

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

prepared for

A Congregational Discussion of Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*  
at the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Beginning of the Reformation

October 31, 2017, marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's (perhaps only legendary) nailing of the 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany.

What does that event, and the profound changes that followed, have to do with us, an ELCA congregation in Lincoln, Nebraska, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Does Martin Luther have anything to say to us today?

What better way to find out than by digging into a work written by him? Patrick and Priscilla Hayden-Roy invite the congregation to join in reading and discussing together one of Martin Luther's most influential short writings, the tract entitled "On the Freedom of a Christian." In 1520 Luther sent this work, accompanied by a letter to Pope Leo X, as a last-ditch – and, as it turned out, fruitless – effort to make peace between himself and the Roman Church. In his letter Luther calls his little book a "spiritual gift," which, although small in size, contains "the whole of Christian life in a brief form." Does this little work still offer spiritual gifts to us? Can it still instruct us as to the meaning of the Christian life?

*A note on the translation: we are reading the translation of the Latin version of the Freedom tract (Luther also wrote a somewhat shorter German version) found in the American Luther Edition published in the late 1950's. In accordance with standard English usage of that time, "homo" is translated throughout as "man," although this word does not refer exclusively to males in Latin. Today this would no longer be considered an accurate translation; we would use "person" or "human" instead. So please allow for the datedness of the translation, and feel free to substitute in your minds more inclusive language as you're reading!*

Format:

. Luther's text, with the letter to Pope Leo, is available through FLC's website and on our dedicated Facebook page "FLC-Lincoln-Luther's Freedom of Christian":

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1984811441806096/>

. The "Questions for Reflection" are also found both on FLC's website and on the Facebook page.

. We will also be posting individual Questions for Reflection on the Facebook page, and invite all members of the FB group to join in the discussion here. We hope this will provide an avenue for those unable to attend the discussion during the Sunday School hour to join in the discussion.

. A note on privacy: our FB page, "FLC-Lincoln-Luther's Freedom of Christian" is set up in FB as a "closed group." This means that:

. anyone can ask to join or be added or invited by a member

. anyone can see the group's name and who is in the group

. only current members can post, and can see what other members post in the group

. only members see stories about the group on FB (ex: News and Feed, and search)

Three meetings will be held in the chapel during the Sunday School hour (9:30-10:30):

October 8: Introduction to the work, discussion of the Letter to Pope Leo (pp. 1-8)

October 22: Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 1: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none" (pp. 8-16)

October 29: Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 2: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all." (pp. 16-27)

## FIRST DISCUSSION

October 8: Introduction to Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*, and discussion of his letter to Pope Leo.

### Questions for Thought and Discussion: Letter to Pope Leo (pp. 1-8)

Please read through the first 8 pages of the "Luther Freedom" file, which contain a brief introduction and Luther's letter to Pope Leo. Patrick Hayden-Roy will be filling in some historical background on this work and the early Reformation on Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup>, during the Sunday School hour in the chapel, and we will also discuss some of the questions below. If you don't have time to read the whole 8 pages, don't worry. Reading through the questions and quotations below will give you a good sense of the text – or just come as you are!

We welcome all to attend, and those who can't are welcomed to join the discussion on our Facebook page.

1. How does Luther refer to Pope Leo in this letter? Let's keep a list – here's a start, beginning on p. 3:

*most blessed father*

*Your Blessedness*

*a Daniel in Babylon*

Do these names surprise you? Why? What do you think Luther means by calling Pope Leo "a Daniel in Babylon"? (See also p. 4, where Luther also uses this name.)

2. Luther responds to the accusation that in his writings against the abuses of the Church he had also engaged in personal attacks against Pope Leo:

*I freely vow that I have, to my knowledge, spoken only good and honorable words concerning you whenever I have thought of you. If I had ever done otherwise, I myself could by no means condone it, but should agree entirely with the judgment which others have formed of me; and I should do nothing more gladly than recant such indiscretion and impiety. (p. 3)*

Why would Luther be willing to "recant" (note this word!) a personal attack against the Pope? Read on in this paragraph – what reasons does Luther give?

