

# Reformation Day (Years A, B, C)

On Reformation Day the church honours Martin Luther and other reformers of the sixteenth century, and reformers of every age. Luther's teachings focused on the promises of scripture, emphasizing that the Spirit works in our hearts to speak God's word to us and that we receive God's grace through our faith in Christ. This is the truth that makes us free. Our life in the Body of Christ is shaped by this gift of freedom.

## Focus Scripture: John 8:31–36

Most scholars believe that the gospel of John was written around 85–90 CE. Jesus' identity and teachings are the priorities in this gospel. John draws us into the new life and understanding of God's purpose that Jesus makes possible.

Reflected in the focus reading today is the struggle within the early church between Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those who did not. This division was probably not as sharp in Jesus' time as the words in John might lead us to believe. When the gospel of John refers to "Jews," it usually is speaking of Jewish religious leaders. It may be helpful to think of the dialogue in John between Jesus and the Jews as a challenging discussion among "family members" who are experiencing a strained relationship.

Verse 30 is a springboard into the focus verses. Jesus has been teaching, and verse 30 reports: "As he was saying these things, many believed in him." Jesus' words to these new believers begin in verse 31.

Living in Jesus' way leads to truth, which in turn leads to freedom. The Jews are puzzled by Jesus' teaching and claim that because they are descendants of Abraham, they are already free. They claim they have never been slaves, neglecting to recall the time of slavery in Egypt or the Babylonian exile.

In John, the writer uses the phrase "very truly I tell you" (v. 34) to signal that a new teaching is to follow. In verses 34–36, Jesus addresses the group's misunderstanding of freedom with the new teaching that everyone who sins is not free and is a slave to sin. Jesus teaches that slavery is not limited to an economic reality, but also is an inward state of being. Even those who claim freedom through Abraham are not as free as they think.

Through Jesus, the Son, we are given a permanent place in the house of God. True freedom comes through Jesus the Christ, not any human ancestor. True freedom comes not from one's heritage, but as a gift from God. Truth for the Jews involved their identity in Abraham; Jesus' truth involves identity in God.

The leaders of the Reformation emphasized the gospel teaching that true freedom is not related to ethnic distinctions or social class. Only Jesus the Christ can free us from slavery to sin, and does so through the truth of the gospel.

Martin Luther felt that the heart of gospel truth is summed up in **Romans 3:19–28**. All people fall short in their relationship with God, but God offers forgiveness of sins through Christ. We are justified – put right with God – by the gift of God's grace, through faith in Christ.

The Hebrew exiles in Babylon blamed the slavery of exile on their ancestors who had disregarded God's law. In **Jeremiah 31:31–34**, the prophet envisions a future time when the ability to know God and God's truth will be a gift from God, written on each heart.

**Psalm 46** is the inspiration behind Luther's classic Reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The words of the psalmist, and the words of Luther, call disciples to place their hope in God alone.

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Scripture calls us to live with God's law on our hearts, to let our faith determine how we act. Jesus invites us to open our hearts to receive God's gifts of grace and salvation – to claim our freedom in Christ. What in the church today needs to be reformed by God's grace? What might you and your church do differently through the reforming, restoring power of the Holy Spirit?



**Focus Scripture**  
**John 8:31–36**

**Additional Scriptures**  
**Jeremiah 31:31–34**  
**Psalm 46**  
**Romans 3:19–28**

**Gracious God,  
write your law on  
our hearts and  
let your word of  
grace dwell in us  
so that no matter  
where we are, we  
may know we are  
forgiven and free.  
Amen.**

## The Focus for Ages 15–18

Young people look forward to the freedoms that come with certain milestones: getting a driver's licence, earning their own spending money, moving away from home after high school. It is sometimes a hard lesson to learn that all of these looked-forward-to events and freedoms also involve responsibility and sometimes a degree of accountability. Getting that driver's licence means taking the time to learn the rules for driving and learning to be a responsible and safe driver. Getting that part-time job can mean a lot of hard work and not much free time. Getting that place of your own will mean having to make your own meals, and finding the rent money. As they mature and begin to experience a degree of independence, young people discover that freedom isn't about being able to do whatever one pleases. Instead it often involves taking others (such as

the government, a neighbour, a friend, a family member) into consideration.

The reading from the gospel of John can help young people distinguish between an understanding of freedom as one that focuses on individual personal liberties and rights, and the kind of freedom that Jesus talks about. Jesus speaks of being "truly my disciples" and what it means to live freely and truthfully in that relationship. The session invites young people to think about what God can free them to do and be. The exploration and celebration of Reformation Day also offers an opportunity to learn more about Martin Luther and other church reformers who dedicated themselves to a way of living and being church that followed Jesus' teachings. Pray that young people will be open to explore the freedom that a relationship with Jesus Christ can bring.

