



The Essential Lutheran Handbook

500th Anniversary
Even Smaller Pocket Edition

Adult Small Group Discussion Guide

SECTION ONE: CHURCH STUFF

1 *How to Listen to a Sermon (page 18)*

Think of both the best and worst sermons you've ever heard. What elements did they share? What made them fundamentally different? Were they both God's Word? Why or why not?

2 *How to Receive Communion (page 21)*

Why do you think there are so many different ways to practice this sacrament? Are the differences logistical or symbolic? How about the many different names? What facets or meanings of the sacrament does each name emphasize? Which name and/or method is most meaningful to you? How come? Has that been the same all your life?

3 *The Anatomy of a Baptism (page 26)*

Both communion and baptism include earthly elements (wine, bread, and water) that connect with something sacred and mysterious. Why would that be worth noticing? Why do you think God chooses to use physical "stuff" to deliver the promises inherent in these sacraments?

4 *How to Share the Peace in Church (page 28)*

Worship liturgies are laid out in a certain order for a reason. Often, the exchange of God's peace makes a bridge between our experience of hearing God's Word in Scripture and sermon and our experience of receiving God's promises in Holy Communion. When does passing the peace happen in your church's worship, and what elements does it connect? What does that timing signify for you? Would you miss this part of worship if it went away? Why or why not?

5 *Five Things You Should Know about the Lutheran Reformation (page 30)*

These five bits of information about the reformers and the quality of life in their era remind us how different our experience is from theirs. Apart from the specific things the reformers fought for and achieved, how has the act of reformation itself become part of church (as well as political and social) life? How has the Christian church reformed (and reformed and reformed) during the last 500 years? Is this good, bad, or mixed? Talk about your thoughts as a group.



6 *The Most Outrageous Luther Quotes and What They Mean (page 39)*

Luther wrote volumes himself, and his students filled reams of paper with even more things he said—outrageous and otherwise. Of the ten quotes selected here, which resonate with you the most? Which is most confusing, or offensive, or off-putting? If we call ourselves Lutherans, do we have to agree with, or like, everything this guy said? How do you think Luther himself might answer that?

7 *Top Five Lutheran Myths and Why We Choose Not to Debunk Them (page 42)*

Does it make a difference to you to know that these stories are mythical? Which is your favorite story about Luther? Why? If you had to define the story of the Lutheran Reformation using one descriptive sentence, what would it be? Would it include elements from these top five myths?

8 *How to Avoid Getting Burned at the Stake (page 45)*

What does the word *heresy* mean? What do you think of the fact that the man credited with founding the whole Lutheran thing was officially named a heretic? What's the most effective way to argue against a charge of heresy?

9 *Luther's Seal (page 53)*

Though Luther is often associated with words, hymns, and theological arguments, the design of his seal shows us that he was also interested in how images and symbols communicate. If you had a seal to tell people who you are and what's important to you, what would it look like? What elements of your faith would make the cut? Which images would you use to show others what you believe about God? We don't use seals to press images into wax these days, but images are all around us. If Luther were alive today, where might his symbol show up?

10 *How to Read Scripture Aloud During Worship (page 73)*

How is reading Scripture in worship different from other forms of public presentation? In your opinion, what are the most important attributes of a good reader (also known as a "lector")? Why do we take the time to read Scripture aloud, especially if the text is printed in a bulletin or projected on a screen? What benefits are there in hearing the Word proclaimed?



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SECTION TWO: EVERYDAY STUFF

- 1** *How to Tell the Difference Between the Law and the Gospel (page 110)*
The writers describe both the law and the gospel in terms that we might not be used to when talking about religion. Instead of propositions or opinions (such as “God is love” or “God hates sin” or “Christians don’t smoke” and the like), Lutherans understand God’s Word as *direct address*. In both the law and the gospel, God is speaking directly. And if we are the ones hearing it, then God is speaking directly *to us*. How does this understanding affect the way we hearers interpret and respond to God’s law and gospel? What’s the most unsettling thing you’ve heard in worship? What made it uncomfortable? What parts of the law or the gospel have given you comfort?

- 2** *How to Proclaim the Gospel to Someone Who Needs to Hear It (page 113)*
What is the most worrisome part of talking to others about Jesus? What might make you feel comfortable proclaiming the gospel? If you were asked to share the gospel with someone but couldn’t use words, what actions would you take?

