

Study Guide for  
**Martin Luther, *How to Live a Christian Life?***  
(Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2003)

**Introduction**

*Chapter 1: Christian Faith*

1. Who can and will talk about faith (see 2 Corinthians 4:13)?
2. Which two statements summarize best the Christian life?
3. Why is there a seeming contradiction?
4. What are the “two natures” of a Christian? Can they be found in all humans alike?
5. Do these two live in peaceful coexistence?
6. In what sense could this biblical view of a Christian be called realistic?

**The Soul: The Spiritual, Inner, or New Man**

*Chapter 2: Living in Faith*

1. Why is it that “absolutely no situation in life has any power to produce Christian righteousness or freedom” or any “power to produce unrighteousness or subservience”?
2. About what should Christians therefore be concerned first of all?
3. How does this compute with the modern idea that political and religious freedom (“civil liberties”) are essential for human life to be human?
4. How do Luther’s assertions put the concept of “psycho-somatic disease,” that is, the notion that there exists a close link between the health of soul and body, into context?

5. Why are theological speculation and various spiritual practices ultimately fruitless for the soul's liberty?

6. Who alone can free the soul? What is the one thing on which the soul thrives?

7. What does the sheer existence of the Savior tell about the natural state of the soul? Along these lines, why is speaking about God's forgiving our sin a stronger statement than speaking about God's loving everybody?

8. What is *the* sign of God's wrath? What is *the* sign of God's favor? Is this view shared by the majority of people today?

9. What is *the* work of Christ? How does this give focus to the mission of the church and her ministers today?

10. Which Word of God are we talking about here? Would a person be saved if they "believed the bible"?

11. Why is salvation by faith, and not by works (or by faith *and* works)? Why this harsh distinction? Isn't faith also a "work," something *we* do? (Read John 17:20; Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:21; 5:2; Philippians 1:29.) Do all "Christians" today (at Luther's time) share this view?

12. What does Luther mean when he states that we *first* come to faith, *then* see the abysmal nature of our sin, and *first then* realize how necessary Christ is for us?

13. How do Christians strengthen their faith in Christ?

14. In what sense are all the following four statements true, in what sense are they all wrong? "We are saved by God's grace alone. We are saved by Christ alone. We are saved by faith alone. We are saved by baptism alone."

*Chapter 3: Law and Promise*

1. What are the two chief teachings of Holy Scripture? Should this motivate Christians to shorten Catechism instruction to half an hour or less?

2. What does the law do? What can it not do?

3. Why are all the laws of God equally impossible to fulfill? Is this view shared by all “Christians”?

4. Mormons believe that God sent Jesus as a Savior because there’s still something good in everybody. In light of Romans 7:18; Ephesians 2:1-7, would you agree? How about Luther, would he agree with the Mormons?

5. What is so glorious about the gospel?

6. What does it mean that salvation is *promised* in the gospel? Does the relation between body and soul, described on p. 18, aid us in understanding this important definition of the gospel (see also pp. 30, 40)? How does this understanding of the gospel help us to see more clearly that salvation is by *faith*?

See Luther’s comments in his “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (*Luther’s Works: American Edition*, vol. 36:59): “If we set ourselves to this exercise of faith, we shall at once perceive *how difficult it is to believe this promise of God* [that is, Mark 16:16; Luther is talking about Baptism in the context]. *For our human weakness, conscious of its sins, finds nothing more difficult to believe than that it is saved or will be saved*; and yet, unless it does believe this, it cannot be saved, because it does not believe the *truth of God* that promises salvation.”

7. If God’s undeserved love (grace, peace, justification) is promised us *in Christ*, what, if anything, do we find of God *outside of Christ*?

8. How does a Christian fulfill the law perfectly in this life? Why is this important? (Read Matthew 5:17-20.)

*Chapter 4: The Characteristics of Faith*

1. What is the first characteristic of faith?
2. What is the freedom of the Christian – and what is it not?
3. What is the second characteristic of faith?
4. How does this inform your understanding of what goes on during church on Sunday morning?
5. How is true worship promoted?
6. Which commandment are we talking about when we speak about faith?
7. How does faith let God be God?
8. Considering God a liar by not believing his word – what kind of sin is this?  
Consider also Luther's statement, made a year earlier (1519) in his "On the Sacrament of Penance" (*Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 35:14): "When you are absolved from your sins, indeed when amid your awareness of sin some devout Christian—man or woman, young or old—comforts you, then receive this absolution in such faith that you would readily let yourself be torn apart or killed over and over again, or readily renounce everything else, rather than doubt that you have been truly absolved before God. Since by God's grace it is commanded of us to believe and to hope that our sins are forgiven us, how much more then ought you to believe it when God gives you a sign of it through another person! There is no greater sin than not to believe this article of 'the forgiveness of sins' which we pray daily in the Creed. And this sin is called the sin against the Holy Spirit. It strengthens all other sins and makes them forever unforgivable."
9. What is the third characteristic of faith?
10. What happens in the "joyous exchange" and marriage between Christ and the soul?
11. Are we justified *after faith*, *because of faith*, or *by faith*?

