

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY



Issue 115

## Luther leads the way

*CH* celebrates the  
500th anniversary of  
the Reformation

First in a four part series





**HEARTH AND HOME** Left: Later Protestants liked to describe the Luthers as the ideal parsonage family. Here a 19th-c. artist imagines the family gathered around to sing with friend Melancthon in the background.

**DIABOLICAL BAGPIPES** Below: Luther's opponents caricatured him as merely a mouthpiece for the devil. Protestants countered that monks, not Luther, were the devil's instruments.

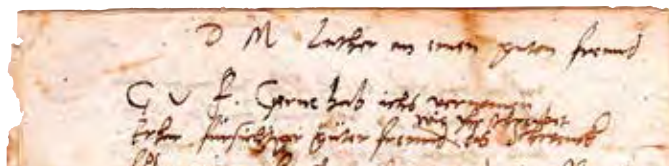


## Did you know?

LUTHER LOVED TO PLAY THE LUTE, ONCE WENT ON STRIKE FROM HIS CONGREGATION, AND HATED TO COLLECT THE RENT

### MICHELANGELO, MUSIC, AND MASS

- Christopher Columbus set sail when Luther was a schoolboy, and Michelangelo was completing his Sistine Chapel ceiling when Luther began teaching theology as a young man.
- Luther preferred music to any other school subject, and he became very skilled at playing the lute. Upon becoming a monk at age 21, he had to give the lute away.
- When Luther celebrated his first Mass as a priest in 1507, he trembled so much he nearly dropped the bread and cup. He was so terrified of the presence of Christ in the sacrament that he tried to run from the altar.
- Luther raised so much hostility that it was rumored—and taken seriously by some—that he was the product of a bathhouse liaison between his mother and the devil. At the Diet of Worms, he was condemned as a “demon in the appearance of a man.”



**THE MAN, THE LEGEND, THE HANDWRITING** The beginning of a letter from, as the text says, “D[oc]tor M Luther to a good friend.”

### SINGING CONGREGANTS, STRIKING PASTOR

Luther made singing a central part of Protestant worship. In his *German Mass* (1526), he dispensed with the choir and assigned all singing to the congregation. He often called congregational rehearsals during the week so people could learn new hymns.

Luther and his fellow reformers also took religious education seriously—here are sermon subjects for a sample week:

- Sunday, 5 a.m.—Pauline Epistles
- Sunday, 9 a.m.—Gospels
- Sunday afternoon—Catechism
- Monday and Tuesday—Catechism
- Wednesday—Gospel of Matthew
- Thursday and Friday—Epistles
- Saturday—Gospel of John

Though preaching was shared during the week, Luther often spoke at all the Sunday services. He became frustrated with his congregation: despite his admonitions and instruction, he felt his people remained godless. “It annoys me to keep preaching to you,” he said, and in 1530 he actually went on strike and refused to preach for a time.



**A SINGING CHURCH** Luther said he had “no use for cranks who despised music.” Here is an early edition of his hymn “A Mighty Fortress.”

- “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.”
- “When I preach I regard neither doctors nor magistrates . . . I have all my eyes on the servant maids and on the children. And if the learned men are not well pleased with what they hear, well, the door is open.”
- “Think of all the squabbles Adam and Eve must have had in the course of their 900 years. Eve would say, ‘You ate the apple,’ and Adam would retort, ‘You gave it to me.’”

### AT HOME WITH LUTHER

- Luther had a mug with three rings. The first, he said, represented the Ten Commandments, the second the Apostles’ Creed, and the third the Lord’s Prayer. Luther was amused he could drain a mug of wine through the Lord’s Prayer while a friend could not get beyond the Ten Commandments.
- The Luthers continually had people in their large house, a former Augustinian cloister (in fact, the very cloister where Martin had lived as a monk). Students, visiting clergy, and friends mingled with boarders who paid rent—or who were supposed to pay rent but were let off by the generous Luther.
- In 1527 a terrible plague struck Wittenberg, and virtually all of Luther’s students fled for their lives. Leaders begged Martin to leave town also, but he felt pastors should stay and help the afflicted. Because he and Katie took in so many sick and dying, their house had to be quarantined even after the plague ended.
- Lutheran minister and teacher Johannes Mathesius and some of his pupils lived with the Luthers for a while in 1540. As this motley group dined together, Mathesius recorded Luther’s memorable sayings, resulting in the book *Table Talk* (1566). Eventually Mathesius acquired so many pupils that Luther had to tell them all to find somewhere else to live.

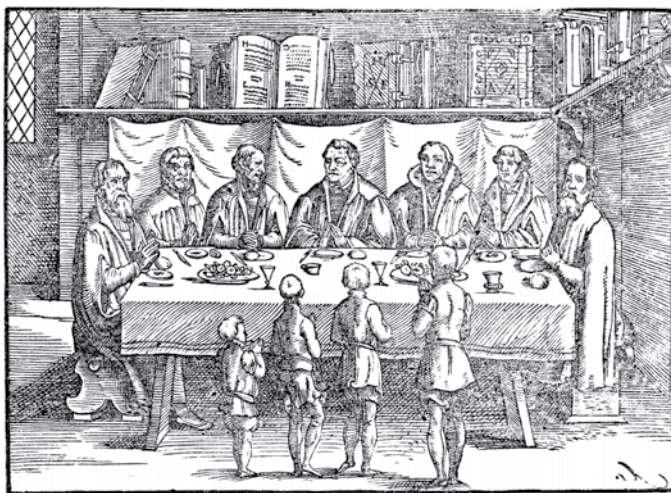
### WHY SHOULD THE DEVIL HAVE ALL THE GOOD MUSIC?

Luther’s colorful sayings helped spread his ideas:

- “The devil should not be allowed to keep all the best tunes for himself.”
- “Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.”
- “Human nature is like a drunk peasant. Lift him into the saddle on one side, over he topples on the other side.”
- “If our Lord is permitted to create nice large pike and good Rhine wine, presumably I may be allowed to eat and drink.”

- “Because we cannot prevent the birds [of temptation] from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.”
- “What lies there are about relics! One claims to have a feather from the wing of the angel Gabriel, and the Bishop of Mainz has a flame from Moses’ burning bush. And how does it happen that 18 apostles are buried in Germany when Christ had only 12?”
- “Farewell to those who want an entirely pure and purified church. This is plainly wanting no church at all.”

*Some of this “Did you know?” was adapted from items written or collected by Herbert Jacobsen, Mark Galli, and Mary Ann Jeffreys for CH issues 34 and 39. On our cover, some of the Protestant reformers are pictured gathered around a miracle of Christ. You can see the whole picture on p. 42.*



**FROM THEOLOGIAN TO TODDLERS** Martin and Katie Luther continually entertained houseguests; this woodcut imagines a meal attended by fellow reformers and the Luther children.



Five hundred years ago, an  
obscure German monk  
published 95 theses for debate  
and unwittingly set off  
a revolution that continues  
to shape the church and  
the world to this very day.



Some of the experts featured in this DVD series include

Dr. Sandra  
Yocum

Rev. Dr. Timothy  
Wengert

Mark  
Galli

Dr. Horace  
Means

Dr. Karin  
Maag

Dr. Scott  
Kisker

Shane  
Claiborne

Fr. Thomas  
Kocik





# THIS CHANGED EVERYTHING

## 500 Years of the Reformation

COMING  
IN 2016

Christian History Institute presents a new three-part documentary on the Reformation. **This Changed Everything** explores the roots and the fruits of the Reformation while grappling with difficult questions about the legacy of division.

Martin Luther and his fellow reformers stripped away the veil obscuring the good news of grace through Christ alone. Yet the Reformation that followed came at a high price: decades of warfare, political turmoil, and social upheaval, and the specter of Christians killing Christians in the name of the Gospel.

Most agree that the medieval church was in dire need of reform, but could complete schism have been avoided? How should we think about our divisions in light of Jesus' passionate prayer that his followers be "one"?

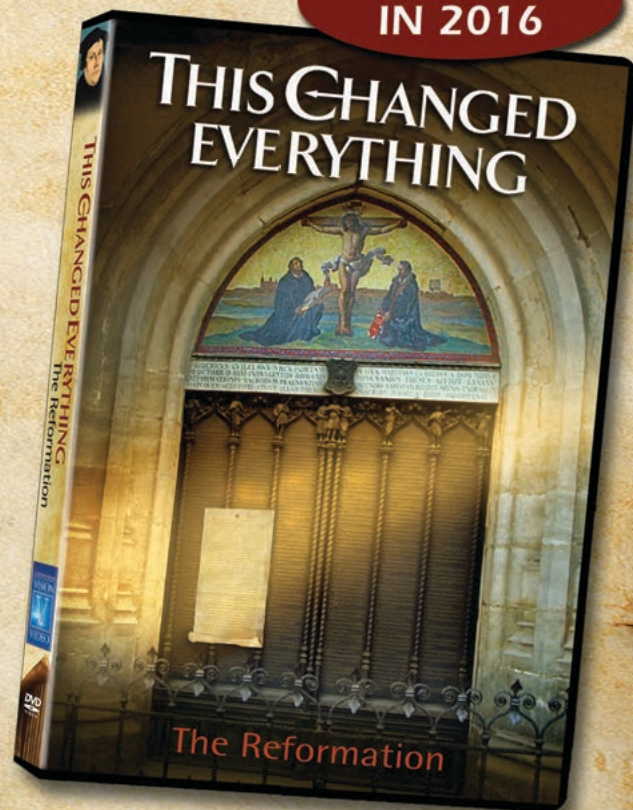
Leading scholars from a broad range of perspectives tell the dramatic story of the Reformation, analyze its effects, and address vital questions about unity, truth, and the future of the church.

For more information on the series, go to [www.ThisChangedEverything.com](http://www.ThisChangedEverything.com).



Produced by Christian History Institute  
[www.ChristianHistoryInstitute.org](http://www.ChristianHistoryInstitute.org)

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"Here's what the Reformation really is all about: it's about discovering quite surprisingly that our relationship to God is not based upon what we do but rather what God does for us in Jesus Christ."

~ Rev. Dr. Timothy Wengert, professor of church history,  
Lutheran Seminary, Philadelphia

"There can be no real unity without truth."

~ Fr. Thomas Kocik, parish priest,  
Archdiocese of Boston

"The Reformation debates, therefore, must continue in the right way, but they must continue in the spirit of oneness."

~ Dr. John H. Armstrong,  
President and founder of ACT3 Network



# Editor's note

WHEN I WAS MUCH YOUNGER, and in graduate school at Duke University, I decided to drop a class. (This does happen, even in graduate school.) I had to decide on a class to take in its place and was going over the course schedule with my mother on the phone. (This also happens sometimes, even in graduate school.) I mentioned that Duke offered a class on Luther. "Oh, you should take that one," she said. "That's where we all started." By *we* she meant Protestant *we*.

I did take the class, entering with the picture many of us have in our heads: a quiet October Wednesday morning in 1517, the young Augustinian friar and theology professor creeping to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg and, with one nail, striking a death blow to medieval Catholicism. By the end of the course, I learned—not for the last time—that the history of the Reformation, like much else about church history, is more complex than I had previously expected.

This issue of *Christian History* is the first of four leading up to the celebration in 2017 of the Reformation's 500th anniversary. This series also serves as a companion to CHI's new DVD *This Changed Everything*, which celebrates the fruits of the Reformation while exploring difficult questions about the cost of division (see ad, page 2).

## THE MAN BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

We begin our journey with the story of Luther. Actually, we start *before* Luther: a number of people throughout the later Middle Ages began to feel that the church had somehow gotten off course and that it needed reform. But Luther's movement caught fire and quickly

resulted in something no previous reform effort had: large-scale division of the Western church.

We're pleased to be able to reprint classic articles from *Christian History*'s two previous issues on Luther (34 and 39) and from issue 49 on everyday faith in the Middle Ages, all updated with new images. But we're also taking a fresh look at who Luther was, who helped him and who opposed him, what he changed and what he didn't.

In 2016 the second and third issues in this series will focus on people who took reformation into the political realm, and about what happened when all the changing allegiances of the movement's early years began to harden and solidify into separate "confessions." Finally, in 2017 we'll finish with an issue on the Catholic Reformation (sometimes called the "Counter-Reformation"), which grew out of the Catholic response to these new Protestant movements.

When I finished that class on Luther all those years ago, I was able to reaffirm a bigger definition of "we," one that includes all Christians. We all started together, 2,000 years ago at the foot of the cross and at the door of the empty tomb. Luther knew that, but we sometimes forget, and divisions that began 500 years ago run deep. No matter what part of the church you come from, I ask you to remember our common beginnings and our common faith as we take this four-part

journey. In so doing, you'll be better prepared to realize our bonds, both past and present, with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ. ☒



Jennifer Woodruff Tait  
Managing editor, *Christian History*

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Don't miss our next issue, the 25 Most Important Writings in Church History. We've surveyed past *CH* contributors to come up with a dynamic list of compelling Christian writings. We'll explore the stories behind them and why they still challenge us today.

For a daily dose of Christian history, visit [www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/today](http://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/today).

In CH 114, the date of Eli Whitney patenting the cotton gin (1794) and the spelling of Chief Selocta's name were incorrect in the timeline. Henry Boehm's relationship to Martin Boehm (p. 18) was misidentified; he was Martin's son. CH regrets the errors.