- 3** *The Top Three Uses of the Law (page 116)*
One example of a “civil” use of law is the speed limit, which sets a boundary and hopefully curbs our impulse to speed, thereby making the roads safer for everyone. When might the speed limit sign start to feel like a *second* use of the law—exposing and/or teaching? Choose one of the Ten Commandments and discuss how it might function both ways.

- 4** *How to Pray (page 119)*
In your experience, what’s the most difficult, awkward, or uncomfortable thing about prayer? When in your life has prayer seemed most natural or appropriate? What made it feel that way?

- 5** *How to Forgive Someone (page 121)*
If you feel comfortable doing so, talk about a time you were the recipient of someone’s forgiveness. What qualifies someone to deserve forgiveness? Why do you suppose some people equate forgiveness with weakness? What factors of human relationships get in the way of us freely offering forgiveness?



6 *How to Confess Your Sins and Receive Forgiveness (page 123)*

Though many Lutherans think of private and personal confession as an exclusively Roman Catholic activity, Martin Luther loved the practice and wanted everybody to participate. What mattered to him—and what matters to us—is actual forgiveness getting directly into the hands (and ears and hearts) of actual sinners. How do you think it would feel to be someone's confessor—hearing their sins and announcing God's forgiveness? What pitfalls can you imagine in this process? What benefits? What kind of trust has to be present to help it work?

7 *How to Resist Temptation (page 125)*

Though the word seems old-fashioned, temptations (including activities, attitudes, emotions, causes, and such) all compete for our loyalty, trust, and faith. Name some of your strategies for discerning the difference between a bad or dangerous temptation and an aspiration or worthwhile goal. What's the best advice in this chapter? How can you use it?

8 *How to Tithe (page 130)*

Calculate what 10 percent of your daily income would be. Share this figure if you're comfortable. Why do you think things often get weird when we talk about money in church? How are wealth and security connected to faith and trust? Who in your life has taught you the most about generosity?

9 *How to Console Someone (page 137)*

In your experience as consoler or the recipient of consolation, which of the five guidelines in this chapter is most effective? What's the difference between consolation and solving someone's problem for them? What are some ways we might use the act of consoling someone as a means for alleviating our own fears or concerns?

10 *The Four Most Common Heresies Well-Intentioned Lutherans Commit (page 146)*

Lutheran theology has a troublemaking quality; it pushes against what we often assume is common sense or logic. What's attractive or compelling about each of the beliefs listed in this chapter? Which beliefs are you most tempted to hold?



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SECTION THREE: BIBLE STUFF

1 *A Brief History of the Bible (page 172)*

Go ahead and write in your handbook. Put a star beside sections of Bible history you think you know pretty well (like, you'd get at least 75 percent on a multiple choice test about it). Put a square beside sections that sound familiar, but you don't know well. Put a question mark beside sections you know nothing about or have never heard of. Circle or highlight one area of Bible history you find particularly interesting or intriguing, and talk about it with the group. Who can you ask for information or help getting to know parts of the Bible that are new to you?

2 *How to Memorize a Bible Verse (page 186)*

Share three things you know by heart (The Pledge of Allegiance, your address, some Shakespeare, a Bible verse, etc.). How have you memorized such things in the past? What are the benefits of knowing some things so deeply that they're actually mapped out in your brain?

3 *The Five Biggest Misconceptions about the Bible (page 191)*

What are some ways your view of the Bible has changed over the years? What has motivated these changes? How does the way we think about the Bible change the way we read or even talk about Scripture?

4 *Jesus' Twelve Apostles (Plus Judas and Paul) (page 193)*

Note that many of the listed people met untimely deaths. The word *martyred* means being killed for one's faith (*martyr* is the Greek word for "witness"). In the early years of the Christian movement, those who accepted death rather than denying Christ were seen as witnesses to the power of Christian faith. Why was it so dangerous to be connected to Jesus in those early days of the church? In what ways is it dangerous now?

5 *How to Identify an Angel (page 196)*

Why do you think angels are popular in stories, legends, and art? Knowing what you know about Lutherans and how we think about theology and God's Word, why would we believe in angels? On the other hand, why might we remain skeptical of some people's stories about encounters with divine beings?