3. "Bad morals" vs. "ungodliness":

*I am not so foolish as to attack one whom all people praise. As a matter of fact, I have always tried, and will always continue, not to attack even those whom the public dishonors for I take no pleasure in the faults of any man, since I am conscious of the beam in my own eye. I could not, indeed, be the first one to cast a stone at the adulteress [John 8:1–11].*

*I have, to be sure, sharply attacked ungodly doctrines in general, and I have snapped at my opponents, not because of their bad morals, but because of their ungodliness. [...] I have no quarrel with any man concerning his morals but only concerning the word of truth. In all other matters I will yield to any man whatsoever; but I have neither the power nor the will to deny the Word of God. (p. 3, 4)*

- a) How are we to understand this distinction between “bad morals” and “ungodliness”?
- b) Luther’s words imply that Christians should be engaged in battles against people’s ungodliness (that is, their attacks against God’s word) rather than against their bad morals. What does this mean for us today?
- c) Have we come to identify the Christian faith with moral living? Is this correct?

4. Now let’s start a second list: how does Luther refer to the papal “see” or the “Roman Curia” in his letter to Pope Leo? (Note: the pope’s *see*, still called the Holy See today, is the seat of the pope’s authority and jurisdiction over the Roman Church. The administrative apparatus that oversees and enacts this authority is called the *Roman Curia*.) Here’s a start, beginning on p. 4 (but there’s a lot more further on – keep looking!):

*more corrupt than any Babylon or Sodom  
characterized by completely depraved, hopeless, and notorious godlessness  
plagues of Rome  
the most licentious den of thieves  
the most shameless of all brothels  
the kingdom of sin, death, and hell  
Antichrist himself could add no wickedness to it*

Patrick will be presenting some background on the abuses in the Roman Church that might have led to this kind of drastic attack. Be thinking about this language – are there instances today where this kind of verbal attack could be appropriate?

5. In the following paragraph Luther makes his offer of peace:

*So I come, most blessed father, and, prostrate before you, pray that if possible you intervene and stop those flatterers, who are the enemies of peace while they pretend to keep peace. But let no person imagine that I will recant unless he prefer to involve the whole question in even greater turmoil. Furthermore, I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound [II Tim. 2:9]. If these two points are granted, there is nothing that I could not or would not most willingly do or endure. I detest contentions. I will challenge no one. On the other hand, I do not want others to challenge me. If they do, as Christ is my teacher, I will not be speechless. When once this controversy has*

*been cited before you and settled, Your Blessedness will be able with a brief and ready word to silence both parties and command them to keep the peace. That is what I have always wished to hear. (p. 7)*

- a) What do you think about this offer? We don't know if Pope Leo ever received or read this letter. But if he did, how do you suppose he would have reacted to it? Why?
- b) Many of us, as Luther claims of himself, "detest contentions." At what point, though, should we no longer remain "speechless"?
- c) Is there anything we can learn from this letter about how to speak truth to power today?

6. Luther refers in the above passage to II Timothy 2:9, which reads: *This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.*

Think about this idea: the Word of God shall not be bound or chained. What does this mean for us in our daily lives today?

7. How, according to Luther, is Pope Leo being deceived and led astray by his advisors?

*Be not deceived by those who pretend that you are lord of the world, allow no one to be considered a Christian unless he accepts your authority, and prate that you have power over heaven, hell, and purgatory. These men are your enemies who seek to destroy your soul [I Kings 19:10], as Isaiah says: "O my people, they that call thee blessed, the same deceive thee" [Isa. 3:12]. They err who exalt you above a council and the church universal. They err who ascribe to you alone the right of interpreting Scripture. (p. 7)*

8. No offense to all of our wonderful vicars over the years – but Luther plays with the meaning of "vicar" here, which comes from the Latin *vicarius*, meaning "substitute," "surrogate," or "proxy." It's related to "vicarious": when you experience something as present, even though it's absent. And Luther criticizes this idea of "absence" in his discussion: a vicar is the "sub" who fills in when the real teacher (Christ) is absent.

*A man is a vicar only when his superior is absent. If the pope rules, while Christ is absent and does not dwell in his heart, what else is he but a vicar of Christ? What is the church under such a vicar but a mass of people without Christ? Indeed, what is such a vicar but an antichrist and an idol? How much more properly did the apostles call themselves servants of the present Christ and not vicars of an absent Christ? (p. 6-7)*

What difference do you think Luther saw between the apostles as "servants of the present Christ" and the current "vicars of an absent Christ"?