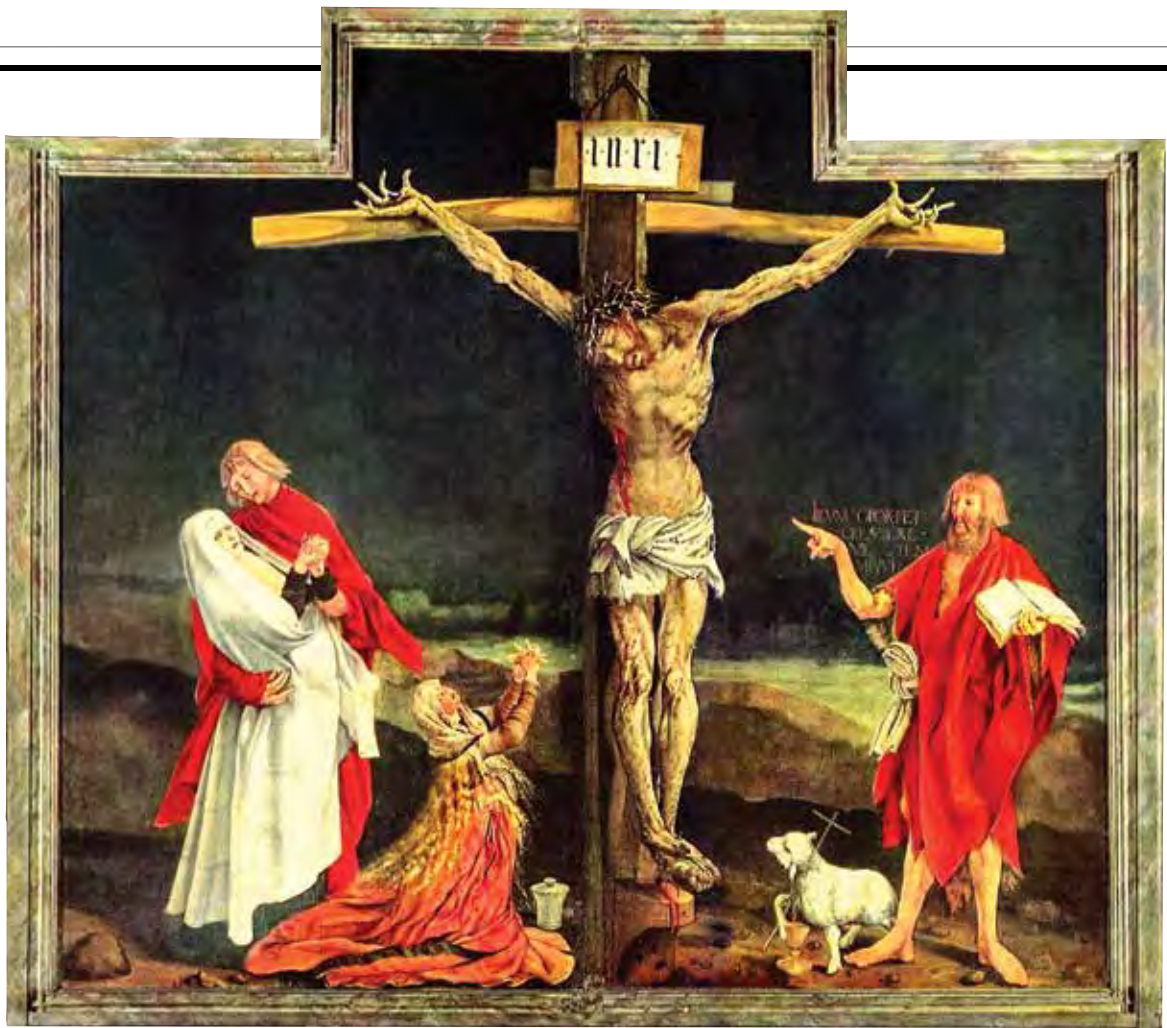


COVERING: EPIGRAPH OF MEINBERG'S MAYOR SHOWING THE REFORMERS' GROUP WITH MARTIN LUTHER (OIL ON PANEL), CRANAACH, LUCAS, THE YOUNGER (1515–86) (AFTER) / ST BLASII PFARRKIRCHE, NORDHAUSEN, GERMANY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES  
BURNING OF JAN HUS—WIKIPEDIA  
EISELEBEN MEMORIAL—LUTHERSTADT EISELEBEN  
PORTRAIT OF ERASMUS, 1523 (OIL AND EGG TEMPERA ON PANEL), HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER, HANS (1497/8–1543) / PRIVATE COLLECTION / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



## 5





# Medieval Christianity: stepping into Luther's world

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN VAN ENGEN

**THE MEDIEVAL WORLD CONJURES UP** *all sorts of images, but it's the unusual ones that stick in our minds: relics in jeweled boxes, religious groups whipping themselves in penance, monks wearing shirts made of hair. Yet we may not recognize how much medieval Europe was a thoroughly Christian culture. To understand Luther, we looked back at this interview from issue 49 about the context in which he arose.*

**CH:** *What are some of the greatest misunderstandings modern Christians have about medieval religion?*

**JOHN VAN ENGEN:** First, they assume that Catholicism was a monolithic system, from pope down to individuals, and that it was this way for a thousand years. But from 500 to 1517, European Catholicism underwent enormous changes and periods of centralization and of decentralization.

In a world that had poor transportation, no televisions, and no telephones, the idea of a pope handing out orders that would be obeyed at the local level everywhere—well, that's something of a dream. When you think about medieval religion, you have to think in regional terms: Catholicism in southern France, in England, in northern Italy, and so on. Though the vast majority of Christians shared the same beliefs and some common forms of worship, there was great diversity.

Second, a great many moderns think medieval religion was mostly about “superstition” and not genuine faith.

**CH:** *Why are such misunderstandings so common?*

**JVE:** Our image of the Middle Ages has been colored by Reformation preaching and teaching. Protestants



**WOUNDED FOR OUR INIQUITIES** *Left:* This altarpiece, from 1512, focuses on Christ's passion and death, as was common throughout the Middle Ages.

**MOTHER, MAY I?** *Right:* In this 15th-c. painting, a family prays to Mary under the gaze of church leaders.

tended to paint the Catholic Middle Ages in very black terms to justify the kind of radical changes they sought.

In addition, we are heirs of the [eighteenth-century] Enlightenment much more than we realize. The Enlightenment exalted reason and repudiated revelation, faith, religious ritual, and rote learning as ignorant superstitions. That has colored our ability to appreciate medieval religious culture.

**CH:** *Rigorous fasting and self-flagellation seem eccentric. Were they?*

**JVE:** People in the Middle Ages had a strong sense they were to love God not just with their minds but also with their bodies. By disciplining the body and its passions, they believed they disciplined their souls, pleased God, and prepared themselves to receive grace. That's why we see things like abstaining from sex, praying all night, and walking barefoot several miles to a shrine.

Our sinfulness lies not only in wills but also in passions gone astray. So you have to bring your whole bodily regimen in line with Christ. It isn't enough to avoid punching your neighbor in the nose, you also have to rid yourself of anger. How do you discipline that? They had this idea that you get at the inner part of you through (a) prayer and confession and (b) disciplining the body. In this way, they would repress or drive out things like lust, gluttony, and greed.

For many people these activities became self-punishments or satisfaction for sin. To Protestants this was a misunderstanding of Christ's atonement. But there was also that other dimension of discipline.

**CH:** *So if Protestants tried to understand medieval religion, would they identify more with it?*

**JVE:** Yes and no. Yes, because whenever we try to understand another age, we come to appreciate some of its strengths. But no, because there are many features Protestants will still find disturbing. For example, take the cult of the saints. In addition to prayers to the Trinity and to Jesus, medieval people prayed to the saints, and in some instances this moved into outright worship of the saints. Or they would spend more time at a shrine of Mary than at their parish church.

**CH:** *What were the greatest challenges medieval priests faced in teaching people the Christian faith?*

**JVE:** Teaching in an illiterate culture was one; helping people, most of whom did not understand Latin,



appreciate the Latin Mass, was another. A third was eradicating superstition. Before Christianity came to Europe, various forms of paganism were all that people knew. By 1100 much of Western Europe was formally converted, but superstition had a way of hanging on.

If you put yourself in the shoes of a medieval person, you can see why. Let's say your wife's pregnancy is going poorly. You're worried both mother and child could die. You pray to Jesus, and more likely, you pray earnestly to Mary, who was thought to look out for women in difficult childbirth. But also in your village, there's a woman who says, "Whenever we've had this problem, we boil certain herbs, lay them on the mother-to-be's tummy, and say a certain charm—and that really helps."

People didn't see this as contrary to their faith. It was like going to the drugstore and getting a little extra help. But priests had to convince people this was unhealthy spiritually.

**CH:** *What are some of the great successes of the medieval church?*

**JVE:** By the sixteenth century, all of Europe (apart from the Jews) was in principle Christian, and many people were devout believers. All this in an area that a thousand years earlier had only a handful of Christians.





In spite of rampant illiteracy, the absence of technology, poor transportation, and stubborn regionalism, there was a commonly shared understanding of how people should live and act. This is particularly amazing because today we assume that to teach moral standards to an entire culture requires strongly centralized government, mass communication, and literacy. But they were able to do this by word of mouth. [For more on how, see CH issue 108 on Charlemagne.—Editors]

**CH:** *What are some legacies the medieval church has left us?*

**JVE:** Cultural legacies abound, like the modern university. The universities of Oxford (in existence sometime before 1096), Paris (1170), Cambridge (1209), and others were all founded in the Middle Ages. The medieval church was anxious to have educated clergy who would in turn educate the laity. There was also a drive to organize knowledge and understand the created universe, and this drive arose directly out of medieval theology.

Also, we Christians assume that the culture around us ought to be Christian, which is a medieval worldview. This was not an expectation of the early church, which assumed the world around it would remain mostly hostile to the faith. But in today's post-Christian era, many Christians are angry and frustrated by an increasingly secular world.

Another medieval assumption is that the death of Christ should be at the center of Christian faith. Westerners forget there are systems of Christianity with other emphases, like the Orthodox concern about

**CALLING A FACULTY MEETING** *Left:* Learned teachers gather at the University of Paris.

**LONG JOURNEYS MAKE LIGHT HEARTS** *Above:* Going on pilgrimage, as this group has just done to Canterbury, was an important part of medieval faith.

the Trinity. The notion that the Christian faith hinges on the suffering and death of Christ is a special contribution of the Western medieval church. When the reformers came along, they changed this theology in certain crucial ways, but they still assumed the central theme is the passion of Christ—not the Trinity or even the Resurrection.

**CH:** *You allude to justification by faith. Was this doctrine forgotten in the Middle Ages?*

**JVE:** Medieval theologians taught that faith is an essential step in being made right with God. But at the popular level, people tended to take faith for granted. They grew up with it. Everybody they knew was Christian. So they concentrated on good works. In addition they listened to the apostle Paul. He talked a great deal not only about faith but also about love, and the end of each of his letters is full of specific admonitions to do good works. So, for the medieval person, the central concern was on making faith manifest in love. ☞

*John Van Engen is Andrew V. Tackes Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. This interview is adapted from CH issue 49.*





# Course corrections

300 YEARS BEFORE LUTHER, REFORMERS WERE ALREADY TRYING TO CHANGE THE CHURCH

Patricia Janzen Loewen

**THE PARDONER** in Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales* explains the wares he's peddling thus:

Then show I forth my hollow crystal-stones,  
 Which are crammed full of rags, aye, and of bones;  
 Relics are these, as they think, every one.  
 Then I've in latten [metal] box a shoulder bone  
 Which came out of a holy Hebrew's sheep.

After showing his beautiful relic containers, the Pardoner then describes his relics' powers. Livestock will be cured of snakebites and pox. Increased wealth is guaranteed. Husbands who are jealous of their wives will never mistrust again, even if previously the wife in question had bedded "two priests, aye, or three."

Chaucer's Pardoner, a clever con-artist cheerfully gaining great wealth while simultaneously preaching that greed is the root of all evil, depicts late medieval Catholicism in a manner that quite nicely complements Luther's own critiques more than a century later. Indeed, it reminds us that Luther and his contemporaries were not the first to recognize such hypocrisies.

Several centuries before Chaucer's revealing parody, the church was already trying to make numerous "course corrections" to the sailing of the ship of faith. Three whose results echoed into Luther's day were the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, the founding of the

**HIT PARADE** Some believers who wanted to show their seriousness in the 14th c. turned to flagellating (beating) themselves in penance for their sins.

Franciscan and Dominican religious orders around the same time, and the rise of conciliarism as a result of the Council of Constance in 1415–1417.

## A HOLY AND PERFECT CHURCH?

One of the most powerful popes of the thirteenth century, and one of the most strong-minded, Pope Innocent III (reigned 1198–1216) knew that abuses existed. Unlike Chaucer's later Pardoner, Innocent was far from cheerful about the matter. His solution: call a reforming council. The canons of the Fourth Lateran Council were a clarion call to the pursuit of holiness. From top to bottom, Lateran IV sought nothing less than a perfect church that could guarantee the salvation of all within her fold.

We read Innocent's seriousness in the letter summoning all bishops, abbots, religious orders, and even kings of Western Christendom to a council. Its reforms were to cut across every sector of society. The purpose of the council was "to eradicate vices and to plant virtues, to correct faults and to reform morals, to remove heresies and to strengthen faith, to settle discords and to establish peace, to get rid of oppression and to foster





**"HOLLOW CRYSTAL-STONES"** Relics, whether real or (more usually) fake, were usually housed in elegant decorated containers.

liberty," and, in what would become the controversial Fifth Crusade, "to induce princes and Christian people to come to the aid and succour of the holy Land."

On November 11, 1215, over four hundred bishops and many abbots, other clergy, and secular leaders met in Rome and began the task of reforming the church. The end result of their work was 70 decrees, called canons, that they hoped would set the church on a good course. Where she had lost her way in sailing the journey of salvation, Lateran IV gave orders to tack back.

Lateran IV's canons began with this assertion: "There is indeed one universal church of the faithful, outside of which nobody at all is saved, in which Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice." To be outside the church was to be damned. The council envisioned a church with the power to enforce all the reforms they hoped for.

Immediately following this powerful claim, the council set out what the church saw as correct doctrine about the Eucharist—transubstantiation—and required that no one could perform the sacrament "except a priest who has been properly ordained according to the church's keys, which Jesus Christ himself gave to the apostles and their successors." The point was double-edged: inept clergy would be removed and the laity would experience correct practice, thereby safeguarding their salvation.

The council argued for the elimination of heresy: "We excommunicate and anathematize every heresy raising itself up against this holy, orthodox and catholic faith which we have expounded above." Given many of the actions of the church against those it would deem heretical in ensuing centuries, this canon's desire for reform and the pursuit of holiness gives reason to ask, "What are you willing to do to create a perfected

church? Is the better course to leave some of the sorting of wheat and tares in divine hands?" This issue of right belief would not diminish. Later Protestant attempts to create a perfected church are rooted in the deep waters of this late medieval desire for perfection.

Most of the remaining canons of Lateran IV specify the precise practical ways in which reform should occur to manifest right belief. The leaders of the church, including monastic orders, were to live holy lives. All clerics were to live chastely and virtuously, and those who failed to do so were to be punished severely. In addition to renouncing all sexual relations, all clergy were to abstain from attending theatrical events, going to taverns, playing games of chance, and wearing ostentatious clothing.

Laity were commanded to attend confession and participate in the Eucharist at least once a year at Easter. The abuse of relics was denounced, and the practice of simony (buying church offices) vigorously condemned. Three centuries prior to the Reformation, Lateran IV charted a thorough program of change.

### THE FRIARS ARE IN THE HOUSE

The Fourth Lateran Council was not the only attempt at reform on Pope Innocent's watch. In 1210 he also approved the famed monastic order founded by Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226).

Francis is perhaps most famous today for the "Prayer of St. Francis" (which he did not actually write) and for having received the stigmata (wounds on the body similar to Christ's). But focusing on that highly unusual event obscures the significant ways in which Francis's life and his followers changed the character of the late medieval church.

This young man, once the son of a prosperous silk merchant with all the world before him, gave up all his property and high status for Christ (including, at one point, the rich clothes his father had bought him, which he took off and laid before the bishop of Assisi). He and his followers set out to wander the world with no money, no shoes, and no lasting address.

Francis's respect for nature echoed through the centuries; he is remembered for preaching to the birds and for his "Canticle of the Sun," which praises God for the whole creation in lines like "Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars in the heavens./ You have made them bright, precious, and beautiful."

It is difficult to overemphasize the profound redirection that the Franciscan order represented. The ideal of monastic life had been set in the fourth century by Pachomius and Antony: monks removed themselves from their world to live an isolated life of devotion (see *Christian History* issues 93 and 105).





