming our lives with sacrificial loving kindness. Without living through experiences such as these, faith is hard and perhaps even impossible to understand. Thus, Luther opens his treatise with the following warning:

Many people view Christian faith as something easy They do this because they have not judged faith in light of any experience, nor have they ever tasted its great power. This is because a person who has not tasted its spirit in the midst of trials and misfortune cannot possibly write well about faith or understand what has been written about it. But one who has had even a small taste of faith can never write, speak, reflect, or hear enough about it (Freedom, 10).

To understand what Luther has written about faith in *The Freedom of a Christian*, we must relate it to our own experiences of “trials” and “misfortunes,” of suffering, pain and tribulation. Unfortunately, there is no lack of such experiences in the world these days. In addition to the individual trials and misfortunes we each face being human, there is also the collective suffering that many around the world and in our own country have to endure unnecessarily due to things such as natural disasters, global pandemics, climate change, droughts, wars, terrorism, political repression, lack of access to health care, poverty, blatant expressions of racism, rising xenophobia and hate crimes, colonialism and so much more. Luther’s claim is that from the debris of all that pain and suffering, the flower of faith is born when touched by the light of the gospel. That is what we learn from the cross of Christ, that the glory of Easter was born out of the pain of Good Friday.

Luther’s claim is that from the debris of all that pain and suffering, the flower of faith is born when touched by the light of the gospel.

There is a particular category of “trials” that Luther focused on in his theology. These were the trials from which he suffered most. He called them by the German word *anfechtungen* (*tentatio* in Latin), the burning anguish provoked by awareness of one’s guilt and doubt about one’s worthiness before God. Those moments of trial and misfortune give us an opportunity to experience our absolute dependence on God’s mercy. That is when we realize that our destiny is in God’s hands alone, and it is a powerful, liberating experience. As the apostle Paul put it, “Whenever I am weak, I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). As a wise elder said once: “Faith is not really faith until it is the only thing that sustains you.” To be held by the hand of God, and nothing but the hand of God, is a powerful experience. Only then can one understand what faith is.

Finally, Luther uses opposites and tension (paradoxes) in his theology. To understand the gospel, Luther realized, we must be able to hold opposing truths in tension with each other. Revelation happens in the middle of those opposites. To take one side without the other is to seriously misunderstand and even distort the gospel. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, for instance, Luther explains that the living word of God is law and gospel, commands AND promises. If one were to take the promises but discard the commandments, one would

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end up with what the German martyr and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” He wrote:

Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjack’s wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which [it] showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. ... Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.²¹

Law and gospel, together, are the living word of God that illuminates our soul with the joy of freedom and orients our lives toward the joy of free service for our neighbors

Without the law, the gospel does not set us free but rather becomes an excuse for all kinds of excesses and abuses that make us less free

and harm us and those around us. Without the gospel, the law becomes a prison for the soul; it stifles love and turns the joy of serving the neighbor into grudging obedience. Law and gospel, together, are the living word of God that illuminates our soul with the joy of freedom and orients our lives toward the joy of free service for our neighbors. Other examples of Luther’s paradoxes follow:

- Christian believers are absolutely free and, at the same time, absolutely bound to their neighbors (Luther uses the contrasting images of lord and servant).
- Christian believers are saints and sinners at once.
- God is absolutely hidden from us yet fully revealed to us (in the cross of Jesus Christ).
- Humans are spiritual beings (interior) and also embodied creatures (exterior).

Some of these paradoxes will be explored below. They must always be held together in tension for us to understand Luther’s point.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. In what ways have we made the Christian faith easy today? How have we made grace “cheap” today?
2. Why does Luther consider “trials” and “misfortunes” a privileged place for discovering what faith is all about?
3. Have you experienced “trials” and “misfortunes” when you felt mysteriously sustained by God? How did God show up for you during those experiences?
4. Some experiences of suffering feel very distant to us. How can you nevertheless enter into the experiences of suffering faced by others different or distant from you? Where can you listen to their stories and their testimonies of how God “showed up” for them? Why is seeking out such stories important?
5. What is the difference between faith and belief?
6. Why do you think Luther relied so much on paradoxes to understand the Christian faith?

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SESSION 3: PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

One more point needs to be clarified in order to understand *The Freedom of a Christian*: Luther's understanding of human nature. Luther was not an optimist when it came to people's capacity to be good and righteous. He was convinced that human beings were thoroughly sinful to the point where even our supposedly good intentions are always tainted by sin.

He also believed that humans can be described as having two natures, a bodily nature and a spiritual nature. In the treatise, Luther explains that he is speaking "from a rather distant and unsophisticated starting point" (*Freedom*, 11) in order to be easily understood by "common folk (for I serve only them)" (*Freedom*, 10). Luther was a brilliant teacher. He took the idea of two natures, which people considered to be common sense, and used it to build his argument in a way that was accessible to common folk. This is how he explains his idea:

*Every human being consists of two natures: a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which people label the soul, the human being is called a spiritual, inner, and new creature. According to the bodily nature, which people label the flesh, a human being is called the fleshly, outer, and old creature. ... This distinction results in the fact that in the Scripture these contrary things are said about the same person, because these two "human beings" fight against each other in the very same human being, as in Gal. 5[:17], "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the spirit, and what the spirit desires is opposed to the flesh" (*Freedom*, 11).*

Notice that Luther speaks of two natures, not two parts. This is important! These are orientations of the whole person, not subparts of the human being. That distinction is important because there has been the tendency in the history of Christian thought and Western civilization to undervalue the body to the point of considering it evil, especially the bodies of women, Indigenous peoples, people of African descent and many others.²² That idea, called "body/soul" dualism, has been used to justify terrible abuses and oppression. Therefore, we must be careful that we don't reinforce that dualism. We must also commit to resisting and dismantling such oppression and abuses.

Notice that Luther speaks of two natures, not two parts. These are orientations of the whole person, not subparts of the human being.

Sometimes Luther comes close to a body-soul dualism, but his main point is not dependent on such dualism – remember his warning above that he speaks "from a rather unsophisticated starting point" (*Freedom*, 11) to make ideas easy for "common folk" to understand (*Freedom*, 10). What Luther seems to be getting at is the human experience of having contradictory forces or inner motives driving our behavior.

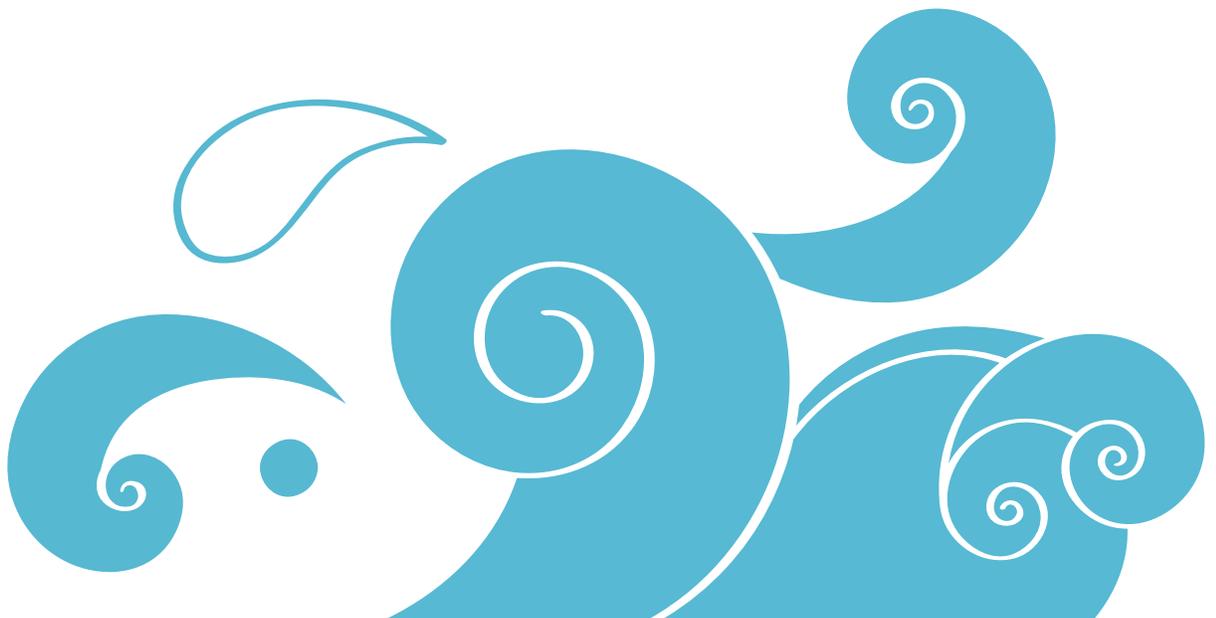
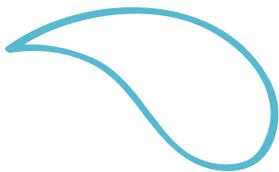
the Freedom of a Christian

For instance, on the one hand, we sometimes experience ourselves as being driven by strong, almost instinctual desires that we sometimes associate with the needs and wants of our embodied selves. On the other hand, we also experience ourselves as decision makers, free agents responsible for our actions. We think of ourselves as beings who have consciousness and language. We are capable of thinking, feeling and empathizing.

We do not act by impulse or reflex alone. We also experience ourselves as beings capable of knowing ourselves and therefore of transcending ourselves. We can enter into intentional relationships with others. We have the power to ponder questions about morality, the meaning of life and the structure of reality (science). We are beings that recognize our own finitude, yet we also experience an unquenchable yearning for the infinite and the eternal. We are both of those realities at the same time. Luther refers to that tension as the inside and the outside of the human person.

Another metaphor Luther uses to speak of human nature is that we have an interior and an exterior. Our interior, or the dimension of interiority, is how we relate to ourselves and to God, which Luther also refers to as our spiritual nature. Our exterior, or the dimension of exteriority, is how we relate to our bodies and, by mediation of our bodies, to other human beings and the rest of creation.

People can engage in acts that, from the outside, look beautiful and laudable but, from the inside, are motivated by vanity or egotism.



