

Note: This sample is a PDF of the Word version of this study.
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The Word Endures: Lessons From Luther Yesterday and Today

by Paul E. Koelpin

Leader's Guide

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Leader's Note

In order to know more about Luther and the truths of the Word he brought to people at the time of the Reformation, we need to read what Luther wrote. In the middle section of each lesson ("The Power of the Word in the Reformation") there will be larger sections of text from Luther. For each of these Luther sections, the participants will be encouraged to pick out what they think are key phrases or thoughts that can be shared with the larger group after the section is read. This is a way of having participants add new content or material to what they currently know about a subject. The participants will be able to put themselves into the time of the Reformation, but also be able to apply truths to their lives today. Remember that except for using the Small Catechism, most will have had little contact with Luther's writings. This study will provide a wonderful opportunity to lead people into some of the great writings Luther penned. The leader, if he or she is used to reading out loud, is encouraged to be the reader of the Luther sections or have someone with very competent reading skills read for the study. The study can drag and participants can be discouraged if a person struggles reading the longer sections of text. One suggestion is to ask a competent reader ahead of time to serve as the "voice of Luther" or "our designated reader for the Luther sections."

Throughout the study there will be suggestions for having the participants work in groups. Group work allows more participation by those in the study. When asking for the groups or individuals to report what they discovered or how they answered, take a sampling from each group or individual. Rather than asking each group to give all the answers their group wrote down, have the groups give only one answer. After the first group or two has a turn, ask the next groups to share only new ideas. This will avoid time being spent on repeats.

In the learning activities that suggest participants work in groups, the phrase "or on your own if you prefer" is included. Some estimate that 25 to 33 percent of individuals are introverts. Some introverts would rather not work in larger groups with others but prefer to work through the materials on their own first. Also, having silent reflection for one to two minutes or pairing up with one other person before asking for feedback can help. Introverts will feel more comfortable giving answers to a larger group if they are allowed to process through the information on their own, or if another person has accepted their ideas (as in a pair).

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Lesson 2

Teach the Word to Children

Worship

Note the multiple words the psalmist uses for God’s Word in Psalm 119—promise, word, laws, precepts, statutes, commands, and decrees. We may equate many of these words with God’s moral will—with *law* in distinction to the *gospel*. Yet it is clear from context that many of the “law” words convey a “gospel” sense of joy, peace, and hope. These “law” synonyms often carry a wider sense of “instruction.” In that sense they may refer to God’s will, God’s promise, or, more generally, to divine teaching. Context will help determine meaning. To the sinful nature God’s just and holy will is always and only a burden and irritation. Only as “new creations” can Christians say that they “delight in God’s commands.” So the word *obey* in a gospel sense means to “follow in faith.”

Psalm 119:9-16 (spoken responsively by half verse)

How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart;

do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

Praise be to you, LORD;

teach me your decrees.

With my lips I recount

all the laws that come from your mouth.

I rejoice in following your statutes

as one rejoices in great riches.

I meditate on your precepts

and consider your ways.

I delight in your decrees;

I will not neglect your word.

Prayer: Lord God, your Word is indeed a light for the path of our lives. Forgive us for the times when we have been less than eager to study it. Strengthen our resolve to learn and teach your truth. Enlighten us by your Spirit to mine the depths of your Word. Amen.

Introduction

Education was at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. Roman Catholic worship had developed along ritualistic lines that devalued the role of instructing lay people. In addition, literacy rates were low and books were rare. Luther changed this culture with his emphasis on the teaching of God’s Word. When, in 1527, a survey (or “visitation”) of congregations was begun to assess the religious situation after the break with Catholicism, the visitors observed a low level of education. Luther penned the Catechisms to improve the situation. In the Preface to the Small Catechism (1529), Luther wrote: “The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief, plain, and simple version.” The Large Catechism (1529) contained an expansion of Luther’s thoughts for those who would teach the basic truths of the Bible to young people. The Catechisms continue to be a critically valuable explanation of law, gospel, and sacraments for the church today.

The Power of the Word in the Early Church

2 Timothy 3:10-17

¹⁰ You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

1. As a boy Timothy had learned the Holy Scriptures from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (see 2 Timothy 1:5). He acquired his advanced education from Paul. Who has served as a “Lois” or “Eunice” or “Paul” in your life? Share an insight or method they used to make clear the truths of Scripture.

Many participants will mention the role of parents (or grandparents). They will likely include the name of a significant teacher (from Lutheran elementary school, Sunday school, or catechism class). They may indicate the importance of daily devotions, taking them to church, or enrolling them in Sunday school or a Lutheran elementary school. Consistency and constancy are critical.

2. Divide the group in half. Have one half of the room make a list of reasons why practical training is important for a pastor's training. Have the other half of the room make a list of reasons why classroom instruction is important for the training of a pastor. Making the lists can be done on your own or with others to generate ideas. You will have 90 seconds. We'll hear a sampling from each half of the room.