12. What happened when Jesus died? Look up *Lutheran Worship* 10 and 137.

13. What does Luther mean when he states that good works are done only after the law is fulfilled? Does it make sense to say that the quality of the doer determines the quality of the deed done? (That means, if the person is good, all he does will be good. If the person is evil, all he does is evil.) Are sleeping and breathing good works?

14. Why is it that only works done in faith give glory to God?

#### *Chapter 5: Christ the Firstborn: Priest and King*

1. What does it mean, to “foreshadow”? Read Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1. How does the Old Testament foreshadow Christ as the Firstborn? In other words: why did God reserve all the male firstborn for himself? See Exodus 13:2, 11-15 (Genesis 4:4); Luke 2:7, 22-24 (Leviticus 12:2-6).

2. The firstborn as king and priest – how do we see this play itself out in the account of Esau and Jacob desiring the blessing of the father, Isaac? Read Genesis 27:28-37.

3. What does it mean that Christ’s priesthood and kingdom is over all the world, but not of this world? Read John 18:36; Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 2:6-8; Romans 8:28. What then are his main blessings?

4. After dying on the cross for us, rising from the dead, and ascending to heaven, is Jesus now done with his work? Read Hebrews 7:20-25; John 15:26; 14:26.

#### *Chapter 6: The Christian: Priest and King*

1. At what point did Christ *assume* his priesthood and kingship? Read Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:13-17; Romans 1:3.

2. What is again the spiritual matrimony Luther speaks about at this place? See p. 31-34 of our book.

3. What does it mean to be a king in a spiritual sense – what does it not mean?

4. How does the crucified Christ provide the clearest expression of the kingship that is ours by faith? Will that make this kind of spiritual kingship attractive to the unbeliever?
5. Why is faith in Christ the sufficient ingredient of Christian liberty?
6. What is the benefit and dignity of being a priest?
7. Why is a special spiritual dignity necessary to teach others about God? Or: what makes us worthy to be messengers of the gospel? Deep spiritual experiences? Holy living?
8. What does it mean for the unbeliever that he is neither a king nor a priest?
9. Again, how is the status of king and priest before God achieved? How is it not achieved? Could it be contradicted by our daily experience?

#### *Chapter 7: Pastors and Preaching*

1. Why is “priest” not an appropriate title for the pastor?
2. How does Scripture call pastors instead?
3. What is the duty of pastors?
4. Why is it that “(a)lthough it is true that we are all priest, we cannot and, even if we could, should not, all minister and teach publicly”?
5. What kind of preaching does Luther call “popular” in his day? What made them so popular in the first place? How about today?
6. What is the object of true preaching?
7. Many Christians are fascinated by their own spiritual life, which we could call “the Christ *in us*.” Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivals, new converts are made to give

“testimonials” about their faith like people would give enthusiastic testimonials about this or that great product they purchased. In what sense can testimonials be said to be *destructive* of faith in Christ, both in the person giving the testimonial and in the person hearing it? How does true preaching *promote and strengthen* faith? How does this inform your understanding of “witnessing” to unbelievers?

8. What does “proper preaching” do?

9. What is lacking when people get bored when they hear the gospel over and over again? In other words: who rejoices in the gospel? For whom is the old gospel of Jesus always new and always good?

10. In what sense have we already conquered sin, death, and the devil? In what sense have we not yet overcome these most serious enemies of men?

### **The Body: The Flesh, Outer, or Old Man**

#### *Chapter 8: An Internal Struggle*

1. What is the current spiritual state of the Christian? When will we be completely “inner and spiritual” *again*?

2. What does Luther actually mean by “body – soul;” “outer – inner;” and “flesh – Spirit”? Is this something that’s in every person, Christian and unbeliever alike?

3. How does the following quote from Luther’s 1519 *Lectures on Galatians* (AE 27:363-364) help us understand which two “men” Luther has in view here? What three “stages” of spiritual “development” can we discern here?