## Prepare

### Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on the scriptures, Psalm 46, John 8:31–36, Romans 3:19–28, and biblical background material (p. 1).
- ❑ Set a worship space with *red fabric*, *white pillar candle*, and *Bible*.
- ❑ Bring *Bibles*, *matches*, *candlesnuffer*, and, if needed, a *CD player*.

### Gather

- ❑ Bring song "God Grant that We May Be Transformed" (#23 on *Seasons Music CD*, volume 7) or "Fresh as the Morning" (#3, *Seasons Music CD*, volume 8), or "Jesus, Face of God" (#4, *Seasons Music CD*, volume 9). All recordings also available as *Seasons mp3 downloads*.

### Engage

- ❑ Bring *photocopies of the focus passage* (John 8:31–36) and *highlighter pens*.
- ❑ Bring *copies of resource sheets "Scripture Reading"* (p. 5) and "Martin Luther" (p. 6).

### Respond

Choose one or two options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Reform list:** *writing paper*, *felt markers*
- ❑ **Poster:** *craft and collage supplies*, *teen magazines*, *news magazines*, *poster board*, *scissors*, *glue sticks*
- ❑ **Reminder cards:** *church magazines*, *mission and outreach magazines*, *pieces of card stock*/*heavy paper*, *felt markers*

### Bless

- ❑ Bring *tealights*.
- ❑ Bring song "Somlandela/We Will Follow" (#22 on *Seasons Music CD*, volume 7), or "Stand, O Stand Firm" (# 18, *Seasons Music CD*, volume 8), or "I Send You Out" (#23, *Seasons Music CD*, volume 9). All recordings also available as *Seasons mp3 downloads*.



## Scripture

John 8:31–36

# Reformation Day (Years A, B, C)

**FOCUS** To explore Jesus' teaching about discipleship, truth, and freedom.

## Gather

**Welcome** young people and invite them to share experiences of the past week.

**Gather** in the worship area and invite a volunteer to light the candle. Point out the colour red in the worship space and explain that this is the colour for Reformation Day, when we remember Martin Luther and other reformers in the church.

**Pray** Form two groups to read alternate verses of **Psalm 46** as an opening prayer, reading the last verse in unison.

**Sing, listen to, or read** the words for "God Grant that We May Be Transformed" (#23 on *Seasons Music*

*CD, volume 7*) or "Fresh as the Morning" (#3, *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*), or "Jesus, Face of God" (#4, *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*).

### Making connections

Invite youth to name some "freedoms" they have now, or are looking forward to having (such as being able to drive). Take turns completing the following sentences: "Freedom means I can..." or, "Freedom means I don't have to..."

- **What are some of the responsibilities that go along with some of these freedoms?**

## Engage

### Setting the scene

Most scholars agree that the gospel of John was probably written about 85 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. There were some struggles at that time in the early church between Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and those who didn't. In the first part of John 8 the gospel writer describes Jesus' actions and teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, and the influence this had on those who were listening. Read **John 8:30**.

### Scripture reading

Distribute photocopies of the focus passage, **John 8:31–36**, and highlighter pens and invite young people to read the passage and highlight words and phrases they are wondering about. Have them also write, in the margins, one or two questions they have about the gospel reading and Jesus' teaching.

- **What parts of Jesus' teaching in these verses do you wonder about?**
- **What advice does Jesus offer to those who believed in him?**

Jesus speaks about discipleship as involving many things: belief, learning from Jesus, knowing truth, and experiencing freedom.

- **What kind of truth do you think Jesus is talking about in verse 32?**
- **What is the people's response to Jesus' teaching about freedom?**

Jesus' listeners seemed to have forgotten that their ancestors were once slaves in Egypt before Moses led them to freedom and a new life in a new country. Invite youth to look again at **John 8:34–36**.

- **What new kind of understanding does Jesus offer about slavery and freedom?**

Sin has been described as those things we do and say which result in our separation from God and from the rest of creation.

- **Based on this definition what do you think it means to be "a slave to sin"?**

Distribute copies of the resource sheet "Scripture Reading" and invite young people to read the paraphrase.

- **In what ways does this paraphrase help you to understand how living in Jesus' way brings freedom?**

Today we celebrate Reformation Day and remember the legacy of Martin Luther and the church

reforms begun nearly 500 years ago. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “Martin Luther” and review the information.

■ **What were the truths that Luther stood up for?**

**Digging deeper**

Invite a volunteer to read **Romans 3:19–28**. Martin Luther felt that the heart of the gospel truth was summed up in these verses.

■ **What does Paul say about being a slave to sin?**

Martin Luther said that a Christian is the most free person of all, subject to no one, and also the most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.

Invite young people to discuss this statement: do they agree or disagree? Why?

**Connecting scripture with life**

The early leaders of the Reformation helped people to see that forgiveness and true freedom are gifts from God.

