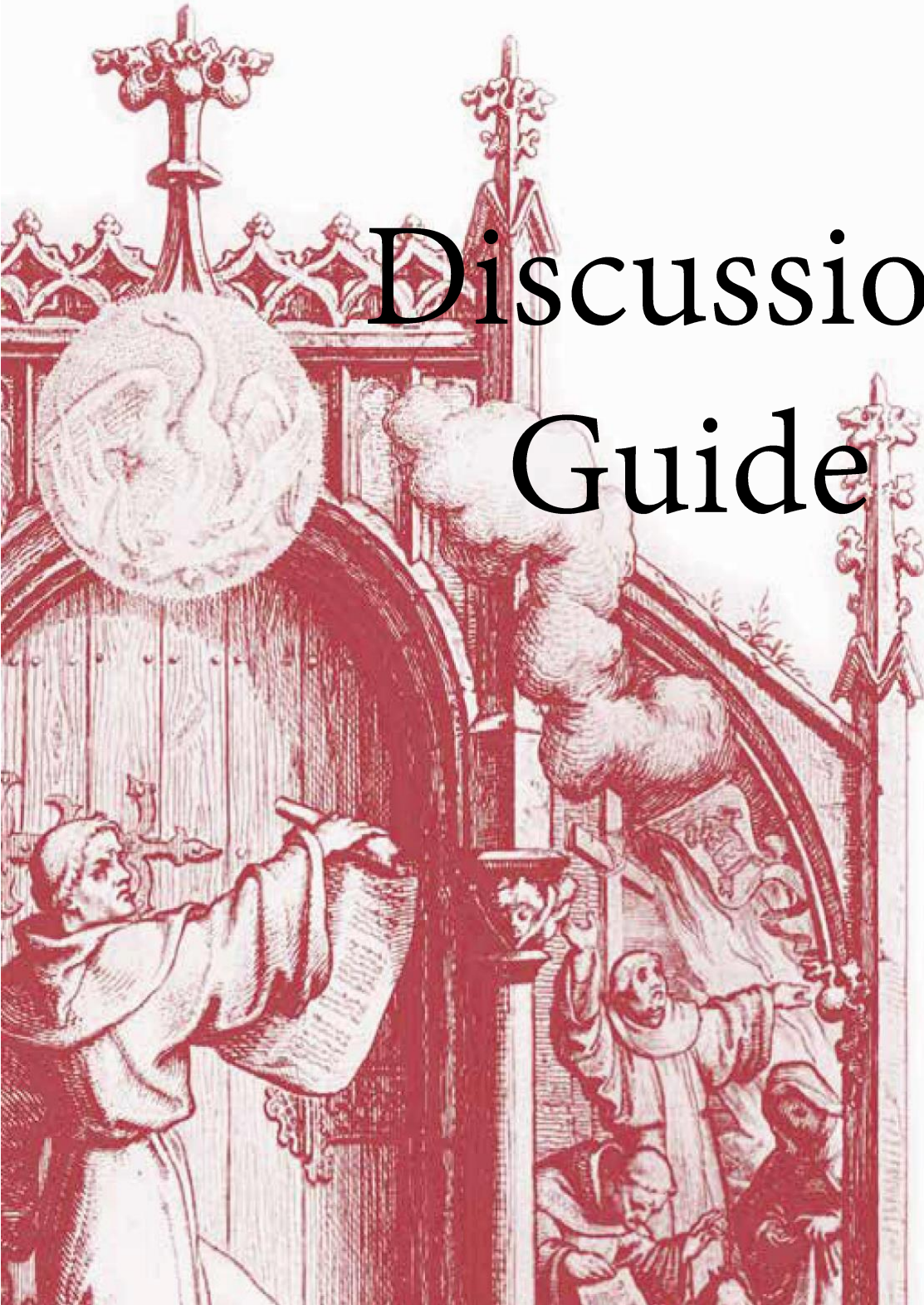


THE ANNOTATED LUTHER

THE ROOTS OF REFORM

VOLUME 1

Discussion Guide



The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform

Edited by Timothy J. Wengert

DISCUSSION GUIDE COMPILED BY MARTIN J. LOHRMANN

Volume Overview

These writings first brought Luther into the public eye and into conflict with church authorities. Enriching readers' understanding of both the texts and their contexts, this volume begins by presenting the *95 Theses* together with the introductory letter that Luther sent to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz on October 31, 1517, as well as the early 1518 *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* that popularized Luther's critique of indulgences. The *Heidelberg Disputation* puts Luther in conversation with his Augustinian brothers and the dominant theological and philosophical traditions of the time, while *The Proceedings at Augsburg* shows the new reformer on trial before the papal representative Cardinal Cajetan.

Early works on the sacraments appear here, too, along with key writings from the watershed year of 1520. These include both well-known works like *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* and *Freedom of a Christian*, as well as the less familiar *Treatise on Good Works*. Throughout this volume, helpful notes, expert insights, and inviting pictures complement Luther's still-engaging Reformation ideas.

**[THE 95 THESES OR]
DISPUTATION FOR CLARIFYING THE POWER OF INDULGENCES, 1517**

Overview

With this work, Luther launched a Reformation of the church in Europe. His careful theological and pastoral probing of indulgences exposed many of the problems that existed in late medieval Christianity.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Thesis 1 foreshadow the criticism of indulgences that is to follow?
2. What spiritual issues confronting typical Christians did Luther address in this work?
3. What role did indulgences play in the forgiveness of sins in medieval theology?
4. How did Luther say that indulgences were being exploited by some people of the time?
5. On what points did Luther criticize the power of the pope? On the other hand, what positive pastoral roles did Luther identify as belonging to the office of pope?
6. What is the difference between the “treasure” of the church as identified by St. Laurence (in Thesis 59) and the treasury of merits discussed in Theses 50–68?
7. Considering Theses 62 and 63, why would Luther write that the true treasure of the church is also the most hated?
8. According to Luther, what responsibilities do bishops and other church leaders have when it comes to preaching forgiveness?
9. Where might Luther have received the ideas behind the “slanders” that he listed in Theses 82–89?