By spirit and flesh, moreover, I understand the whole man, especially the soul itself. Briefly, to give a very crude comparison, just as I may call flesh that is injured or ill both healthy and ill (for no flesh is altogether illness), because, to the extent that it begins to be healed and is healthy, it is called health, but where injury or illness is left, it is called illness; and just as illness or injury hinders the rest of the flesh, healthy though it is, from doing perfectly that which healthy flesh would do—so the same man, the same soul, the same spirit of a man, because he is associated with and tainted by the disposition of the flesh, is spirit insofar as he savors the things that are of God (Matt. 16:23), but is flesh insofar as he is influenced by the enticements of the flesh; and if he consents to these, he is altogether flesh, as is stated in Gen. 6:3. On the other hand, if he consents entirely to the Law, he is altogether spirit; and this will take place when the body becomes spiritual. Accordingly, one must not imagine that these are two distinct human beings. But it is like a morning twilight, which is neither day nor night yet can be called either one. Nevertheless, day, as that toward which it is tending after the darkness of night, is more appropriate. By far the most beautiful illustration of both truths is that half-alive man in Luke (10:30 ff.) who, on being

taken up by the Samaritan, was indeed being healed but still was not fully restored to health. Thus we in the church are indeed in the process of being healed, but we are not fully healthy. For the latter reason we are called “flesh”; for the former, “spirit.” It is the whole man who loves chastity, and the same whole man is titillated by the enticements of lust. There are two whole men, and there is only one whole man. Thus it comes about that a man fights against himself and is opposed to himself. He is willing, and he is unwilling. And this is the glory of the grace of God; it makes us enemies of ourselves.

4. Based on the above quote, does “spiritual” mean “without the body”? How does this insight help you appreciate the means of grace as channels of the Holy Spirit?

5. If, according to Scripture, man *is* “flesh” (and doesn’t just *contain* fleshly parts), what does this mean for man’s highest natural faculties, like his will and intellect? Can man, without the Spirit of God, perhaps prompted by energetic or emotional music, “decide for Jesus” out of his own will?

Consider also the following quote from Luther’s 1525 “On the Bondage of the Will” (AE 33:227-228, 254), where Luther discusses a humanistic misunderstanding of the scriptural teaching on “spirit” and “flesh”:

But let us suppose that ... not every desire is flesh, i.e., ungodly, but that which is called spirit is good and sound. Notice what absurdity follows from this, though not of course as far as human reason is concerned, but with respect to the whole Christian religion and the supreme articles of faith. *For if what is most excellent in man is not ungodly and lost or damned, but only the flesh, or the lower and grosser desires, what sort of redeemer do you think we shall make Christ out to be? Are we to rate the price of his blood so low as to say that it has redeemed only what is lowest in man, and that what is most excellent in man can take care of itself and has no need of Christ? Then in the future we must preach Christ as the redeemer, not of the whole man, but of his lowest part, namely the flesh, and man himself as his own redeemer in respect of his higher part.* Choose which you please: if the higher part of man is sound, it does not need Christ as its redeemer, and if it does not need Christ, it triumphs with a glory above that of Christ, since in taking care of itself it takes care of the higher part, whereas Christ only takes care of the lower. Then the kingdom of Satan, too, will be as nothing, since it will rule only over the lower part of man, and in respect of the higher part will rather be ruled over by man.

... Are we[, based on Romans 3:10ff.,] ignorant of what it means to be ignorant of God, not to understand, not to seek after God, not to fear God, to turn aside and become worthless? Are not the words entirely clear, and do not they teach us just this, that all men are devoid of the knowledge of God and full of contempt for him, and they all turn aside to evil and are worthless as regards the good? For it is not a question here of ignorance about where to find food or of contempt for money, but of ignorance and contempt for religion and godliness. And such ignorance and contempt are beyond doubt not in the flesh and the lower and grosser passions but in the highest and most excellent powers of men, in which there ought to reign righteousness, godliness, the knowledge of God and reverence for God. In other words, they are in the reason and the will, and therefore in the power of free choice itself, or in the very seeds of virtue and the most excellent thing there is in man.

6. What changes for the Christian in comparison to the unbeliever? Read Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:17. Many a book markets Christianity as a way to “inner peace” not unlike Buddhism, just better. Is this a biblical description of the inner state of the Christian?

