



## *Luther: The Man and the Movie*

by Rev. Robert C. Baker

### **Leader Guide**

This brief downloadable Bible study is in an easy-to-use, discussion-based format. Primary Bible verses relating to the topic are included, but you may want to have Bibles handy for study participants.

Before presenting this study, view *Luther*, starring Joseph Fiennes (rated PG-13). Both DVD and VHS versions of *Luther* are available for purchase from CPH.

Before the session begins, familiarize yourself with this study. Pay special attention to the three Bible verses printed in the section entitled "Unchanging Word." Consult the Concordia Self-Study Bible, or other reputable commentaries, for notes on those passages.

Make enough copies of this study for each Bible study participant. Divide larger groups into smaller groups of no more than eight people. You may choose to do this for the section "Changed Lives." Smaller groups encourage a greater number of participants to reflect and respond to questions and will make the study more enjoyable and memorable for both them and for you.

In addition to Scripture, we recommend reviewing the following resources:

- *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*, Frederick Nohl (CPH, 2003)
- Luther's Small Catechism (Apostles' Creed)

### **Changing Currents**

The first major film on the German reformer in 50 years, *Luther* opened in American theaters on September 26, 2003. With an all-star cast including Joseph Fiennes, Alfred Molina, Bruno Ganz, Claire Cox, and two-time Academy Award winner the late Sir Peter Ustinov, *Luther* was directed by Emmy nominee Eric Till. *Luther* is now available on DVD and VHS.

According to executive producer Dennis Clauss, *Luther* highlights important events of the reformer's life. Some scenes in the film exhibit artistic license, Clauss says, but not without a purpose. For example, the burial of the young suicide, Thomas, was used to depict Luther's pastoral care for people using quotations from him. Following Louis de Rochemont's 1953 classic *Martin Luther*, scholarly research has leaned toward presenting a more balanced picture of the reformer, including his human frailties as well as his historic faith, Clauss says. This approach was taken in *Luther*.

1. In 2003, *Luther* was in the top 25 percent of U.S. box-office draws and was the third-highest-grossing film in Germany. The film is still opening in theaters worldwide and is now available in DVD and VHS. What impact do you think *Luther* will have in the next five or ten years? The next fifty?

2. The first scene of the film shows Luther as a young law student terribly frightened by a thunderstorm. Drenched with rain and horrified by lightning and thunder, Luther promises God to become a monk if He spares his life. Have you ever made a similar promise? Have you ever experienced a life-changing crisis and made a crisis-born decision?

3. *Luther* briskly notes major events in Luther's early career including his thunderstorm experience, his vows as a monk, and his nervousness the first time saying Mass. Why do you think the filmmakers chose these early events over others? What would you have included?

## Unchanging Word

Does God love me? Am I forgiven? Those questions not only crossed Martin Luther's mind, but they also pierced his heart. Finding no relief in the prescribed religious rituals of his day, Luther was driven into the Scriptures. There Luther found the precious, forgiving Savior—Luther would even say the Savior found him! This was the Christ who fulfilled God's Law by His life, satisfied God's wrath for our sin on His cross, and secured our justification by His empty tomb. Luther's story then, of which the movie *Luther* tells only a part, is the story of every Christian.

## On This Rock

In an early, dramatized scene we see Luther (played by Joseph Fiennes) as a theology student in Professor Karlstadt's classroom. Luther challenges the claim that Matthew 16:15–19 implies there is no salvation outside of the Roman Church, and that the pope must be obeyed in all things.

*[Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

1. Luther suggests that the Greeks (Eastern Orthodox Christians) do not interpret Matthew 16:15–19 in a way that support Rome's claims. How does this affect Rome's assertion that she is the only "true" Church? How is salvation found only in Christ (John 14:6)? Describe how Peter himself testifies that salvation is found only in Jesus' name (see Acts 4:8–12).

2. In St. Matthew's inspired Greek text, Jesus clearly distinguishes Peter (*Petros*, a masculine noun) from rock (*petra*, a feminine noun). Jesus

builds His Church not on Peter (*Petros*), but on the ministry of the confession (*petra*) that *He is the Messiah, God's Son*. Why is the distinction between *Petros* and *petra* in this passage important? Why should we be concerned about original languages of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16–17)?

3. Jesus states that *flesh and blood* (human reason) did not reveal Him to Peter, but rather God the Father. In his Small Catechism, Luther says, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him." What motivates us to take credit for our salvation (Romans 7:5)? What is the result (Galatians 3:10; 5:4)?

4. Jesus gave the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" to His Church, which publicly administers them through her called and ordained servants (Augsburg Confession V, XIV). Through Word and Sacrament, God forgives our sins and grants us the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:18; 10:16; Acts 2:38–39). How are you comforted knowing that God in Christ delivers His forgiveness *to you*?

## The Righteous Shall Live

Luther would later experience God's love in way that would "open heaven" for him. As a theology teacher (the movie shows one particularly humorous scene of Dr. Martin ridiculing "relics"), Luther was required diligently to study the Scriptures. While preparing his lectures on the Psalms, Luther saw a familiar passage from Romans (1:16–17) in a new light:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

1. Luther shuddered at the thought of God’s righteousness—for him it meant God’s awful judgment. But Luther noticed that Romans 1:17 can be translated “The one who is righteous by faith *shall live*.” He felt as if he had been “reborn” through this Gospel promise. Describe when you have been transformed by God’s promises in Scripture.

