

## **Why the Reformation still matters**

A three-fold exploration of some of the principles of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation

### **1. Martin Luther - (1) the struggle in his heart**

How the Reformation brought clarity regarding how we're clothed with God's righteousness – an alien righteousness of God declared as a gift, as distinct from where Luther had come from ... a background of earned merit to appease an angry God by doing good and filling up on grace delivered by the church. We close with application on how we feel about ourselves and our sense of worth before God, and how we too can be right with God.

Scripture reading is Romans 1:7-17

### **2. Martin Luther - (2) the struggle against his church**

Moving from soul struggle to church trouble, and Luther's break with Rome. A look at what 31 October marks as a 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and what all the fuss is about. What's the significance of his posting 95 theses on the chapel door, and what his first major arguments and debates with church officials were all about (i.e. his famous stands at Leipzig and then Worms). Overall, the theme is another great principle of Reformation: how do we trust the words of Scripture and why? i.e. bouncing off Luther's: 'A simple layman armed with the Scriptures is superior to both Pope and Councils.' The application will ask questions about our trust in Scripture and our willingness to let the truths and principles of Scripture change and rule our life, because they are the very words of God.

Scripture reading is 2 Timothy 3:10-17

### **3. John Calvin - developing the church's theology**

Shifting from first generation reformers to the second, and to Calvin's special contribution. Overall, the theme is another great principle of Reformation: the church - what do we view as the true church of Christ and why? i.e. bouncing off Calvin's grand objectives in writing his 1536 Institutes: '(a) To convince the King of France that evangelicals were not heretics but rather they were the true church, and (b) to build up the church by the simple teaching of the doctrines of faith.' The application will ask questions about our view of the church, the value of belonging to such and our willingness to let true gospel preaching of the church and the fellowship of the church edify us in godliness (Calvin's great aim), and in the end, what does a true church look like, and do we love the church like Christ does?

Scripture reading is Acts 2:38-47 and then 1 Timothy 3:14-16

**John P Wilson**  
**Moderator-General**  
**Presbyterian Church of Australia**

## Martin Luther – (1) the struggle in his heart

The times Luther lived in (late 1400s Europe)

Luther's struggle towards conversion



The burning question was: *'How can I avoid the sword and earn the lily?'*



Good study didn't help him find peace of soul (though he was studying good things).



Good monkery didn't help him find peace of soul (though he was still studying good things and learning about humility).



Even mystical piety didn't help him find peace of soul (though he was still reading some good books, and studying worthy examples).

**Luther's progress in the University**

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’

**There are two ways to read Romans 1:17 ...**

- 1.** The righteous ... shall live by faith  
... making faith (the ‘life of faithfulness’) the evidence of being righteous
  
- 2.** The righteous shall live ... by faith  
... making faith the channel through by righteousness is given to a person

**There are two ways to read Habakkuk 2:4** quoted by Paul in Romans 1:17 ...

- 1.** ‘You’ll know who righteous people are ... because they live a life of faith.’  
... making faith the evidence of being righteous
  
- 2.** ‘The people God considers righteous shall live ... and they so live by faith’  
... making faith the way in which righteousness comes to a person

Luther’s own words:

‘At last, meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open ... the whole of Scripture had new meaning.’

**the hospital?**

**the law court?**

The Reformation principle of justification through faith – the principle upon which the church stands or falls.

## Small group discussion questions (session 1)

These are for guided discussion within your group. Feel free to browse from question to question as they take your interest, and explore the issues as far and as deeply as the discussion is of benefit to members.

**Martin Luther - (1) the struggle in his heart.** How the Reformation brought clarity regarding how we're clothed with God's righteousness.

1. Why is it that when you mention the name Martin Luther, many people think you are referring to Martin Luther King, and why do you think more is known about him than the Reformer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century? Perhaps you might share around the group as to what you knew of Luther's contribution to the church prior to this meeting.
2. There are some striking parallels of life-story between the apostle Paul and Martin Luther and their journeys to faith in Jesus Christ. From Philippians 3:3-9, can you identify some parallels (and also differences) with regard to their determined search for truth, and then with regard to their understanding of righteousness?
3. What is meant by 'imputed righteousness' and when, in one's own faith journey, does this transaction take place?
4. In what ways can Luther's biblical understanding of righteousness provide assurance of faith – read also additional passages on the subject such as Titus 3:4-7 and Romans 5:9-11.
5. Is there a sense in which we might still be behaving as 'functional Catholics' in that we feel there's an essential connection between:
  - our worship and other acts of devotion (i.e. prayer and Bible study); and
  - our assurance of God's love and a sense of security in Christ?i.e. feeling that we ought to worship, pray and read Scripture, otherwise we have no right to assume we know the love of God or have an assured peace of soul?
6. What's the connection between knowing about Luther's 'alien righteousness' and experiencing it in your life. Who, or what, makes the connection?
7. Romans is the book that seemed to grip Luther's mind. He came to see that salvation is a gift from God and can't be earned. Why do you think that the Bible's teaching of 'grace through faith alone' is such a hard concept for 21<sup>st</sup> century Australians to accept?

## Martin Luther – (2) the struggle against his church

### The story so far

Luther's own words:

'I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open ... the whole of Scripture had new meaning.'

