

Reformation Roots Study Guide

Overview

This study guide is written to help participants make connections between the events of history and the dynamics of today's church. In order to facilitate reflection and dialogue among the participants here are some processes to use:

- The facilitator should view the session in advance to prepare for the discussion.
- Double check the equipment the day of the study to make sure that everything is working. Technical difficulties derail even the most enthusiastic group.
- During the viewing make sure that everyone can see the screen. After the viewing, if at all possible, rearrange the seating to a semi-circle or a circle so that participants can see each other to better facilitate conversation.
- Provide nametags and/or have participants introduce themselves before having the opening conversation. Remember that a newcomer is less likely to return if they are not made to feel welcome through some form of introduction or inclusion. Whether a church is large or small, not knowing 'how things are done here' can make a participant feel uncomfortable. The more the facilitator can be clear about the process and hospitality, the more comfortable people will feel.
- Use the opening and closing prayers provided or create your own.
- After the opening prayer and introductions, begin with the opening conversation with people in pairs (or with 3 people at the most). Encourage people to pair up with people they don't know. The later discussion will be much more lively if people have a chance to connect personally before they are asked to engage the material. The facilitator will have to break off the conversation. This is an important activity but it is primarily to make connections and open the way for more conversation after the video.
- Set ground rules for discussion. If you have a stable group that meets weekly you may only have to mention these the first session. If people move in and out of the group you will have to make these reminders at each session. Many people have the impression that church history is dry and dusty but participants may discover there are some lively issues that still impact us today—and there may be differences of opinion.
 - It is OK and welcome to have differences of opinion—as history shows, it is what we do with those differences that make the difference.
 - If anything personal happens to be shared, that information stays in the room unless the person who spoke gives permission to speak outside the group.
- Look over the discussion questions and highlight the ones that you want to make sure to cover. Depending on how lively the discussion is you may have to cut down the number of questions you cover.
- If you have more than 12 people in the class you may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion purposes and then pull the class back together before the end of the session to glean themes from each group.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to move the discussion on to a new question if the group is stuck and/or to keep any one person from dominating the discussion. One technique in the latter situation is to insert yourself with something like, "That is very interesting. What do some of the rest of you think about this issue?"

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Background for the Leader

This series on the Reformation features historians who have a passion for the church and its story. They will, along with a host, transport you through one of the most interesting and important periods of church history. This era begins with the church suffering from moral decay and fierce defensiveness and ends with a fracturing of the church into many smaller pieces. Onto this stage come some of the most remarkable characters in history. These reformers carry with them fresh ideas that challenge the stultified thinking of that era as well as recover the deep truths of scripture.

The scholars featured in this series will introduce you to the characters and major events while avoiding drowning you in endless details. You will hear the major themes of authority and freedom that are woven throughout and you will learn that both forces, pushed to the extreme, have caused tremendous suffering.

Though Martin Luther is credited with being the major force of the Reformation, learners will meet many others who prepared the ground before him as well as those who followed after and who took advantage of the new intellectual freedom to question all manner of doctrine and practice.

We live in the post-Reformation era when denominations are trying to discover common ground rather than points of disagreements. Many of those earlier areas of disagreement have been resolved through dialogue and statements of agreement. The aim of this series is to help explain the existing landscape of western Christianity and to suggest that some of the unresolved Reformation themes are still in play today.

You have permission to make copies of the tree graphic on the last page of this study guide. This graphic illustrates the origins of most of the denominations in the United States.

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Session 1: From Night to Dawn: The Stage is Set

Welcome:

This study will help us to discover how the church came to be so diverse and divided and perhaps lead us to think about finding common ground in our time. We will also see that disagreements and conflict are built into the human experience, both in the church and the world. We will also be introduced to reformers that acted on the call to renew and reform a church that had gone astray.

This series invites us to use our imaginations as we enter into a foreign time and place. In order to better understand the flow of events in the Middle Ages, we must give up modern assumptions about government, freedom, science and church. The historians featured in this series will invite entry into that strange and dangerous world. Notice that they use what is called the “historical present” which brings the past into present tense.

Opening Prayer:

Here we stand with those who, with courage and conviction, called the church to be faithful to the Gospel

And here we stand with those who are renewing the church today.

Here we stand, witnesses to your love for all.

