

THE CHURCH: At the Crossroads of Faith and Life
A Brief Bible Study for Small Groups and Individuals
Olivet Lutheran Church
Fargo, North Dakota

Martin Luther's Seven Marks of the Church

“A seven year-old-child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd.” Martin Luther

Seven Marks of the Church

Study number one:	Confession and Absolution
Study number two:	The Word of God
Study number three:	Ministry
Study number four:	Worship
Study number five:	Suffering
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Study number seven:	The Lord's Supper

This study was written by the staff at Olivet Lutheran Church, Fargo and used during Lent.
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Confession and Absolution

Opening prayer:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Read the Scripture:

Psalms 51:1-13

Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Take another look at the scripture you've just read. What important insights come immediately to mind? What questions do you have about the appointed lessons?
2. What is guilt? Is it different from shame? Have guilt or shame played a big part in your life? In your spirituality?
3. With whom can you be most honest? To who can you confess?
4. Think/talk about a time when you shared a confession with another person or when someone confessed to you. (Keep in mind that confession may take many forms.) Describe the experience. How did it feel?
5. How does confession (telling the truth) and true repentance (willingness to change our ways) affect our relationships?
6. What does forgiveness mean for our relationships with others?
7. What happens if we withhold absolution/forgiveness from others? What happens if it is not offered or given to us?
8. Is forgiving the same thing as forgetting?
9. We regularly confess our sins in worship, publicly and aloud. How is that experience for you? Has it become routine in its regularity?
10. Do you believe that God knows about our sins before we confess them? If so, why is it important to confess them at all?
11. What does it mean to you that God is willing and able to absolve you of your sins? What does such a promise mean for today? For the future?

Closing Prayer: (Psalm 51:1, 11-13)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness; in your great compassion blot out all my offenses. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right

spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit. Amen.

The Word of God

Opening Prayer:

Gracious and Almighty God, your Word comes to us in so many ways. As we study and ponder your Word as revealed in the Scriptures, open our eyes and ears and hearts that we may experience your Living Word. By your Spirit, we pray the Word may turn our entire lives to You, the source of our salvation. Amen.

Scriptures:

Psalm 119:102-105

John 1:1-5, 10-14

Questions for discussion:

1. Tell of a time you feel God was very close. Tell of a time you felt God was far away.
2. What is your favorite Bible verse? How does it speak to you today?
3. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Do you agree or disagree? Discuss your answer.
4. Read Psalm 119:102-105. How does God’s Word show us God’s intent for our lives? How does God expect us to live, and what is God’s purpose for us?
5. Read John 1:1-5, 10-14. Name one time you’ve experienced God’s love “in the flesh.” What happened? What difference did that make in your life?
6. Have you ever experienced God’s Word-made-flesh without verbalization? Describe what that meant to you.
7. In the past, issues such as slavery, the holocaust, and apartheid were encouraged by selective readings of Scripture. Can you think of ways God’s Word is misused today? How can we combat such misuse?
8. In what ways does God’s Word make you uncomfortable today?
9. What is God’s work of challenge to you? Word of hope?
10. Discuss the ways by which the Church is called to speak and/or carry our God’s Living Word today?

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, the Living Word for us, help us to see your gracious movements among us today and each day. Give to us your Word that shows us the way to live and drives us to your grace and mercy. Instill in our heart the faith to believe your Word that forgives and transforms our lives. May it strengthen us for living life today. Amen.

Ministry

Opening prayer:

Loving God, as we move through Lent, help us to take time to reflect on your love for us, and your presence among us. May you be at work among us as we experience your grace through the ministries of your church. Amen.

Scriptures:

John 15:16-17

1 Peter 4:10-11

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 13

Questions for discussion:

1. What did you hear from the scripture passages? Did you hear anything new?
2. What does “bearing fruit” mean?
3. Talk about what it means to you to be chosen by God.
4. When you think “minister”, what or who comes to mind?
5. Who does ministry?
6. What does it mean to be a steward?
7. If one of your best friends were to identify your greatest gifts, what would they be? Name two.
8. How can you use your gifts for ministry at the crossroads in your daily life?

Closing Prayer:

As we close our study today, help us trust in your presence in our lives and in your church. Your Spirit activates us to reach out in ways that may seem foreign to us. Help us in all we do as we are all ministers in this world. Amen.

Worship

Opening Prayer:

Almighty God, you pour out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and supplication. Deliver us, as we come in to your presence, from cold hearts and wandering thoughts, that with steady minds and burning zeal we may worship you in spirit and in truth; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Read the Scriptures:

Psalm 96:109

Luke 1:46-55

Revelation 5:11-13

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. When you hear the word “worship”, what comes to mind?
2. Describe a worship experience that was especially meaningful to you. What do you remember most?
3. In Psalm 96, we are called to sing songs of praise to God. Do you have a favorite song or hymn?
4. What “marvelous works” of the Lord are evident to you?
5. Psalm 96 also speaks of idols. What are some of the false gods people worship? Are there some things that distract you from worship?
6. Why was Mary singing praises to God in the reading from Luke’s Gospel?
7. What are you particularly thankful for or grateful about today?
8. Name some ways that your gratitude might be expressed. Do you see that expression in worship?
9. In the book of Revelation, John paints a picture of the heavenly host at worship. Who is the “Lamb?” Why is the “Lamb” worthy of worship?
10. When you think of the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross, what is your first response? What does Jesus’ action indicate about your worth?
11. Why is it important to worship with others regularly? How about individually or privately?

