



## Lesson 1

# Christian Freedom in the Cause of Reform

## Worship

**Hymn:** “O Lord, Look Down from Heaven” CW 205:1,3,4 (based on Psalm 12)

1. O Lord, look down from heav’n, behold,  
And let your pity waken.  
How few are we within your fold,  
Your saints by all forsaken;  
True faith seems quenched on ev’ry hand;  
Your Word is not allowed to stand.  
Dark times have us o’ertaken.
3. Therefore said God, “I must arise—  
The poor my help are needing.  
To me ascend my people’s cries,  
And I have heard their pleading.  
For them my saving Word shall fight  
And fearlessly and sharply smite,  
The poor with might defending.”
4. Defend your truth, O God, and stay  
This evil generation,  
And from the error of its way  
Keep your own congregation.  
The wicked ev’rywhere abound  
And would your little flock confound,  
But you are our salvation!

**Prayer:** Lord God, you have proven your faithfulness in every generation—your promises are sure and certain. We pray that you continue to preserve the truth of your Word among us. And help us also to be sensitive to our neighbor’s needs so that we reflect your love with kindness and compassion for one another. Amen.



## Introduction

After he was declared a heretic at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was taken to the Wartburg Castle (outside of Eisenach) for protection. Luther considered it an exile. He was away from his duties at Wittenberg, living in disguise as a knight. In Wittenberg, the cause of reform continued, but without Luther's guiding spirit, the movement became "radicalized"—moving quickly and recklessly in directions that allowed confusion and disorder to occur. People were equating reform with "doing the opposite" of Roman Catholic practice. Statues and altars were being destroyed. Revisions in worship were introduced without much instruction. Sensitive consciences were troubled by the sudden changes. So Luther returned to Wittenberg in March of 1522. He began immediately to instruct about the cause and course of reform by preaching sermons for eight consecutive days in Wittenberg. These are known as the *Invocavit* sermons since he began on the Sunday after Ash Wednesday, which is called *Invocavit* (after the Latin for "he will call"—the introit verse for the day from Psalm 91:15). In this series of sermons, Luther called for moderation, patience, instruction, order, and love.

## The Power of the Word in the Early Church

### 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1

<sup>23</sup> "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. <sup>24</sup> No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

<sup>25</sup> Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, <sup>26</sup> for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."

<sup>27</sup> If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. <sup>28</sup> But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. <sup>29</sup> I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? <sup>30</sup> If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

<sup>31</sup> So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. <sup>32</sup> Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— <sup>33</sup> even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. <sup>11:1</sup> Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

1. Paul writes, "I follow the example of Christ."  
Consider the ministry of Jesus Christ—list times when he "gave up his rights" for the good of others.
2. Give reasons why we need to be sensitive to the way others perceive our attitudes or actions.
3. Demonstrate how 1 Corinthians 10:31 ("So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God") serves as an overarching principle in a life of Christian faith and love.

## NOTES

## The Power of the Word in the Reformation

4. Imagine you are standing in a Wittenberg church, hearing Luther preach these sermons. You have seen ornate altars and statues torn down in your church. The worship service with which you were familiar has undergone changes, but no one has explained the reasons why. From these excerpts of Luther's sermons below, underline the sentences you think would be especially helpful for you and others around you.

From the First and Second Invocavit Sermons (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 51, pp. 70-78, excerpted):

And here, dear friends, one must not insist upon his rights, but must see what may be useful and helpful to his brother, as Paul says, "All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful." For we are not all equally strong in faith, some of you have a stronger faith than I. Therefore we must not look upon ourselves, or our strength, or our prestige, but upon our neighbor, for God has said through Moses: I have borne and reared you, as a mother does her child. What does a mother do to her child? First she gives it milk, then gruel, then eggs and soft food, whereas if she turned about and gave it solid food, the child would never thrive. So we should also deal with our brother, have patience with him for a time, have patience with his weakness and help him bear it; we should also give him milk-food, as was done with us, until he, too, grows strong, and thus we do not travel heavenward alone,

but bring our brethren, who are not now our friends, with us. If all mothers were to abandon their children, where would we have been? I would not have gone so far as you have done, if I had been here. The cause is good, but there has been too much haste. For there are still brothers and sisters on the other side who belong to us and must still be won.

Let me illustrate. The sun has two properties, light and heat. No king has power enough to bend or guide the light of the sun; it remains fixed in its place. But the heat may be turned and guided, and yet is ever about the sun. Thus faith must always remain pure and immovable in our hearts, never wavering; but love bends and turns so that our neighbor may grasp and follow it. There are some who can run, others must walk, still others can hardly creep. Therefore we must not look upon our own, but upon our brother's powers, so that he who is weak in faith, and attempts to follow the strong, may not be destroyed of the devil.

Take note of these two things, "must" and "free." The "must" is that which necessity requires, and which must ever be unyielding; as, for instance, the faith, which I shall never permit any one to take away from me, but must always keep in my heart and freely confess before every one. But "free" is that in which I have choice, and may use or not, yet in such a way that it profit my brother and not me. Now do not make a "must" out of what is "free," as you have done, so that you may not be called to account for those who were led astray by your loveless exercise of liberty.