Here we stand, called to be your servants, your followers, your children.

In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

Divide up into pairs, preferably with someone you don’t know well. Share with each other for 2-3 minutes around the following: The time period we will be hearing about today was full of turbulence and change. What kinds of changes are impacting your own life and congregation?

Play Session 1 Video

Synopsis:

- The Lutheran Reformation did not happen in a vacuum. Many forces of historical events paved the way.
- There were earlier reformers who challenged church authority.
- Economic, political, cultural and intellectual changes created cracks in the existing system of authority.
- The growth of humanism and universities prepared the ground for Luther.

Questions for Discussion:

- What stands out for you about what you saw and heard?
- What did you learn about the period leading up to the Reformation that is new to you?
- If you lived then, what would you want from the church and your faith?
- We know that we are living in a time of immense change, which can be disorienting. What changes do you think were most important during the Middle Ages that made the Reformation possible or even necessary?
- What forces are driving change for the church in our time?
- What is different now?
- There was a growth of intellectual inquiry during this period, which was a challenge to the authorities. Is there a tension between faith and reason?
- The “Age of Reason” brought scientific breakthroughs but has it also led to agnosticism and even atheism?

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- What place does authority have in the church?

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for entering into history in the person of Jesus who made a way to you without our own effort or striving and who demonstrates that all things can be made new. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Session 2: From Bondage to Freedom: Luther Rediscovered Grace

Welcome and Introduction:

This session introduces us to the character of Martin Luther and his early struggles. During this session imagine yourself in the 15th century where superstition rules, the masses are uneducated, life is short, you are asked to pay for your forgiveness and the church holds your eternal destiny in its hands.

Opening Prayer:

God of history, help us to see your hand in bringing truth and freedom to an imperfect world through imperfect individuals. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Martin Luther had an experience during a thunderstorm that sent him off in a whole new direction in life. Have you had an experience that sent you in a different direction than you anticipated?

Play Session 2 Video

Video Synopsis:

- What began as a deeply personal and interior struggle has a startling impact on the whole Christian world.
- The power and authority of scripture is recovered.
- Righteousness is seen as a gift rather than an achievement
- The understanding of God's grace as a free gift is revolutionary in a system where it is mediated by the church.

Questions:

- What stands out for you from this video session?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Can you identify with Luther's question, "When will I know when I've done enough to earn God's love?"
- Do people worry today about their eternal destiny or their standing with God?
- Do you believe that people need to meet God halfway or do something to receive salvation?
- Why did the church react forcefully to Luther?
- How does your church deal with disagreements?

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, we are so grateful that rather than requiring us to climb up to you, you entered into this world to bring us into your loving embrace. Help us to trust that you have done it all and we can live in that freedom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Session 3: From Scholar to Provocateur: Luther Takes on the Church

Welcome and Introduction:

The pace and the drama of this story increase in intensity. We could see it coming as Luther finds the answer to his deepest despair and wants the world to experience the same relief from the fear of God's wrath. At this point, he is not about to compromise and moderate his stance.

Opening Prayer:

Loving God,

Thank you for brother Martin, who fearlessly searched scripture in search of a loving God, who in Christ exchanges God's righteousness for our sin.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the questions: Where have you looked for God's love? In family? Friends? Scripture? (a particular passage?) Nature? Other places?

Play Session 3 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Luther takes on the penitential system of the Catholic Church.
- Luther's impact is multiplied through the distribution of his writings thanks to the printing press.
- Luther espouses a theology of the cross versus a theology of glory.

Questions:

- What stands out for you about what you saw and heard?
- What was a new learning for you?
- Do you believe you need to do anything to atone for your sins?
- How is your view different from the theology of the church in that day?
- Do you know of present-day Christian leaders who, perhaps like Pope Leo, promise reward for giving money?
- The scholastic theologians believed that they could fill in the missing pieces in our understanding of God. How do you deal with what you don't understand about God? What can we know about God?
- How is not knowing everything about God a form of suffering?

Closing Prayer:

Dear God of mystery and wonder. We seek to know you in all your majesty but are content to know you as you reveal your heart in the person of Jesus Christ.

In His name we pray, Amen.