9. Do you have other thoughts or impressions regarding the Letter to Pope Leo you would like to share here?

Looking Ahead

Our next meetings will be on October 22nd and 29<sup>th</sup> during the Sunday School hour in the chapel, and will be dedicated to the Freedom tract.

October 22: Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 1: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none”

October 29: Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 2: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all.”

Please join us, either by posting on our FB page, coming to the discussion on Sunday, or both!

## SECOND DISCUSSION

October 22: Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 1: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to none” (pp. 8-16)

### Questions for Thought and Discussion:

Please read Part 1 of the Freedom tract, pages 8-16 in the “Luther Freedom” file. We will be discussing this part of the text during the Sunday School hour in the chapel, considering the questions below. If you don’t have time to read all of pp. 8-16, don’t worry. Reading through the questions and quotations below will give you a good sense of the text – or just come as you are!

We welcome all to attend, and those who can’t are welcomed to join the discussion on our Facebook page.

Luther begins his tract with a paradox: two statements that seem to contradict each other, but which he says are both true for the Christian:

*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.*<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

*A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

The tract is organized around a discussion of these two statements: the first half (pp. 8-16) is devoted to the first statement, and the second half (pp. 16-27) to the second. Our discussion is organized in the same manner, so this week we’ll discuss what Luther has to say about the first statement, and October 29<sup>th</sup> will be devoted to part two.

Twofold human nature (inner spirit vs. outer flesh):

Luther’s point of departure in the Freedom tract is twofold human nature: the inner spirit or soul on the one hand, and our outer flesh, our mortal beings, on the other. Luther typically quotes from Paul’s letters when talking about twofold human nature, but he – and Paul – are drawing here on ancient philosophical traditions. While we could digress here and look deeply into both the tradition and how Luther redefines it, in this discussion we will simply try to make sense of how Luther situates his argument in the Freedom tract within the framework of twofold human nature. Along the way we will get a sense of how he defines the “inner” vs. the “outer” person.

Luther explains the central paradox of the tract using this framework: the Christian is free lord of all according to his/her spiritual nature, and servant to all according to his/her bodily nature. The first part of the tract, then, is concerned with humans' inner nature (or the soul), and answers the question: how does the soul become righteous and free?

1. Consider the following passage, which discusses the relationship between “external things” and Christian freedom:

*It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude. [...] It does not help the soul if the body is adorned with the sacred robes of priests or dwells in sacred places or is occupied with sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain kinds of food, or does any work that can be done by the body and in the body. [...] Such works produce nothing but hypocrites. On the other hand, it will not harm the soul if the body is clothed in secular dress, dwells in unconsecrated places, eats and drinks as others do, does not pray aloud, and neglects to do all the above-mentioned things which hypocrites can do. (p. 9)*

a. Can any works, even spiritual exercises such as praying, fasting, meditating, make the soul free, according to Luther?

b. Note, too, that according to Luther not only do good works not make the soul free and righteous; neither do bad works “produce unrighteousness or servitude”!

Luther is saying to us: whether helping every day at Matt Talbot Kitchen or dealing drugs – these activities are NOT what make our soul either righteous or unrighteous before God. Do you agree?

2. Consider the following passage:

*One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ, as Christ says, John 11[:25], “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live”; and John 8[:36], “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”; and Matt. 4[:4], “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. (p. 9)*

The soul, then, according to Luther, is not some “good core” within the person, or what he or she “really is” or “really wants to be”; the soul’s help lies not within, but rather outside itself, in the Word of God. It is the Word of God alone that makes the soul righteous.

Now consider the following passage:

*To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God. [...] The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by*

*faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.* (p. 10)  
So how does the soul receive the saving Word of God, if not through works?

3. Faith is the means by which we receive God's saving Word – “by faith alone” – this is one of Luther's most profound and controversial insights, and lays the foundation of the Reformation.