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Have you ever had the experience of being physically present in a place – even performing certain actions, such as reciting the Lord’s Prayer at church – but your mind being somewhere else? Likewise, people can engage in acts that, from the outside, look beautiful and laudable but, from the inside, are motivated by vanity or egotism. This distinction is the key to understanding Luther’s relentless insistence that good works cannot make us good or truly righteous. It is also the key to understanding two of the central claims in *The Freedom of a Christian*, namely that:

The Christian [person] is a completely free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian [person] is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all (Freedom, 10).

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Why do you think Luther found it necessary to speak of human beings as having two natures?
2. What times have you felt your interior (or spiritual) nature? In what ways have you experienced the distinction between your spiritual (interior) and bodily (exterior) natures?
3. What is the problem with saying that human beings are composed of two “parts,” a physical body and a spiritual or immaterial soul?
4. How does Luther’s distinction between the inner and the outer natures of the human person help with morality? (Hint: It has something to do with motivation.)
5. How do you think a person can be free and subject to none while at the same time being “a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all”?

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Unit 2: Facing God

This unit explores the first part of Luther's treatise, about our relationship with God. Luther was worried about superficial solutions to the serious problem of human fallenness (or sin). He doubted that external actions could get to the core of the problem. Instead, he believed that only the gospel has the power to heal the wound of sin that causes so many injustices and that separates us from God and each other.

When faith dares to believe and trust the promises of the gospel, then our relationship with God begins to be healed. When we learn to see ourselves and each other as God sees us, then our lives produce abundant fruits of love, peace, joy, righteousness, and justice.

Before starting each session, read the portions of the treatise assigned in parentheses. You might want to write down in your journal any insights and questions for further exploration that come to you as you read.

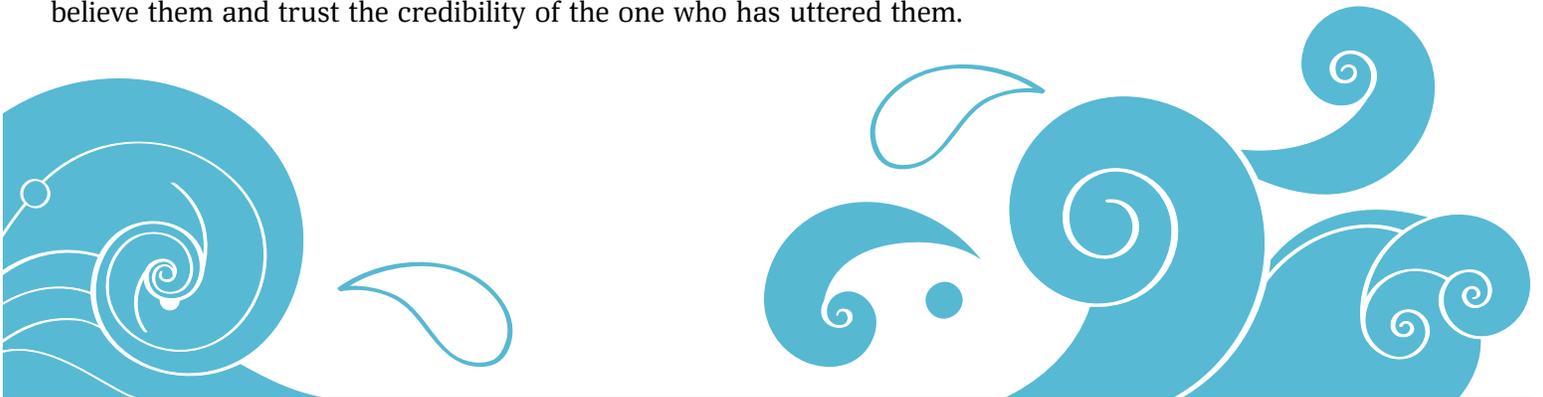
SESSION 4: THE POWER OF THE LIVING WORD OF GOD

(Read paragraphs 24-30.)

We may consider it certain and firmly established, that the soul can lack everything except the word of God. Without it absolutely nothing else satisfies the soul. But when [the] soul has the word, it is rich and needs nothing else (Freedom, 12).

There is a saying about how "sticks and stones may break our bones but words cannot hurt us." Whoever has ever been hurt by words knows how devastating they can be, even more so than "sticks and stones." Words can touch our inner being and wound our very souls in ways that physical things such as sticks and stones cannot.

The opposite is also true; words can bring us joys and even pleasures that material things cannot match. "I am so proud of you!" "I love you too!" "I forgive you; I really do." "Yes!" Those are just a few examples of words that can enter deep within us and touch us in the intimacy of our souls. But words can do that only if we believe them and trust the credibility of the one who has uttered them.



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It is through words that God acts in us to save us and set us free. Thus, in the book of the prophet Isaiah, God declares:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

In the Small Catechism, speaking of the power of baptism, Luther clarifies that “without the word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life.” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1165). Likewise, what makes bread and wine a sacrament is not magic but the faith of the heart which clings to the words of Jesus, promising, “This is my body” and “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26, 28).

At one point in Jesus’ ministry, the gospel tells us, he was unable to perform many miracles in his hometown because of the people’s unbelief (see Mark 6:5 and Matthew 13:58). The faith of the believer and the word of God belong together!

Through the living word of the gospel, Christ enters into the solitude of our interiority and communicates to us God’s promises:

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38).

Through the living word of the gospel, Christ enters into the solitude of our interiority and communicates to us God’s promises. ... These words, like so many others from Holy Scripture, are like an explosive detonation shattering the chains and bars that imprison our souls.

These words, like so many others from Holy Scripture, are like an explosive detonation shattering the chains and bars that imprison our souls. It liberates us. It allows us to reach the full stature of our true beautiful selves, fashioned in the image of God.

Trust in the words of the gospel liberates us from the compulsive need to constantly justify ourselves. Freed in Christ, we no longer have the need to prove our worth whether to God, to others or even to ourselves. There is a radical transformation in our priorities and in the things we value. In terms of our sense of worth (of ourselves and of others) it no longer matters whether we are wealthy or poor; women, men or trans; physically able or disabled; citizen or undocumented; Ph.D., M.D. or G.E.D.; Brown, White, Black or any race or ethnicity; highly esteemed in society or marginalized; from this religion or from that one. The list goes on and on.

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We are liberated to be simply human, God's children, siblings to each other, equal members of the community of God's beautiful creation. Those other things don't disappear; they continue to be part of our life experience and social location, but they no longer have the power to define us. They are put in proper perspective. Thus, Paul – writing from prison and awaiting possible execution – exuberantly exclaims:

Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith (Philippians 3:7-9).

When we are thus made free in Christ, then our actions and behavior become truly good, righteous and holy because we are liberated from the tyranny of such hidden compulsions as fear, insecurity or egotism. Only then can our actions truly be called righteous, free and praiseworthy, because only then do they flow from genuine love.

The gospel sets us free but does not make us perfect!

A note of caution is needed here. On this side of eternity even our best intentions and purest motives are distorted by sin and severely limited by our finite capacities and the limits of our understanding. Despite our best intentions we will not always know the right thing to do. The gospel sets us free but does not make us perfect! In order to serve the well-being of our neighbors we must be thoughtful, intentional and humble. We must make use of the best resources available; we must engage our moral traditions (for example, the Ten Commandments and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount) and engage disciplines such as Ethics, Theology, and the Human and Social Sciences, such as Psychology, Race Analysis, Gender Analysis, History, Economics, etc. We must make good use of our reasoning powers and be open to the wisdom that others bring including the wisdom of "common folk," and of those directly affected by issues.²³ But even then, we ought never forget that on this side of eternity even the best moral principles and best reasoning continue to be tainted with sin; we always stand in need of divine guidance and forgiveness. No matter how good our actions are and how pure our intentions might seem to be, in the end everything depends on faith because everything depends on God.



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Faith is what makes our works good or bad, not the works themselves.

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themselves. No matter how good, beautiful and righteous an action or behavior appears to be from the outside, it lacks the power to make a person good or righteous. Only faith can do that! What makes an action or behavior righteous or good is precisely the inner disposition of the one performing it, not the action or behavior itself. And since the living word of God through the Holy Spirit is what creates faith in the soul, then the only thing that can ultimately make us good and righteous is the living word of God. Thus, Luther says,

One thing and one thing alone is necessary for the Christian life, righteousness, and freedom, and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ. ... [W]hen soul has the word, it is rich and needs nothing else, because the word of God is the word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, freedom, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and every imaginable blessing (Freedom, 11-12).

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Reflect on a time when you felt the power of words in your personal life. What were these words? What emotions did you feel when you received them?
2. What words of the Holy Scripture resonate most with you? How do they make you feel?
3. Reflect on a time when you felt the word of God operating on you, deep in your soul. What were the words? What effect did they have on you?
4. What would you like to be liberated from? What words from Scripture might speak to that particular situation? Spend some time in quiet meditation, dwelling in those words and letting them operate on you; then, journal about the experience.
5. What do you think Luther (following Paul) meant when he said that if an action does not proceed from faith, then it is sin (Romans 14:23)?
6. How would the world be different if our decisions, actions and behavior proceeded from sincere faith and genuine love?

SESSION 5: THE POWER OF SIN

(Read paragraphs 31-38.)

The inner person becomes guilty and a condemned slave of sin only by ungodliness and unbelief of the heart and not by any external sin or work (Freedom, 13).

Luther was convinced that human nature²⁴ has been so distorted by sin that humans can never be truly good or righteous on their own. This is a point he stressed throughout his career with great passion. For instance, in the treatise he explains, “When you begin to believe, you discover at the same time that everything in you is completely blameworthy, damnable sins, as Rom. 3[:23] states: ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’ And Rom. 3[:10-12] says, ‘There is no one who is righteous,’ no one does good, ‘all have turned aside, altogether they have done worthless things’” (*Freedom*, 12-13; Luther is quoting from the Vulgate translation of the Bible).

There is a difference between individual sins, in the plural, and sin, in the singular. Sins are symptoms of sin; sin is the root cause of all sins. Sin, in the original biblical languages, means to miss the mark, as when an archer’s arrow misses the bull’s-eye. Sin is an inclination within us that makes our lives miss the mark.