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Session 4: From Priest to Outlaw

Welcome:

It's hard to imagine in our day of 24-hour news channels that someone like Martin Luther could be either ignored or dismissed but in the Middle Ages, news travelled slowly. Now that the authorities are paying better attention to Martin, he is being exposed as a heretic. His writings will get him into more trouble. Things are coming to a head.

Opening Prayer:

Lord, thank you for the courage of those who face tremendous danger for the sake of the Gospel and who have been faithful, even to death. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the questions: Have you ever stood up for something that drew attention to you? What was that like?

Play Session 4 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Luther is excommunicated for heresy.
- Luther writes his seminal works.
- Luther is on trial.
- Luther is under threat.

Questions:

- What stands out for you about what you saw and heard?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- In the brutal Middle Ages, opposition, whether political or theological, was met with an intense reaction from the authorities. Why was Luther's stand such a threat?
- With the authorities of church and state arrayed against him, Luther stood his ground but he needed a day to think about it. Have you ever had to make a difficult decision that required some deep reflection?
- Luther was haunted with the question, "how could you alone be right?"
- When you have taken a position contrary to the popular stance, have you asked yourself that question?
- Do you know any reformers in the present day who are challenging the status quo?
- Do they make you uncomfortable?

Closing Prayer:

Although we do not experience threat because of our faith, we often lack courage to be bold in our witness. Help us trust in you so that we may demonstrate by our words and deeds that we belong to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Session 5: From Heretic to Hero

Welcome:

In this session we can feel the heat increasing on Brother Martin. He stood his ground in the face of the power of the empire and the papacy. Luther credits his trust in God's power rather than his own individual courage. He knows that others have met a grisly death for their stand. This is a very dramatic story that twists and turns and has us riveted.

Prayer:

Dear God of hope and power, help us to trust you when we are faced with difficult decisions. Thank you for those who were confident in your steady hand to live on the edge for your sake. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Have you ever been afraid and felt that you only had God to lean on? Briefly describe that if you feel comfortable sharing.

Play Session 5 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Luther is exiled at Wartburg Castle.
- Luther translates the Bible into German.
- While Luther is away from Wittenberg, the movement fragments.
- Other more radical reformers emerge.

Questions:

- What stands out for you about what you saw and heard?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Luther was given a forced sabbatical in the castle at Wartburg, where he used the time to translate the New Testament into the German language. Have you ever been forced to take a sabbatical because of illness, injury, job loss or other reasons? Was it a productive time in ways that surprised you?
- Having the Bible available in the language of the people was revolutionary. Why was it dangerous? How is that true in our time in many parts of the globe?
- What do you think is dangerous about letting everyone read scripture for themselves?
- Who has final authority regarding the interpretation of scripture?
- While Luther was away at Wartburg, the movement began to splinter. External authority can help contain fracturing but there can be a loss of freedom. But freedom can also lead to chaos. Where is the middle ground? How is that handled at your work, church and home?
- There were followers of Luther who believed that stained glass windows and statuary should be destroyed. They were called iconoclasts. Luther argued that much of the church's practices could remain. Some churches are more spare than others. Could this be a reflection of this old argument? What does your church look like?

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for those who have faithfully translated your Word into language we can understand. Give us wisdom and a community that can help us discern its meaning for our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Session 6: From Scholar to Father: The Domestic Luther

Welcome:

When we last left Luther he had returned, at his peril to Wittenberg, where trouble was brewing. The freedom that his followers experienced led to dissension and discord. And Luther turns another corner and marries Katharina Von Bora and a side of Luther emerges that grounds him in the ordinary daily life of spouse and father.

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, you enter into our lives in the person of Jesus and make sacred all of life. Help us to see that our mundane callings can be a living sacrifice for the sake of the neighbor and a witness to your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the questions: Are there some ordinary activities that remind you of God's presence? What are they and why do they bring your awareness to God's presence?

Play Session 6 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Martin marries Katharina and develops a domestic theology.
- Luther hones his theology of vocation
- Luther copes with death of two daughters.
- Reformation is out of Luther's control- Swiss and Radical.

Questions:

- What stands out for you about what you saw and heard?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Luther's understanding of the calling of a Christian is to serve the neighbor. How has that idea influenced your understanding of your various callings in the home, community, at work and at church?
- What is your impression of Katharina von Bora? What kind of a woman was she?
- Luther suffered deeply from the death of two children. How did he endure the suffering? What have you learned about your own suffering?
- With the central authority of the church and empire diminished, splinters in the ranks began to appear. Does this make way for more diversity of expressions or a challenge to the unity of the body of Christ?
- Can you have unity without uniformity?
- How do you handle this question in your own home or congregation?