While previous monastic reforms cleaned up many abuses, through them monks also sought to more fully remove themselves from society. Remarkably, the Franciscans upended this ideal. Instead of fleeing from the secular, Franciscans dedicated themselves to preaching and teaching among the people and serving the poor, as Christ had done. As they walked, preached, and begged, they were overturning a spiritual pattern that was nearly a millennium old.

Francis also blessed a “Third Order” monastic movement, allowing lay people to enter into a spiritually devoted life without taking monastic vows. The possibility that the laity could be as saintly as monks was a concept that re-emerged powerfully in the thirteenth century (see “Duty and delight,” CH 110). It would echo in the Reformation-era discussion of the priesthood of all believers.

Franciscans were not alone in changing the character of medieval life. Another monastic order that arose in the thirteenth century, the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans (founded 1216), concerned itself with rooting out heresy—part of how the church understood its reforming task. Among the most famous Dominicans was one of the church’s greatest theologians, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

Aquinas, like Francis, was from a wealthy family who disagreed with his career goals. In his case they didn’t mind him becoming a monk, but they wanted him to be a more respectable Benedictine. They resorted to kidnapping their own son and trying to get a prostitute to seduce him before finally giving



**I’M HOLDING UP THE CHURCH** Left: Aquinas wanted to put all Christian knowledge on a firm logical foundation.

**ME TOO** Above: Supposedly Innocent III had a dream in which Francis of Assisi was the only thing holding up a tilting, off-course church.

up. (Even so, they made him leave secretly through the bedroom window so that no one would know what had happened to him.)

Aquinas took as his goal nothing less than the presentation of all theological truth in as complete and logical a format as possible. He once wrote, “Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.”

### THE COUNCIL THAT ORDERED MORE COUNCILS

But this thirteenth-century reforming energy did not last. The ship sailed off course again. Everybody, including the church, agreed that much of the fourteenth century could be summed up with the proverbial “two steps back.” Or maybe more than two.

Beginning in 1309 seven successive popes left the perceived neutrality of Rome to reside in Avignon, France, where they lived for nearly 70 years under a cloud of suspicion. In France the pope was seen as a vassal of the French king rather than an advocate for all Christians. It was whispered that corruption abounded—money could purchase anything from forgiveness of sins to lucrative dioceses. Catherine of





Siena, famous theologian, mystic, and Third Order Dominican, wrote letters to Pope Gregory XI urging him to leave Avignon and return to Rome.

When the pope did move back to Rome in 1377, the situation got worse. Two men, and then three, claimed the papacy. Western Christianity entered into schism. Some regions followed the Roman pope, others the French pope. The hope of a pure and holy church that guaranteed the salvation of all within had sunk deep in the ocean.

So in 1409 the church convened the Council of Pisa, and, when it failed, the Council of Constance in 1415. Church leaders were ready to take drastic measures. First, as at Lateran IV, they agreed that heresy had to be dealt with, and set an example with John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, whose teachings on the nature of the church they considered heretical. They ordered both men to be executed.

Wycliffe had the personal good fortune of having died several decades earlier, but his body was nevertheless exhumed and condemned. Hus was less fortunate, and very much alive, when chained to the stake. Since Protestants tend to view Wycliffe and Hus as harbingers of the Reformation, they do not regard the Council of Constance as reforming the church—yet that is what its participants thought they were doing.

In addition to decisive action in regard to heresy, the council resolved the problem of multiple popes once and for all. They deposed the three previous claimants and elected one new pope: Martin V. Furthermore, they argued that the potentially abusive power of a single man, specifically the pope, could be mitigated through the frequent meeting of councils:

A good way to till the field of the Lord is to hold general councils frequently, because by them briers, thorns, and thistles of heresies, errors, and schisms are rooted out, abuses reformed, and the way of the



**THE BURNING OF HUS** Above: Ironically, attempts at reform led the council to condemn two theologians whom Protestants would later regard as saints.


**LET'S FIX THIS, FOLKS** Left: The Council of Constance wanted to place even popes beneath conciliar authority.

Lord made more fruitful. But if general councils are not held, all these evils spread and flourish.

The council believed that if the church was to be the ark of salvation, it needed to be shipshape, and that no one, "of whatever rank, condition, or dignity, including the pope," was above the decrees of the councils.

Councils were called, though not as many as the Council of Constance had hoped and without as much power. Eventually the movement fell apart. In 1512 Pope Julius II had the last word when he coerced the Fifth Lateran Council to affirm papal superiority over councils, thereby returning to the old order of things, just in time for the emergence of something new.

## A REKINDLED FLAME

In 1517 an indulgence seller named Tetzel set up near the town of Wittenberg. Like Chaucer's Pardoner, he knew that spiritual promises could be highly profitable. Martin Luther's response to this abusive practice, the 95 *Theses*, marked the start of the Reformation. The sixteenth-century reformers were echoing cries that had sounded within the church for centuries. From the Fourth Lateran Council to the Council of Constance, the church had already made many course changes. The Protestant reformers now set out to finish the journey others had begun. 

*Patricia Janzen Loewen is assistant professor of history at Providence University College in Manitoba.*





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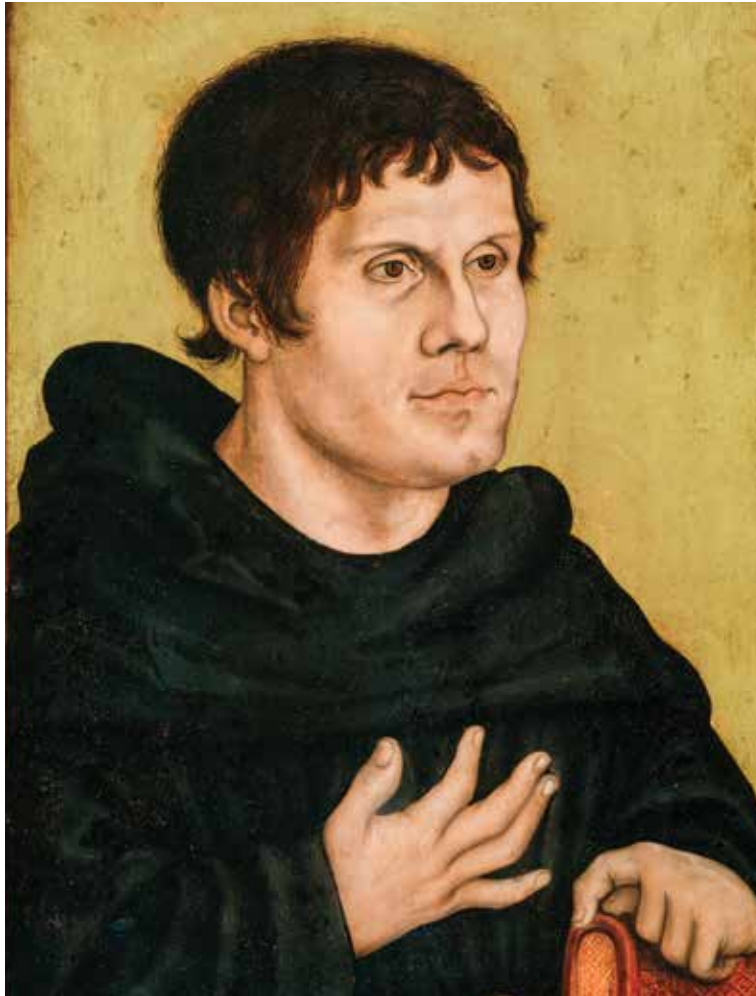
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# The accidental revolutionary

IN HIS QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL PEACE, LUTHER HAD NO IDEA HE'D LEAVE HIS WORLD IN TURMOIL

*James M. Kittleson*



**YOUNG AND EARNEST** Luther as an Augustinian friar. He later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

Luther's childhood gave no indication he would one day split Western Christianity. He was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben (about 120 miles southwest of modern Berlin), where both parents may have worked as domestic servants.

Within the year, the family moved to Mansfeld, where his father Hans (spelling his last name Luder) found work in the local copper mines. Hans quickly climbed to ownership or part-ownership of several mines and even became a member of the city council.

Luther remembered his childhood in part for (in today's terms) its physical abuse. Both his mother and father beat him in frightening ways. He became so estranged from his father on one occasion that Hans sought his forgiveness. But Luther also remembered, "He meant well by me." Strict physical discipline was normal in the era.

There is also no evidence of anything unusual about the family's piety. Hans joined others in seeking

a special indulgence for the local parish church. Margaretha, Luther's mother, shared common superstitions. For example, she blamed the death of one of her sons on a neighbor she regarded as a witch.

## A FARSIGHTED DECISION

Despite common origins, two things set young Luther apart. First, Hans, who could have satisfied himself with having the lad learn to read, write, and cipher before joining the family business, sent the boy to Latin school at age 14 and then on to the University of Erfurt.

**AN ADVISER TO SIXTEENTH-CENTURY** tourists remarked that people who returned from their travels without having seen Martin Luther and the pope "have seen nothing." Another man read Luther's works and declared, "The Church has never seen a greater heretic!" But upon reflection he exclaimed, "He alone is right!"

How could one person evoke such conflicting reactions echoing through the centuries? Luther himself said, "Others before me have contested practice. But to contest doctrine, that is to grab the goose by the neck!"



**MOVING UP IN THE WORLD** *Right:* Cranach's paintings of the elderly Luthers show Hans in a fine woven coat with a fur collar.

**LITTLE DID THEY KNOW** *Below:* Ever wonder what an indulgence looked like? Here is one from the late 14th c.

Hans was ambitious not just for his son, but also for the entire family. If he succeeded, young Luther would become a lawyer, who, whether in the church or at court, could provide handsomely for both parents and siblings.

Second, Luther proved to be extraordinarily intelligent, earning his bachelor's at age 19 and his master's at 22—the shortest time allowed by the University of Erfurt—before proceeding to the faculty of law.

He proved so adept at disputations (public debates that were the principal means of learning and teaching) that he earned the nickname “The Philosopher.” A pleased Hans gave his son the costly gift of the central text for legal studies at the time, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

#### “HELP ME, ST. ANNE”

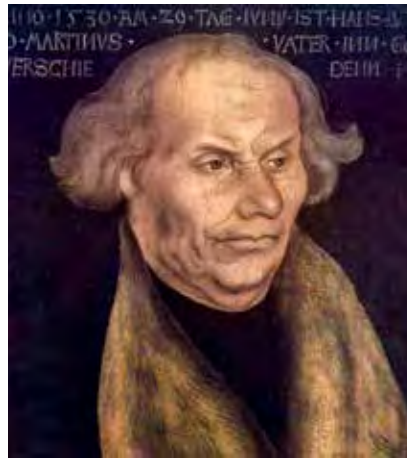
Unfortunately, the promising law student soon had doubts about the status of his soul and about the career his father had securely set before him. In 1505 the 21-year-old took an officially sanctioned leave from the university and visited his family to seek their advice about his future. On his return, as Luther fought his way through a severe thunderstorm, a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him.

“Help me, St. Anne!” the frightened Luther screamed, hoping to escape the lightning. “I will become a monk!”

Luther spent several weeks discussing his decision with friends. Then, in July 1505, as was required on entering monastic life, he gave away all his possessions—his lute, on which he was proficient; his many books, including the *Corpus Juris Civilis*; his clothing and eating utensils—and entered the Black Cloister of the Observant Augustinians. As was also customary, he endured more than a month of examining his conscience before proceeding to the novitiate and a further year of scrutiny before becoming a friar.

By all evidence Luther was extraordinarily successful as an Observant Augustinian, just as he had been as a student. He did not simply engage in prayer, fasts, and ascetic practices (including going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold, and flagellating himself), he pursued them earnestly.

A priest in less than two years, Luther soon went to Rome as the traveling companion of a senior brother on



important business. In addition, his superiors ordered him to undertake the study of theology so he could become one of the order's teachers.

Though the fears and anxieties that drove him into the Black Cloister had left Luther during his first year or so there, they began to intensify as the novelty of monastic life wore off and he felt increasing terror of the wrath of God. “When it is touched by this passing inundation of the eternal,” he wrote, “the soul feels and drinks nothing but eternal punishment.”

The command to study theology meant he could investigate his struggles intellectually, but it was slow going. His teachers, following the Bible, taught that God demanded absolute righteousness: “Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mat. 5:48). People needed to love God absolutely and their neighbors as themselves. When they failed, the church would step

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**EXPLOSIVE BOOK** Above: In the *95 Theses*, Luther questioned the idea that Christians could draw on the treasury of Christ's merits, deposited with the church, to alter their standing with God.

**QUIET DOOR** Right: Luther may have posted the theses for debate on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, a common practice, though the story only arose after his death.



in with the grace of the sacraments, and they should repent in a fully contrite manner without the selfish purpose of saving themselves.

But Luther was plagued by the fact that human beings are incapable of the selfless acts and states of mind the Scriptures require. The most crushing one to Luther was this obligation to be contrite and repent. In the late Middle Ages, repentance most commonly occurred in the course of sacramental confession and penance: the sinner confessed, was forgiven, and then performed penitential acts that completed the process.

Luther knew that in the midst of this most crucial act, he was at his most selfish, confessing sins and performing penance out of a human instinct to save his own skin. And yet, sin being sin, he commented later, "If one were to confess his sins in a timely manner, he would have [had] to carry a confessor in his pocket!" As his teachers knew, this fact could lead to despair.

### WHO COULD BE RIGHTEOUS?

During his early years, whenever Luther came to the famous "Reformation text"—Romans 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word *faith*, but to the word *righteous*. Who, after all, could "live by faith"? Only those who were already righteous. (See "What did Luther know and when did he know it?," p. 19.)

The young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous—and he knew it. During this turmoil Luther often approached Johannes Staupitz, his superior in the monastic order, about his doubts, sins, and outright hatred of a righteous God. He came so

often that Staupitz once commanded him to go and commit a real sin: "You want to be without sin, but you don't have any real sins anyway . . . the murder of one's parents, public vices, blasphemy, adultery, and the like. . . . You must not inflate your halting, artificial sins out of proportion!"

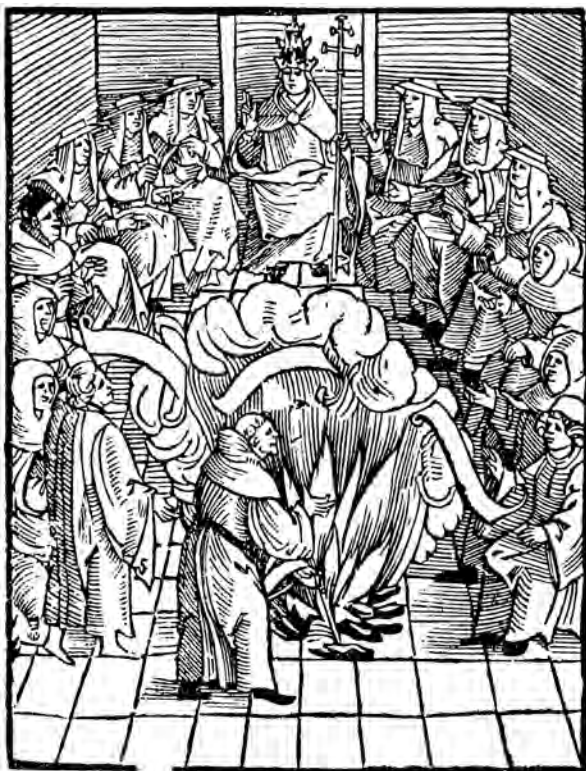
But Luther wasn't comforted: "My conscience would never give me assurance, but I was always doubting and said, 'You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.'"