10. Near the end of the *Theses*, how did Luther contrast the treasures of indulgences with the treasure of the cross?
11. How does recognizing the rhetorical structure of the theses help in understanding Luther’s intent? What seemed to you the strongest arguments? The weakest?

LETTER FROM MARTIN LUTHER TO ALBRECHT, ARCHBISHOP OF MAINZ, 31 OCTOBER 1517

Overview

With the famous postage date of October 31, 1517, Luther sent this letter to his highest local church authority, the powerful Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz. Little did Luther know how much this critique of indulgences challenged the economic, political, and theological order that Albrecht personally represented.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Luther write to his archbishop as part of his presentation of the *95 Theses*?
2. What pastoral concerns did Luther express about how indulgences were being preached to the common people?
3. What ways of knowing God's forgiveness did Luther say were better than buying indulgences?
4. For Luther, what was the difference between preaching indulgences and preaching the gospel?
5. What concerns did Luther have for Albrecht personally (pages 53–54)?
6. What positive or negative responses do you think Luther might have expected from Albrecht?

A SERMON ON INDULGENCES AND GRACE, 1518

Overview

This sermon popularized the critique of indulgences that Luther started with the *95 Theses*. Here Luther emphasized that Scripture calls people to live out their faith by attending to holy relationships with God and neighbors, not by buying indulgences.

Discussion Questions

1. In medieval teaching, what were the three parts of the sacrament of penance? Where did indulgences fit in that system?
2. Instead of buying indulgences, what penitential works might Christians do?
3. At this point in his career, Luther allowed that indulgences might be something pious Christians could take or leave as a matter of freedom (even though he personally rejected their value for Christians). What do you think about that approach to disagreement?
4. In this work, how did Luther talk about sufferings and punishments with respect to God's righteousness?
5. What did Luther view as the primary dangers of indulgences?
6. In what ways did Luther connect indulgences and economic injustice or corruption in this work?
7. What arguments do the *95 Theses* and the *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* hold in common? How might this help define what Luther thought most important early in the debate?
8. While critical of scholastic theology and its method, Luther also used aspects of academic theology in his sermon. What might this say to the notion that Luther's approach to theology was completely new and a break with the past?

HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION, 1518

Overview

With these provocative theses, Luther shared what it meant to him to be “a theologian of the cross.” These theological and philosophical statements also show Luther’s engagement and familiarity with medieval scholasticism.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to become wise by “Distrusting completely our own wisdom” (p. 81)?
2. In the early theses, what is the relationship between God’s law, human reason, and the works of God?
3. How did Luther teach the difference between doing works to try to appease God and doing good works as the result of having a lively relationship with God?
4. Why would good works be mortal sins without fear of God?
5. What does it mean to be a theologian of the cross and a theologian of glory (Thesis 21)?
6. For Luther, what was the relationship between theological and philosophical truth? What did it mean to use theology and philosophy correctly?

The Proceedings at Augsburg, 1518

Overview

This is Luther's published version of his meeting with Cardinal Cajetan, a representative of Pope Leo X. He described both his sincere hope that his ideas might someday receive a fair hearing from church leaders and his skepticism that such open deliberations would ever take place. As in Luther's *Explanations of the 95 Theses*, important concepts of the early Reformation like the "happy exchange" and justification by faith alone find clear expression here.

Discussion Questions

1. In the first paragraph, Luther called himself "an inquiring disputant." What hopes, expectations, and concerns might have come with that self-description?
2. Near the beginning of this work, Luther described hearing "a new Latin language" at Augsburg, in which flattery means peace and truth brings confusion. What did he mean by this?
3. On what points was Luther criticized by Cardinal Cajetan? How did Luther respond?
4. On point 6 of pages 139–140, what did Luther mean by saying that the saints share in the merits of Christ?
5. Luther wrote that "no one can be justified except by faith" (p. 141). In his context, what might have been controversial about that phrase?
6. While discussing what makes a sacrament effective, Luther talked about people receiving Holy Communion worthily or unworthily (p. 143). In his view, what makes a person worthy to receive the Lord's Supper?
7. How did Acts 5:29 inform Luther's view of what it means to obey authority? (p. 147).
8. Luther wrote, "How much I repress and do not mention here, you will surely notice, good reader, but not without groaning," (p. 151). What did he mean by that?
9. An important theme running throughout this document is the relationship between church councils and papal authority. Where have you seen that theme appear in this work? What position did Luther prefer, and why?
10. How did Luther see himself as defending the Roman Church through his critiques of it?

A SERMON ON THE MEDITATION OF CHRIST'S HOLY PASSION, 1519

Overview

This meditation invites Christians to experience the meditation of Christ's passion as an entrance into the saving relationship with God that comes through Christ's dying and rising for us. More than just a pious exercise, meditation upon the passion and resurrection can give what it says: the death of the old self and the rising of a new being with Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. In Luther's view, how was meditation upon Christ's passion sometimes used incorrectly among people of his time?
2. What thoughts does the image on page 170 of Christ as the "man of sorrows" (originally published as the title page illustration for this sermon) inspire in you?
3. Why do you think Luther says it is important to meditate upon Christ's passion "with a terrified heart and a despairing conscience" (p. 172)?
4. Instead of simply leaving people to feel bad, what positive benefits come from recognizing our sin and guilt with respect to Christ's passion?
5. What Bible verses offer comfort rather than fear when it comes to Christ's dying for our sins?
6. Luther wrote: "There is no avoiding being conformed to Christ's image and suffering" (p. 174). What does that mean to you?
7. What examples of Lutheran "law and gospel" theology do you find in this sermon?
8. Through meditation on God's salvation through Christ's cross, how are Christians strengthened for daily life?
9. By paragraph 10, Luther has agreed with St. Albert's saying that it is "more beneficial to ponder Christ's passion just once than to fast a whole year or to pray a psalm daily." In what sense has he agreed with this statement?

SERMON ON THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE, 1519

Overview

By Luther's time, the sacrament of penance had taken a central role in Christian ideas and practices concerning salvation. Luther's sermon aimed to correct abuses and misunderstandings about what it means to repent, while emphasizing the many blessings that come when Christians confess their sins and hear God's word of forgiveness.