Love, therefore, demands that you have compassion on the weak, as all the apostles had. Once, when Paul came to Athens (Acts 17), a mighty city, he found in the temple many ancient altars, and he went from one to the other and looked at them all, but he did not kick down a single one of them with his foot. Rather he stood up in the middle of the market place and said they were nothing but idolatrous things and begged the people to forsake them; yet he did not destroy one of them by force. When the Word took hold of their hearts, they forsook them of their own accord, and in consequence the thing fell of itself. Likewise, if I had seen them holding mass, I would have preached to them and admonished them. Had they heeded my admonition, I would have won them; if not, I would nevertheless not have torn them from it by the hair or employed any force, but simply allowed the Word to act and prayed for them. For the Word created heaven and earth and all things; the Word must do this thing, and not we poor sinners. In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.

5. In his famous treatise called *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520), Luther wrote: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” First, explain what this quote means. Then, how did this saying apply to the circumstances of “radical reform” happening in Wittenberg?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Notice the illustrations Luther uses to make his point. How do these comparisons or analogies help to clarify his point?
  - The pattern of a mother
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - The sun
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. How might someone be led astray by a “loveless exercise of liberty”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. In what ways does Luther display a supreme confidence in the power of the Word to change hearts and lives?

## The Power of the Word Today

9. Read through the following paragraphs. On the basis of what we know about Luther's approach to reform based on the previous sections of this study and the following paragraphs, how might we respond to a modern theologian who says that Luther's concern for one's neighbor means that a Lutheran is willing to "change with the times"? Put a star by the sentences you think would help you with your response.

There is an adage that asserts: "The reformed church is always being reformed." The expression did not originate with Martin Luther, but there are those who claim that it conveys the spirit of Luther. While the sentence seems clear enough, we might ask the traditional Lutheran question: "What does this mean?" Is the phrase an appeal to stay current with the times or a plea to be mindful of the past? Is it a call for change or an encouragement to find renewal by following in the footsteps of the reformers? In the end, how are we to understand the operative word *reformed*? The word allows for a wide sense of interpretation. For Lutherans, then, it seems wise to consider how Luther conceived of his own "reforming" work.

In Luther's name, some modern theologians have developed "new insights" into the church's doctrine. Consider especially how some Lutheran theologians have reinterpreted the historic and biblical teaching on such issues as marriage and sexuality. They champion their cause by saying that Luther taught about Christian freedom. With that, whether consciously or not, they make Luther into an innovator. From what we know about Luther, how would he have approached this issue? For Luther the answers to all questions about God—his will and his ways—could only be found in what he revealed to the world in the Bible. Those eager to gain Luther as an ally must confront his lifelong stance as an advocate for biblical theology that did not change. Freedom for Luther was found in what the Bible clearly taught—the triumph of grace over sin. It was, therefore, not a license to depart from the authoritative Word but an invitation to follow it in faith.

Modern "innovative" theology also displays a conceit with which Luther would have been uncomfortable. By its very nature, "new theology" implies that the believers of former generations were at best negligent or, at worst, wrong in their beliefs. The very concept that the doctrine of the church is somehow subject to change would have been foreign to Luther.

What should we think about the adage: "The reformed church is always being reformed"? The perspective has some merit if we understand it to mean that each generation needs to make the truths of God's Word its own—in a sense to rediscover them. Believers must also communicate clearly God's truth to the next generation. Luther would support whatever it takes to do just that—adjustments in language or style but never a departure from the doctrine of the Word. There is an expanded version of the phrase that reads: "The reformed church is always being reformed by the Word of God." To that, with Luther, we say: "Amen." (From "Back to the Beginning," *Forward in Christ* [October 2012])

10. What is one lesson from Luther you will want to remember from today's study?

NOTES

## Summary

Christian freedom is not an end in itself. The radical reformers in Wittenberg were in danger of giving the impression that reform was more about outward changes in custom and practice and less about real issues of doctrine and the Word. Luther's appeal for moderation, order, and love is instructive. The very nature of the Lutheran Reformation stirs passions, and spiritual descendants of the Reformation want to reflect the energy of the reformers. But the end goal is always the salvation of souls. To this end Christian love instructs "not to seek our own good, but the good of others."

## At Home

Try to find specific examples on TV, on the Internet, or in the newspaper that society has "changed with the times" away from what had been accepted in the past as being according to God's will.

Include in your prayers those religious leaders who have led others away from the true teachings of God's Word in order to satisfy societal wants. Pray that they return to the unchangeable, pure truths of the Word.

## Additional Reading

Luther's Invocavit sermons – *Luther's Works*, Volume 51, pp. 69-100.

## Closing Prayer

**Prayer:** Lord God, help us to understand the gospel balance between doctrine and practice. Make us willing to teach the truths of your Word by what we say and do. Amen.