The critical turn in Luther's life came when Staupitz ordered him to obtain his doctorate and become a professor of the Bible at Wittenberg University. Luther resisted the call, saying, "It will be the death of me!" but finally relented and became a *doctor ecclesiae* (teacher of the church). There a revolution in his theological thinking occurred in his lecture hall and study from 1513 to 1519.

About late 1513 or early 1514, when he arrived at Psalm 72 in his lectures, he explained to his students, "This is what is called the judgment of God: like the righteousness or strength or wisdom of God, it is that with which we are wise, just, and humble, or by which we are judged."

The last clause is what Luther had read: God judges by his righteousness. But he would teach increasingly that God gives us righteousness. In fact, a little later during these same lectures, he asserted that all the attributes of God—"truth, wisdom, salvation, justice"—are "the things with which he makes us strong, saved, just, wise."





On the heels of this change came others. Luther no longer understood the church as the institution that boasted apostolic succession, but instead as the community of those who had been given faith. Salvation came no longer by the sacraments as such; instead the sacraments nurtured God-given faith. The idea that human beings had enough spark of goodness to seek out God, commonly taught in the Middle Ages, he proclaimed as coming from “fools” and “pig theologians.”

Humility for him was no longer a virtue that earned grace but a necessary response to the gift of grace. Faith for him no longer consisted of assenting to the church's teachings but of trusting the promises of God and the merits of Christ. In short, Luther found himself working a revolution that contradicted almost everything he had been taught. It lay there, ready to explode, and even Luther was unaware of how loudly it would do so.

### CHAIN REACTION

What happened was more like a long but powerful chain reaction than a sudden explosion. It started on All Saints' Eve, 1517, when Luther formally objected to the way the short, dumpy Dominican friar Johann Tetzel was preaching a plenary indulgence.

Indulgences were documents individuals bought from the church either for themselves or on behalf of the dead to release either the purchaser or the deceased from purgatory for a certain number of years. A plenary or total indulgence would release a deceased person altogether and was seldom offered. (The first record of a plenary indulgence dates to 1095.)



**DUELING FIRES** Left: Pope Leo X burned Luther's books after the Diet of Worms in 1521. The previous December Luther (above) had burned the papal bull in which Leo condemned his teaching.

The money from indulgence sales was used to support church projects, such as, in the case of Tetzel, the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Tetzel carefully orchestrated his appearances to excite public interest, crafting sermons to delight and persuade. (Though he may not have said, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul out of purgatory springs,” the phrase was certainly a common jingle.)

Luther wanted to question the church's trafficking in indulgences and challenged all comers to debate the practice in proper academic fashion—his publication of the theses (in Latin) was not an intentional act of rebellion, but simply the accepted way of inviting such a debate.

But the printing press snatched the matter from his hands. His *95 Theses* were translated into the common language and spread across Germany within two weeks of printing. Luther was asked to debate the theological issues during the Augustinian order's regular meeting in spring 1518. He also underwent an excruciating interview with Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg that fall. It was so painful, as Luther recalled it, that he could not even ride a horse afterward because his bowels ran freely from morning to night from the stress.

Luther had good reason to be anxious. The issue quickly became not indulgences, or even Tetzel's indulgences (which were extraordinary by any estimate), but the authority of the church: does the pope have the *right* to issue indulgences? The substance of the original matter was of little concern to Luther's opponents. In fact, church authorities repeatedly forbade them to debate it with him. The question was instead whether the church could declare that this is so and rightly expect obedience.





**"I CANNOT RECAT"** Above: A 19th-c. artist imagines Luther at Worms.



**TEN MONTHS ON ICE** Left: In captivity at the Wartburg as "Knight George," Luther ate like a nobleman, and it showed . . . and disturbed his stomach.

from the law (in particular the laws of the church) even while they are bound in love to their neighbors.

### "I WILL NOT RECAT"

The Diet of Worms, held in the spring of 1521, was little more than the backwash from a ship that had already set sail. Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (also King Charles I of Spain, where he lived and ruled) had never been to Germany. He called the Diet to meet the German princes, whom he scarcely knew by name and desperately needed to court. But he knew this friar by the name of Luther also needed to be addressed.

Luther was convinced he would finally get the hearing he had requested four years earlier in 1517. As he was ushered in, Luther was awed to see Emperor Charles V himself, surrounded by his advisers and representatives of Rome; Spanish troops decked out in parade best; electors, bishops, territorial princes, and representatives of great cities. In the midst of this impressive assembly sat a table with a pile of Luther's books.

The archbishop of Trier asked Luther if he wished to recant his writings in whole or in part. He was taken aback—this was not a debate but a judicial hearing. He begged for time to think: "This touches God and his Word. This affects the salvation of souls." Given a day in his quarters, he wrote, "So long as Christ is merciful, I will not recant a single jot or tittle."

The next day's business at the Diet delayed Luther's return until evening. Candlelight flickered. He was asked again, "Will you defend these books all together, or do you wish to recant some of what you have said?"

There were three kinds of books in the stack, Luther declared. Some were about the Christian faith and

The core issue became public at the Leipzig Debate in late June 1519. Students from Wittenberg came armed with staffs. The local bishop tried to forbid the debate, and Duke George of Saxony, who sponsored it, sent an armed guard to keep order. There Luther declared that "a simple layman armed with the Scriptures" was superior to both pope and councils without them. A bull threatening excommunication followed quickly in mid-1520. Luther responded by burning it.

That summer Luther wrote *The Address to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*. With these three essays, he set himself and his (by now) many sympathizers in opposition to nearly all the theology and practice of late medieval Christendom.

In the first he urged secular rulers to take the necessary reform of the church into their own hands (see "The political Luther," pp. 36–38). In the second he reduced the seven sacraments to three (baptism, the Lord's Supper, and penance) and radically altered their character. In the third, he told Christians they are free





## What did Luther know and when did he know it?

In 1545 the elderly Luther reluctantly authorized the publication of his collected Latin works. In its preface he told of his second course of lectures on the Psalms, given in 1519, a tense and dramatic year (see p. 17). Against its stormy backdrop, Luther approached the Psalms for the second time. But this time, he recalled, he was “armed” with a discovery that gave him a new understanding of the meaning of Scripture. (Luther’s casual comment to his friends in 1532 that the insight had occurred “on this *cloaca* [toilet]” has fascinated psychoanalysts and historians for years.)

For a long time, when Luther approached the letter to the Romans, he was held up by a single phrase: “the righteousness [or justice] of God” (Romans 1:17), “*justitia dei*”:

I hated this term “*Justitia Dei*” which by the common usage and custom of all the teachers I was taught to understand . . . [as] that formal or active justice . . . with which God is just, and punishes unjust sinners. For, however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience, nor could I trust that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love, nay, rather I hated this just God who punished sinners. . . . At last, God being merciful, as I meditated day and night on . . . “The just shall live by faith,” there I began

**FEELING REBORN** The idea that God’s righteousness is a gift was present in the medieval tradition, but Luther in his reading had never encountered it.

to understand the justice of God as that by which the just lives by the gift of God, namely by faith. This straightway made me feel as though reborn, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From then on, the whole face of Scripture appeared different.

But when did he discover this? The key insight he describes is actually found in his writings as early as his first Psalms lectures of 1513–1514. And medieval commentators consistently interpreted Romans 1:17 as referring to God’s “active righteousness” by which he makes us righteous, not to the justice by which God judges us. So Luther’s “common usage and custom of all the teachers” can’t be talking about biblical commentators on this bothersome passage. Rather, he must be speaking of more general philosophical and theological texts.

In short, if we take Luther’s “breakthrough” to refer exactly to what he described in the 1545 collected works—the understanding that God’s righteousness is God’s gift to us rather than the standard by which he judges us—then it must have come early in his life, because it is documented early in his writings. And it consisted not in a brand new idea but in a broader and more radical interpretation of an idea already known to the medieval tradition.

But if the breakthrough happened in 1519, it cannot have consisted simply of the insight that God’s righteousness is a gift. Luther already knew that by 1519. What shows up for the first time in 1519, in the middle of controversy with the powers of church and empire, is a clear account of “justification by faith alone”—a joyful confidence in God’s forgiveness through faith in Christ’s promise. Luther’s “breakthrough,” not confined to Romans 1:17, consisted of taking the idea of righteousness as gift and reorienting all of Scripture and hence all of Christian theology around it.

Why is this important? Those who insist on the “late breakthrough” in 1519 see Luther’s earlier teaching as inferior, still shackled by medieval Catholic ways of thinking. But if Luther was accurately remembering in 1545 that his key insight consisted of the realization that God’s righteousness is a gift, then he developed and intensified a theme already present throughout pre-Reformation tradition.

Against the persistent Christian tendency, found in all churches, to turn God into a demanding taskmaster who grades our performance in virtue and holiness, Luther insisted that the fundamental nature of God is shown in his generous gift of righteousness to those who do not possess it. —Edwin Woodruff Tait, CH contributing editor





good works, and these he certainly wouldn't retract. Some attacked the papacy, and to retract these would be to encourage tyranny. Finally, in some he attacked individuals, perhaps too harshly, but those individuals had defended papal tyranny.

Surely, the archbishop answered, one individual could not call into doubt the tradition of the entire church: "You must give a simple, clear, and proper answer. . . Will you recant or not?"

Luther replied, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning . . . then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience." Then he may have added, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

### KIDNAPPED BY FRIENDS

When negotiations over the next few days failed to reach any compromise, Luther was condemned. Still he was granted safe conduct as promised, but only for another 21 days. As Luther and his companions made their way back to Wittenberg, four or five armed horsemen plunged out of the forest, snatched Luther from his wagon, and dragged him off.

His own prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, had abducted him to keep him safe. Luther was now an

**SO ALL COULD READ** Luther once remarked, "If God had wanted me to die thinking I was a clever fellow, he would not have gotten me into the business of translating the Bible." Here is one printing of his translation.


outlaw; anyone could kill him without fearing reprisals from an imperial court of law. He soon arrived at the Wartburg, one of Frederick's castles.

Luther despised his enforced stay at the Wartburg. He missed his friends in Wittenberg and hated being sidelined from the action. He even made plans to seek a call to the University of Erfurt where he would be outside his friendly captor's jurisdiction. That failed, but he did manage to commandeer a horse and make a flying trip to Wittenberg, from which he returned much relieved at the course of events among his friends.

In spite of his complaints, Luther's 10 months on ice were among the most productive of his life. He continued writing: his touching and almost autobiographical *Commentary on the Magnificat*, his uncompleted *Postillae* (homilies on a set of biblical lessons), and his translation of the New Testament into German, of which he did a rough draft within 11 weeks.

But what had begun in a lecture hall was now a popular movement. Throughout Germany monks and nuns were fleeing their monasteries and cloisters—some for conscience's sake and some for the sake of convenience. Luther felt obliged to respond to people's practical questions. He took a middle road. How could one best serve one's neighbor? If one did so in holy orders, then one should remain. On the other hand, if one could serve one's neighbor better outside the monastery or cloister, then one should live in the world.

As his revolution expanded, Luther was increasingly thrust into the public arena. He openly returned to Wittenberg in early spring of 1522 without asking Elector Frederick's permission. Some argued that all Christians must marry and that all monks and nuns must become laypeople. Luther retook his pulpit and preached on the obligation to love one's neighbor whatever one's calling in life.

The hallmark of Luther's life [as the rest of this issue will illustrate—Editors] was the way he joined forceful personality and forceful doctrine. For him doctrine was never mere scholarship: it was life itself. In his *Large Catechism*, he urged Christians to read and reread their catechisms, for "in such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and fervor." He wanted all Christians to become people taught by God. 

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# “Contemplate Christ”

LUTHER'S THEOLOGY EMERGED FROM HIS OWN STRUGGLES

Timothy George



**AT THE FEET OF CHRIST** Lucas Cranach put himself in this painting between John the Baptist and Luther, who is holding a Bible.

declared, “What I began as a Doctor, I must truly confess to the end of my life. I cannot keep silent or cease to teach.” In his view, the Reformation happened because the pope tried to hinder him from fulfilling his vocation of expounding the Scriptures.

## DYING TO BE A THEOLOGIAN

Though he held a doctor’s degree, Luther was no mere member of a learned guild of scholastic theologians. His theology grew out of his anguished quest for a gracious God. For Luther theology was not simply the academic study of religion. Rather it came out of his reading and thinking during a lifelong process of struggle and temptation.

As Luther never tired of saying, only experience makes a theologian. “I did not learn my theology all at once,” he said, “but I had to search

ONE DAY IN 1511, Luther and his monastic mentor, Johannes Staupitz, sat under a pear tree in a garden near their cloister at Wittenberg.

The vicar-general of the Augustinian order told young Luther he should become a professor of theology and a preacher. Luther was taken aback. “It will be the death of me!” he objected. “Quite all right,” said Staupitz. “God has plenty of work for clever men like you to do in heaven!”

Luther did receive his doctor’s degree—just over a year later, on October 18, 1512. That day he also received a woolen beret, a silver ring, two Bibles (one closed, the other open), and a commission to be a “sworn doctor of Holy Scripture.”

He took that commission seriously. It guided his theology and his career as a reformer. Years later he

deeper for it, where my temptations took me... Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living—nay, dying and being damned—make a theologian.”

Out of Luther’s struggles emerged a theology that shook the foundations of medieval Christendom. Though Luther appreciated the protests made by such forerunners as John Wycliffe of England and Jan Hus of Bohemia, he recognized his own efforts as qualitatively different. (See issues 3 and 68 of *CH* for more on Wycliffe and Hus.)

Luther’s protest against Tetzels sale of indulgences in 1517 did more than call for church reform; it challenged church identity. His radical views were crystallized by later interpreters into three statements on Scripture, faith, and grace that set the stage for reformers to come.





**AND IT WAS VERY GOOD** In this image by Cranach for a 1530 edition of Luther's German Bible, God surveys his creation.

### **SOLA SCRIPTURA: SCRIPTURE ALONE**

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther declared his conscience captive to the Word of God. But that declaration did not mark his decisive theological break with the Church of Rome. That had happened two years earlier, in July 1519, at Leipzig, nearly two years after the 95 *Theses*.