Sins, in the plural, are symptoms of sin; sin, in the singular, is the root cause of all sins.

Our internal compass is out of sync with what is truly good and desirable. We become alienated from God, the source and goal of our existence. That leaves us with an abysmal emptiness in our souls, a spiritual hunger nothing can satisfy. We try to fill that emptiness with things such as money, status, power, relationships, sex and the like, but eventually we end up hungrier than before. In the end, only God can fill that emptiness and satisfy the deep hunger of the soul. This is expressed beautifully in the opening of Augustine’s *Confessions*: “You [God] made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”²⁵

The tragedy is that, rather than let that restlessness of the heart lead us to God, we use it to turn away from God. In the treatise Luther uses the technical, Latin word *concupiscentia* to describe our perverted desires. Some versions of *The Freedom of a Christian* translate *concupiscentia* as “desire.” However, that gives the false impression that desires in themselves are bad. Without desires we would lack motivation to do anything, good or bad. Desires are an important part of being human. They are a natural and good part of us as physical, embodied creatures. Desires are a gift from God. The problem is that we misuse them. We point them in the wrong direction and end up missing the mark.²⁶

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Sin also has a collective, social dimension. No human being is an island entire of itself, as the poet John Donne wrote. We exist in webs of relationships; we are always part of specific cultures and social institutions.²⁷ Those institutions, cultures and other webs of relationships also bear the marks of sin, of missing the mark. Theologians have called that “structural sin.”²⁸

When society is organized so that some groups are privileged at the expense of others, the marks of sin become apparent.

When society is organized so that some groups are privileged at the expense of others, the marks of sin become apparent. Sin even leads people to misuse the word of God and distort its meaning, justifying such unjust social structures as if they had been sanctioned or even mandated by God. Sadly, unjust social structures can be justified by their victims as well as their perpetrators (this is a form of internalized oppression).

Some examples of structural sin in Western civilization can be seen in the still-open wounds of slavery, Jim Crow laws and lynching; the mass murder of Jews, Roma people, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people, and so many others viewed as subhuman by the white supremacists of yesterday and today; the extermination or forced relocation of Native Peoples on this continent and the expropriation of their ancestral lands; sexual exploitation of and violence against girls, women and sexual minorities; the pollution of the planet and extinction of countless species and ecosystems. The list is endless and ongoing; the pain is profound. One of Luther’s great insights is that we cannot heal our sin without honestly confronting it. He discovered from personal experience and from his studies of Holy Scripture that God frees us from sin first by making us painfully aware of our depravity and the seriousness of our sinfulness. Otherwise, we would simply trick ourselves into thinking that our condition is not really that bad or that we can, by our own strength and efforts, free ourselves from the clutches of sin. Only total surrender to God’s grace can set us free. In the treatise, Luther explains:

By this knowledge you will realize that you need Christ, who suffered and rose again for you, in order that, believing in him, you may become another human being by this faith, because all your sins are forgiven and you are justified by another’s merits, namely, by Christ’s alone (Freedom, 13).

In sum, Luther thought that the word of God addresses the soul with two distinct kinds of words: commands (also known as “law”) and promises (also known as “gospel”). Through the law God condemns us, revealing to us how far we have fallen from the way God wants us to live and be, and how others have been hurt by our sin. This is like a surgeon cutting us open but only to access the inside that needs to be cleansed and healed. Then comes the gospel, God’s promises, which speaks directly to the soul a word of forgiveness and redemption. By faith the soul clings to those promises; we experience a new birth and, for the first time, real freedom.

Only by taking a serious look at our sin, individual and collective, and opening ourselves to God’s healing action in us and in our society, can we hope for healing from the terrible wounds that we carry and from which so many continue to suffer.

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Only by taking a serious look at our sin, individual and collective, and opening ourselves to God's healing action in us and in our society, can we hope for healing from the terrible wounds that we carry and from which so many continue to suffer. The destructive power of sin can be defeated only by the life-giving power of faith.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. How do you see the influence of sin in the world today? In your own life? In the communities and country where you live? In nature?
2. How can we listen to those directly affected by structural sin?
3. How are you affected by structural sin? How do you benefit from sinful systems or unjust social structures (from the present or the past)? What would it mean to confess and repent from structural sin?
4. Where have you heard or seen God's words of "law" being addressed to the world today? What is that word? Who are the prophets of today?
5. Where have you heard or seen God's words of promise (or "gospel") recently? What are those words? Do you believe them? How can we respond? How will you respond?

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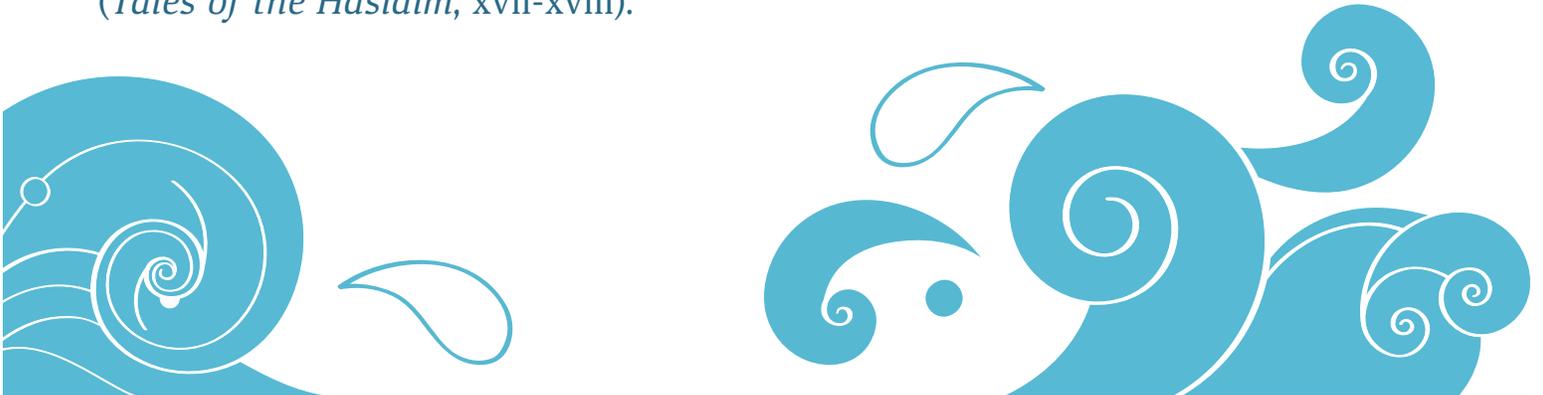
SESSION 6: THE POWER OF FAITH

(Read paragraphs 39-51.)

What person's heart upon hearing these things would not rejoice from its very core and upon accepting such consolation would not melt in love with Christ—something completely unattainable with laws and works? Who could possibly harm or frighten such a heart? If awareness of sin or dread of death overwhelms it, it is ready to hope in the Lord. It neither fears hearing about these evils nor is moved by them, until finally it despises its enemies. For it believes that Christ's righteousness is its own and that its sin is now not its own but Christ's. More than that, the presence of Christ's righteousness swallows up every sin (Freedom, 21).

Early on, we learn who we are from the words of our caregivers and those we trust. Their words, spoken or otherwise communicated, have the power to shape our sense of identity and our personality. That is why we should be thoughtful about the words we utter, especially to children and those over whom we have any kind of influence. That is also why we should be careful about what words we consume, even in adulthood, because words, as poets and storytellers know, have the uncanny ability to enter the intimacy of our solitude and touch our very souls. The living word of God, communicated to us through the reading of Scripture, the proclaiming of the gospel and the administering of the sacraments, and mediated through different kinds of icons and art, has the power to transform us from the inside out. Jewish theologian Martin Buber relates the following ancient story about the power of words:

My grandfather was [disabled]. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how [his teacher] ... used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke [despite his disability], and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured (Tales of the Hasidim, xvii-xviii).



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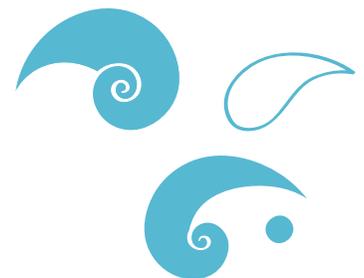
In the treatise, Luther explains that the effects of the word of God on us can be compared to the effects of fire on iron. When the ironsmith puts an iron rod into a flaming oven, little by little the iron is transformed by the fire, sharing the heat and color of the flames. Thus, the promises of God conveyed in the words of the gospel are not just in themselves “holy, true, righteous, peaceful, and filled with total goodness,” but those very attributes of God’s living words are appropriated by the soul that believes them. As Luther puts it:

The soul that adheres to them with a firm faith is not simply united with them but fully swallowed up by them, so that it not only shares in them but also is saturated and intoxicated by their every power. For if Christ’s touch healed, how much more will this tender touch in the spirit—or, better, this ingestion by the word—communicate to the soul all things that belong to the word. Therefore, by this means, through faith alone without works, the word of God justifies the soul and makes it holy, true, peaceful, and free, filled with every blessing and truly made a child of God (Freedom, 14-15).

Those very attributes of God’s living words are appropriated by the soul that believes them.

But there is more! What the word of God promises us in the gospel is nothing less than full communion with Christ, the second person of the Triune God. This full communion between Christ and the believer is so intimate and close that Luther compares it to the relationship of marriage where two individuals become one flesh.²⁹ In an ideal marriage what once belonged to the individual spouse now belongs to the other as well. By faith our betrothal to Christ is fulfilled. According to Luther, all that used to be ours alone – including our sin, guilt, shame, emotional wounds, fragility, suffering, mortality and even hell – have now been taken up by Christ, our divine spouse. But Christ being God, all those things are now hollow and empty of any power. In fact, they have been obliterated by Christ on the cross.

Conversely, in this “happy exchange” between Christ and the believer’s soul, effected by the word of God received in faith, all that belongs to Christ now belongs to the one who believes as well! Rather than our sin bringing down Christ, it is Christ’s beauty, goodness and majesty that swallow up all our sin so that nothing remains but Christ’s holiness and goodness. This is reflected in the apostle Paul’s words to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27), and therefore “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).