### Two points of view

#### A Question of Authority

... an example, Luke 1:28

[illustration of Red Bull from: Michael Reeves & Tim Chester, *Why the Reformation Still Matters* (2016)]

#### The Indulgence Controversy

... a pope, a bishop and a monk

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God.
62. The treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.
66. The treasure of the indulgence is a net with which they now fish for the riches of men.
82. Why doesn't the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there?
86. Why doesn't the pope, who is the richest man on earth, build this church of St Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?

## **Leipzig Debate, 1519**

## **The Diet of Worms, 1521**

'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason I am bound by the Scriptures ... my conscience is prisoner to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant, for to disobey one's conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me. Amen'

## **Leader of the reform movement**

## **Marriage**

### **How everything changed:**

1. From superstition to Scripture
2. From merit to mercy
3. From hatred to hope
4. From fear to freedom

Stephen Nichols says:

'During Luther's remarkable lifetime he'd seen the entire western world change ... and that was due in no small part to this lawyer turned monk turned reformer', 'this change brought about an entire revolution of church life, practice and doctrine.'

## Small group discussion questions (session 2)

These are for guided discussion within your group. Feel free to browse from question to question as they take your interest, and explore the issues as far and as deeply as the discussion is of benefit to members.

**Martin Luther - (2) the struggle against his church.** Moving from soul struggle to church trouble, and Luther's break with Rome.

1. Why did Luther bother to make a protest? That is, what issues are at stake in the 95 Theses and what were Luther's main pastoral concerns? Do we face similar issues today?
2. Some of 95 Theses emphasize God's grace and the gospel. How might the human propensity either to 'earn' salvation or to buy a way around God's judgment undercut the gospel today?
3. Luther was reluctant to leave the church, and only did so when 'forced' to. When (i.e. over what principles) would you consider leaving a church?
4. Even if you have no intention of leaving your church, nevertheless, if you were concerned about a particular practice or teaching of your church today, how and to whom might you express that concern? By what authority would you do it?
5. Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses 500 years ago this month. They were a set of topics meant to spark discussion and debate. What themes would you include today if you were to make your own version of the 95 theses to spark discussion and debate within the PCA?
6. The posting or publishing of a set of theses is not commonly the way to spur public discussion today. How have you tried to raise important matters of public concern or debate?
7. Discuss: 'Surely, the Reformation story is like dad's reminiscences of the old days, and the Reformers are like embarrassing grandparents – we don't need these principles anymore because all the churches are basically the same now.'

## John Calvin - developing the church's theology

### Family

### Education

### Friends

### Born again

'... God at last turned my course in another direction by the secret rein of his providence. What happened first was God by sudden conversion **subdued** me and brought my mind to a teachable frame. For I was so strongly devoted to the superstitions of the papacy that **nothing less** could draw me from such depths of mire.'

### Riots in Paris

### First writings

☞ By 1534 he had begun by .....

☞ By March 1536 Calvin published his theological masterpiece: .....

With two grand objectives:

1.

2.

## **Providentially waylaid – or, ‘How not to issue a Call to your pastor’**

‘when he realised that I was determined to study in privacy in some obscure place, and saw that he gained nothing by entreaty, he descended to cursing, and said that God would surely curse my study if I held back from giving help at a time of such great need. Terrified by his words, and conscious of my own timidity and cowardice, I gave up!’

## **Strasbourg – a *very* sweet interlude**

## **Return to Geneva**

### **1. Calvin the preacher**

### **2. Calvin the church reformer**

- Pastor: to .....
- Doctor: to .....
- Elder: to .....
- Deacon: to .....

### **3. Calvin the theologian**

## **Decline and death**

## Small group discussion questions (session 3)

These are for guided discussion within your group. Feel free to browse from question to question as they take your interest, and explore the issues as far and as deeply as the discussion is of benefit to members.

### John Calvin - developing the church's theology

Shifting from first generation reformers to the second, and to Calvin's special contribution.

1. Perhaps you might share around the group as to what you knew of Calvin's contribution to the church prior to this meeting.
2. Calvin taught that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God and that the church is to be ruled by them. How do you respond to those who say that the Scriptures are just ancient texts that do not speak authoritatively to the 21<sup>st</sup> century church?
3. Are there examples in your world today where this principle of 'Scripture's teaching being authoritative for the church' is being tested, and where you as a Christian are being called on to make a stand?
4. People constantly criticize the church (eg it's not relevant for today; it's not inclusive; it's like entering a time-warp; it's full of hypocrites; it doesn't cater for my family's needs). How do you handle criticism of your church? What can you say in response that might be helpful?
5. Calvin taught that the marks of a true church are: right preaching of the Gospel of Jesus, right distribution of the sacraments and the right application of discipline.
  - a) What do you think he meant by each one, and do you think that in any sense his marks might be just for his day only?
  - b) How do each of Calvin's marks of a true church match up with what we read of in Acts 2:42-47 and 1 Timothy 3:14-16?
6. One of the official criticisms by the Roman Catholic Church of the day, and even today, is: 'The Reformers were schismatics – they just wanted to divide and separate, but Jesus wants the church to be one (quoting John 17:21).' How can we answer such criticisms and suggest that neither Luther nor Calvin wanted to depart from the official church of the day?
7. Calvin contributed to our understanding of 'church', and emphasised the difference between the 'visible' and the 'invisible' church. What do you think he meant by this and how might that help you understand how things are in your own church? We can read passages of Scripture such as John 10:14, 27 and Matthew 13:24-30 to assist our understanding of this.