Practical Training

Classroom Instruction

Ask the one half to share their reasons why practical training of a pastor is important. When they are finished, ask the other half if they have anything to add to the list. Then ask to hear the other half of the room for their reasons why classroom instruction is important for a pastor. When they are finished, ask the other half if they have anything to add to the list.

Clearly both practical training and classroom instruction are important. That is why our training system for pastors includes both Seminary instruction and a vicar year under the training of a mentor pastor. Paul was Timothy's teacher and mentor. Paul refers to the "practical" elements in vs. 10—the events Timothy experienced as he traveled with Paul. He also places emphasis on training in the truths and applications of Scripture.

3. Pastors and teachers are to use the Scripture for the purposes of "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." On your own, pick one of those four purposes and write down an example of it being carried out by another Christian (perhaps even a child) besides a pastor or teacher. We'll hear samples.

The leader could also assign the specific purposes to groups, tables, or sections of the class to have examples given for all four purposes. When hearing the samples, ask the participants to only give answers no one has said yet.

Pastors and Lutheran elementary school teachers are called to be shepherds. As such, they are to be leaders who use the Scripture as Paul describes. But Scripture is not the domain of pastors and teachers alone. Scripture is a spiritual guidebook—it is always useful when applied to the situations of life. Elders use it in their work within the congregation. Parents use it with children in families. A child might rebuke another on the playground. Teachers use it in classrooms. Scripture applies the power of the Spirit to matters of discipline and training.

The Power of the Word in the Reformation

4. Luther encouraged continued study of the catechism. While the following portion of the Large Catechism is being read, underline the encouragements you think are important to remember.

Have the leader or someone who is a competent reader read through the following portion of *The Large Catechism* for the group.

Excerpts from the Preface of the Large Catechism (1529):

⁷ But for myself I say this: I am also a doctor and preacher; yes, as learned and experienced as all the people who have such assumptions and contentment. Yet I act as a child who is being taught the catechism. Every morning—and whenever I have time—I read and say, word for word, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Psalms, and such. I must still read and study them daily. Yet I cannot master the catechism as I wish. ⁸ But I must remain a child and pupil of the catechism, and am glad to remain so. Yet these delicate, refined fellows would in one reading promptly become doctors above all doctors, know everything, and need nothing. Well, this, too, is a sure sign that they despise both their office and the souls of the people. Indeed, they even despise God and His Word. They do not have to fall. They have already fallen all too horribly. They need to become children and begin to learn their alphabet, which they imagine they have long outgrown.

¹⁴ If these reasons were not enough to move us to read the catechism daily, we should feel bound well enough by God’s command alone. He solemnly commands in Deuteronomy 6:6–8 that we should always meditate on His precepts, sitting, walking, standing, lying down, and rising. We should have them before our eyes and in our hands as a constant mark and sign. Clearly He did not solemnly require and command this without a purpose. For He knows our danger and need, as well as the constant and furious assaults and temptations of devils. He wants to warn, equip, and preserve us against them, as with a good armor against their fiery darts [Ephesians 6:10–17] and with good medicine against their evil infection and temptation.

¹⁹ Therefore, I again beg all Christians—especially pastors and preachers—not to think of themselves as doctors too soon and imagine that they know everything. (For imagination, like unshrunk cloth, will fall far short of the measure.) Instead, they should daily exercise themselves well in these studies and constantly use them. Furthermore, they should guard with all care and diligence against the poisonous infection of contentment and vain imagination, but steadily keep on reading, teaching, learning, pondering, and meditating on the catechism. And they should not stop until they have

tested and are sure that they have taught the devil to death, and have become more learned than God Himself and all His saints.

²⁰ If they show such diligence, then I will promise them—and they shall also see—what fruit they will receive, and what excellent people God will make of them. So in due time they themselves will admit that the longer and the more they study the catechism, the less they know of it and the more they will find to learn. Only then, as hungry and thirsty men, will they truly relish what now they cannot stand because of great abundance and contentment. To this end may God grant His grace! Amen.

After the reading, ask for volunteers to share one encouragement they underlined as important to remember about studying the catechism. Answers will vary as to what was underlined. Notice that Luther uses himself as a point of comparison. If the author of the explanations, who is a Doctor of Theology, says that he needs to continue reviewing and learning, then others will all the more recognize the necessity of daily review and instruction. Luther was well aware that Satan often tempts by turning strengths into weaknesses. Beware the temptation to think you “know it all.”

5. Choose one of the following activities:

After the leader has read through the options, let the groups, tables, or individuals choose which activity they would like to answer. Another option is to have the leader assign specific tables, groups, or each half of the room to answer A or B.

A. In groups of three to four people (or on your own if you prefer), give at least three responses to someone who says, “Memorizing parts of the catechism has very little benefit.” Have your group pick one response to share with the other groups. You will have 90 seconds.

Possible answers: There is great value in having “ready access” to doctrinal basics. While it is true that some rote learning methods do not promote the application of information, the catechism explanations are designed to describe and instruct. Memorizing allows one to have expanded explanations to Bible teachings. Memorizing also allows one to review chief teachings of the Bible.