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The more we delight in the words of God's promises and soak in them, the more our souls glow with the anticipation of Christ's beauty, righteousness, justice and holiness, and the more our lives will reflect the light of Christ in our relationships with others.

For now, all we have is a promissory note, an engagement ring, for all that we will be given in full on the other side of eternity. But the word of the one who has given us

the ring is trustworthy, and the promise is good. And believing that is the greatest worship we can offer God. As Luther puts it:

This is the highest worship of God: To bestow on God truthfulness and righteousness and whatever else ought to be ascribed to the One in whom a person trusts. Here the soul submits itself to what God wishes; here it hallows God's name and allows itself to be treated according to God's good pleasure. This is because, clinging to God's promises, the soul does not doubt that God is true, righteous, and wise—the One who will do, arrange, and care for everything in the best possible way (Freedom, 15).

By faith we can already taste God's promises and begin to live in expectation of their fulfilment. The more we delight in the words of God's promises and soak in them, the more our souls glow with the anticipation of Christ's beauty, righteousness, justice and holiness, and the more our lives will reflect the light of Christ in our relationships with others. That is how faith alone makes us righteous, just and holy. But it is an alien righteousness; the light we shine on others is Christ's light reflected, not our own.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Have you ever felt enthralled by a story from Holy Scripture? If so, what was the story? What do you remember about the experience?
2. Reflect on a time, perhaps from your childhood, when you were promised something you really wanted but had to wait for it. What was the experience like?
3. Which of the promises of the gospel are you looking forward to the most?
4. Do this exercise in small groups. Choose a brief story from the gospel. Have one person read it out loud, slowly, while the others listen with their eyes closed, trying to enter the scene through their imagination. Engage all your senses in experiencing the scene. Have a long pause at the end so that listeners can linger in the scene and perhaps even approach the characters with questions. Then have a conversation with the other members of the group about the experience.

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SESSION 7: THE POWER OF FREEDOM

(Read paragraphs 52-69.)

Not only are we the freest kings of all, but we are also priests forever. This is more excellent by far than kingship, because through the priesthood we are worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another the things that are of God. For these are the priestly duties that absolutely cannot be bestowed on anyone who does not believe. Christ obtained this priesthood for us, if we trust in him, so that as we are confreres, coheirs, corulers, so we are co-priests with him, daring to come with confidence into God's presence in the spirit of faith and cry, "Abba, Father," to pray for another (Freedom, 20).

As Luther put it, we are like the dog in Aesop's fable. The dog had a juicy steak in its mouth, but when it looked down, it saw a reflection of the steak on the surface of the lake. The dog opened its mouth to take a bite out of the steak, but in doing so it lost both the real steak and its reflection (*Freedom*, 20). That is how Adam and Eve, our ancestral parents, fell. The tempter tricked them into believing that if they ate from the tree that God had forbidden, then they would be like God. What they seemed to have forgotten is that they were already like God: "God created humankind in [God's] image" (Genesis 1:27). But Adam and Eve didn't believe this, and by reaching out to steal what was already theirs, they ended up losing it.

That is the tragic story of humanity, the beginning of sin. Because we refuse to trust the promises of Christ, we fall away from our relationship with God. In doing so, we condemn ourselves to lives that are empty and devoid of meaning and joy.

When we believe (trust), everything changes! When we believe deep in our hearts that God favors us and that, in Christ, nothing can frustrate God's plans for us, then we are truly free. Through the power of faith all things end up serving us and contributing to our fulfillment. Luther uses two figures from the biblical world and from his own social context to describe the effects of faith on believers. Faith makes believers into priests and royalty:

*First, what pertains to kingship is this: through faith every Christian is exalted over all things and, by virtue of spiritual power, is absolutely lord of all things. Consequently, nothing at all can ever harm such a one to whom, indeed, all things are subject and forced to serve for salvation. Paul states this in Rom. 8[:28]: "We know that all things work together for good for the elect." He says the same thing in 1 Cor. 3[:21b-23]: "All things are yours, whether ... life or death or the present or the future ... and you belong to Christ" (*Freedom*, 19).*

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What pertains to priesthood is this: that we are empowered to enter into the presence of God as formerly only priests were allowed to do, in order to intercede for the world and for our neighbors' needs. Speaking of Christ's own royalty, Luther explains:

His "kingdom is not from this world." He rules over and consecrates heavenly and spiritual things, such as righteousness, truth, wisdom, peace, and salvation. Not that everything on earth and in hell is not subjected to him (otherwise, how could he protect and save us from them?), but his kingdom does not consist in nor is it derived from such things. Similarly, his priesthood does not consist in the external pomp of robes and gestures But his [priesthood] consists in spiritual things, through which, in an invisible, heavenly office, he intercedes for us before God, offers himself there, and does all the things that a priest ought to do (Freedom, 18).

The royalty and power that the believer has received by faith should not be confused with secular power. Luther was very troubled, for example, by the way the institutional church of his day had distorted such spiritual authority and turned it into secular power. Perhaps one of the most tragic instances of that confusion of powers, even though Luther never mentions it, was when Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Americas and the Pope claimed authority, in the name of Christ, to give those lands to the kings of Spain and Portugal. The reasoning was that because those lands were not ruled by any authority recognized by Christianity, their Christian discoverers had the right, perhaps even the obligation, to conquer and Christianize them, even by force. The practical application of such thinking was tragic and resulted in a genocide of unthinkable proportions that targeted Indigenous peoples and in some ways continues to this day. The theological, juridical argument used by the church and Iberian royalty to claim authority of the lands of the original peoples of the Americas eventually became codified into U.S. law by what is now referred to as "the doctrine of discovery."³⁰ The ELCA voted to repudiate that doctrine at its 2016 churchwide assembly.³¹ Several of the ELCA's ecumenical partners have also repudiated the doctrine of discovery.

It must be emphasized that for Luther there is a difference between the royalty and priesthood that all believers have in common from Christ and the specific offices some have received to serve as political leaders or as ministers of the church. From Luther's perspective, the function of political leaders is to curb evil and promote the common good, especially the well-being of the most vulnerable members of society. The function of pastors is to proclaim the word of God (law and gospel) and administer the sacraments. Such functions belong to those to whom they have been entrusted and should not be arbitrarily taken over by others.

the Freedom of a Christian

The power of the believer is of a different kind. Luther explains:

This power, which “rules in the midst of enemies” and is powerful “in the midst of oppression,” is spiritual. This is nothing other than “power made perfect in weakness” so that in “all things ... I may gain” salvation. In this way, the cross and death are forced to serve me and to work together for salvation. This is a lofty, splendid high rank and a true, omnipotent power and a spiritual sovereignty, in which there is nothing so good or nothing so evil that cannot “work together for good,” if only I believe (Freedom, 19).

The power that comes from faith is not the power to rule over others. In a sense it is the power to rule over ourselves.

The power that comes from faith is not the power to rule over others. In a sense it is the

power to rule over ourselves. The power of faith allows us to not be defeated by fear, guilt or any other adversity, even death. Firmly rooted in the promises of God, it allows the believer to withstand any storm that comes their way and to emerge on the other side of the experience stronger and more resilient. The power of faith is the boldness to believe that God loves us all as loving parents love their children. Therefore, we can come into God’s presence in prayer to share with God the needs of our neighbors. And we can dedicate ourselves to working for the well-being of others because we are convinced that our well-being and eternal destiny have already been taken care of by God in Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. What three powers of faith does Luther list in the treatise?
2. What does it mean that faith gives us the power to be “kings” (or, to use more inclusive language, “royalty”) and priests? What are appropriate ways of using that power? How are you and your church and community being called right now to be royalty and priests to your neighbors?
3. What is the doctrine of discovery? Why did the ELCA repudiate it? What are other examples of the church having misused the powers of faith?
4. Have you ever experienced the kind of power Luther talks about? What was it like? If not, have you ever met someone else who had that power? What were they like?
5. According to Luther’s explanation, what is the difference between being a priest (which all baptized Christians are) and being a pastor (which only a few Christians are)? What responsibilities and privileges do Christians have as priests? What are “rostered leaders” in the ELCA?

What opportunities are available to you to use your “priestly and royal” powers to serve the community? In what ways would you like to get more involved?

the Freedom of a Christian

Unit 3: Facing Our Neighbors

This unit explores the second part of Luther's treatise, specifically what the freedom of a Christian implies for our daily life and our life in community. By faith we are freed from something, but we are also freed for something. We are freed from the captivity of sin; we are freed for loving service to the neighbor, whomever they may be. By faith we are set free. By love we bind ourselves in freedom to our neighbors and joyfully commit ourselves to their well-being. Thanks to God's abundant grace, good works are not necessary for our salvation, but they are absolutely needed for the well-being of our neighbors. Luther explains that Christians should even train their bodies and take good care of them so as to better help their neighbors.

Before starting each session, read the portions of the treatise assigned in parentheses. You might want to record in your journal any insights and questions that come to you.

SESSION 8: MISUNDERSTANDINGS, MISUSES AND ABUSES

(Read paragraphs 70-74.)

Prayer is needed, so that the Lord may "draw us" and make us "theodidaktos," that is, "taught by God." Moreover, as he promised, he will "write the law in our hearts." Otherwise, it is all over for us. For unless God teaches this wisdom hidden in mystery inwardly, [human] nature, because it is offended and regards it as foolish, can only condemn it and judge it to be heretical (Freedom, 36).

A common misunderstanding of Luther's teaching is that if we are saved by grace alone, then we can do whatever we want and no longer need to follow the commandments or do good works. Luther disagrees:

They say, "If faith does all things and alone suffices for righteousness, why then are good works commanded? We will therefore be content with faith, take our ease and do no works." I respond, "Not so, you wicked people, not so!" To be sure, this would be true if we were completely and perfectly inner, spiritual persons, which will not happen until the resurrection of the dead on the last day. As long as we live in the flesh, we are only beginning and advancing toward what will be perfected in the future life (Freedom, 22).