But can't works help out in making us righteous, even just a little bit? Luther is very emphatic here:

*This faith cannot exist in connection with works—that is to say, if you at the same time claim to be justified by works, whatever their character—for that would be the same as “limping with two different opinions” [I Kings 18:21] (p. 10)*

And Luther makes it equally clear that while evil works can make us guilty in human society, they are not what make our souls guilty and damnable before God:

*On the other hand, only ungodliness and unbelief of heart, and no outer work, make him guilty and a damnable servant of sin. (p. 10)*

What then is sin in the eyes of God? Does this challenge your own understanding of what sin is? If so, how?

4. The Word of God: commandments and promises (or law and gospel)

Luther rightly asks his reader: if faith alone justifies, then why are there so many commandments in the Bible? His answer is that the whole of Scripture is divided into two kinds of speech: commandments (the law) and promises (the gospel, the good news of Christ). The commandments tell us what we ought to do, but they do not give us the power to do it. Their purpose then, is:

*They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability [... and] being truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself nothing whereby he may be justified and saved. (p. 11)*

Only then can we hear the promises of God:

*Here the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying, “If you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things.” [...] The promises of God give what the commandments of God demand and fulfill what the law prescribes so that all things may be God's alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. (p. 11)*

Feel free to comment on Luther's understanding of law and gospel.

5. What is so special about faith? Luther lays out three “powers of faith” in the Freedom tract, which we will now consider:

- A. Faith frees from the law
- B. Faith honors God
- C. Faith unites the soul with Christ

A. Faith frees from the law (this is where we learn exactly what Luther means with “the freedom of the Christian”!)

*A Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law. It is true that “the law is not laid down for the just” [I Tim. 1:9]. This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man’s righteousness and salvation. (p. 12)*

The Christian is free from the demands of the law. Luther is quick to say that this freedom should not encourage us to live in wickedness. But it does make our works completely unnecessary for our salvation.

a) What do you think about this idea of Christian freedom? Do you agree with it? Do you see any potential problems or challenges in it?

b) How is this understanding of freedom different from, say, the freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment?

B. Faith honors God

Why does Luther say that faith honors God?

*It is a further function of faith that it honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy. There is no other honor equal to the estimate of truthfulness and righteousness with which we honor him whom we trust. Could we ascribe to a man anything greater than truthfulness and righteousness and perfect goodness? On the other hand, there is no way in which we can show greater contempt for a man than to regard him as false and wicked and to be suspicious of him, as we do when we do not trust him. So when the soul firmly trusts God’s promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God. The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. (p. 12)*

On the other hand, Luther writes that there is no greater wickedness than NOT trusting in God’s promises. And that is exactly what we do, when we trust in our own good works to make us righteous!

*On the other hand, what greater rebellion against God, what greater wickedness, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing his promise? For what is this but to make God a liar or to doubt that he is truthful?—that is, to ascribe truthfulness to one’s self but lying and vanity to God? Does not a man who does this deny God and set himself up as an idol in his heart? Then of what good are works done in such wickedness, even if they were the works of angels and apostles? Therefore God has rightly included all things, not under anger or lust, but under unbelief, so that they who imagine that they are fulfilling the law by doing the works of chastity and mercy required by the law (the civil and human virtues) might not be saved. They are included under the sin of unbelief and must either seek mercy or be justly condemned. (p. 12)*



Performing “civil and human virtues” or even “the works of angels and the apostles” can be the greatest wickedness, if done in order to prove one’s innocence and righteousness. So what would Luther say to the idea that the Christian faith means “learning to be a good person”? What do you think?

#### C: Faith unites the soul with Christ

One of the more remarkable images Luther uses in this text is that of the marriage between the soul and Christ. This is an ancient image, but in medieval theology the soul was understood to be the pure and spotless bride *in and of itself*. Luther rejects this idea, and, using very drastic language, calls the soul, in and of itself, a *harlot* (or in the German version: *ein Hürlein*, a little whore). But faith is like a marriage, where Christ takes ownership of the harlot’s property: sin, death, damnation, while the harlot is given Christ’s property: his grace, life, and salvation. This is what Luther refers to in the German version of the Freedom tract as the “happy exchange” (*der fröhliche Wechsel*).

*Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, “If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his,” as the bride in the Song of Solomon [2:16] says, “My beloved is mine and I am his.” (p. 13)*

Luther asks all of us, men and women, to find our identity not only in a woman, but in a harlot! What do you think about this imagery?