Luther's opponent in the Leipzig debate was an accomplished professor at the University of Ingolstadt, Johann Eck (see "From preachers to popes," pp. 41–44). An onlooker sympathetic to Luther, humanist scholar Petrus Mosellanus, described Luther at the dramatic face-off:

Martin is of middle stature; his body thin, and so wasted by care and study that nearly all his bones may be counted. He is in the prime of life. His voice is clear and melodious. His learning, and his knowledge of Scripture are so extraordinary that he has nearly every thing at his fingers' ends. Greek and Hebrew he understands sufficiently well to give his judgment on interpretations. For conversation, he has a rich store of subjects at his command.

Eck, Mosellanus wrote, "has a huge square body, a full strong voice coming from his chest, fit for a tragic actor or a town crier, and more harsh than distinct." In German *Eck* means "corner," and he boxed Luther into one. He forced Luther to say that popes and church councils could err and that the Bible alone could be trusted as an infallible source of Christian faith and teaching.

Under duress Luther articulated what would come to be the formal principle of the Lutheran Reformation: all church teaching must be judged by the Bible. He ended his official statement to Eck, "I am sorry that the learned doctor only dips into the Scripture as the water-spider into the water; nay, that he seems to flee from it as the Devil from the Cross. I prefer, with all deference to the Fathers, the authority of the Scripture, which I herewith recommend to the arbiters of our cause."

Late medieval theologians, even those who sought reform, placed tradition alongside the Bible as a source of church doctrine (see "Course corrections," pp. 9–12). The following year, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther stated: "What is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed."

Luther did not reject tradition outright. He respected the writings of the early church fathers, especially those of Augustine, and he considered universal statements of faith, such as the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, binding on the church in his day. But he maintained that all creeds, sayings of the fathers, and decisions of church councils must be judged *by*, never sit in judgment *upon*, the "sure rule of God's Word."

For Luther the church was the creation of the Bible, born in the womb of Scripture. "For who begets his own parent?" Luther asked. "Who first brings forth his own maker?" He held a high view of the inspiration of the Bible, calling it once "the Holy Spirit book."

Arguably Luther's greatest contribution to the Reformation was his translation of the Bible into German. He wanted common people—the farm boy and the milkmaid—to "feel" the words of Scripture "in the heart." And what truly distinguished his exegesis was his ability to make the text come alive. For him Bible stories were not distant historical acts but living current events, as we see in his treatment of Gideon: "How difficult it was for [Gideon] to fight the enemy at those odds. If I had been there, I would have messed in my breeches for fright!" For Luther the Bible was no mere depository of doctrine. In it a living God confronts his people.





**MAYBE HE'S HAVING ANOTHER BREAK-THROUGH** This 19th-c. memorial in Luther's birthplace of Eisleben, Germany, shows him hard at work in his study.

### **SOLA FIDE: FAITH ALONE**

Martin Luther developed his understanding of justification amid both the moralism and the mysticism of late medieval religion (see "Stepping into Luther's world," pp. 6–8). He made strenuous efforts to find a gracious God, doing penance according to the dictates of scholastic theology. Ultimately he became frustrated to the point of despair.

Luther's illumination came at some point during his scholarly labors (see "What did Luther know?," p. 19). He wrote shortly before his death about the experience:

At last, God being merciful, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words "the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the just shall live by faith," I began to understand [the] "justice of God" as that by which the just lives by the grace of God, namely faith; and this sentence, "the righteousness of God is revealed," to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "the just lives by faith."

This straightaway made me feel as though I had been reborn, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. . . . And now, where I had once hated the phrase, "the righteousness of God," I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me.

Luther considered justification by faith "the summary of all Christian doctrine" and "the article by which the church stands or falls." In the *Schmalkaldic Articles* (1537), which could be considered his theological "last will and testament," he wrote: "Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed."

According to the medieval understanding of justification, which was derived from Augustine, a person gradually receives divine grace, which eventually heals sin's wounds. But Luther abandoned this medical image of *impartation* for the legal language of *imputation*: God accepts Christ's righteousness, which is alien to our nature, as our own. Though God does not actually remove our sins, God no longer counts them against us. We

are at the same time righteous and sinful ("*simul justus et peccator*," as Luther put it).

Luther called this a "sweet exchange" between Christ and the sinner: "Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified; learn to pray to him despairing of yourself, saying 'Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness and I am thy sin. Thou hast taken on thyself what thou wast not, and hast given to me what I am not.'"

Medieval theologians considered faith one of the three theological virtues, along with hope and love. They emphasized faith's cognitive content—intellectual assent to doctrine—and saw that assent as a virtue formed by love.

But to Luther such faith was not sufficient for salvation. (Even demons have it, Paul wrote.) Truly justifying faith—"fiducia," Luther named it—is something more. It means taking hold of Christ, hearing and claiming God's promises as we have understood them, and apprehending our acceptance by God in Jesus Christ.

### **SOLA GRATIA: GRACE ALONE**

Modern people often see Luther as the apostle of human freedom and the father of rugged individualism. But this view misunderstands his theological revolution, similar to the revolution Copernicus would soon be causing in the scientific realm. Copernicus's calculations, published in 1543, removed earth—and thus, humanity—from the center of created reality. Likewise, Luther's theology changed humanity's place in the process of salvation.

For Luther salvation was anchored in the eternal inscrutable purpose of God. He guarded against





**PREACH CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED** A 1547 painting by Cranach of Luther preaching pictures the central place of the cross in Luther's message.

human-centeredness by insisting that God's grace comes from outside ourselves: not just a human possibility, nor a dimension of the religious personality, but a radical and free gift of God, who gives us even the grace to take hold through faith.

"This is the reason why our theology is certain," Luther explained. "It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive."

Luther's doctrine of the divine sovereignty and initiative in human salvation came to fullest expression in his famous debate with Erasmus over grace, free will, and predestination. For Erasmus, humans, though fallen, remained free to respond to grace and thus cooperate in their salvation (see "The man who yielded to no one," pp. 46–49). Luther, however, saw the human will as completely enslaved by sin and Satan: we think we are free, but we only reinforce our bondage by indulging in sin. Grace releases us from this enslaving illusion and leads us into "the glorious liberty of the children of God." God wants us to love him freely, Luther said. But that is only possible when we have been freed from captivity to Satan and self.

### **SOLO CHRISTO: CHRIST ALONE**

Luther believed that the study of doctrine can not be divorced from the art of argumentation. He believed foes without and within the Christian church besiege the Gospel and that he needed to set it forth in opposition to competing claims.

Luther felt that each *sola* faces an enemy: *Scripture alone*, against Scripture subordinated to a false understanding of tradition; *faith alone*, against faith achieved by human righteousness; and *grace alone*, against a theology that humans could merit salvation.

Stated positively, each *sola* affirms the centrality of Jesus Christ, *Christ alone*. First, Luther proclaimed that

Christ is the sole content of Scripture and the principle for selectivity within Scripture. Famously he criticized the Epistle of James because it did not proclaim Christ sufficiently in his view: "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching," he wrote. "Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it!"

Secondly, Christ is the center of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith: through Christ's substitutionary death on the cross, God acted to redeem fallen humanity. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther wrote, "We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart."

Finally the doctrine of grace can be approached only through the cross, through the "wounds of Jesus" to which Staupitz had directed the young Luther in his early struggles. Luther's words to Barbara Lisskirchen, who worried she was not among God's elect, are words he could have spoken to himself as well:

The highest of all God's commands is this, that we hold up before our eyes the image of his dear son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Every day he should be the excellent mirror wherein we behold how much God loves us and how well, in his infinite goodness, he has cared for us in that he gave his dear Son for us. . . . Contemplate Christ given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better. ☩

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**CAREFUL, DON'T SPILL** This woodcut pictures Luther and Jan Hus (1369–1415), despite the fact that Hus had been dead for 100 years, giving Holy Communion “in both kinds”—bread and wine. Among the communicants is John Frederick, elector (ruler) of Saxony.

# Christ present everywhere

WHAT BOTHERED OPPONENTS MOST ABOUT LUTHER—FROM CATHOLICS TO FELLOW REFORMERS—WASN'T HIS VIEWS ON GRACE BUT HIS DOCTRINE OF THE EUCHARIST

*David C. Steinmetz*

**WHO WAS JESUS**, and what could he have meant to imply about himself when, as the Gospel of Matthew reports, he broke bread and told his disciples to “take, eat, this is my body”?

Early Protestants were fairly certain they knew what Jesus did *not* mean: to suggest that bread and wine had been miraculously “transubstantiated” into his physical body and blood. The word “transubstantiation,” the medieval Catholic understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, rests on a distinction between the *substance* of a thing (what it really is) and its *accidents* (how it appears to observers).

Ever since the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (see “Course corrections,” pp. 7–10), Catholic teaching had insisted that consecrated bread and wine are transformed by the power of God into the substance of Christ’s body and blood without altering their accidental qualities. Therefore observers could detect no change in the consecrated elements or distinguish them from unconsecrated ones by taste, appearance, weight, or smell.

Like his Catholic opponents, Luther located Christ’s presence in the elements of bread and wine. But he believed transubstantiation is an unsatisfactory explanation of the mystery of Christ’s real presence.





**RIGHT THERE WITH JESUS** In this altarpiece of the Last Supper by Cranach, Luther is pictured as the apostle holding the cup. Cranach made several paintings picturing leading reformers as apostles.

The problem with transubstantiation in Luther's mind was that it requires the faithful to believe *two* miracles: (1) that Christ is really present and (2) that his presence requires reducing bread and wine to their accidents. For Luther *one* miracle sufficed. Christ is substantially present in the Eucharist—but so, too, are the bread and wine.

Luther also held that the Eucharist is not a sacrifice. It is not something the priest offers to God for the sins of his congregation—not even when that sacrifice is understood, as medieval Catholics held, as a re-presentation of the unique sacrifice of Christ in an unbloody form. Instead the Eucharist is a *gift* God gave to the church. Luther preferred to regard it as a “benefit” or “testament” rather than a sacrifice.

*Testament* was a particularly important word for early Protestants. A testament is a one-sided contract that offers an inheritance to a beneficiary on the death of the testator (the person who makes the contract). A will is one good example.

When Christ the testator died, he fulfilled the condition of his one-sided contract and offered to the church “in his will” the benefits of his death and Resurrection. The church did not in any sense merit such gifts, but received them as an undeserved inheritance. The Eucharist was therefore for the early reformers not a place where sacrifices are offered, but where benefits are received.

Luther agreed with other reformers and disagreed with his Catholic opponents in his contention that the Eucharist is a visible form of the Word of God. That is, he saw it as a proclamation in visible, rather

than audible or written, form of Christ's death and Resurrection. The Eucharist therefore offers Christ, not to God the Father, but to the worshiping congregation. The Word of God, the lively and life-giving voice of the living God, is the instrument by which God created the world and through which he will renew it. That Word is actually the fundamental sacrament of which baptism and the Eucharist are visible forms.

### CHRIST'S PRESENCE DISPUTED

There, though, the agreements against Catholicism ended and disagreements between the reformers began to multiply. Luther dismissed his fellow reformer Zwingli's reading of John 6:63 (“the Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing”), by which Zwingli implied that there is nothing special about the elements. [*More about Zwingli to come in CH 118! —Editors*]

The “flesh” that God condemns, Luther said, is not the material world, but our self-centeredness that opposes God. Whenever fallen human beings—characterized by Luther as having their hearts turned in on themselves—trust what is not God as God, they commit the primal sin of idolatry, even if what they trust is something as good as human love or as enduring as human friendship.

But, Luther thought, no one commits idolatry by trusting the material channels for grace God has established in baptism and the Eucharist. They are trustworthy because they rest on God's promise. Not to trust the promise is not to trust God.

Furthermore, the risen Christ is present in the Eucharist. Luther believed that something unprecedented had happened to Jesus' body in the Resurrection. Although he continued to bear a human body, it was a body no longer subject to limitations of space and time. Indeed the body of the risen Christ could even walk through the door of a locked room to appear suddenly in the midst of his disciples.

Thus Luther thought what had occurred in the Resurrection was a transfer of attributes in which Christ's human nature took on some of the characteristics of his divine nature—including the trait of *ubiquity* (the ability to be everywhere). Luther saw no need to bring Christ down from heaven in the Eucharist. Christ is already present on earth because he is still everywhere. He is present in the bread and wine, even before they are consecrated.

Luther once taunted Zwingli with the claim that Christ's body could be found everywhere, even in a peasant's bowl of pea soup (though, Luther warned, no one could locate Christ by stirring vigorously). If the



risen Christ is where the Father reigns, he is never distant from the worshipping congregation.

Luther drew a simple distinction in German between a thing being present (*da*) and being accessible (*dir da*). The risen Christ is present (*da*) in ordinary bread and wine. But he is accessible to the church (*dir da*) only in the Eucharist. God has attached his promise to the Eucharist. Only there, and not in ordinary bread and wine, is Christ savingly present in the full reality of both natures, truly human and truly divine.

Luther therefore insisted on a literal reading of the verb “is” in the words of institution (the scriptural narrative of Jesus’ instituting the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which are said at every Communion service): “This is my body.” The Eucharist is not a mere sign pointing to a distant reality or even an icon through which the power of that distant divine reality is present. It is the thing itself, the true body of Christ present with the bread.

Luther also answered the controversial question of whether unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ with a resounding *yes*. The presence of Christ does not depend on the faith of the communicant or the piety of the celebrant but on the reliability of God’s promise. Even if an irrational creature—say, a mouse—were to eat the consecrated host, it would eat the body of Christ.

Nevertheless Luther thought faith is still essential to receive the saving benefits of Christ’s presence. Unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ, but they eat and drink to their own damnation. Benefits, Luther warned, are restricted to believers.

### WHO IS JESUS? WHERE CAN WE FIND HIM?

Luther believed in and preached what he regarded as the historically reliable narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection in the four Gospels, a narrative anticipated in the Old Testament and further explained in the New. Christians are called to obey this Jesus and no other.

At the same time, explaining Jesus as his story is told in the Gospels is no simple task. It compelled Luther and his fellow reformers to use the complex technical language of the ancient creeds. Luther indicated at the beginning of the *Schmalkald Articles* (a 1537 summary of Lutheran doctrine) that he had no quarrel with Catholicism over the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ. Other reformers would have agreed.



**SHOWING FORTH GRACE** Left: In a scene from the same altarpiece as the one shown on p. 26, Luther’s friend Melancthon baptizes a baby.

**THE WORD BECAME FLESH** Right: In a woodcut from an edition of Luther’s *Small Catechism*, John the Baptist baptizes Christ in the Jordan.

But unlike his fellow reformers Zwingli and Calvin, who argued that Christ’s humanity, now ascended into heaven, could not be physically present on earth, Luther saw ample evidence in the New Testament that the risen Christ had undergone a transformation. His body is no longer subject to temporal and spatial limitations.

Therefore it can be physically present whenever the Eucharist is celebrated. The good news for Luther was that Christ is not only present but also accessible. Disagreements over the Eucharist centered on how to grasp Christ on earth. Luther believed that one might not be able to see his presence by vigorously stirring a bowl of pea soup, but the believer would know where to find him when the minister offers the consecrated bread and wine. **¶**

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# The century that changed the world

—1453: Turks capture Constantinople.