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Good works are absolutely essential to the life of the Christian, who has been set free by faith, but good works do not earn us credit in heaven. Luther's point is that they cannot be used as if heaven were a bank where our good works gain interest so that eventually we can present them to God and put God in debt to us! Good works are not credit or currency. Good works are gifts of love. As Luther puts it:

Good works are absolutely essential to the life of the Christian, who has been set free by faith, but good works do not earn us credit in heaven. ... Good works are gifts of love.

Look at what love and joy in the Lord flow from faith! Moreover, from love proceeds a joyful, gladsome, and free soul, prepared for willing service to the neighbor, which takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, profit or loss. For such a soul does not do this so that people may be obligated to it, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies, nor does it anticipate thankfulness or ingratitude. Instead, it expends itself and what it has in a completely free and happy manner, whether squandering these things on the ungrateful or on the deserving. For as its Father also does – distributing everything to all people abundantly and freely and making “his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,” so the son [or daughter] only does or suffers everything with spontaneous joy, as each person has through Christ been filled with delight in God, the lavish dispenser of all things (Freedom, 29).

Faith always bears abundant fruits of good works. But we have not yet achieved the fullness of our freedom, and we won't until we are on the other side of eternity, what Luther calls “the resurrection of the dead on the last day.” Meanwhile, on this side of eternity we have that freedom and fulfillment only as a promise that we hold on to in faith even amid the turbulence of our inner doubts, base instincts, unhealthy cravings, misoriented desires, unbridled affects and distorted understanding that Luther characterizes as “living in the flesh.” That is why, elsewhere, Luther says that, on this side of eternity, people of faith live in the paradoxical state of being saints and sinners simultaneously.

Another thing that needs to be clarified is that Luther himself was not immune to the distorting effects of sin described in his work. Therefore, his own works (and life) must be studied with a critical eye and not just accepted as if he were right about everything or his decisions were always correct. The distorting influence of sin in his work can be seen clearly in his disturbing calls for violence against Jews, which, centuries later, were lifted up by Hitler and his minions to provide pseudo-theological justification for the genocide of the original people of God's covenant. In 1984 the Lutheran World Federation repudiated Luther's anti-Judaic writings, and in 1994 the ELCA followed suit with “A Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community.”³²

Luther himself was not immune to the distorting effects of sin described in his work.

the Freedom of a Christian

Another instance when Luther's thought seems to have been blurred by sin (structural and cultural) was his infamous diatribe during the German Peasants' War, in which he advised the nobility to kill rebellious peasants like dogs, even though they had sought Luther's support and he had taken up their cause and demands as just and reasonable. Luther too was simultaneously a saint and a sinner, and his works bear the marks of both. The gospel still resonates strongly in his works and in the overall testimony of his life, but one must not mistake Luther's prejudices and limited vision of reality for the gospel to which he dedicated himself. Likewise, Luther's writings yield meanings beyond what Luther himself might have intended. That is how the Holy Spirit works, not only through us but sometimes *despite* us.

Now let us return to the relationship between freedom and good works. One way Luther's teachings were distorted was by misconstruing the role of good works. As we shall see below, good works grow from the faith that makes us free just as apples grow from apple trees. If our lives are not bearing good works, then we are deluding ourselves in thinking that we have faith. The Latin American Lutheran theologian José David Rodríguez, Sr. put it this way: "Faith is never lazy nor slothful; true faith is dynamic and alive and always bears abundant fruits of love and kindness towards the neighbor." (*Introducción a la teología*, 28). However, we must accept that, for now, "we are only beginning and advancing toward what will be perfected in the future life" (*Freedom*, 22).

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. According to Luther, what role do good works play in the life of a Christian? Why does he say that the Christian is saved by faith alone yet also required to do good works?
2. Reflect on a time when you have seen faith bear fruits of abundant love.
3. How can good works be misused? How can the freedom of a Christian be abused?
4. How do you think Luther's own work was distorted by sin?
5. How can a text distorted by prejudices and misconceptions still convey important truths?

the Freedom of a Christian

SECTION 9: TRAINING THE BODY FOR FREEDOM

(Read paragraphs 75-77.)

For, under these circumstances, it is also Christian to care for the body. At times when the body is healthy and fit, we can work and save money and thereby can protect and support those who are in need. In this way, the stronger members may serve the weaker and we may be sons [and daughters] of God: one person caring and working for another, “bearing one another’s burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ.” Look here! This is truly the Christian life; here truly “faith is effective through love.” That is, with joy and love [faith] reveals itself in work of freest servitude, as one person, abundantly filled with the completeness and richness of his or her own faith, serves another freely and willingly (Freedom, 27-28).

We are learning more and more from science how closely connected our bodies and minds are. In fact, the ancient idea that the world is made of two different kinds of stuff, one material and the other spiritual or mental, is now rejected by most scientists and theologians. For instance, we now understand that injury to the brain can result in damage to mental capacity and that mental activity activates neural networks in the brain and even physiological changes in the body. Body and soul are likely just two aspects of our one indivisible being.

Luther knew nothing about neuroscience or modern biology, but he had personal knowledge of how the mind and body are connected. In fact, he believed that an important part of one’s faith life was disciplining the body. An undisciplined body is easy prey for the compulsions of sin. A body properly trained in the disciplines of spirituality can use everything in the service of authentic love, true righteousness and holiness, seeking the glory of God and the well-being of the neighbor.

Being in “the flesh” means being oriented toward one’s self and concerned only about one’s own interests... . being in “the spirit” means orienting our whole being toward love of God and neighbor.

Luther describes the body as the site of a never-ending tug of war between the spirit and the flesh. But if spirit and flesh are not different parts of the human person, then what are they? They can be thought of as orientations of the whole person. Being in “the flesh” means being oriented toward one’s self and concerned only about one’s own interests, desires, needs and wants. Luther called this *incurvatus in se*, a Latin expression that means being curved in upon one’s self. It’s like walking around in a fetal position: all you can see is yourself! Conversely, being in “the spirit” means orienting our whole being toward love of God and neighbor. But even after one is transformed by the power of faith, old habits die hard. So we tend to go back to our original, sinful posture, *Incurvatus in se*.

the Freedom of a Christian

Therefore, even though we are saved by faith alone and without the works of the law, Luther believed that we still need the commands of the law and spiritual disciplines to help align our whole selves with the Spirit. However, Luther warns his readers that such works “ought not to be done under the supposition that through them a person is justified before God. For faith, which alone is righteousness before God, does not endure this false opinion but supposes [that works be done] only so that ‘the body may be enslaved’ [to freedom] and may be purified from its evil ‘passions and desires’ [concupiscence] so that the eye may not turn again to these expunged desires” (*Freedom*, 23).

Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, a Lutheran ethicist and ecofeminist, beautifully summarizes all this with a story in her book *Resisting Structural Evil* that she borrows from Native American/American Indian folklore:

I am reminded of a Cherokee tradition in which a wise elder narrates a story to the tribe’s young people about a fierce battle between two wolves that live inside him. One wolf, clever and proud, is known for its greed, hate, envy, and violence. The other, strong and courageous, is known for its grace, love, peace, and humility. As the Cherokee elder describes the frequent and mounting tension between the two wolves, an excited boy implores him, ‘Please tell us which wolf will win!’

‘The one who will win,’ the elder replies, ‘is the one I feed’
(*Resisting Structural Evil*, 260).

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Why did Luther think that taking good care of the body is important? How is taking good care of the body connected to serving the neighbor? What do you think about that connection?
2. How can we take good care of our bodies? In what ways can we discipline (or train) our bodies so that we are better able to serve God and our neighbor?
3. What would it mean in our contexts to take seriously Luther’s idea that “at times when the body is healthy and fit, we can work and save money and thereby can protect and support those who are in need. In this way, the stronger members may serve the weaker”? How does that compare with the values of our society and communities?
4. What does Luther mean when he says that the body must be “purified from its evil ‘passions and desires’”? What makes a desire or passion evil or good?
5. Why is it dangerous to divide the human being into body and soul? How has that dualism been used to justify injustices and unhealthy practices?
6. How can we “feed” the right wolf?

the Freedom of a Christian

SESSION 10: RIGHTEOUS LIKE A TRUCK

(Read paragraphs 76-91.)

As Christ also says, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” It is obvious that fruit do not bear a tree nor does a tree grow on fruit, but just the reverse: trees bear fruit and fruit grow on trees. Therefore, just as it is necessary that trees exist prior to their fruit and that fruit make trees neither good nor bad, but that, on the contrary, specific kinds of trees make specific kinds of fruit, so it is necessary that first the very character of a person be good or evil before doing any good or evil work and that a person’s works do not make one evil or good but rather that a person does evil or good works (Freedom, 24).

Joseph Sittler, a very influential Lutheran theologian in the United States in the middle of the 20th century, liked to tell a story about a “righteous truck” that illustrates Luther’s view of the relationship between good works, freedom and faith. On a visit to the Holy Land, Sittler decided to rent a car to visit one of his students who was living in Ramallah. All he could get was an old pickup truck. He didn’t mind, but as he explains:

Within two miles on that road the thing began to hiss and choke and sputter. I drove into a gasoline station; and the attendant was a sabra, a young Jewish boy who had grown up there. And I said: ‘The thing is hissing and clogged up; it just may be the air intake. Will you have a look?’ He took off the distributor, wiped it out, and said, ‘Step on it!’ It started right off. He said, ‘Tsedeq’ [Hebrew word for “righteous and just” found in Hebrew Scriptures]. That is, it is righteous... . Righteousness means to get rid of the gunk which is standing in the way of what God intended” (Running With the Hounds, 23).

If all the parts of the truck are working properly and in right relationship with each other, then the truck runs smoothly.

To be righteous, in biblical terms, means to be in right relationship with God and each other. When human beings are in right relationship with God, they are automatically in right relationship with themselves, other human beings and God’s good creation, and they abound in good works. This is what it means to be truly righteous, pious or just (three words often used to translate the same biblical concept); it simply means being as one was meant to be, as God intends us to be.