7. How does our liturgy reflect this change in the Christian? Read *LW*, p. 158 (similar p. 136). In the current main hymnal of the ELCA, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, this reads (p. 77): “we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, ...” ELCA’s contemporary hymnal, *With One Voice*, offers as an alternate confession (p. 11): “Gracious God, have mercy on us. In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things done and left undone.” The new hymnal proposal of the ELCA makes the alternate form the primary form and changes what was formerly primary to read: “we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, and are not worthy to be called your children.” Where’s the journey headed? How does this example enhance your understanding of orders of service as important teaching tools and confessions of what a church believes and teaches?

8. Why do Christians come to church primarily? Why have Lutherans traditionally been reluctant to begin the church service with a series of “praise song” to make everybody feel great? Why do those who don’t believe in original sin (95% of all “Christians” in the USA) need not have any qualms here? How would a confession of sin “feel” after a series of praise songs?

9. How do the works of the Christian, performed by the body, enter this picture? What can they do; what can they not do?

10. Which parts of man need to be disciplined, that is, schooled by the Spirit to be conformed to the inner man who is already recreated in Christ’s image? What happens if this is not done?

### *Chapter 9: Working the Body into Submission*

1. How do those, who pretend to be justified by their works, ideas, insights, spiritual practices, feelings, etc., actually “vivify” their flesh instead of mortifying it? Would that serve God or praise him?

2. Those who don’t believe in any god usually don’t try to be “justified before God.” How do they “justify” their existence? How is this related to the First Commandment?

### *Chapter 10: Working in the Garden*

1. How does the example of Adam and Eve in paradise help you to understand the role and significance of good works in the life of the Christian believer? Read Genesis 2:15.
2. In what sense are the works of the Christian done “freely”?
3. Whatever a Christian does is Christian, that is, good and pleasing in God’s sight. Discuss this statement.
4. People become better, or even good, people by doing good things, that is, through continual practice. In what sense is this false in the case before God?
5. What significance has the outward recognition and appearance of works?
6. Again, why does being saved by faith, not by works, give all glory to God?

#### *Chapter 11: Working Under a Yoke*

1. In what sense do all Christians reject and shun good works?
2. Why is the notion that we are justified before God by works such a powerful “monster” that leads multitudes astray?
3. What is the purpose of preaching the law? What does the gospel bring?

#### *Chapter 12: Working For Your Neighbor*

1. For whom is the Christian to work? How is this expressed in the Ten Commandments?
2. How does this set Christianity apart from the many publications on “self-improvement” (with or without God’s assistance)? What is a potential spiritual problem of “self-improvement”?
3. What is “*faith really working through love*” (Galatians 5:6)?

4. How does faith, on the level of reflection, enable us to serve others selflessly? Read 2 Corinthians 8:9.

*Chapter 13: Working Like Christ*

1. Why would it be a mistake to apply Philippians 2:5-8 to the incarnation of Christ?
2. How does the right understanding of Philippians 2, applying it to the humiliation and exaltation of Christ according to his human nature, give us an example of how believers are to serve our neighbor in love?
3. How do we become the Christ of our neighbor?
4. Doing good works freely – what does this mean in relation to the neighbor we serve? How is acting freely in this sense acting like God?
5. Why will unbelievers, despite many great virtues, balk at certain works?
6. What is the truly “need-oriented” life of the Christian?

**Conclusion**

*Chapter 14: The Riches and Glory of the Christian*

1. What are the riches of a Christian? How do you know you’ve got them too?
2. If Christ’s glory consists in serving us men – in what does the Christian’s glory consist?
3. Why are the true riches and glory of a Christian “neither preached nor desired”?
4. Why are we called “Christians”?

5. In what sense are Mary and St. Paul examples of true Christian liberty that doesn't view Christ as "a taskmaster far more severe than Moses"?
6. Christians serve their neighbor because they're saved already – not in order to be saved. In your view, how does this truth motivate to do good – how might it hinder good from being done?
7. In today's church, are works being taught as necessary for salvation? In other words: Is faith always and clearly preached as the means by which we receive the salvation won by Christ and offered in the means of grace (gospel word and sacraments)? Or: What is usually considered a "relevant sermon"? For what things do pastors today "stir up their people and urge them to be zealous"?
8. How does "work or suffering" increase your faith?
9. In what sense can Christians be called "channels" or "vessels"?
10. What does it mean to take on our neighbors' sins?
11. Where does the Christian life happen – inside or outside of us?
12. In summary, how does Christian liberty compare to civil liberties?