2. Paul calls the Gospel of Jesus Christ the power of God for both Jews and Gentiles. Along with other Bible passages, this shows that *faith in the Messiah* has always been the sole basis for a right relationship with God (see Genesis 15:6; Romans 3:21–24; 4:1–3). Why should we remember this when reading the Bible? What do we need to distinguish carefully when reading Scripture (see John 1:17)?

3. Luther tried to earn God’s favor by following the traditions and regulations of the Church. In the end, as Johann von Staupitz (Bruno Ganz) reminds him in one early scene, Luther was “angry with God.” How are good works done apart from faith worthless (see Hebrews 11:6)? How are good works done *trusting in Christ* the only true works of love (Ephesians 2:8–10)?

4. In Romans 1:17, Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4, which is quoted twice more in Scripture (Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ is the common theme running throughout the Bible (John 5:39; 2 Timothy 3:15). Why is it also the most important teaching of the Christian Church?

## **I Also Will Acknowledge**

*Luther* portrays the reformer’s valiant confession (“Here I stand!”) before Emperor Charles V and the papal representatives at the Diet of Worms. Following his “capture” and stay at the Wartburg, where he

translated the Bible into German, the film shows Luther’s confrontation with Karlstadt in Wittenberg. The movie also shows the former monk meeting, and marrying, the former nun Katharina von Bora (Claire Cox). At the end of *Luther*, we see Philip Melancthon calling out “Martin, we’ve done it!” What had been done, of course, was that the Confession of the German evangelical churches—the Augsburg Confession—had been presented to the emperor.

*So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32–33)*

1. Luther found peace in knowing that God loved Him unconditionally in Christ. God’s love in Jesus moved Luther to acknowledge His Savior even when—literally—his life was on the line. This was the same motivation for St. Paul (see 2 Timothy 1:8–12). What gives us strength to acknowledge Christ in tough times (see Romans 8:28–39)?

2. On June 25, 1530, Dr. Gregory Brueck, princes, and other rulers presented the Augsburg Confession to the emperor at the Diet of Augsburg. While theologians had had a hand in writing this Confession, none of these men were pastors or professional church workers. How is the Augsburg Confession truly a layperson’s Confession of our Savior?

3. The filmmakers of *Luther* strove to present a picture of Luther that we don’t often think about: Luther as colleague, friend, and husband. How might such a portrayal be helpful as we think about acknowledging Christ? Discuss the opportunities we have in our daily lives to confess Him.

4. Jesus acknowledges us before our Father in heaven (Hebrews 9:24). He does so as our great High Priest, who has purchased us through the shedding of His blood (10:12–14). When can we approach our Father to

give Him thanks for His love in Christ? List some of the many blessings God gives us through His Son (see 1 Peter 1:3–9).

## Changed Lives

Jesus Himself builds His Church upon this truth: He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Through the Word of Christ crucified and resurrected, God justifies us (declares us righteous) by His grace through the gift of faith. We give thanks for Luther and other faithful teachers who proclaim this biblical, Christian teaching, and whose lives encourage us to confess Christ before others. If you have not divided into smaller groups of eight people or less, take the time to do so now. Or, you may want to review and discuss the following questions in pairs and report back to the larger group.

### Talking about Luther

1. After hours, a nondenominational Christian co-worker tells you she has seen the *Luther* film. She wonders why, following the Reformation, Lutheran worship still looks so “Roman Catholic” (Augsburg Confession XXIV, Apology VII/VIII 33, XXIV). How do you respond?

2. Your auto mechanic’s wife has given birth. You congratulate him at the shop and ask if they have considered having the baby baptized. He wants to know what Lutherans believe about Baptism. How do you answer (see Acts 2:38–39; 1 Peter 3:21)? What do you do to follow up?

### Connected to Luther

1. Luther wrote that the Bible is the manger in which the Christ Child lies. Some Christians throw out the Baby (legalism) while others throw out the manger (lawlessness). Discuss Luther’s belief in the Bible as God’s errorless Word, cradling the Christ (see John 5:39–40).

2. Although Lutherans were the first *Protestants*, many Protestants do not agree with Luther’s teachings. Some say that faith is a human decision to follow Christ. How does Luther’s doctrine that faith is God’s *gift* (Ephesians 2:8–9) provide true comfort to troubled hearts?

## Idea Exchange

For more information about the movie or further reflection on Luther’s life and teachings, see the following:

- Book: *Luther: Biography of a Reformer*, Frederick Nohl (CPH, 2003; item no. 12-4226).
- Book: *Martin Luther: A Man Who Changed the World*, Paul L. Maier (CPH, 2004; item no. 56-2274).
- Children’s book: *The Adventures of Martin Luther*, Carolyn Bergt (CPH, 1999; item no. 22-2810).
- DVD/VHS: The classic, black-and-white *Martin Luther* (1953, Louis de Rochemont, producer; item no. 87-0065).

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