When human beings are in right relationship with God, they are automatically in right relationship with themselves, other human beings and God’s good creation, and they abound in good works.

the Freedom of a Christian

Luther writes, “Good works do not make a person good, but a good person does good works,’ and ‘Evil works do not make a person evil, but an evil person does evil works.’ Thus, a person’s essence or character must be good before all works, and good works follow and proceed from a good person” (*Freedom*, 24). Luther is interested not in external appearances but in the very essence and character of a person. If our character is deformed by sin, then no matter how many good deeds or holy rituals we perform, our works cannot really be good even if they appear so. Even the loftiest, most altruistic act of self-sacrifice can be contaminated by the secret, inner desire to win the approval of others or even of God. Then, rather than selflessly helping another, one is really turning the needy neighbor into a pawn in one’s scheme for self-aggrandizement.

Luther was convinced that the only way to be freed from those forces that distort even our best intentions is to abandon self-justification. But that is possible only when we confess our guilt and surrender to God’s amazing grace, given to the world in Christ. Any inkling that we can earn what has been offered us freely by God immediately destroys the gift and sends us back to the vicious cycle of self-justification that feeds concupiscence (misoriented desires). This helps us understand some of Luther’s obsessive emphasis on faith alone. It also explains such cryptic commands as “Let whoever wants to do good things begin not with the doing but with the believing. For only faith makes a person good, and only unbelief makes someone evil” (*Freedom*, 25).

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. How does Luther define righteousness? How do you define righteousness? How is Luther’s definition similar or different from yours?
2. According to Luther, what is the connection between a person’s actions and their character? What do you think about that way of understanding good works? Does it change the way you think about what is moral or immoral? How and why?
3. Luther once told a friend feeling guilt for his sins to “sin boldly, but believe in Christ even more boldly.” Why do you think Luther gave him that advice? Is it an invitation to throw oneself into a life of sin?
4. How would you describe to a person unfamiliar with Christianity this faith that can free us and make us truly good, righteous and holy?
5. How do we avoid turning faith into just another kind of good work?

the Freedom of a Christian

SESSION 11: FREE TO SERVE

(Read paragraphs 92-114.)

Look here! This should be the rule: that the good things we have from God may flow from one person to the other and become common property. In this way each person may “put on” his [or her] neighbor and conduct oneself toward him [or her] as if in the neighbor’s place. These good things flowed and flow into us from Christ, who put us on and acted for us, as if he himself were what we are. They now flow from us into those who have need of them. Just as my faith and righteousness ought to be placed before God to cover and intercede for the neighbor’s sins, which I take upon myself, so also I labor under and am subject to them as if they were my very own. For this is what Christ did for us. For this is true love and the genuine rule of the Christian life. Now where there is true and genuine faith, there is true and genuine love (Freedom, 32).

Up to this point Luther’s analysis of Christian freedom has been focused solely on the individual and their experience of themselves, of God and of their body. If we were to leave it at that, we would end up with a seriously distorted understanding of what the life of a Christian is all about. For Luther, Christians ought to imitate Christ by using their freedom to become free, willing and joyful servants³³ of the well-being of the neighbor, just as Christ used his freedom to take the form of a servant/slave (the Greek word in the New Testament is *doulos*) for the sake of our liberation. This is how Luther puts it:

Although individual Christians are thereby free from all works, they should nevertheless once again “humble themselves” in this freedom, take on “the form of a servant,” “be made in human form and found in human vesture,” and serve, help, and do everything for their neighbor, just as they see God has done and does with them through Christ. And they should do this freely (Freedom, 28-29).

A word of caution is in order here. Too often this idea that Christians are called to be servants has been turned into an ideological weapon used to keep economic, racial, sexual, gender or ethnic minorities - including women and girls - in subservient positions, directly contradicting the spirit of the gospel. This word is addressed to each of us individually, not as a mandate for us to force upon others. I am the one called to joyfully and freely put everything I have and everything I am at the service of the common good of my neighbors and of God’s good creation. I am the one called to discern what action seems most fitting according to moral principles and contextual analysis. Furthermore, when understood properly, this binding ourselves in loving service to the neighbor is the culmination of the process by which God makes us free and fulfilled by Christ through the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. Generosity, compassion, loving kindness, humility, etc., are what the freedom of a Christian looks like.

the Freedom of a Christian

There is a curious transformation that happens here. The more we transcend ourselves and give ourselves in service to the neighbor, the more fully we become ourselves and the more fulfilled we feel. Thus, my neighbor becomes a way by which God reaches out to me in my time of need and, likewise, I become a concrete expression of God's presence in my neighbor's life. This dynamic is expressed beautifully in the essay anthology *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, especially in the chapter "Who Are You? Christ and the Imperative of Subjectivity" by theologian Anna Mercedes. Considering women's victimization and how their experience of the cross and resurrection of Christ the servant (or *doula*) has the power to transform their situations, Mercedes writes:

There is a curious transformation that happens here. The more we transcend ourselves and give ourselves in service to the neighbor, the more fully we become ourselves and the more fulfilled we feel.

For freedom Christ has set us free; for freedom we have been restored as doulas. Astonishingly, abundant care for others – even when it is dangerous, even at the foot of our sisters' crosses – may lead to a new incarnation of vibrant subjectivity, to a revelation of the risen Christ: as it did in Jesus, as it does for us when we encounter Christ in our sister, as it does when we come into ourselves in the midst of our love for others³⁴.

We find our true selves in loving service to the neighbor. But the true self that one discovers is the self of Christ! Thus, it is Christ who is at work in our lives. As the tagline of the ELCA has it: "God's work. Our hands." Luther articulated this by writing that in our free service to each other we become like little Christs for each other. Thus, Luther concludes the treatise with the following memorable words:

We find our true selves in loving service to the neighbor. But the true self that one discovers is the self of Christ!

Therefore, we conclude that Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God; likewise through love they fall down beneath themselves into the neighbor – remaining nevertheless always in God and God's love (Freedom, 32).

That is the freedom of a Christian. The freedom to love ourselves as God loves us. The freedom to dedicate our lives to the well being of our neighbors. The freedom to collaborate with God in the work of bringing healing, beauty, justice and wholeness to the world. It is the freedom to love.

the *Freedom* of a Christian

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND/OR GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. What are examples of times when someone was Christ to you and came to your service, especially in a time of need? Reflect on a time when you transcended yourself in service to your neighbor and felt the joy and freedom that Luther talks about.
2. In your specific setting, who are the neighbors you are called to serve? What are their needs? How can you find out? In what concrete ways can you serve your neighbors?
3. In a society wounded by injustice and inequality, how can we "live in Christ and our neighbor"? Who are your neighbors? Who are your neighbors as a church, as a community and as a group (e.g., in terms of race, gender, economic status, etc.). How have your neighbors been a blessing to you? What are some things they struggle with? How can you be a servant to them?

What is the difference between healthy and unhealthy ways of serving each other? What are examples of unhealthy ways of being a servant? What are examples of healthy ways of serving one another?

Appendix 1: Endnotes

1 This study is based on Martin Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), translated and with commentary by Timothy J. Wengert, from *The Annotated Luther Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016). References to the treatise are indicated in the text in parentheses with the abbreviation "Freedom"; the page numbers given are from the PDF version of Wengert's translation, available through 2020 here: <https://www.elca500.org/>. The symbol ¶ refers to the paragraph number in Wengert's translation. Note that the numbering does not include the letter to Pope Leo X but begins with the introduction to the treatise itself.

2 Here "person" is used instead of "individual" because the latter can be misunderstood. Luther used *Christianus Homo* in the original version. In Luther's view human beings are always in relationships (with others, with God and with themselves). The rugged individualism displayed, for example, in old cowboy movies is a dangerous distortion of what an individual person actually is. Even God does not exist apart from relationships, as the doctrine of the Trinity makes clear. Therefore, if humans are the image of God, then relationships are fundamental to the essence of individual people.

3 Ibid.

4 "Holy Communion, Setting One," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 95.

5 Romans 7:15. All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission; all rights reserved.

6 Since ancient times the church has offered lists of sins to guide people in their moral discernment and to help priests as they listened to parishioners' confessions. One such list is the famous "seven deadly sins": pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony (greed), anger and sloth. What those lists often miss is the insight that sin can also take the form of not recognizing the beauty of God's image in oneself. This can result in low self-esteem or, worse, in the inability to remove oneself from abusive or demeaning relationships. It can also express itself in a misguided sense of humility that leads us to neglect the talents God has given us.

7 For the particular example of race and racism, see the ELCA social statement *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* at <https://www.elca.org/en/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Race-Ethnicity-and-Culture>.

However, one cannot consider any of those categories in isolation from the others. For example, race, economic status, and gender identity are all part of a person's identity and can affect each other. The high degree of interaction among those categories is what some people refer to as "intersectionality."

8 See James H. Cone's powerful book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

9 See Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

10 See "Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent" at <https://youtu.be/QofnGzsZaas>. Also see "Explanation of the Declaration of the ELCA to People of African Descent" at http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Slavery_Apology_Explanation.pdf

11 See the 20th anniversary edition of Vine Deloria Jr.'s classic *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003).

12 See the ELCA social message "Gender-based Violence" at http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Gender_Based_Violence_SM.pdf

13 For congregational resources on caring for creation, see: <https://vimeo.com/301256430>. The ELCA social statement *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* can be found at <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Caring-for-Creation?>

the Freedom of a Christian

14 For ELCA resources for people living with disabilities, visit <https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Disability-Ministry>.

15 The English version of this famous saying by the Spanish poet is my translation; the Spanish original reads: “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia.” See José Ortega y Gasset, “Meditaciones del Quijote” in *Obras Completas: Tomo 1* (Madrid: Alianza, 1983), 322.

16 For a brief overview of Lutheran-Jewish relations from a Jewish perspective, visit <https://www.ajc.org/news/lutheran-jewish-relations-a-model-of-mutual-respect>.

17 For an overview of contemporary Lutheran-Catholic relations, visit <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/lutheran-roman-catholic-dialogue>. For a review of points of agreement, differences and reconciliation between the Lutheran and Catholic churches, see Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015).

18 Isaiah 13:3c-17.

19 Amos 5:24

20 For a brief biographical sketch of Martin Luther visit <https://elca.org/Faith/ELCA-Teaching/Luther-and-Lutheranism>. There are many books on Luther’s life; see, for instance, Roland H. Bainton’s classic *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978 [1950]) and James M. Kittelson’s *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003 [1986]). Luther’s life has been examined in several documentaries with varying degrees of accuracy; here is one produced by PBS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXK9NNp1yk4>.