*Chapter 15: The Abuse of Christian Freedom*

1. Christian liberty is the middle road between which two false opinions? In what sense can both false views be described as "works righteous"?
2. What is the chief example Luther uses? What modern words would we use for this thing?
3. Again, from what does faith set us free – and from what not?

4. When is there a time to offend others? Whom are we to offend, whom not?

*Chapter 16: The Proper Understanding of Rituals*

1. Why is it that rituals are necessary?

2. What is their danger?

3. Do we ever grow up spiritually in this life? In other words: As God's *children*, do we ever get beyond the stage of the "hot and inexperienced period of youth" where we wouldn't need rituals anymore for schooling and discipline of the body?

4. Doesn't the Christian do everything out of a willing spirit? Why is it then that we need to be "imprisoned" and "restrained" by iron fetters?

5. How does the illustration of builders and workmen help you to understand why Christians, on the one hand, value liturgical orders highly but, on the other hand, despise them?

6. The 1531 *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, one of the Lutheran statements of faith, states (VII/VIII,33, 40):

... we maintain that the different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church, *although it pleases us when universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquility. ... With a very grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and teach common folk and the ignorant. ... [The apostles] observed certain days not as if that observance was necessary for justification, but in order that the people might know at what time they should assemble. Whenever they assembled they also observed some other rites and a sequence of lessons.* Frequently, the people continued to observe certain Old Testament customs, which the apostles adapted in modified form to the gospel history, like Easter and Pentecost, *so that by these examples as well as by instruction they might transmit to posterity the memory of these important events.*

What are the "universal rites"? Why would it be beneficial to observe them in light of 1 Corinthians 14:36? What are, according to this text, the two chief purposes of "ceremonies" / "rituals"? Were services in the early church "informal"?

7. In 1524, Luther wrote a letter to Christians in Livonia who were divided in their liturgical orders. Even though they seemed to be united in the faith, different "worship formats" caused offense and obscured the unity in the faith. Luther writes, addressing especially the leaders (AE 53:46-48):

... those who devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith. *But those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of that Christian harmony and unity of which St. Paul and St. Peter so frequently write. ... For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty, but bound to consider the edification of the common people. ... Now when your people are confused and offended by your lack of uniform order, you cannot plead, 'Externals are free. Here in my own place I am going to do as I please.'* But you are bound to consider the effect of your attitude on others. *By faith you are free in your conscience toward God, but by love be bound to serve your neighbor's edification.*

Twenty years later, toward the end of his life, Luther briefly summarizes these thoughts as follows (AE 38:317):

For where it can be done without sinning and endangering the conscience or without giving offense, *it is indeed fine for the churches to agree in external matters, which are in any case voluntary, even as they agree with one another in the Spirit, in the faith, in the word, and in the sacrament; for such agreement makes a fine impression and pleases everyone. Agreement is also good because such dissimilarity, since it is unnecessary, looks very much like a schism or disunion and discord.*

In 1526, a few years after writing his *How to Live a Christian Life*, Luther describes the situation in Germany like this (AE 53:61-62): There is a “widespread demand for German masses and services” and a

general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new masses, for *everyone makes his own order of service.* Some have the best intentions, but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leadings lights, rather than being ordinary teachers – *as is always the case with Christian liberty: very few use it for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor; most use it for their own advantage and pleasure. ... Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, however, we are certainly bound to forego our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone. Seeing then that this external order, while it cannot affect the consciences before God, may yet serve the neighbor, we should seek to be of one mind in Christian love, as St. Paul teaches [Rom. 15:5-6; I Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2]. As far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies, just as all Christians have the same baptism and the same sacrament [of the altar] and no one has received a special one of his own from God. ... [External orders] are needed for those who are still becoming Christians or need to be strengthened ... They are essential especially for the immature and the young who must be trained and educated in the Scripture and God's Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to teach others and to increase the kingdom of Christ.*

How does Christian freedom apply to the question of liturgical order? How are unity of faith and unity in liturgical order related? How do liturgical conformity, order, and stability serve the strengthening of faith and outreach? How is liturgical diversity potentially confusing? Are we so strong in faith now so that we don't need uniformity anymore? How does Luther's description of Germany in the late 1520s compare to the LCMS in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? If a congregation claimed to teach Lutheran doctrine but offered various “worship styles,” originating in different denominations with different theologies, what might you think?

8. If faith is the highest worship of God because it receives from him what he desires to give as a gift, eternal salvation, what are the two key elements of a Christian church service?