6 *Five Inspiring Women in the Bible (page 199)*

Were any of the biblical women named in this chapter new to you? Who are some strong, intelligent, and thoughtful women leaders in your church? In your community? In the world?

7 *How to Locate the “Canon within the Canon” (page 201)*

What are the key ingredients in a book or passage of the Bible that, according to Martin Luther, make it more central, special, or important than others? What should we do with parts of the Bible that make us uncomfortable, or that we have a hard time believing or trusting or liking?

8 *A Brief History of God’s Covenant with the People (page 205)*

What kind of God keeps making covenants with people who regularly fail to uphold their part of the bargain? What does this strategy say about who God is and what God values? How do we see this covenant in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

9 *How to Read Key Types of Bible Literature (page 207)*

Which types of Bible literature seem the most straightforward and easy to understand? Which seem more complicated? Why do you think there are so many different types of writing in the Bible? How might this variety of genres change the way you read or think about various stories in the Bible?

10 *How to Interpret “Controversial” Bible Texts and Remain Lutheran (page 212)*

How does the Lutheran insistence on open, shared, deliberative interpretation of Scripture make reading the Bible more complicated? What do we base this commitment on? In what ways might this commitment guide your life as a community of faith? Why do you think Lutherans tend to resist quick shortcuts, proof texts, and simple answers when it comes to the Bible? Has it been your experience that we do?



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SECTION FOUR: LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM

1 *The Ten Commandments (page 230)*

Why would we use the words “fear and love” together when thinking about our relationship with God? Can faith be founded on anything other than trust? What do the commandments show about who God is and what God wants for human community?

2 *The Ten Commandments (page 230)*

The Ten Commandments themselves consist of three positive commands (numbers 1–3) and seven prohibitions (the “you shall nots”: 4–10). In his explanations, Martin Luther adds positive actions to all the commandments. Does this make the commandments harder or easier to follow and apply? Why?

3 *The Creed: The First Article (page 233)*

Is creation a one-and-done event for Lutherans, or an ongoing thing? Why do you think Martin Luther uses the present tense to describe God as Creator? How can he say that God the Creator provides things like shoes and clothing, when those things are made and traded by people?

4 *The Creed: The Second Article (page 233)*

What does it mean to have a Lord? In Luther's explanation of this part of the creed, who is the subject of the verbs (who is doing all the acting, choosing, deciding, etc.)? According to this section, what's our role in redemption? How do you feel about that?

5 *The Creed: The Third Article (page 234)*

What does it tell you about Luther and the Lutheran church that one of the major statements of Christian belief is a confession of our inability to believe? What does Luther describe as the work of God's Holy Spirit? How is the Holy Spirit's daily work related to the Holy Spirit's duties on the Last Day?



6 *The Lord's Prayer (page 235)*

The catechism's line-by-line explanation of this prayer is likely one of the most helpful and lovely things dear old Martin penned. What other parts of the church—or the nation or the world or even your own life—might benefit from this kind of treatment?

7 *The Lord's Prayer (page 235)*

Many people have been put off by Luther's claim in the fifth petition that we "deserve only punishment." It does seem a little harsh. Note, however, that he uses the first person ("we"), rather than saying something like "All those sinners over there deserve only punishment." What does that tell you about Luther's view of humanity? What about Luther's view of God? Revisit the Ten Commandments section. Keeping those rules and Luther's explanations in mind, what does it seem that God thinks people deserve? Where do you stand?

8 *The Sacrament of Holy Baptism (page 239)*

Would Lutherans perform or recognize a baptism that was done without water? Why or why not? What does Luther most want people to know about baptism? Talk about the last baptism you participated in. What made you a participant? What will you look or listen for next time?

9 *The Sacrament of Holy Baptism (page 239)*

What are the two parts of confession? Knowing what you know about Martin Luther's deep concern that the gospel be preached and heard, which part do you suspect is the most central to him?

10 *The Sacrament of the Altar (page 242)*

Trick question alert: How can a person be sure they are worthy of receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion? People have gotten tangled up in that for a long time: Can we ever be good enough or truly prepared? How do you make sense of this requirement? Is it a requirement? How does Luther's explanation put our concerns to rest? According to Luther, what is the only thing necessary?