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, your people do not experience oneness in the body of Christ. Help us see that we all belong to everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ, Amen.

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Session 7: From Simple to Complex: The New Church finds Common Ground

(Note to leader: If you are Lutheran, ask your pastor for a copy of the Book of Concord which contains the confessional documents referenced in this session)

Welcome:

In our last session we saw this new reforming movement suffering from more splintering. This week we'll learn about how Luther, and then his partner Melanchthon, attempt to build unity around beliefs held in common. The documents from this period, called confessional statements, still provide common ground for the Lutheran Church but at that time the process of building this accord was messy.

Opening Prayer:

Loving God, we thank you that you have chosen to work through ordinary and flawed people to bring your Word to the world. Find ways to use us, in spite of our weaknesses, in service to you and our neighbor. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the questions: Have you ever tried to build consensus in a family or work situation? What was that like?

Play Session 7 Video

Video Synopsis:

- The Lutheran church is born.
- There are disagreements in the ranks.
- Melanchthon assumes leadership
- Confessional documents are created that define common ground.

Questions:

- The Book of Concord contains the confessional statements from this period. (If you have a copy pass this book around the room.)
- What stands out for you about what you saw and heard?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Luther didn't intend to start a new church, but once the chasm was so big and his movement was taking shape, he had to help organize it. Can you imagine what it must have been like to make up new rules and structures? What would you keep or discard?
- How were disagreements handled?
- Why did they feel it was important to create confessional documents?

Closing Prayer:

God of all history, we thank you for leaders who sought to be faithful to the Gospel throughout time. Help us to hold to the center of our faith, the grace made abundant through your son, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, Amen

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Bonus Session 8: Luther's Legacy

Welcome:

This session is a bonus and helps to fill in some of the content of Luther's theology. These cornerstone ideas have become bedrock for Lutherans and many others.

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, we know of your unconditional love through the witness of scripture and the ongoing teaching and preaching of its word of life for us. Thank you for teachers and preachers who still speak that same loving and forgiving word.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Luther is famous for his emphasis on grace. Share an experience of grace from your own life. Try to think of something in the last month.

Play Session 7 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Theology of justification by grace through faith
- Theology of vocation
- Priesthood of all believers

Questions:

- What stands out for you from this video session?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Do you wrestle with Luther's understanding of justification and that you contribute nothing?
- What do you think are the most important discoveries of Luther?
- Luther was embarrassed that his name was attached to the new church. If you had the chance to rename the denomination, what would you call it?
- Do you have conversations about your faith with others? What do you say to those who believe that they need to accept Jesus, or make a decision for Jesus?

Closing Prayer:

Thank you Lord for freeing us from the fear of your wrath so that we might serve the neighbor freely. In Jesus' name, Amen

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Session 9: Swiss Reformation: A Rationalist's Revolt

Welcome:

The Lutheran Reformation wasn't the only trouble vexing the papacy. In the south of the empire were the Swiss reformers who split with Luther, particularly on the Lord's Supper. We will meet two of the main reformers in this session.

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, you call your people to be faithful to your Word but many times there are disagreements about what that looks like. Help us to see that in all these matters, Jesus is at the center. In his name we pray, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Have you ever taken communion at a church of another denomination? What was that like?

Play Session 9 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Zwingli's city reformation.
- Church order is reformed.
- Influence of Erasmus
- John Calvin's influence all across Europe.

Questions:

- What stands out for you from this video session?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Zwingli believed that Christ's body was present in symbolic form. Luther talked about real presence. Living in a scientific age, how do you view this question?
- Zwingli and Calvin create a different church order. What do you think of their structure? Can we learn anything from it?
- As a linguist and reformer, Erasmus has tremendous influence. What do you think is his greatest contribution?
- Calvin was an intellectual giant and was a prolific writer. What new did you learn about him?

(Note: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in full communion with The Reformed Church in America, The United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church USA and The Moravian Church, among others, thus bridging some of the rifts from this period.)