—1455: Gutenberg completes printing the Bible using movable type.

—1469: Desiderius Erasmus born.

—1470: Portuguese explorers discover Gold Coast of Africa.

—1473: Nicolaus Copernicus born.

—1478: Spanish Inquisition begins.

—1483: Luther born at Eisleben.

—1484: Luthers move to Mansfeld.

—1484: Ulrich Zwingli born.

—1491: Henry VIII born.

—1492: Columbus makes first voyage to the Americas.

—1495: Leonardo da Vinci begins painting *The Last Supper*.

—1496: Menno Simons born.

—1497: Philipp Melancthon born.

—1498: Girolamo Savonarola burned at the stake in Florence.

—1502: Frederick, elector of Saxony, founds Wittenberg University.

—1505: Luther vows to become a monk; enters Order of Augustinian Hermits.

—1506: Pope Julius II orders work on St. Peter's in Rome; Leonardo da Vinci paints *Mona Lisa*.



Luther and Cajetan, 1518

—1507: Luther ordained and celebrates first Mass.

—1508: Michelangelo begins painting Sistine Chapel ceiling.

—1509: John Calvin born; 18-year-old Henry VIII of England assumes throne, marries Catherine of Aragon.

—1510: First shipload of African slaves arrives in Hispaniola (Haiti).

—1512: Luther earns doctorate; leaves monastery to teach at Wittenberg.

—1513: Vasco Núñez de Balboa discovers the Pacific Ocean; Leo X becomes pope.

—1515: Luther lectures on Romans; appointed district vicar over 10 monasteries.

—1516: Erasmus issues *Greek New Testament*; Thomas More writes *Utopia*.

—1517: Albert of Mainz hires Johann Tetzel to sell indulgences.

—1517: On October 31 Luther distributes *95 Theses* on indulgences.

—1518: Luther appears before Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg, but refuses to recant; Frederick the Wise protects Luther from being handed over to Rome.

—1518: Melancthon becomes professor of Greek at Wittenberg.

—1519: Charles I of Spain elected Holy Roman Emperor Charles V; Hernán Cortes enters Aztec capital; Zwingli begins New Testament sermons; Swiss Reformation starts.

—1519: In July Luther debates Johann Eck at Leipzig and denies supreme authority of popes and councils.



Katharine von Bora, 1528

—1520: Papal bull gives Luther 60 days to recant or be excommunicated; Suleiman I becomes sultan of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire.

—1520: Luther writes *To the Christian Nobility, On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*; burns papal bull and canon law.

—1521: Luther excommunicated; refuses to recant writings at Diet of Worms, edict condemns him as heretic and outlaw; "kidnapped" and hidden at Wartburg Castle; begins translating the New Testament.

—1521: Private masses abolished in Wittenberg; Andreas Karlstadt gives the laity wine as well as bread in the Lord's Supper; religious statues destroyed; Melancthon writes *Loci Communes*; Henry VIII titled "Defender of the Faith" for attack on Luther; Hadrian VI becomes pope.

—1522: Luther comes out of hiding and returns to Wittenberg.

—1522: Spaniards complete circumnavigation of globe; Ignatius Loyola writes *Spiritual Exercises*; Zwingli holds Reformation debates.

—1523: Clement VII becomes pope; first two Reformation martyrs, Belgians Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes, burned at the stake.



# Martin Luther Other Reformers Church and State World Events

—1524: Luther debates Karlstadt on the Lord's Supper; Luther's former superior, Johannes Staupitz, dies.

—1524: Erasmus writes *On Freedom of the Will*; Peasants' Revolt begins; Diet of Nuremberg fails to enforce Edict of Worms condemning Luther.

—1525: Anabaptist movement begins in Zurich, spreads to Germany.

—1525: Luther writes *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes on the Peasants' Revolt*; marries Katharine von Bora; writes *Bondage of the Will* against Erasmus.

—1526: Reformation spreads to Sweden and Denmark.

—1526: Luther writes *German Mass*; son Hans born.

—1527: Luther writes "A Mighty Fortress"; argues against Zwingli on the Lord's Supper; daughter Elizabeth born (d. 1528).

—1527: First Protestant university (Marburg) founded; imperial troops sack Rome; plague strikes Wittenberg.

—1529: Luther and Zwingli reach no agreement on the Lord's Supper at Marburg Colloquy; Luther publishes *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism*; daughter Magdalena born (d. 1542).



Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor

—1529: Name *Protestant* first used; Second Diet of Speyer decides to enforce Edict of Worms; Turks lay siege to Vienna.

—1530: Luther's father, Hans, dies; Diet of Augsburg attempts to end division in Roman Empire; as an outlaw Luther cannot attend, but Melancthon presents *Augsburg Confession*, a statement of Lutheran beliefs.

—1531: Luther begins lecturing on Galatians; son Martin born; mother, Margaretha, dies.

—1531: Schmalkaldic League, a political body of German Protestant groups, forms in defense against Charles V; Zwingli killed in battle.

—1532: Diet of Regensburg and Peace of Nuremberg guarantee religious toleration in face of Turkish threat.

—1532: Luther is given Augustinian cloister in Wittenberg for his home.

—1533: Three-year-old Ivan the Terrible ascends Russian throne.

—1533: Luther's son Paul born.

—1534: Henry VIII declares himself supreme head of the Church of England; Paul III becomes pope.

—1534: Luther publishes German Bible; daughter Margaret born.

—1535: Anabaptist uprising at Münster put down; Anabaptists executed; Thomas More beheaded for opposing Henry VIII; Charles V forms Catholic Defense League.

—1536: Luther agrees to Wittenberg Concord on the Lord's Supper, but Zwinglians do not accept it.



Early Lutheran service

—1536: First edition of Calvin's *Institutes* published; William Tyndale burned at stake in Antwerp; Denmark and Norway become Lutheran; Erasmus dies.

—1537: Luther draws up *Schmalkaldic Articles* as his "theological last will and testament."

—1538: Calvin expelled from Geneva.

—1539: Frankfurt Truce declared between Catholic and Protestant territories.

—1540: Calvin returns to Geneva from exile; Society of Jesus (Jesuits) formed; Philip of Hesse, German prince, enters bigamous marriage with Luther's consent; conferences at Hagenau and Worms fail to reconcile Protestants and Catholics.

—1541: At Conference of Regensburg, Melancthon and Martin Bucer reach agreement with Catholics on most doctrines, but Luther and Rome reject their work; Karlstadt dies.

—1543: Copernicus writes that the earth revolves around the sun.

—1545: Council of Trent convenes for reform of the Catholic Church.

—1546: Martin Luther dies.

—1552: Katharine Luther dies.

—1555: Peace of Augsburg allows rulers to determine religion of their regions.

# Momentous vows

WHY LUTHER'S MARRIAGE SHOCKED THE WORLD AND CHANGED VISIONS OF FAMILY LIFE FOR CENTURIES TO COME

Beth Kreitzer



**DEARLY BELOVED** This 15th-c. Flemish painting shows a medieval public celebration of the sacrament of marriage.

Antichrist—a sure sign of the impending end times.

Predictably most of Luther's critics were unhappy with the union. Famed scholar Erasmus (see "The man who yielded to no one," pp. 42–45) spread the rumor that the lovely bride was only days away from giving birth—thus implying that Luther had left his vows of celibacy because of lust and the wiles of a beautiful woman. But Erasmus also hoped that marriage would help to temper Luther's irascible personality and soften his tendency to attack his opponents.

In a letter written a year later, Erasmus noted both ideas were in error—Luther's wife was not pregnant when they married (although by the time of the letter she was in fact "heavy with child"), and Luther continued to write in his former "noxious" and "hostile" fashion against his critics. So much for the moderating influence of a woman!

## PROTESTANT PIGS?

Other enemies were less polite. Many in Catholic Europe thought that Luther's arguments against monastic vows and clerical celibacy, and his calls to empty convents in the name of "Christian freedom,"

were only a cover for his own sinful desires. This perspective was so prevalent that even at the beginning of the twentieth century, respected Catholic historian Heinrich Denifle could still suggest that Luther's insatiable lust largely caused the Reformation.

In his own day, scores of Catholic writers, and those we would call cartoonists, skewered both Martin and Katharine—one woodcut shows a herd of Protestant pigs forcing their way into a church, followed by the biggest pigs of the group, the proud Martin and Katie

ON JUNE 13, 1525, 41-year-old Martin Luther and Katharine von Bora, 15 years his junior, married in Wittenberg after a brief engagement of less than a day. It was a union that shocked a nation—not because of their age difference, but because the couple was, in the eyes of the medieval church, committing incest.

As a former monk and a former nun, the two had been "brother" and "sister," even if only in a spiritual sense. Popular opinion held that such a union could only result in a "monstrous birth," most likely of the





**SOLEMN CEREMONY** *Left:* A monk takes his habit.

**VOWED TO CELIBACY** *Below:* Some women felt a call to the religious life, but others ended up in convents because their marriage prospects were not good.



Reformation and on marriage and family life in general.

### **BETTER TO MARRY THAN TO BURN**

Already in 1520, five years before his own surprise marriage, Luther had concluded that celibacy—that is, abstaining from marriage and sex—was no longer necessary for a “religious” (someone living a vowed life, like a monk or a nun) or for a priest (that is, a cleric, hence the term “clerical celibacy”). Celibacy for parish priests had been required by parts of the church for a millennium, although only universally since the tenth century. For monks and nuns, a vow to celibacy had been a basic expectation since the origins of Christian monasticism in the third century.

Luther and other reformers questioned the practice both on scriptural grounds and for practical reasons. Practically it was quite clear that many priests (and some religious as well) could not live celibate lives—the priest and his “housekeeper” were stock characters in popular tales, plays, and songs, along with the “lusty” priest or monk who was a threat to honorable wives and maidens.

These stereotypes were true enough for the church to establish fines that priests could pay for taking concubines and for any resulting children. The reformers thought these financial arrangements gave the appearance that the church was winking at such relationships rather than tackling their serious moral deficiencies. Luther thought the church was unwilling to consider any changes because of all the money to be made in collecting fines.

Luther. Luther’s characteristic response to such pamphlets was to suggest that they were worth using only to wipe one’s rear end.

But if Luther’s enemies provided an expected response to his marriage, that of his friends is a bit more perplexing. Given the job of observing the initial joining of the couple in the marriage bed (a common practice at the time), Luther’s friend Justas Jonas later wrote that he was moved to tears—and not tears of joy.

Even Luther’s closest colleague, Philipp Melancthon, had misgivings and was surprised and angry when he heard of the event. Melancthon did hope, like Erasmus, that marriage might cure Luther of his sharp tongue and “frequent jesting habits.”

But at a time when all of Luther’s attention was needed for the precarious political and theological situation in Germany, Melancthon thought, he was distracted by “that woman” who had chased him around and ensnared him. It showed a real weakness in a man who was otherwise, according to Melancthon, a saint.

Melancthon’s (momentary) ire at his friend’s wedding was perhaps one reason why Luther neither consulted nor invited him, but it helps reveal why Luther’s marriage was such a bombshell—one that had a long-lasting impact both on the course of the



**WHAT GOD HAS JOINED** *Left:* In a 16th-c. woodcut, God joins Adam and Eve in marriage.

**LET NOT MAN SEPARATE** *Below:* The Luthers' wedding rings are accompanied by the famous marriage statement.

Any vows that attempt to set up a higher or different set of requirements than those already required by God are suspect at best and damning at worst.

### MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY

Luther was by no means the first reformer to marry: Melancthon, despite being so aghast at Luther's nuptials, had already married in 1520; Johannes Bugenhagen (the Wittenberg pastor who performed the Luthers' wedding; see "From preachers to popes," pp. 39–44) married in 1523; and Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli did so in 1524. Many others did too, some at great risk if they married in lands still Catholic and under the authority of non-reform-minded bishops.

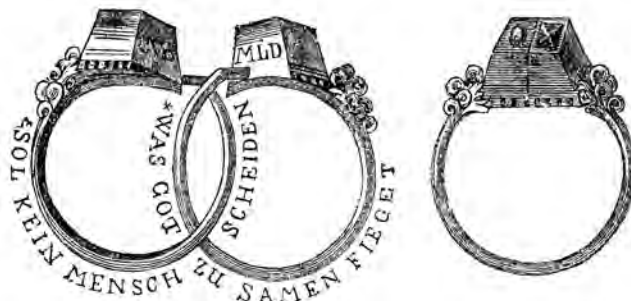
Luther encouraged many of his friends to marry, writing to another monk in 1525: "Stop thinking about it and get on to it with joy. Your body demands it; God wills it and urges you to it." But it initially appeared that

Luther was not going to practice what he preached—even in early 1525, he wrote to friends that he was not inclined to marry. Knowing he was a condemned heretic, he felt sure that he would experience an early death, and it was hardly fair to bring a wife and children into such a life.

Also the period from late 1524 to 1525 was an incredibly difficult and dangerous time, fraught with frequent uprisings of peasants who cited Reformation teachings of "Christian freedom" as their rationale. It was hardly time, many thought, for Luther to be distracted by marriage—and to undercut popular support of reform by giving support to the idea that the whole movement was based on one monk's sexual drive.

But Luther thought his marriage was God's plan: "While I had other matters to think about, God suddenly in a marvelous way threw me into marriage with the nun Katharine von Bora." He acknowledged that he married for a number of reasons: to please his father (who wanted grandchildren), for companionship (he was, after all, a human being), to show support for the value of marriage, and to provide a suitable home for Katharine, who had fled her convent two years before and was the last of 12 nuns from that convent to find a permanent home.

The practical problems of finding appropriate living situations for women (and men) who left their religious lives behind occupied Luther. But he thought the value



Instead, reformers argued that Scripture quite clearly indicates that men and women were created for each other and for marriage, and were commanded to marry and be fruitful. For Luther marriage was not a human invention after the Fall, as some theologians maintained, but was the basic expectation for all human beings, an integral part of God's good creation. The sexual drive, for Luther, could no more be ignored than eating or sleeping.

Regarding Paul's pronouncement that while it is "better to marry than to burn," it is far better still if Christians can remain unmarried (1 Cor. 7:8–9), Luther acknowledged that a few men are given the gift of remaining celibate. (He questioned whether women are ever given it.) But it is a gift, not something that could be required for the ministry and certainly not something that anybody could make a vow about.



of leaving behind the false and hypocritical life of vowed celibacy for lives of true value and vocation in the world far outweighed the challenges.

Marriage, despite its sacramental status in the medieval church, had long played second fiddle to celibacy. The reformers were determined to reverse that. They did not wish to reject celibacy for those truly given that gift, but since they saw the gift as so rare they hardly worried about it.

Instead they sought to fight the mistaken high estimation of an “easy” life of celibacy over marriage. They saw the latter as a life of sacrifice and service, and as the only real and divinely ordained remedy against the sin inherent in sexual desire, which a vow of celibacy could never kill.