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995 [1937]), 43.

22 This distinction between the spirit as good and the body as evil has been misused in Western civilization to justify the subjugation and exploitation of human beings deemed closer to the body than to the spirit. For instance, women were denied ordination and leadership roles in society for centuries under the excuse that they were not rational enough because, in contrast to (white) men, they were too close to the body, to nature and to the emotions. Another example of that type of abuse comes from Howard Thurman, a spiritual mentor to Martin Luther King Jr. In his autobiography Thurman tells of being pinched by a white girl; when he complained, the girl claimed that he couldn’t real feel pain because he was black and not truly human. See Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1979). Finally, in 1540 the Spanish court in the city of Valladolid heard a case in which the conquistadors argued that enslaving the native peoples of the Americas was not illegal or immoral because they were closer to irrational animals than to rational men. They lost the case. See Luis Rivera Pagan, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

23 The ELCA engages in this process to produce “social statements” that offer guidance to its members and institutions about specific issues of importance to church and society. For a description of how the church carries out this process and to access all ELCA social statements, visit <https://elca.org/Social-Statements>.

24 Remember that human nature is fundamentally relational. There is no isolated individual who exists apart from relationships. We become what we are through relationships (with other human beings, with nature, with God, with culture, etc.). Therefore, human nature is not a thing or substance. When we speak of a distortion in human nature, we are speaking also of a breakdown in our ability to sustain those relationships in healthy and wholesome ways, or even of a fracturing in the relationality that constitutes our very being.

25 Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.

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26 The concept of “the flesh” points to the same reality, but “the flesh” should not be confused with a devaluation of our bodies, which are part of God’s good creation. Flesh, in this context, refers to our entire embodied selves under the conditions of *concupiscentia* (that is, distorted and misoriented desires). When the heart is oriented toward God by faith, our whole being, with body and desires included, is transformed and participates in the glory of God. Until the day when all creation is redeemed and fulfilled on the other side of eternity, we get only occasional glimmers of that future glory.

27 For various cultural perspectives on what being Lutheran means, see Richard J. Perry’s essay collection *Catching a Star: Transcultural Reflections on a Church for All People* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2004).

28 For an analysis of the structural dimensions of sin and justification, see Walter Altmann’s *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, translated from the Spanish by Mary Solberg (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992 [1987]), especially chapter three, “Conversion, Liberation, and Justification.” For concrete applications see, for example, Mary E. Lowe, “Sin from a Queer, Lutheran Perspective,” and Beverly Wallace, “Hush No More: Constructing an African American Lutheran Womanist Ethic,” in Mary J. Streufert, editor, *Transformative Lutheran Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), chapters 5, 7 and 13.

29 Luther’s analogy is powerful but betrays the sexism that permeated European society in the 16th century. Luther is thinking of a male prince of pristine reputation marrying a peasant girl of bad reputation. The marriage results in a “happy exchange” in which the peasant girl is elevated to the social status of the prince and gifted with all her husband’s wealth and riches. The prince, however, is not affected or changed at all by the poverty or bad reputation of his bride. For Luther, the peasant girl is the soul and the prince is Christ. We absolutely reject the analogy’s sexism and even misogyny. For the ELCA’s position on women and justice, see the social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* at <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Current-Social-Writing-Projects/Women-and-Justice>. Luther’s analogy of a “happy exchange” still works without these sexist, misogynist, heteronormative assumptions. See for example the constructive use of this analogy in Kathryn A. Kleinhans, “Christ as Bride/Groom: A Lutheran Feminist Relational Christology, in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies*, *ibid.*, 123-134.

30 For a helpful exposition of the doctrine and its codification into U.S. law, see Tink Tinker, “The Doctrine of Christian Discovery: Lutherans and the Language of Empire,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (March 2017) at <https://elca.org/JLE/Articles/1203>.

31 For an explanation of the ELCA’s repudiation of the doctrine of discovery and the text of the resolution, see Vance Blackfox, “A Reflection on the 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly’s Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (March 2017) at <https://elca.org/JLE/Articles/1202>. The resolution can be found here: <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/assets/pdfs/ELCA-RepudiationDoctrineOfDiscoverySPR2016.pdf>.

32 See <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Jewish-Relations>.

33 In the New Testament, the same word (*doulos*) means both “servant” and “slave.” Translators of Luther use both words in the treatise. Remember that Luther and the New Testament authors understand the word differently from the cruel enslavement of African (and Indigenous) peoples to amass wealth for generations of White colonizers. For that reason, this study prefers the word “servant,” though that term poses other problems.

34 Anna Mercedes, “Who Are You? Christ and the Imperative of Subjectivity in Mary J. Streufert, editor, *Transformative Lutheran Theologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

Appendix 2: Glossary

Concupiscentia – Technical Latin word used by Luther to speak of desires when they are distorted and misoriented due to sin.

Doctrine of discovery – “The legal doctrine that the first ‘christian’ explorers, who ventured away from Europe and landed on foreign soil unknown to european christian folk, had the right by Discovery to claim ownership of those Native People’s land for their own christian monarch. By law, then (i.e., by euro-christian law), that christian country had the sole right to negotiate with or conquer the Native People of that land in order to establish christian ownership of ‘property’” (“The Doctrine of christian Discovery: Lutherans and the Language of Empire,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, March 2017, ¶4). The 2016 ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved a resolution to repudiate the doctrine of discovery. The resolution can be found here: <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/assets/pdfs/ELCA-RepudiationDoctrineOfDiscoverySPR2016.pdf>.

Faith – Trust in God and God’s promises in the gospel. It is given by the Holy Spirit through the hearing of the word of God. Should not be confused with “blind faith” or belief. It does not replace reason but illuminates it.

Flesh – Has many meanings. In the treatise Luther uses it mostly to refer to the experiences people have of feeling driven by appetites beyond their conscious control. Under the conditions of sin, the flesh is oriented toward satisfying its own desires without regard for the needs or well-being of others. It can also refer simply to the body, as in the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in ... the resurrection of the body [/flesh].”

Freedom – The power to make our own decisions and act without coercion or compulsion. Freedom exists when our decisions and actions are consonant with our true, God-given nature rather than the distortions that sin causes in us. It should not be confused with the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want.

Gender-based violence – “Physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, or other personal harm inflicted on someone for gender-based reasons, including but not limited to intimate partner violence and domestic violence. This can include such things as catcalling women or bullying boys who are not perceived as “man enough.” Perpetrators commit gender-based violence to assert power over someone” (*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action*, 76).

Good works – Actions and behaviors that naturally flow from faith and love. True good works are motivated only by the desire to praise God and seek the well-being of the neighbor. Luther was concerned with counterfeit good works performed with the self-centered intention of earning merit with God or praise from others.

Gospel – The good news that we are saved by God’s grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

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Happy exchange – Luther’s expression for what happens between Christ and a person when that person accepts by faith the promises of the gospel: Christ takes upon himself the sins, death and suffering of the believer and gives them in turn his own righteousness, glory, love, eternal life, etc. On this side of eternity we have the exchange only as a promise.

Human nature – That which makes humans uniquely what they are. The abilities, tendencies and constitution that allow humans to be human, especially the ability to communicate, form intentional and meaningful relationships, remember the past, imagine the future, feel, think, create, etc. The term can be used in contradictory ways; for instance, it can refer to the way God intends humans to be or the way humans act against God’s will because of sin.

Intersectionality – “Humans have multiple aspects to their identities, including gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, social class, etc. These aspects of human identities are tied to systemic privilege and oppression; gender is tied to sexism, ethnicity is tied to racism, etc. Intersectionality describes the ways different forms of discrimination and systemic oppression affect each other and shape the lives of individuals and communities in distinct ways. All human identities and all forms of privilege and oppression are made up of many intersections.” (*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action*, 77).

Justification – The way in which God repairs the broken relationship between humanity and God caused by sin. That broken relationship at the core of the human being results in a distortion of our nature, a misuse of God’s creation and an abuse of others and even ourselves. Through forgiveness and reconciliation God heals those distorted and broken relationships and restores in us our true nature (the image of God in us), allowing us to be righteous. On this side of eternity we have only justification by faith and anticipation of what will be fully ours on the other side.

Law and gospel – See “Word of God.”

Lord – In Luther’s late-medieval society, this term referred to the ruling class such as the princes and the nobility. Luther transforms its meaning by using it to describe the experience of freedom produced by faith. Faith makes a person “lord” of all things because, trusting that God has promised to take care of us, we know all things, even suffering and evil, can be used by God to serve our well-being.

Paradox – A truth that can be expressed only by embracing two opposing concepts at the same time. Luther makes abundant use of paradoxes: law and gospel, saint and sinner, free and bound, revealed and hidden. The opposing concepts must always be held in tension; if one concept is favored, the entire insight is distorted.

Racism – Specifically, structural racism: “Refers to the reinforcing pattern (or system) of personal attitudes, individual behavior, cultural beliefs, historical memory, customs of social groups, working of institutions in society, and the policies of governments that has allowed the privilege associated with ‘whiteness’ and the disadvantage of ‘color’ to endure and adapt over time” (*Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture: A Guide for Leading Conversations on Race, Ethnicity, and Culture in Your Congregation*, 19).

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Righteous – Describes a person in right relationship with God, themselves and others, who therefore naturally seeks to behave in ways and make decisions that are just and loving. Luther teaches that righteousness is possible only by faith. Complete righteousness is possible only on the other side of eternity, after the resurrection. Because of faith, Christ clothes believers with his righteousness.

Servant – One who is dedicated to looking after the well-being of others. The term should not be confused with slaves or forced labor in the sense, for example, of the cruel and inhumane institution of the African slave trade.

Sexism – “The reinforcement of male privilege, which leads to discrimination. It promotes the silencing, controlling, and devaluing of women, girls, and people whose gender expression is different from the conventional expressions of masculinity and femininity” (*Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action*, 4).

Sin – A distortion in human nature caused by humanity’s turning away from God, which results in a breakdown in our relationship with the very source and ground of our being. It also affects all relationships by turning others into mere objects to satisfy our own desires, with little regard for their needs or well-being.