Closing Prayer:

Creator God, your people yearn to understand your will and your ways, yet find discord and disarray. Help us to find our center in your Son, Jesus Christ. In His name, Amen.

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Session Ten: Radical Reformation: Revolution and Withdrawal

Welcome:

As we have seen in previous sessions, the Protestant Reformation began splintering right away. The newly found freedom to study scripture and think differently about the church, led some to move even farther away from the Catholic Church. In this session we will meet some of those reformers.

Opening Prayer:

Give us open hearts and minds to learn about Christian brothers and sisters who have taken a different path. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Did you grow up in the denomination you now belong to? If so, can you imagine changing to another denomination? If you have changed churches, what was that like?

Play Session 10 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Early revolutionary zealots
- Anabaptists who broke ranks over baptism
- Anabaptists withdraw from society

Questions:

- What stands out for you from this video session?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- The early radical reformers linked their movement with the kingdom of God on earth and believed that armed revolt was acceptable.
- Do you see attempts in our time to link faith with politics?
- What's good about it? What's not so good?
- Later reformers believed in withdrawal from civil society. Is that a radical version of separation of church and state?
- This movement held to a believer's baptism. How do you feel about needing to make a conscious decision to be baptized?
- Have you heard of people being re-baptized? What do you think about it?
- How has this movement influenced American Christianity?

Closing Prayer:

Dear God, help us to understand the path others have taken. Keep us from pride and judgment while we seek to be faithful to the God of our understanding.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Session 11: English Reformation: A Political Reformation

Welcome:

In this session we will discover the roots of the Anglican churches, which today includes the Episcopal Church, as well as the Scottish Presbyterian church. We will be surprised to hear a different take on Henry VIII's decision to oppose the papacy.

Opening Prayer:

In each age and time, your spirit stirs and calls people to faithfulness. Thank you for leaders who hold to the Gospel in troubled times. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Do you remember any stories about Henry VIII breaking away from the Roman Catholic church to form the Anglican church? What are they?

Play Session 11 Video

Video Synopsis:

- Political, rather than theological split
- Not a radical reform.
- Under Elizabeth, a settled reform.

Questions:

- What stands out for you from this video session?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Were you surprised to hear a different take on Henry's move against the pope?
- In the United States, the question of sovereignty has been raised in regard to a Catholic president. Some opposing John Kennedy for President, worried that he would be subject to the Pope, rather than the constitution. How do you feel about that?
- What did you find unique about the English Reformation?
- The Elizabethan Settlement was an attempt to solidify and stabilize the Reformation in British lands. How does your church try to create stability and predictability in times of change?

(Note: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in full communion with the Anglican, Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Methodist Church, thus healing some of the rifts of this Reformation period.)

Closing Prayer:

Keep us steadfast in your Word, trusting in your guiding hand. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Session 12: Catholic Reformation: Reaction and Renewal

Welcome:

The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages was faced with revolt on many fronts. Initial reaction was often swift and unbending. However, we will learn in this session that a needed reformation took place in the Catholic Church, too.

Opening Prayer:

Dear God, help us love our brothers and sisters who have a different experience of the faith. Give us insight into their world and thought so that we may build bonds of peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening Conversation:

In pairs for 2-3 minutes share around the following: Have you ever experienced a new tradition starting in your family? Do you remember how it got started? Do you like the new tradition?

Play Session 12 Video

Video Synopsis:

- The Catholic Church called together a council - the Council of Trent
- They dealt with both dogma and institutional reform
- Ignatius Loyola and Teresa of Avila were important reformers
- The Church stabilized

Questions:

- What stands out for you from this video session?
- What did you learn that is new to you?
- Shared power between Councils and Papacy sounds good but difficult to make work. Do we see that in struggles between the President and Congress or Pastor and Church Council?
- How was the Roman Church better off after the reformation?
- Vatican II brought much needed reform to the Catholic Church such as liturgy in language of the people.
- What reforms do you think still need to be made?
- In the Apostle's Creed we say we believe in the Holy catholic church. What does that mean to you? (Note that it is a small "c" and catholic means universal.)

Substantial progress has been made to find common ground of the main issue that precipitated the Reformation, namely justification.