This message found a ready ear. Numerous monks left their monasteries, married, and found other professions or became clergy in the growing reform movement. Nuns also left, although in fewer numbers—families were not always willing to receive them back again, and the same economic factors that had driven many women into convents to begin with were still in place. The inability to find a husband of the proper social status or to provide a proper dowry often led parents to send “excess” daughters to convents.

In some German-speaking lands, rather than closing and forcing unprotected women out into the world, convents became Lutheran. They espoused evangelical teachings and offered freedom from restrictive vows, but remained safe homes for unmarried or unmarriageable women.

Women who did leave their convents—especially those who, like Katharine von Bora, married former priests or religious—were often reviled and attacked as “whores” unable to keep their vows on account of weakness and lust. However, in general, areas that became Protestant quickly adjusted to the notion of married clergy. It took a long time before communities were willing and able to support these new clergy families financially. But many were ready to see monks and nuns return to secular status as good tax-paying citizens of their towns.

### THE “WEAKER” SEX?

Luther and many other writers complained that marriage (and women) had fallen into disrepute in their day. Books and pamphlets repeated criticisms of the married life and its difficulties, and complained about women’s weak nature and behavior. Popular songs, plays, and woodcuts likewise joked and complained about marriage and women.



**A FAMILY EVENING** A memorial in Eisleben shows the Luther family as they are often pictured, with Martin playing the lute and Katie and the children reading and listening.

Luther blamed both the church and the so-called wisdom of ancient Greek and Latin authors for these negative attitudes. The reformers felt that they needed to encourage parents to provide spouses for their children rather than sending them off to monasteries or convents and to encourage young people to marry despite any possible hardships, rather than choosing lives of selfish ease. They saw marriage as central to society, the most important building block of every community.

The reformers argued that church law did not help the situation. First, Catholic doctrine stressed the sacramental nature of marriage; that is, if performed correctly with the right intention, God promises to provide grace through the act. But what if the promises of marriage are not performed correctly? And what if one (or both) of the actors do not intend to engage in a true marriage?

Church law insisted that the sacrament and legal bond of marriage required no witnesses, parental consent, or priestly approval—but only promises of consent from the man, aged at least 14, and the woman, aged at least 12. Cases over contested marriages filled the courts. Secret marriages were the biggest problem. Many people found it appealing to promise marriage to a partner but not always to keep or even “remember” such promises. More often than not, court cases were brought by young women left high and dry (and frequently pregnant) after secret marriage vows. They were not always successful, especially if either partner was already promised to another.



**LEGENDARY TREE?** The Luther family, plus Melancthon, gather around a Christmas tree. Legend credits Luther with inventing such trees, but there is no historical evidence for this.

began to allow divorce, although the practice remained quite rare: Christians were urged to forgive their partners and seek to live according to the law of love rather than the mere letter of permission.

### LUTHER'S PRIVATE LIFE


Luther was not the first priest to marry in the sixteenth century, nor was he arrested or martyred in the end for doing so. All the foremost reformers of the day (apart from Erasmus) married, and most had children.

Luther and Katie had six children, two of whom died young, and he experienced all the joys and griefs of husband and father, as he often noted when reflecting upon his life.

If Luther's own marriage and family life had a larger impact on the Reformation than those of others, it was for two reasons: he had a fairly happy and successful marriage and family life, and he spoke and wrote about it often.

We know far more about Luther's "private" life than almost anyone else's in this period, as he shared it in person with many of his contemporaries (his Wittenberg home was always filled with visitors and boarders) and in writing with almost everyone else (he was a hugely popular author and wrote copiously about many topics, including his own life). For centuries admirers have idealized Luther's home as the proper Protestant parsonage—the prolific intellectual father, the hard-working and thrifty wife, the well-behaved children.

But apart from its beginning, Luther was not particularly radical or trailblazing in his married life. He respected and loved his wife, and disciplined and loved his children. He was not superhuman or without fault, but neither was he cold or distant, unable to navigate the transition from a celibate monastic community to a commonplace family setting with its hustle and bustle, its fears and joys.

In fact it is possible that by his very ordinariness as husband and father, Luther provided the best example for those who looked to him, either to fail or to succeed. His teachings on marriage were revolutionary and had far-reaching impact, but his own marriage and family life, for all its public status, found its continued influence through its very sharing in the common lot of others. 

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The second complication reformers complained about was the extensive list of impediments to a lawful marriage between a man and woman. Not only was marrying within blood relations forbidden, but also within relationships created by marriage and even by spiritual ties such as godparenthood. Forbidden marriage relationships became so frequent that the church developed payments to excuse brides and grooms from the possible legal restrictions that might prevent them from marrying their chosen spouses.

### A SWEEPING CHANGE

Luther's response was shocking: marriage is a wholly secular matter. In keeping with his views of church and state, he insisted that church laws should not govern who can and cannot marry, who is married, and whether or not such unions can ever be dissolved. He felt marriage decisions should be governed by the state's laws and judges, according to the principles of natural law.

Furthermore, he argued, while God commands marriage, it is not established by Christ in the New Testament as a sacrament. Instead it is a civil union, in which the church has only an advisory role. The state could and should forbid secret marriages, and it should require public proclamation prior to any official wedding and registration of the union to make it legally binding.

These sweeping changes were introduced widely in Europe over the course of the century—even in Catholic regions—because the problems caused by secret marriages were simply unsustainable.

Likewise, because marriage does not have the permanent quality of a sacrament, Luther felt it was not indissoluble. Divorce and remarriage could be an option. Luther accepted three grounds for divorce: impotence, adultery, and the refusal of sexual intercourse (the "conjugal debt"). Many jurisdictions in Protestant areas



# Mother of the Reformation

While Henry VIII had three wives named Catherine, Martin Luther had only one. However, for one of the more famous spouses in history, little evidence survives about Katharine von Bora Luther.

She was born in January of 1499, educated in at least two convents after the remarriage of her father when she was six, and eventually became a nun at age 16 at the Cistercian convent in Nimbschen. The Reformation arrived in Nimbschen by 1519, and Luther's influence penetrated the convent, affecting at least some residents, who soon sought to leave.

When families failed to remove their eager daughters (quite possibly because they had no economic provision for them at home), a small group of nuns applied for Luther's help. He arranged for a local merchant who regularly delivered goods to the convent to leave with, instead of empty barrels, 12 young women hidden in his wagon. Nine of them made their way to Wittenberg in April 1523. When the nuns arrived, one observer wrote, "A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town all the more eager for marriage than life. May God give them husbands lest worse befall."

By 1525 Katharine was the final ex-nun left without a husband. Although she had several suitors, she rejected them all, finally declaring that she would only marry either Nicholas von Amsdorf (one of Luther's close colleagues) or Dr. Luther himself. She and Martin married in June of 1525, and she then found herself thrust into a public spotlight of largely negative attention.

It is likely, though, that Katharine lived without much direct exposure to the slanderous personal attacks on her marriage. Though educated and certainly able to read, even in Latin, she may have been too busy to care much about public opinion outside of her own local area. The care of the Luthers' large household required great time and effort. Katharine managed a garden and several distant farms, the stables and kitchen, a brewery, and all the duties and servants that went along with them. She also had six children in the space of eight years—one daughter died in infancy, another died at 13.

The plague occasionally haunted Wittenberg, pushing Katharine into the healer's role. Her home, a former Augustinian cloister, was large and always filled with family, friends, and Luther's students who were frequent boarders (see "Did you know?," inside front cover).

Martin wrote that he did not love Katharine when they married, and he was afraid that she was proud. "I am not madly in love," he said to one friend, "but I cherish my wife." To another: "Other women have worse faults." But he quickly developed deep affection,



**EARLY TO RISE** Martin Luther called Katie "Doctora Lutherin" and "Morning Star of the Reformation" (the latter because she usually got up at 4 a.m.)

calling her "Lord Katie" and "my rib," and declaring "I wouldn't give up my Katie for France or for Venice." She clearly supported and respected his work, and while no doormat, she accepted her own vocation as being that of Christian wife and mother, the only calling Luther saw open for women. He once remarked, "In domestic affairs I defer to Katie. Otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost."

After Martin's death in 1546, the family lost much of the financial support they had received while he was alive. War and plague forced them to flee Wittenberg several times, and Katharine was never able to regain stability.

She wrote of Martin after his death, "He gave so much of himself in service not only to one town or to one country, but to the whole world. . . . My sorrow is so deep that no words can express my heartbreak. I can neither eat nor drink, not even sleep." In 1552 she was injured in an accident while moving to a new house. She died from her injuries at the age of 53, leaving four adult children and an enduring spiritual and social legacy.

—Beth Kreitzer



# The political Luther

LUTHER REVOLUTIONIZED VIEWS ON CHURCH AND STATE

*Lewis W. Spitz*

**DURING THE SCHMALKALDIC WAR**, which broke out after Martin Luther's death, Catholic Spanish troops defeated Protestant German princes and overran much of German Saxony, including Wittenberg. When the Spanish soldiers stood at Luther's grave in the Castle Church, they demanded that Luther's body be exhumed and his bones burned as heretic's bones. But Emperor Charles V stopped them. He is said to have declared: "I do not make war on dead men!"

This story seems to be a golden legend, but it shows the passions Luther aroused. The Reformation was not merely a theological dispute but an event that disturbed all areas of life—social, economic, and political.

## PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHER

Luther formed his ideas not as an abstract political philosopher but as a person in charge of and confronting real-life situations. His correspondence, especially during the last 15 years of his life, shows him constantly involved in political situations, advising and urging

**BROTHERS IN CHRIST** This 16th-c. woodcut shows Luther and Frederick the Wise kneeling before the crucified Christ.

city councils concerned with urban reformation, and chastising episcopal and secular princes. Luther took his final journey in the dead of winter in 1546 not for religious reasons but to restore good relations between two territorial princes—brothers who had fallen out over property.

Throughout his life Luther enjoyed the protection and generosity of the electoral Saxon princes. (These noble rulers of Saxony were called "electors" because they were among the seven leaders who had historically elected the German kings.) Frederick the Wise (1486–1525) protected Luther from papal and imperial forces, both because Luther was his subject and because he was the best-known professor at Frederick's recently founded University of Wittenberg (1502).

Religion played a minor role at best here. Frederick understood little of the "new theology" and cherished





his extensive relic collection until he died. He used court chaplain and lawyer Georg Spalatin as a go-between with Luther to avoid compromising himself more than necessary.

However, Frederick's brother John (ruled 1525–1532) was a convinced reformer, and his son John Frederick (ruled 1532–1547) considered Luther his spiritual father. These cozy relationships have led some to speak of Luther's Reformation as a "princes' reformation," meaning it was primarily a political revolution: local princes asserting their power against Rome under the guise of a theological dispute.

But Luther harshly attacked ecclesiastical princes (bishops and archbishops) in Germany in the early years, criticized secular princes during his later years, and developed a theory of resistance against any rulers who were, in his view, trying to destroy true religion. His polemic against Catholic ruler Georg of Ducal Saxony combined theological arguments with devastating irony and ridicule.

In his letters and sermons, Luther often urged rulers to moderation and equity. In replying to an inquiry in 1528, he wrote, "You ask whether the magistrate may kill false prophets. I am slow in a judgment of blood even when it is deserved. In this matter I am terrified by the example of the papists and the Jews before Christ, for when there was a statute for the killing of false prophets and heretics, in time it came about that only the most saintly and innocent were



**FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES** Left: John Frederick "the Magnanimous," Frederick the Wise's nephew, helped Luther in his reform efforts.

**SEVEN-HEADED LUTHER** Above: This satirical woodcut attacked Luther as a religious and political fanatic.

killed. . . . I cannot admit [allow] that false teachers are to be put to death. It is enough to banish."

But he named names when he let loose blasts against actual rulers, contrary to many of his contemporaries. "There are lazy and useless preachers," he thundered, "who do not denounce the evils of princes and lords, some because they do not even notice them. . . . Some even fear for their skins and worry that they will lose body and goods for it. They do not stand up and be true to Christ!"

And in regard to politicians, he once said they "are generally the biggest fools and worst scoundrels on earth, but God will find them out, better than anyone else can, as indeed he has done since the beginning of the world."

### PLACES FOR CHURCH AND STATE

Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers leveled the clergy to servants of the congregation—not enjoying a higher privilege than the laity, not even in their role as celebrants of baptism and the Lord's Supper. "Thank God, a child of seven knows what the church is," he wrote; "the holy believers and the lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd." Elsewhere he said it is the "assembly of the saints, i.e., the pious, believing men on earth, which is gathered, preserved, and ruled by the Holy Ghost, and daily increased by means of the sacraments and the Word of God."

PAPA AGIT GRATIAS CAESARIBVS  
PRO IMMENSIS BENEFICIIS.



Gros gut die Keiser han gethan  
Dem Papst: vnd vbel gelegt an.  
Dafür im der Papst gedächt hat  
Wie dis bild dir die warheit sagt.  
Mar. Luth. D.

If such views seem commonplace among Protestants today, it is only because Luther made them stick. At the time the church seemed universally arrayed against him, so Luther hoped that lay princes, as baptized Christians in authority, would serve as emergency bishops in reforming the church.

During his *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516), Luther commented on Romans 13:1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities”:

In our day the secular powers are carrying on their duties more successfully and better than the ecclesiastical rulers are doing. For they are strict in their punishment of thefts and murders, except to the extent that they are corrupted and insidious. . . . But the ecclesiastical rulers . . . actually nourish pride, ambitions, prodigality, and contentions rather than punish them (so much so that perhaps it would be safer if the temporal affairs of the clergy were placed under secular power).

Against Rome’s century-long attempt to make the church dominant over the state, Luther argued that God works in the spiritual realm through the Gospel and in the temporal realm through secular authority.

St. Augustine had stressed the negative role of the state (“a great robbery”) as a curb on sin. Luther emphasized the positive. He thought that secular authority serves as the instrument of God’s love, for its laws should conform to the basic natural law, which is the law of love.

**CONFLICT BETWEEN PRINCES** Luther wrote and Cranach illustrated this anti-Catholic broadside which pictured the emperor in the act of cutting off the pope’s head.

Luther frequently referred to the ruler as a “father and helper,” “gardener and caretaker,” or “God’s official.” In his view individual rulers were divinely instituted to restrain evil and prevent anarchy and chaos.

### RESIST RULERS?

Luther taught, however, that there is also a great need for justice in the world and that one has the duty to resist tyrannous rulers who violate natural law and political laws. While every subject should strive to be a good citizen and obey valid laws, he thought that if a regime establishes laws that are contrary to the natural law of love, the regime’s subjects are bound to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29).

He thought that under such conditions believers should withhold obedience to the government in passive resistance, and, for years, he rejected the idea of active resistance to rulers (except for those he called “healthy heroes” or “wondermen” who, like Samson, found themselves directly and unambiguously called by God to undertake a revolution). He observed that “changing a government is one thing, but improving it is another.”