#### 6. All who believe in Christ also share in his kingship and priesthood

##### A. We are all kings:

*First, with respect to the kingship, every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of a spiritual power, he is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him any harm. [...] This is not to say that every Christian is placed <sup>150</sup>over all things to have and control them by physical power—a madness with which some churchmen are afflicted—for such power belongs to kings, princes, and other men on earth. Our ordinary experience in life shows us that we are subjected to all, suffer many things, and even die. As a matter of fact, the more Christian a man is, the more evils, sufferings, and deaths he must endure, as we see in Christ the first-born prince himself, and in all his brethren, the saints. The power of which we speak is spiritual. It rules in the midst of enemies and is powerful in the midst of oppression. This means nothing else than that “power is made perfect in weakness” [II Cor. 12:9] and that in all things I can find profit toward salvation [Rom. 8:28], so that the cross and death itself are compelled to serve me and to work together with me for my salvation. This is a splendid privilege and hard to attain, a truly omnipotent power, a spiritual dominion in which there is nothing so good and nothing so evil but that it shall work together for good to me, if only I believe. (p. 14-15)*

What sort of a kingship is this? How is it different from political power?

## B. We are all priests

Here we find another one of Luther's central teachings: the "priesthood of all believers" – which was a frontal attack on the Roman understanding of priests as an elevated, holy caste. But Luther says all believers are priests:

*... for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. [...]*

*You will ask, "If all who are in the church are priests, how do these whom we now call priests differ from laymen?" I answer: Injustice is done those words "priest," "cleric," "spiritual," "ecclesiastic," when they are transferred from all Christians to those few who are now by a mischievous usage called "ecclesiastics." Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them, although it gives the name "ministers," "servants," "stewards" to those who are now proudly called popes, bishops, and lords and who should according to the ministry of the Word serve others and teach them the faith of Christ and the freedom of believers. Although we are all equally priests, we cannot all publicly minister and teach. We ought not do so even if we could. (p. 15)*

What does it mean for the members of FLC that we are all priests?

## 7. Christ for you and me

How should Christ be preached?

- . not as historical facts (16)
- . not in order to teach laws (16)
- . not in order to stir up anger or hatred against the Jews (16) – or, in our day, against anyone practicing a religion different from our own;

*Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him. This is done when that Christian liberty which he bestows is rightly taught and we are told in what way we Christians are all kings and priests and therefore lords of all and may firmly believe that whatever we have done is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God, as I have already said.*

*What man is there whose heart, upon hearing these things, will not rejoice to its depth, and when receiving such comfort will not grow tender so that he will love Christ as he never could by means of any laws or works? (p. 16)*

How can we all teach people today about this Christ for you and me?

8. What other thoughts do you have as you reflect on your reading and discussion of Part 1 of Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*?

## Looking Ahead

Our final meeting will be on October 29<sup>th</sup> during the Sunday School hour in the chapel:

Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 2: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all.”

Please join us, either by posting on our FB page, coming to the discussion on Sunday, or both!

### THIRD DISCUSSION

October 29: Discussion of *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Part 2: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (pp. 16-27)

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion:

Please read Part 2 of the Freedom tract, pages 16-27 in the “Luther Freedom” file. We will be discussing this part of the text during the Sunday School hour in the chapel, considering the questions below. If you don’t have time to read all of pp. 16-27, don’t worry. Reading through the questions and quotations below will give you a good sense of the text – or just come as you are!

We welcome all to attend, and those who can’t are welcomed to join the discussion on our Facebook page.

We recall that Luther’s Freedom tract begins with the following paradox:

*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.*

*A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*

Luther explains the paradox based on twofold human nature: the Christian is free lord of all according to his/her spiritual nature, and servant to all according to his/her bodily nature. We have seen that the first part of the tract is concerned with humans’ inner nature (or the soul), and answers the question: how does the soul become righteous and free?

The second part of the tract is concerned with humans’ outer nature (“flesh”: their body, their mortal life in the world), and answers the question: if the soul becomes righteous and free through faith alone, why should Christians be bothered with good works?