B. In groups of three to four people (or on your own if you prefer), give at least three suggestions as to how one could memorize the parts of the catechism. Have your group pick one suggestion to share with the other groups. You will have 90 seconds.

Possible answers: Select a part of the catechism to memorize for the week. Write it out on a card and post it where it will be seen during the day or week (on the refrigerator, in the car). Say it each evening after supper or after the devotion. Ask someone outside of your home to be an accountability partner and encourager for you as you both memorize the same catechism part for that week.

6. Luther says: “They themselves will acknowledge that the longer and the more they study the Catechism, the less they know of it, and the more they find yet to learn.” This adage holds true of learning in general. Give reasons why.

Possible answers: (1) We cannot retain easily the details of all that we have learned—this demands constant repetition and (2) learning is like exploring—the further along the path we tread, the more we realize what remains yet to be discovered.

The Power of the Word Today

7. Read the following paragraphs. As you do, circle phrases or sentences that will help you complete this sentence: Lutheran education is unique because

_____.

Some concluding thoughts about Lutheran education are provided at the end of these paragraphs.

Lutherans, now distanced 500 years from the time of Martin Luther, often wonder just what Luther would say about the practice of the church that bears his name today. Would Luther approve of what they teach? Does the twenty-first-century church rightly (rightfully) bear the name “Lutheran”? Does the mystical concept of “Luther’s spirit” live on?

What we can say is that Luther was passionate about the subject of education—especially since he perceived a prevailing attitude in German lands that disparaged the value of “book” learning. In her study titled, *Martin Luther: Learning for Life*, Marilyn Harran submitted that “Luther portrayed education as a contest between God and the devil” (192). He warned that neglect of education would have disastrous consequences, both for the welfare of the earthly state and the welfare of souls.

If Luther had an overarching principle for education, it would be that education must work to serve the cause of the gospel—to sustain the sharing of the life-saving message of Christ and to retain the wholesome influence Christianity has on societies engaged in

the struggle against evil. In a very real sense the Lutheran Reformation was an educational movement—a return to biblical truth by *teaching* clearly and correctly what God said in his Word. Error needed to be exposed, and the truth required proper instruction. Luther wrote his catechisms so that instruction could and would happen in homes and churches and schools.

We might ask: How might Luther judge the modern instruction? The question must remain in the hypothetical, but we have clues about what Luther might say or ask. He certainly had opinions about pedagogy (the art or science of teaching). And he voiced his views about curriculum. But I suspect he would keep the focus on the gospel. He might ask: Are you teaching the chief parts of the catechism clearly—distinguishing between God’s righteous will and God’s redeeming love? Are you clearly teaching about how God’s grace comes to us in both the Word and the sacraments? How do you model life of discipleship (carrying “the cross”) for your students? For Luther, the Word of God was paramount.

Ask participants how they would complete the sentence in question 7 above. Lutheran education promotes a healthy and comprehensive exploration of Scripture. It also follows a hermeneutic approach that trusts that “Scripture will interpret Scripture.” For Luther the Bible was a grand “unity”—pointing entirely and always to Jesus Christ and the gospel. Lutheran education works diligently to distinguish between law and gospel. Luther also understood the proper place of reason—as a means God grants to grasp, discuss, and explain. He did not allow reason to “reign supreme” over the work of the Spirit. For Luther, education also had a practical quality in that Christians desire to serve their neighbors.

8. On your own, write down at least three things that can be done in homes, churches, and schools to make sure that we retain and maintain distinctly Lutheran education. After two minutes, share your list with a person next to you. We’ll hear samples from the groups.

Allow two minutes for the individuals to come up with a list and also about a minute or two to share with a person next to them. When hearing the samples, ask the participants to only give answers no one has said yet. Possible answers: Education on all levels (youth to adult) needs to be a priority. This needs to be an organized and encouraged program. The catechism needs to be “in the home.” Recommend further study in the Lutheran Confessions as part of the congregation’s educational program.

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

Answers will vary. Hear a sampling.

Summary

Catechetical instruction is critical for the church. Luther's clear explanations are both time-honored and timeless. The Small Catechism and Large Catechism continue to be indispensable tools in the maintenance of the scriptural, confessional unity we enjoy.

At Home

Create a plan for reviewing the chief parts of the catechism. If you organize your daily review of the explanations to the chief parts (Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Keys and Confession, and Lord's Supper) into the smaller divisions suggested by Luther (one explanation per day), you will complete your review in approximately one month.

Additional Reading

Harran, Marilyn, *Martin Luther: Learning for Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997).

Luther, Martin, *Luther's Large Catechism with Study Questions*, edited by Rodney L. Rathmann, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010).

Closing Prayer

Speak or sing together the following hymn stanzas.

Hymn: "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" (CW 203)

1. Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word;
Curb those who by deceit or sword
Would seek to overthrow your Son
And to destroy what he has done.

2. Lord Jesus Christ, your pow'r make known,
For you are Lord of lords alone;
Defend your Christendom that we
May sing your praise eternally.

3. O Comforter of priceless worth,
Send peace and unity on earth.
Support us in our final strife,
And lead us out of death to life.