Slave – Luther’s translators sometimes use the word “slave” when Luther meant “servant” (defined above), which gives the mistaken impression that Luther condoned slavery. Luther uses the word to reference people whose role was to look after the needs and well-being of others. Luther is not referring to chattel slavery.

Soul – In the treatise Luther uses this term to refer to a particular aspect of the human person, closely connected to what we would today call the psychological dimensions such as consciousness, self-awareness, memory. In short, the term means the way we experience ourselves as subjects of our own thoughts, feelings, actions and decisions rather than as mere objects or bodies tossed around by external forces beyond our control. It should not be confused with the idea that humans are souls imprisoned in bodies.

Word of God – The way God communicates with humanity. The Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit but not dictated word for word by God. Luther taught that the term has two functions: law and gospel. The law is the commands that teach God’s will and make us realize how incapable we are of keeping them. The gospel is God’s promises of forgiveness, reconciliation and eternal life. Ultimately, the living word of God is Jesus Christ.

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Appendix 4: Synopsis of *The Freedom of a Christian*

According to Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* “contains a summary of the whole Christian life” (*Freedom*, 9). Its main point is that only faith can make us free in such a way that we can give ourselves in loving and joyful service to our neighbors, whoever they may be, without seeking anything in return other than to praise God.

Luther opens his treatise by explaining that faith is not something people can learn from books. He also warns his readers that faith cannot be acquired through practice or rehearsal, like a skill or a virtue. Instead, he thought that “faith is learned through tribulations” (*Freedom*, 34). That is so because faith is trust in God’s faithfulness and goodness. We get a “taste of faith” when we endure tribulations, suffering and spiritual trials, because only then must we rely not on our own strength and resources but on God alone. To experience faith is to experience the freedom of a Christian.

Luther liked to use opposites held in tension (paradoxes). To describe the experience of the freedom of a Christian, he proposes the following paradox:

The Christian [person] is a completely free lord of all, subject to none.

The Christian [person] is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all (*Freedom*, 10).

How can a person feel absolutely free, having all things bound to serve them, while at the same time feeling like “completely dutiful servants of all, subject to all”? The answer is love! “Love’ by its very nature is dutiful and serves the one who is loved” (*Freedom*, 10). The model is Jesus Christ, who – even though he was absolutely free and Lord of all because he was the Son of God – became a servant of all, even giving up his life for all (Philippians 2:5-8) because of love. That tension between being freed by faith and being moved by love to use that freedom to serve the well-being of our neighbors, whoever they may be, is beautifully summarized in the treatise with the following words:

[Christians] do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God; likewise through love they fall down beneath themselves into the neighbor – remaining nevertheless always in God and God’s love (*Freedom*, 32).

Another paradox is necessary to explain that experience of freedom and servitude in the life of faith:

Every human being consists of two natures: a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which people label the soul, the human being is called a spiritual, inner, and new creature. According to the bodily nature, which people label the flesh, a human being is called the fleshly, outer, and old creature (*Freedom*, 11).

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Those two natures should not be confused with subordinate parts of the human being; each term refers to the entire person but from a different perspective. In fact, before using that image, Luther warned his readers that he had chosen “a rather distant and unsophisticated starting point” (*Freedom*, 11). He uses the dual nature of human beings to explain why a person can become good and righteous never through external rituals and works but only by faith. Appealing to common sense, he asks, “How could poor health or captivity or hunger or thirst or any other external misfortune harm the soul, when even the godliest, purest, and freest consciences are afflicted with such things?” (*Freedom*, 11). Likewise, he continues, “It does not help the soul if the body wears the sacred robes set apart for priests or enters sacred places or performs sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain foods, or does absolutely any work connected with the body” (*Freedom*, 11).

The word of God has the power to touch human beings deep in their interior, spiritual nature. Therefore, “One thing and one thing alone is necessary for the Christian life, righteousness, and freedom, and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ” (*Freedom*, 11). Through the word the Holy Spirit reaches deep within us and liberates us from the things that enslave us. “Thus, to preach Christ means to feed, justify, free, and save the soul – provided a person believes the preaching” (*Freedom*, 12). Faith is the human spirit daring to believe the promises of the gospel and, by believing, being “caught up beyond themselves into God” (*Freedom*, 32). Everything depends on the promises of the gospel and the faith that trusts them. But learning to trust in the promises of the gospel is not straightforward. We must take a closer look at the word of God in order to understand how God works the miracle of faith in the human soul.

The word of God consists of commands and promises (law and gospel). A common misunderstanding is that, even though the commands reveal to us what is good and teach us God’s will, “what is taught is not thereby done” (*Freedom*, 14). The human predicament is not that we don’t know what we should do but that we don’t do it. That is what the commands (the law) reveal to us. When we take the divine commands seriously, we are forced to despair of ourselves “and to seek help elsewhere from someone else” (*Freedom*, 14). Only when people learn to despair of themselves are they ready to receive the word of the gospel that promises complete forgiveness and reconciliation with God for the sake of Christ. The promise is that Christ has fulfilled on our behalf everything that the law requires for our salvation.

For what is impossible for you to fulfill using all the works of the law, which though great in number are useless, you will fulfill easily and quickly through faith. Because God the father has made all things depend on faith, whoever has faith has everything and whoever lacks faith has nothing (*Freedom*, 14).

Faith, therefore, is not about uncritical adherence to dogma or ritual. Faith is the union of the soul with the one who has given himself up in sacrificial love. This union transforms the soul and “makes it holy, true, peaceful, and free, filled with every blessing and truly made a child of God” (*Freedom*, 15).

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Luther speaks of three powers of faith. The first, as stated above, is that faith allows a believer to be “swallowed up by [the promises of God], so that it not only shares in them but also is saturated and intoxicated by their every power. ... [T]his ingestion by the word ... communicate[s] to the soul all things that belong to the word” (*Freedom*, 14-15). This is similar to the effect of fire on iron: “Just as heated iron glows like fire because of its union with fire, so it is clear that a Christian needs faith for everything and will have no need of works to be justified” (*Freedom*, 15).

The second power of faith is that “it honors the one in whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard possible for this reason: Faith holds the one in whom it trusts to be truthful and deserving” (*Freedom*, 15).

The third power of faith is that it unites the believer with Christ. To describe the results of that “happy exchange,” Luther uses the medieval image of a wedding between a poor peasant woman of ill repute with a wealthy nobleman of flawless reputation.

The third incomparable benefit of faith is this: that it unites the soul with Christ, like a bride with a bridegroom. By this “mystery” (as Paul teaches), Christ and the soul are made one flesh. For if they are one flesh and if a true marriage – indeed by far the most perfect marriage of all – is culminated between them (since human marriages are but weak shadows of this one), then it follows that they come to hold all things, good and bad, in common. Accordingly, the faithful soul can both assume as its own whatever Christ has and glory in it, and whatever is the soul’s Christ claims for himself as his own (Freedom, 16).

The result is that “the faithful soul, through the wedding ring of its faith in Christ her bridegroom, is free from all sins, secure against death, protected from hell, and given the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of her bridegroom, Christ” (*Freedom*, 17).

From such union the believer also receives from Christ the responsibility and privileges of royalty (“kingship”) and of the priesthood. Royalty does not imply secular authority: “This does not establish that Christians possess and exercise some sort of secular power over everything – ecclesiastical leaders far and wide are possessed by such madness” (*Freedom*, 19). Rather, it refers to our knowledge that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Therefore, the believer is absolutely free and lord of all things, because, by the power of faith, all things serve the believer spiritually in the end, even pain, suffering, evil and death: “This is nothing other than ‘power made perfect in weakness’ so that ‘in all things’ ... I may gain salvation. In this way, the cross and death are forced to serve me and to work together for salvation” (*Freedom*, 19). And to be a priest by virtue of our union with Christ simply means to be “worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another the things that are of God” (*Freedom*, 20).

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All those things take place in the interior, spiritual nature of the believer, and only partially and imperfectly until the fulfillment of all things on the day of the resurrection in eternity. For “as long as we live in the flesh, we are only beginning and advancing toward what will be perfected in the future life” (*Freedom*, 22). Until then we continue to live in the body as it is now, with its limitations, needs and desires, and in relationship with others. Therefore, we must discipline the body, as athletes do, for it to serve a higher end than its own desires. In that sense, good works, rituals, fasts and the like can be helpful but not if they are done to earn God’s favor.

Good works are not good or bad in themselves. Luther explains, “It is necessary that first the very character of a person be good or evil before doing any good or evil work” (*Freedom*, 24). He recalls Jesus’ saying, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit” (*Freedom*, 24). Good works flow naturally from the heart of the person who has been liberated and transformed by faith. Their good works are like the works Adam and Eve performed in the garden. They did them joyfully without expecting anything in return; they did them not because they needed them but because the garden did.

Christians must do good works because their neighbors need them. This is a point that Luther makes forcefully and repeatedly:

For a human being does not live in this mortal body solely for himself or herself and work only on it but lives together with all other human beings on earth. Indeed, more to the point, each person lives only for others and not for himself or herself. The purpose of putting the body in subjection is so that it can serve others more genuinely and more freely (Freedom, 27).

Furthermore, he insists:

It is also Christian to care for the body. At times when the body is healthy and fit, we can work and save money and thereby can protect and support those who are in need. In this way, the stronger members may serve the weaker and we may be sons [and daughters] of God: one person caring and working for another, “bearing one another’s burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ.” Look here! This is truly the Christian life; here truly “faith is effective through love.” That is, with joy and love [faith] reveals itself in work of freest servitude, as one person, abundantly filled with the completeness and richness of his or her own faith, serves another freely and willingly (Freedom, 27-28).

In conclusion, the Christian is made free by faith, but true faith always bears fruits of genuine love. Through faith the believer is conformed to Christ and embodies Christ’s love for the neighbor and all of God’s creation. “Therefore,” writes Luther, “I will give myself as a kind of Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see will be necessary, advantageous, and salutary for my neighbor, because through faith I am overflowing with all good things in Christ” (*Freedom*, 29).