1. Luther’s insistence that people become righteousness before God only through faith, and not through works, led his opponents to raise the following criticism: if works have no impact on salvation, then Christians will have neither motivation nor any reason for doing good works:

*Here we shall answer all those who, offended by the word “faith” and by all that has been said, now ask, “If faith does all things and is alone sufficient unto righteousness, why then are good works commanded? We will take our ease and do no works and be content with faith.”* (p. 16)

Before reading on: what would be your objection to this criticism? Why, in your mind, should Christians do good works?

2. Luther’s discussion of works relate to two aspects of the Christian’s life:

- a) good works in relation to the self: helping the Christian to control the flesh, which “strives to serve the world and seeks its own advantage” (p. 17), and
- b) good works in relation to one’s neighbor.

Let’s first think about a), the benefits good works have for helping Christians “put the body under control and hold it in check” (p. 17). As an exemplary monk, Luther had submitted himself eagerly to the monastic disciplines. Interestingly, his new theology of grace does not reject these disciplines. Instead he argues that because Christians are not wholly spiritual beings, but rather still live in the flesh, such disciplines are still beneficial in controlling those fleshly drives that, quoting Romans 7:22-23, “are at war with the law of my mind and make me captive to the law of sin.”

*In this life he must control his own body and have dealings with men. Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline and to subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and faith and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man, as it is the nature of the body to do if it is not held in check. (p. 17)*

We don’t put much emphasis on “fastings, watchings, and labors” in our church life today. Does Luther’s argument – that good works help the believer to “discipline the flesh” have any relevance or applicability today?

3. Luther must have realized that in making this concession – that good works help discipline the flesh – he came dangerously close to allowing good works once again to play a role in salvation. Consider the following passage:

*In doing these works, however, we must not think that a man is justified before God by them, for faith, which alone is righteousness before God, cannot endure that erroneous opinion. We must, however, realize that these works reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its evil lusts, and our whole purpose is to be directed only toward the driving out of lusts. Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God. Hence a man cannot be idle, for the need of his body drives him and he is compelled to do many good works to reduce it to subjection. Nevertheless the works themselves do not justify him before God, but he does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things.*

*In this way everyone will easily be able to learn for himself the limit and discretion, as they say, of his bodily castigations, for he will fast, watch, and labor as much as he finds sufficient to repress the lasciviousness and lust of his body. But those who presume to be justified by works do not regard the mortifying of the lusts, but only the works themselves, and think that if only they have done as many and as great works as are possible, they have done well and have become righteous. At times they even addle their brains and destroy, or at least render useless, their natural strength with their works. This is the height of folly and utter ignorance of Christian life and faith, that a man should seek to be justified and saved by works and without faith. (p. 17)*

How does Luther argue that good works in fact do not have any role to play in salvation? Do you find his arguments convincing?

4. Luther goes on to argue that while good works do not make a Christian, a Christian does good works. To make this argument clear, he presents a number of analogies (pp. 17-18)

- . the works of Adam and Eve in Paradise before the fall did not make them righteous
- . a bishop's official acts (consecrating a church, confirming a child, etc.) do not make him a bishop; he must first be a bishop before the acts are valid
- . a good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor a bad tree good fruit (Matt. 7:18)
- . a good or bad house does not make a good or bad builder, but the other way around

a) What do you think about Luther's argument? Is it true that Christians do good works?

b) What do you think of these analogies? Does one of them seem more (or less) helpful than another in explaining Luther's assertion that good works don't make a Christian, but Christians do good works?

5. In the following passage Luther discusses how a "good work" (one might think of caring for the sick, giving to the poor, making peace, etc.) can become "damnable" by means of an "addition":

*If works are sought after as a means to righteousness, [...] and are done under the false impression that through them one is justified, they are made necessary and freedom and faith are destroyed; and this addition to them makes them no longer good but truly damnable works. They are not free, and they blaspheme the grace of God since to justify and to save by faith belongs to the grace of God alone. What the works have no power to do they nevertheless— by a godless presumption through this folly of ours—pretend to do and thus violently force themselves into the office and glory of grace. We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible. We do not condemn them for their own sake but on account of this godless addition to them and the perverse idea that righteousness is to be sought through them; for that makes them appear good outwardly, when in truth they are not good. (p. 19)*

a) What "addition" is Luther referring to?

b) How does his understanding of good works differ from what "appear outwardly" to be good works?

c) Does this challenge your understanding of what makes a good work good? If so, how?