12. What would help deepen your worship life?

Closing Prayer:

Bless us, O God, with a reverent sense of your presence, that we may be at peace and may worship you with all our mind and spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Suffering

Let us pray:

God there are times when we come to you with hearts that are heavy. There is much we don't understand in the world. There is injustice and much suffering. In the vastness of the questions that can arise, help us to know again that your love surrounds us and gives us courage and strength. Amen.

Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Romans 8:19-28

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Read the scripture references. What do you hear? Do you hear anything new?
2. Why is suffering a mark of the church?
3. What do you see as the sources of suffering? In Terry Fretheim's book About the Bible he says "Suffering has generated a variety of opinions. They include: 1) All suffering is bad and to be avoided at all costs. 2) All suffering is due to sin. 3) All suffering is taking up the cross. 4) All suffering is the will of God." With which of these do you agree?
4. What are some pat answers you have heard about suffering?
5. Are there ways in which you have suffered? Suffering can send out ripples. How has suffering touched your life?
6. What do you do with the suffering you see around you? What might God call you to?
7. Is there anything positive about suffering?
8. One thing that distinguishes us from other world religions is that, God suffers:
 - a. Because of us

- b. With us
 - c. For us
- Talk about what this means to you.
- 9. Talk about a time when someone's presence made a difference, when someone entered into your suffering with you.
 - 10. How do you find meaning in your suffering?

Let us pray:

We thank you God for this time to focus on a question as big as suffering. Help us to be open to your presence in our own suffering and in the suffering of others. Help us be compassionate and grace filled in our interactions with others, bringing your love and light. Amen.

Baptism

Opening Prayer:

Gracious and Almighty God, as you wash us in these waters, pour upon us a living faith that we may believe your promises. Help us to see your gracious movements each day. By your Spirit, we pray we are opened and changed, so that we may know the joy of a new life. Amen.

Scriptures:

Matthew 28:18-20

Romans 6:3-5

Titus 3:4-8

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

- 1. When were you baptized? Can you recall any stories about your baptism?...about any baptism you have witnessed?
- 2. What words, phrases or thoughts come to your mind when you hear "baptism?"
- 3. Read Matthew 28:18-20. Why do we baptize? What is the connection between baptism and discipleship?
- 4. Are you a baptismal sponsor for anyone? How do you, or in what ways can you maintain the connection and keep those responsibilities?
- 5. Our bodies and the earth are mostly water; it is absolutely essential for Life. We say that water used with Gods' Word makes a baptism. Discuss the reasons why we use water, and why God's Word is essential in baptism?

6. Read Romans 6:3-5. Water can also be dangerous. Paul says we are drowned, joined to Jesus' death and resurrection. What is put to death? What are the ways you experience, or would like to experience new life?
7. Have you ever wondered about your worth? In baptism, what does God say about your worth? What are the benefits we receive in baptism?
8. Luther said in baptism we daily receive life, forgiveness and eternal salvation. Therefore, it is mysterious, not magical. What's the difference?
9. Read Titus 3:4-8. Who's righteousness saves us? With this in mind, what's it like being an "heir according to the hope eternal life?" How does this change us?
10. In the Lutheran church we baptize infants, believing that God is the one who acts, whether or not we understand what is going on. What does this say about God's grace?
11. What difference does your baptism make to you? How can you take that message to the world?

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, in the Living Waters of baptism, help us to see your gracious movements among us today and each day. Give us faith to believe your promises that change and transforms our lives. Amen.

The Lord's Supper

Opening Prayer:

Lord, Jesus, you fill us with your grace in powerful ways. Feed us with your Holy Spirit that we may have strength for life. Open us to your forgiveness that, living in faith we may know the joy of a new life. Amen.

Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Mark 14:12-26

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Name the two sacraments in the Lutheran tradition. What is the connection of baptism and the Lord's Supper?
2. What words, phrases or thoughts come to your mind when you hear "The Lord's Supper," or "Holy Communion" or "Eucharist?"
3. We proclaim that the benefits of Holy Communion are forgiveness, eternal life and strength for living. What does it mean told again and again we are forgiven and loved?
4. Talk about a time when the Lord's Supper was particularly meaningful.
5. Sometimes people worry about their worthiness to receive this gift. Talk about why that might be, and how Jesus' promises might address this.
6. Tell of a time you felt alone. What would it mean if you would have known someone was with you? How might that relate to the Sacrament?
7. Jesus said, "this is my body, this is my blood." Therefore, we say Jesus is really present in, with and under the bread and wine. What do you think this means?

8. Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Jesus says, “do this in remembrance of me,” and Paul writes that we proclaim the Lord’s death when we partake of this meal. Why do you think this is?

9. Read Mark 14:12-26. Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his friends on this night one of them betrayed him. Further, his closest disciple denied him and the others deserted him. How do we participate in this same betrayal, denial and desertion? What does it mean that God gave and continues to give us this gift in this midst of these things?

10. Why does something as simple as eating and drinking have such importance in our confession of faith?

11. What difference does it make to you to partake in this meal? How can your life be changed and strengthen for the living of this life?

Closing Prayer:

With praise and thanksgiving, to God ever living, the tasks of our everyday life we will face. Out of faith ever sharing, in love ever caring, embracing God’s children of each tribe and race. With your feast you feed us, with your light now lead us; unite us as one in this life that we share. Then may all the living with praise and thanksgiving give honor to you, Christ, whose name that we bear. Amen.