Discussion Questions

1. How does sin get in the way of a right relationship with God?
2. Why do human efforts at reconciliation and "making satisfaction" for sin fall short?
3. Although in paragraph 6 (pp. 189–190) Luther redefined the sacrament of penance, he claimed to be following Scripture and other ancient church authorities in his new definition. Which passages and church writers did he use to explain his reform of penance?
4. According to Luther, what is the proper role of a pastor or priest in confession and forgiveness?
5. In this tract (especially paragraphs 10 and 11, pp. 192–193), what is the most serious sin one can commit, and why?
6. Luther wrote, "Christ established that authority in the church should be service" (p. 195f.). What does that mean to you? What might it have meant to people in Luther's time?
7. How does a good understanding of penance lead to doing good works for others?
8. What does it mean that "in this life we are never without sin" (p. 199), and what does it have to do with the sacrament of penance?
9. What does Luther's summary (*Summa Summarum*, p. 201) mean to you?

THE HOLY AND BLESSED SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM, 1519

Overview

In contrast to typical medieval views that baptism was primarily a one-time event, this short work says that Christians live out their baptism all their lives. Baptism therefore becomes a lifelong foundation for our relationship with God, our self-understanding, and our care for those around us.

Discussion Questions

1. Without requiring it, why did Luther prefer baptism by full immersion?
2. Why is baptism “not fulfilled completely in this life” (p. 208)?
3. What passages or stories from the Bible did Luther use to explain what baptism is and does?
4. In light of Luther’s teaching about daily dying and rising through baptism, what kind of progress or improvement might Christians expect or look for over time? What kind of progress or improvement might Christians not expect?
5. What is the role of faith in the sacrament of baptism (p. 214 and following)?
6. In paragraphs 16–18, Luther connected baptism, the theology of the cross, and vocation. How do you understand the relationship between these topics?
7. Near the end of this work, Luther described baptized people as both children of God and “poor condemned little worms,” (p. 222). In what sense are both of those true?

THE BLESSED SACRAMENT OF THE HOLY AND TRUE BODY OF CHRIST, AND THE BROTHERHOODS, 1519

Overview

Luther's first work specifically on the topic of Holy Communion describes the Lord's Supper as a "sacrament of love." More than just a God-pleasing ritual to be done by rote, Holy Communion creates and sustains lively fellowship between Christ, individuals, and all believers.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the work, Luther insisted that the sacrament must be at once "external and visible" and "internal and spiritual," (p. 230–231). What did he mean by that?
2. Luther advocated for communion in "both kinds." First, what does that phrase mean? Second, what changes might this particular reform of the Lord's Supper bring to communities?
3. Paragraph 4 (p. 233) begins a discussion of communion as "the fellowship of all the saints." Discuss some of the ways that Luther understood that concept.
4. What does Luther's analogy between political communities and spiritual communities say about Holy Communion (p. 234–236)?
5. In this sermon, how does a person receive Holy Communion worthily or unworthily?
6. Paragraph 9 (p. 236) makes a strong connection between receiving the grace of the sacrament and sharing love and grace with others. What do you think about that paragraph?
7. Paragraph 20 (p. 245-247) begins a critique of the "the Mass" as it was frequently practiced in Luther's time. What specific practices did Luther criticize, and why?
8. Why is Holy Communion particularly valuable for those near death (p. 247f.)?
9. Do you see an insistence upon the "real presence" of Christ in the sacrament in this tract? Why or why not?

TREATISE ON GOOD WORKS, 1520

Overview

An early critique of the Lutheran movement was that the preaching of justification by faith alone would lead to Christians not caring about good works. With this little book, Luther aimed to show that his teaching about faith not only supported good works but actually provided the only true foundation for good works that serve others with no strings attached.