"The Lutheran World Federation/Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations." (JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church)

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Wrap up:

As we have witnessed, the church in the late Middle Ages was held together by the power of the empire and papacy. Cracks in the mortar began appearing before the arrival of Luther but he brought the beginning of a major revolt and disunity. In our day, the ecumenical movement and theological dialogues have sought to heal some of these wounds and build a greater sense of shared mission among many denominations, including Catholic. A modern counterpart to those old struggles is the Arab Spring uprisings that began in 2011. What was to be a hopeful new day in the Middle East has instead exposed the huge rifts in Islam with results that look like 15th and 16th century Europe. When the authoritarian lid is off, differences become life-threatening.

Thank God, Christians are not killing each other over these old theological disputes. In fact, thanks to long-term efforts, there are more opportunities to share clergy, the Lord's Table and ministries with other denominations. Perhaps this is a response to the call issued by St. Paul:

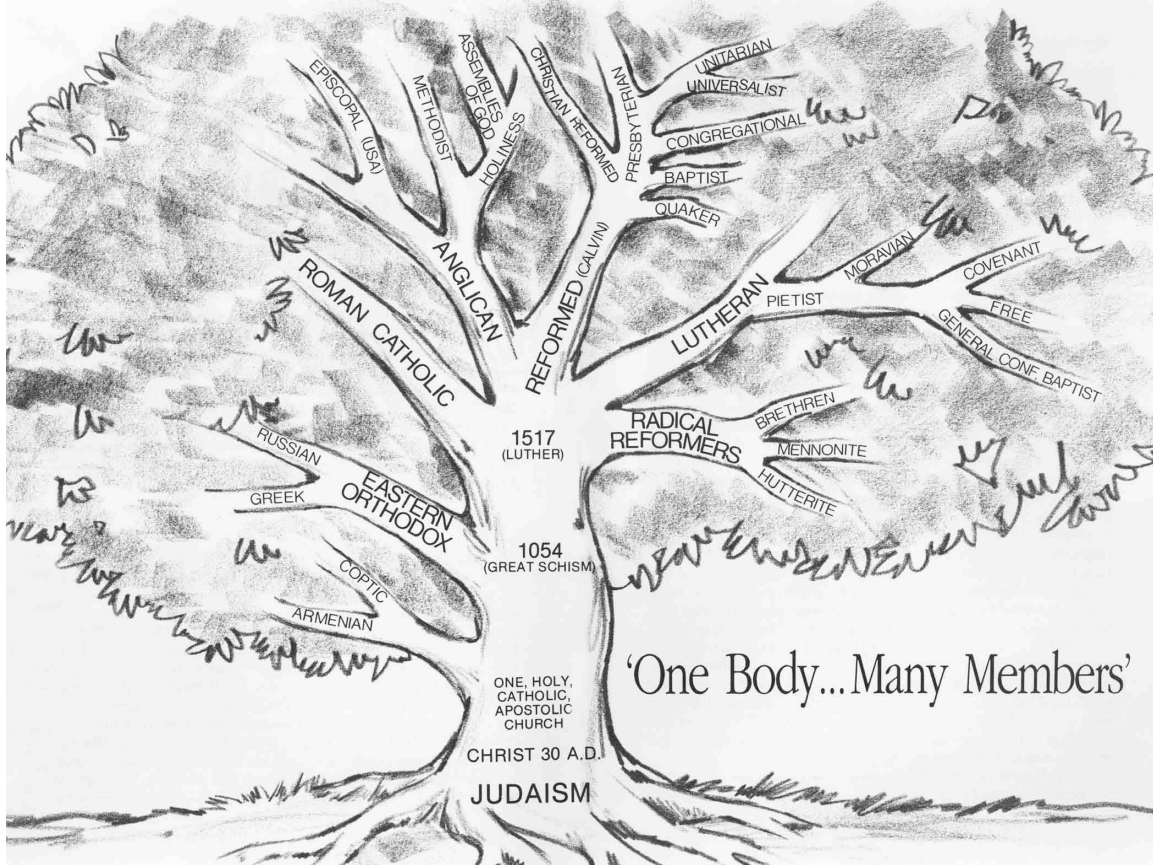
"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 3:4-6)

Closing Prayer:

Holy God, unite the wills of your people to bring the good news to all people.
Open our hearts to all who belong to Jesus Christ. In his name, Amen.

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The Reformation Family Tree



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