6. Beginning on p. 20 Luther begins the discussion of good works in relation one's neighbor. Central to this discussion is Philippians 2: 5-8:

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the*

*likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death" [Phil. 2:5-8]. (p. 21)*

Take a minute to think about what it might mean in practical terms to have the mind of Christ – that is, his willingness to *empty himself* of his divinity and take on the form of a human, of a servant – within us. Now read how Luther ties this idea to the freedom of the Christian:

*Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him. This he should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval.*

*He ought to think: "Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ." (p. 21)*

- a) According to Luther (and Paul), Christians, too, are to "empty themselves" as Christ did. Empty ourselves of what? How does Luther understand this?
- b) What, according to Luther, motivates the Christian (who knows him/herself to be free from all requirements of the law) to become a servant to all?

7. Consider the following passage:

*Behold, from faith thus flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations. He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward. (pp. 21-22)*

Why do you think Luther places such emphasis on the love, joy, willingness, and free mind of the Christian as he/she serves his/her neighbor? What motivates you to serve your neighbor? Are we afraid of "wasting" our good works on thankless people?

8. Luther discusses at several points in the Freedom tract a "middle way" between following laws in order not to offend "weaker" believers, and refusing to follow laws that claim to make righteous. Consider the following passage:

*Hence the Christian must take a middle course and face those two classes of men. He will meet first the unyielding, stubborn ceremonialists who like deaf adders are not willing to hear the truth of liberty [Ps. 58:4] but, having no faith,*

*boast of, prescribe, and insist upon their ceremonies as means of justification. Such were the Jews of old, who were unwilling to learn how to do good. These he must resist, do the very opposite, and offend them boldly lest by their impious views they drag many with them into error. In the presence of such men it is good to eat meat, break the fasts, and for the sake of the liberty of faith do other things which they regard as the greatest of sins. Of them we must say, "Let them alone; they are blind guides." According to this principle Paul would not circumcise Titus when the Jews insisted that he should [Gal. 2:3], and Christ excused the apostles when they plucked ears of grain on the sabbath [Matt. 12:1-8]. There are many similar instances. The other class of men whom a Christian will meet are the simple-minded, ignorant men, weak in the faith, as the Apostle calls them, who cannot yet grasp the liberty of faith, even if they were willing to do so [Rom. 14:1]. These he must take care not to offend. He must yield to their weakness until they are more fully instructed. Since they do and think as they do, not because they are stubbornly wicked, but only because their faith is weak, the fasts and other things which they consider necessary must be observed to avoid giving them offense. This is the command of love which would harm no one but would serve all men. It is not by their fault that they are weak, but by that of their pastors who have taken them captive with the snares of their traditions and have wickedly used these traditions as rods with which to beat them. They should have been delivered from these pastors by the teachings of faith and freedom. So the Apostle teaches us in Romans 14: "If food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat" [Cf. Rom. 14:21 and I Cor. 8:13]; and again, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean" [Rom. 14:14].*

*For this reason, although we should boldly resist those teachers of traditions and sharply censure the laws of the popes by means of which they plunder the people of God, yet we must spare the timid multitude whom those impious tyrants hold captive by means of these laws until they are set free. Therefore fight strenuously against the wolves, but for the sheep and not also against the sheep. (p. 25)*

What do you think about Luther's "middle way"? How might this be a useful concept in our community?

#### 9. Living outside ourselves:

*Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians. (p. 22)*

*We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into*

*God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love [...]. (p. 24)*

These two quotations contain the very center of the Freedom tract, at the core of which is the idea that as Christians we live “outside ourselves” (note: German theologian Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen wrote an important study of Luther’s theology entitled: *Nos extra nos* – “we outside ourselves”): we live in Christ through faith, and in our neighbor through love. God, as it turns out, is nearer to our innermost selves, than we are.

How does this model of living outside ourselves contrast with the understanding of the self we find in our society today? Consider its emphasis on individualism, “self-realization,” finding one’s “identity.”

10. What other thoughts do you have as you reflect on your reading and discussion of Luther’s *On the Freedom of a Christian*?