■ **How might Jesus’ teachings have given Martin Luther the courage to speak up for change?**

The freedom about which Jesus speaks is not necessarily freedom from oppression, suffering, or stress.

■ **What do you think it means to be free in Christ?**

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## Respond

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Choose one or two of the following options.

- Reform list** Jesus’ teaching about truth and freedom inspired Martin Luther. The list that Luther nailed to the church door included church practices that he thought needed to be changed.



The Spirit’s work of reformation is still going on today. As a group, create a list of things in your church or denomination that may be in need of reformation. Discuss together how the group might initiate action on some of these items.

- Poster** Jesus’ teachings encouraged people to reflect on what it meant to be free in Christ, and what true freedom is. Invite young people to use the art and craft supplies to create a poster called

“Road to Freedom.” Have them include words and images that describe what “freedom to live in God’s way” might look like.

- Reminder cards** We are called to witness to Jesus’ teachings, as did Martin Luther. Invite young people to look through church magazines to find stories of those who are witnesses to Jesus’ teachings about discipleship, truth, and freedom. Share together some of the things that these people do or say that express Jesus’ teachings. Distribute pieces of card stock and invite young people to write down a word or phrase to take home as reminders to live Jesus’ teachings in their daily lives.

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## Bless

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**Gather** again in the worship area. Invite young people to consider some truths that they have learned from scripture and from Martin Luther about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Take turns lighting tealights and placing these in the worship space, forming a pathway leading from the central candle, as a symbol of commitment to live in God’s ways.

**Sing, listen to, or read** the words of “Somlandela/We Will Follow” (#22 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 7*), or “Stand, O Stand Firm” (# 18 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 8*), or “I Send You Out” (#23 on *Seasons Music CD, volume 9*).

**Close your session** by inviting group members to spend a few minutes in silence, then read the “Closing prayer” on the resource sheet “Scripture Reading.”

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## Reflect

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In what ways were young people able to come to an understanding about Jesus’ teachings being

discipleship, truth, and freedom? How might you continue to support them in their discipleship?



**M**artin Luther was born in Germany about 500 years ago, in a time when few people had an education or could read. The only church at that time was the Roman Catholic Church, and only the priests had access to Bibles, which were all written in Latin.

Wanting an education, Martin Luther began by studying law. After a powerful experience of God's presence, when he was 22 years old, Luther left law school and went to a monastery to become a monk. There he began to study the Bible, in preparation for teaching at the university. During his studies Luther started to question some of the things he had been taught about God and about belief.

It was when Luther studied the book of Romans that he rediscovered the teachings about grace. In particular he came to believe that people didn't need to try and earn God's forgiveness by being good. He believed that God's forgiveness was freely given to everyone. This was contrary to the practice in the church at that time of selling "indulgences" to raise money. People were told that if they gave money to the church by buying these "indulgences" then the punishment for their sins would be cancelled. In a way this was trying to buy God's forgiveness.

# Martin Luther

Luther began to make a list of other problems he had with the way things were in the church. By the time the list was finished there were 95 items. On October 31, 1517 Luther nailed his list, which we now call "The Ninety-Five Theses," to the door of a church and encouraged everyone to begin discussing and debating these ideas.

The church leaders didn't like this. Luther was arrested and excommunicated (officially excluded from the church). One month later the Emperor declared Martin Luther an outlaw.

In spite of this he continued to write teaching materials with questions and answers to help children and adults learn about the Christian faith. These "catechisms" are still used in Christian education today. Luther also translated the New Testament from Latin into German to make it easier for people to read, and wrote hymns which are found in many church hymn books today.

Martin Luther never planned to start a new church but, because the church leaders at the time refused to change, many of Luther's followers felt they had no choice but to leave the church. Luther is credited with starting the Protestant Reformation, which was the beginning of all the different denominations of Protestant churches today.

## Here I stand...

Martin Luther's views were condemned as heretical (an opinion that contradicts church teaching) by Pope Leo X. When Luther was called to explain his views he respectfully but boldly explained that he stood by his writings:

"Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scripture or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."



# Scripture Reading

Then Jesus turned to the Jews who had claimed to believe in him.

“If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.”

Surprised, they said, “But we’re descendants of Abraham. We’ve never been slaves to anyone. How can you say, ‘the truth will free you’?”

Jesus said, “I tell you most solemnly that anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life and is, in fact, a slave. A slave is a transient, who can’t come and go at will. The Son, though, has an established position, the run of the house. So if the Son sets you free, you are free through and through.”

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## *Closing prayer*

Ever-present God,  
May my eyes see the good in all Creation.  
May my ears hear the music of harmonious relationships.  
May my lips speak words of praise and affirmation.  
May my hands offer kindness and blessing.  
May my heart carry God’s dream of peace and justice for all.  
May my feet walk on a sacred path, with Christ to guide my steps. Amen.

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