Discussion Questions

1. In the preface to Duke John of Saxony, Luther wrote that he was content to teach the Christian faith to regular people in humble ways. How does this idea resonate with the rest of this treatise?
2. How did Luther connect faith and works in his discussion of the first commandment?
3. Luther believed all other commandments flow from the first commandment. How does that viewpoint change one's perspective on good works?
4. How did Luther combat the argument that good works are not important for Christians if faith alone justifies?
5. Do you recognize tendencies within yourself or others that relate to Luther's description of the four kinds of people? (p. 281-282)
6. On page 295, Luther described times when God's name is not honored. Consider a time when you may have experienced the following: "The most pernicious kind comes when there is no attack at all and everything is running smoothly, lest in such a situation the person forgets God and through lack of restraint misuses the good times."
7. Luther connected the third commandment with prayer. How does remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy enrich both outward prayer and inward prayer?
8. Luther described the Ten Commandments as a mirror. What do they reflect back at you when you contemplate on them?
9. Honoring authority in the home, church, and civil realm served an important role in Luther's view fulfilling the fourth commandment. How did he describe the relationship between faith, freedom, authority, and obedience? What purpose did Acts 5:29 play in Luther's understanding of this commandment? (p. 350)

10. Luther frequently turned the commandments on their heads, identifying positive aspects to commandments that begin “you shall not.” For example, he interpreted the commandment not to kill as a call to protect our neighbors and preserve their lives; the commandment not to steal became a command to use our possessions to help and serve others; and the commandment not to bear false witness against our neighbors encourages us to protect our neighbors’ reputations. How did this approach enrich our understanding of the commandments? What is the relationship between these positive instructions and justification by faith alone?

TO THE CHRISTIAN NOBILITY OF THE GERMAN NATION CONCERNING THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN ESTATE, 1520

Overview

After identifying the “three walls” that the papacy had created in order to insulate itself from critique, Luther invited the political authorities to oversee reform of the church if the church leaders themselves would not. In Luther’s view, political leaders have the right to do this as a way of living out their baptisms in the positions of service that God has given them.

Discussion Questions

1. In the opening address to his friend and colleague Nicholas von Amsdorf, Luther described himself as a “court jester.” What might he have meant by that?
2. Why did Luther appeal to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the other political authorities for reform of the church?
3. According to Luther, what three walls did “the Romanists” build to protect their power?
4. What did Luther mean by saying that “all Christians are truly of spiritual status,” (p. 381)?
5. If all Christians are “consecrated priests through baptism,” then what is the proper work of bishops and pastors in the church?
6. How did Luther challenge the idea that only the pope can interpret Scripture?
7. What did Luther mean by writing “Christian authority can do nothing against Christ” (p. 392)?
8. What are some of the historical examples that Luther gave to refute these three walls?
9. How might Luther’s arguments have appealed to the interests of the political authorities?
10. What are some of the strategies Luther suggested for political leaders who favored reform? Which strategies do you think sound the most potentially effective?

THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN, 1520

Overview

Written as the papal bull of excommunication was on its way to Wittenberg from Rome, Luther expressed the deep freedom he experienced through faith in Christ. At the same time, this freedom was not an individualistic or isolated freedom but one that—as the second half of the tract makes plain—expresses itself most completely through unconditional service to our neighbors and to this world that Christ died to save.

Discussion Questions

1. How might the dedicatory letter to Pope Leo X serve as a “case study” in how to practice Christian freedom? (p. 468).
2. Luther started his tract by saying, “Many people view Christian faith as something easy.” In *The Freedom of a Christian*, what does it mean to have faith?
3. What did Luther mean by separating the inner person from the outer person?
4. What happens in the union of the bridegroom, Christ, and the soul through faith?
5. In what sense is Christ’s free justification of sinners both subjective (personal) and objective (not about us)?
6. What are your thoughts on Luther’s assertion that good works don’t make a person good but that a good person goes good works? What Bible verses or illustrations from daily life did Luther use to help make this point?
7. As the tract moves into its second half, why did Luther insist that discipline was still necessary for Christians?
8. Based on the second half of this text, how might you describe Lutheran views of good works?
9. What does it mean to be free to serve?
10. After reading the entire tract, how would you explain Luther’s conviction that Christians are both free lords of all and dutiful servants of all?