Luther followed this teaching himself when in 1529–1530 he refused to sanction resistance by Elector John to the emperor. (In the end he yielded only when legal experts convinced him otherwise.) And, in that critical hour when he stood at Worms, Luther resisted the temptation to unleash a popular national uprising against the pope and the emperor. He reminisced many years later, “If I had wanted to start trouble, I could have brought all Germany into a great bloodbath. Yes, I could have begun such a game at Worms that the emperor himself would not have been safe. But what would that have been? A fool’s game! I did nothing but left it all up to the Word.”

Perhaps in his 1534 *Commentary on Psalm 101* we see the political Luther most clearly:

The spiritual government or authority should direct the people vertically toward God that they may do right and be saved; just so the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another, seeing to it that body, property, honor, wife, child, house, home, and all manner of goods remain in peace and security and are blessed on earth. God wants the government of the world to be a symbol of true salvation and of his kingdom of heaven. ¶

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# Preachers, popes, and princes

THE MEN WHO MENTORED LUTHER, FOUGHT WITH HIM, AND CARRIED HIS REFORMATION FORWARD

*David C. Steinmetz and Paul Thigpen*

## JOHANNES STAUPITZ (C. 1460–1524)

Johannes Staupitz was Luther's superior in the Augustinian order, his predecessor in the chair of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, and his adviser in an especially critical period of theological development.

Staupitz was one of a long line of theologians in the late Middle Ages who protested in the name of Augustine the direction that the church was taking in its interpretation of the Gospel. The Reformation was a continuation of that protest, even though the form was somewhat different and the content of the reformers' answers was often radically new.

Unlike Luther, Staupitz belonged to the Saxon nobility. Numbered among his childhood friends was Frederick the Wise, the future elector of Saxony. In 1500 Staupitz's quiet life was interrupted by a call from

**ALL TOGETHER NOW** In this 17th-c. painting, Luther and Melancthon join previous and later reformers including Wycliffe, Hus, Calvin, Zwingli, Foxe, and Bucer in facing down popes, cardinals, Catholic princes, and the Devil.

Frederick to become professor of Bible at the newly founded University of Wittenberg and to serve as the first dean of the theological faculty. He had hardly settled into the routine when he was summoned to assume additional responsibilities, as the vicar-general of the Reformed Congregation of the Hermits of Saint Augustine.

Since Staupitz was busy in his administrative activities, he had very little time to spend as professor at the University of Wittenberg. Because he felt that his work as an administrator was more important than his work as an educator, he decided to prepare a younger man to



**PIOUS PRINCE** *Left:* Frederick the Wise supported Luther, whether or not he fully agreed with him.

**CALM CONFESSOR** *Below:* Johannes Staupitz tried to comfort Luther in the middle of his spiritual trials.

and to seek a quiet sanctuary where he could spend his last years in peace.

In a 1523 letter to Luther, Staupitz reaffirmed his faith in Christ and in the Gospel and compared his love for Luther to the love that David had for Jonathan. However he also made it clear that he was not entirely sympathetic with the direction that the Reformation had taken. It seemed to him that the adherents of the new movement had made issues of conscience out of matters that were theologically neutral and had abused the freedom of the Gospel by their conduct. He died shortly after this final correspondence.

### FREDERICK III "THE WISE" (1463–1525)

Frederick III, elector of Saxony, was both an avid collector of relics and a supporter of modern scholarship. He was educated at an Augustinian monastery and made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He collected religious relics—19,013 of them, in fact, by the year 1520—with the wish that Wittenberg, as a depository of sacred items, would become the Rome of Germany. He had such rarities (it was claimed) as four hairs from the Virgin Mary, a strand of Jesus' beard, and a piece of the bread eaten at the Last Supper.

The pious Frederick also founded the University of Wittenberg in 1502. After inviting Luther (and later Melancthon) to teach there, he found himself having to protect his troublesome professor of Bible. When in 1518 Luther was summoned to Rome for a hearing, Frederick intervened and arranged for the meeting to take place on safer German soil. He also refused to execute the 1520 papal bull that condemned Luther. And after the Diet of Worms placed the reformer under an imperial ban, Frederick secretly offered him refuge at his castle, the Wartburg.

The Saxon ruler's reputation for justice earned him the title "the Wise," but Luther noted his cautious nature and took to calling him "the hesitater." His chaplain and secretary, Georg Spalatin, made him familiar with Lutheran teaching, but scholars debate how much of it Frederick accepted.

Spalatin supervised the publication of many of Luther's works and became a trusted friend. In 400 letters to Spalatin, Luther shared everything from the deeply personal and intimate—how Spalatin should make love to his bride—to the mundane: "I have planted a garden and built a wall, both with marvelous success."

Though Frederick never openly advocated reform, he refused to suppress Luther, and in 1524 he ended the veneration of relics in Saxony (though he did protest the

take over his post at the university. In 1511 he encouraged Luther to earn a doctor's degree in theology and to assume the chair that Staupitz felt he could no longer fill. As Luther later recounted the story, he presented a long list of excuses in opposition to the suggestion, only to have them all wittily countered by Staupitz.

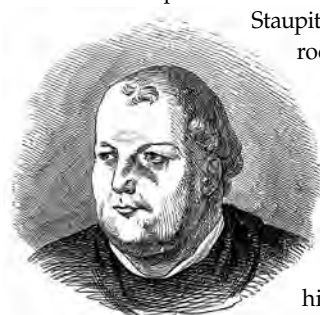
During his early years at Wittenberg, Luther sought Staupitz out as his confessor and spiritual adviser.

Staupitz, whose theology was firmly rooted in the thought of Augustine and whose disposition was marked by an unbounded confidence in the mercy of God, found it difficult to understand the complexity and depth of the spiritual torment through which Luther was passing. Nevertheless, as Luther himself later acknowledged, Staupitz

was able to help him to see the positive purpose of God in the temptations and trials that assailed him.

When the indulgences controversy broke out in Germany in the fall of 1517, Staupitz at first stood by Luther, though he urged him to consider the possibility of recantation.

As soon as it became clear to Staupitz that Luther was in danger of arrest, he released Luther from his vows to the Augustinian order so that Luther could act with greater freedom. After Augsburg, Luther and Staupitz corresponded and even saw each other again in Saxony. But, frightened by the turn of events and fearful for his own safety, Staupitz resolved to take himself out of the conflict between Luther and Rome







iconoclasm of Luther's followers). Perhaps the best clue to Frederick's final position came when he lay on his deathbed in 1525. The elector asked to receive the Lord's Supper in both bread and wine—contrary to papal doctrine, which forbade the cup to the laity, but in keeping with Luther's teaching. Luther preached at his funeral, and Melancthon praised him as the prince who had done more than any other to advance the Reformation.

#### LEO X (1475–1521)

Extravagant son of a notorious Renaissance family, Giovanni de' Medici was made a cardinal at the age of 13 and became Pope Leo X at 38. Described as both "a polished Renaissance prince" and "a devious and double-tongued politician," the pleasure-loving and easy-going Leo went on a wild spending spree as soon as he ascended the papal throne.

His coronation festivities alone cost 100,000 ducats—one-seventh of the reserve Pope Julius had left in the papal treasury. Leo's plans for rebuilding St. Peter's Basilica were estimated to cost over a million ducats. Within two years as pope, Leo had squandered the fortune left by his predecessor and faced serious financial embarrassment.

To keep up with his expenditures, his officials created more than 2,000 salable church offices during his reign. The total profits from these offices have been estimated at 3,000,000 ducats—but still that was not enough for Leo.

The sale of indulgences provided the pope with yet another source of income. To pay for St. Peter's, offset the costs of a war, and enable a young noble to pay for three offices to which Leo had appointed him, the

**EXPENSIVE EXECUTIVE** *Left:* Leo X knew how to win friends, influence people, and spend money.

**POWERFUL PREACHER** *Above:* Johannes Bugenhagen was a popular and beloved pastor to Wittenberg Protestants, even if he was a bit long-winded.

pope issued an indulgence for special sale in Germany. A Dominican, Johann Tetzel, was given the task of promotion, to which Luther reacted with his theses. The rest, as they say, is history.

Leo condemned Luther's teachings in 1520 with the bull *Exsurge Domine*, calling the reformer "a wild boar" who had invaded "the Lord's vineyard." When Luther refused to recant, Leo excommunicated him and called for the secular government to punish him as a heretic.

In 1521 Leo's armies defeated the French at Milan. Characteristically he celebrated the triumph with an all-night banquet, from which he caught a chill, developed a fever, and died. In his brief seven years as pope, he had spent an estimated 5,000,000 ducats (over \$22,000,000) and left behind a debt of nearly another 1,000,000. With the papal coffers empty and the papal residence plundered, Leo's coffin had to be lit by half-burned candles borrowed from another funeral. His successor, Adrian VI, was the last non-Italian pope until John Paul II.

#### JOHANNES BUGENHAGEN (1485–1558)

Bugenhagen, the popular Protestant minister of the city church in Wittenberg, loved to preach and was reluctant to quit. In *Table Talk*, Luther is reported to have told of a man who came home from church on Sunday, expecting to find a hot meal waiting for him. When his wife



**WATCH THIS** Spalatin, Luther, Bugenhagen, Erasmus, Melancthon, and other reformers are among those gathering around a miracle of Jesus in this Cranach painting.

briefly, he married another instead. When Luther eventually decided to follow Bugenhagen's example, Bugenhagen performed the ceremony and defended the marriage of Christian clergy in print.

Bugenhagen was the great popularizer of the Lutheran Reformation. He had a gift for making difficult ideas clear and understandable to people who lacked the ability to follow an intricate argument or to distinguish subtle shades of difference. No one was more faithful to Luther in the quarrels that troubled the church.

But Bugenhagen was not simply an echo chamber in which the ideas of Martin Luther could reverberate with a minimum of static interference. He was also a gifted organizer who translated the theology of Luther into the structures of congregational life—writing church orders, liturgies, and instructions for various church bodies throughout northern Germany from 1528 to 1544. He was the one Lutheran reformer who grasped the importance of institutions for the life of faith.

Two characteristics of Bugenhagen's church orders deserve special mention. The first was his persistent attempt to give as much autonomy as possible to the local congregation; the second was his effort to provide for some supervision in the form of an office of superintendent. The superintendent was for Bugenhagen the evangelical equivalent of the Roman Catholic bishop. He was to oversee the pastors in his district to make certain that the doctrine they preached was "pure" and that the lives they lived conformed to the Gospel that they preached.

When Luther died in 1546, Bugenhagen gave his funeral address. He took the death of Luther hard and seemed to age more rapidly after that. Nevertheless he remained by his post, even when Wittenberg was besieged and fell to the emperor—although because Bugenhagen wished to remain at the university and in the city church, where he felt he was still needed, he adapted with what seemed to many other Lutherans disgraceful ease.

Bugenhagen died in April 1558 and was buried under the altar of the city church. He had been throughout his life Luther's close friend and adviser. But Luther was more than his friend; he was his fate.

### JOHANN MAIER ECK (1486–1543)

Professor of theology at the University of Ingolstadt, Johann Eck was on good terms with Luther until the controversy over indulgences broke out. Eck's attack on Luther's theses especially galled the reformer, not only because Eck was an old friend, but also because he was—unlike those "perfidious Italians" who opposed reform—a fellow German.

hurriedly put a half-cooked meal on the table, he was outraged and demanded an explanation. "Well," his wife said, somewhat flustered, "I thought Dr. Pommer [Bugenhagen's nickname] was going to preach today." Bugenhagen was so widely respected that his penchant for preaching long sermons was overlooked as the one regrettable weakness in an otherwise splendid pastor.

Bugenhagen, who had studied the classics rather than theology, was nevertheless ordained to the priesthood in 1509. Like many other Protestant reformers, he was influenced by Erasmus (see "The man who yielded to no one," pp. 46–49) to undertake a deeper study of the Bible and the church fathers. Unlike Luther he had no real background in late medieval scholastic theology. In 1517 he read the first writings of Luther to be published in Germany.

Shocked at first but eventually persuaded, he began to correspond with Luther and finally set out for Wittenberg to learn more from Luther himself. He arrived in 1521, shortly before Luther departed for his fateful confrontation at the Diet of Worms.

Luther was quick to see that a man of unusual talent had come to Wittenberg and cast about to find a place where he could make the best use of him. He settled on the city church, whose pulpit had recently fallen vacant, and succeeded in installing Bugenhagen there in 1523.

Of all the reformers in Wittenberg, Bugenhagen was the first to marry; in 1522, after courting one woman





**DREADED DEBATER** Left: Johann Eck was cordial with Luther until the indulgence controversy broke out.

**CONSTANT COMPANION** Above: Philipp Melancthon did not agree with Luther on everything, but the Reformation might not have taken shape as it did without him.

A public debate was arranged in 1519 at the University of Leipzig, with Eck on one side and Luther (with fellow reformer Karlstadt) on the other. The scene was tense: Leipzig's town council provided Eck with a bodyguard of 76 men, while Luther and Karlstadt arrived in town with 200 students armed with battle axes. Charges and countercharges flew in sharp repartee for 18 days.

The debate turned the focus of the controversy from indulgences to spiritual authority. Does the church have the right to issue indulgences? At last Duke George the Bearded, the patron of Leipzig who hosted the debate, called it to a halt.

The next year Eck helped procure Luther's condemnation in the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*. In Luther's public response, *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*, he suspected as much, claiming that the papal document was "the progeny of that man of lies, dissimulation, errors, heresy, that monster Johann Eck.... Indeed, the style and the spittle all point to Eck."

The pope appointed Eck as his special inquisitor to publish the document in the German areas of Franconia and Bavaria. But Eck met with considerable opposition. In Leipzig he had to hide for his life in a cloister; in Wittenberg his own works were burned by university students, along with canon law and the papal bull. Nevertheless for the rest of his life, Eck organized Catholic opposition to the Lutheran Reformation.

### PHILIPP MELANCTHON (1497–1560)

In a canny, though unfair, estimate of himself and his contemporaries, Luther once remarked: "Substance and words, Melancthon; words without substance, Erasmus; substance without words, Luther; neither substance nor words, Karlstadt."

Luther's high estimate of Melancthon seems justified, for he became the Reformation's systematizer of Lutheran doctrine. Nevertheless their close friendship was not without difficulties.

Melancthon was born in Bretten in southwestern Germany, his family name was Schwartzert, and his father was an armorer for the elector. In accordance with the common practice of the humanists (who prized Greek and Latin learning, he translated his rather ordinary German name (meaning "black earth") into the more elegant Greek word for the same thing: *Melancthon*.

In 1518 at the age of 21, the young Melancthon accepted the call to become professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg. His interests were primarily literary; he went there with the intention of purifying the teaching of Aristotle from what he thought were the absurd opinions of the medieval Aristotelians.

However he soon came under the influence of Luther, who persuaded him to take up theology instead. Luther admired Melancthon's vast classical erudition and his talent for careful and precise definition.



**BROTHERS IN ARMS** Melancthon and Luther—are they agreeing or debating in this 20th-c. memorial?

Melancthon chose to remain a layman, though he did yield to Luther's persistent urging to earn the first theological degree obtained at Wittenberg.

Melancthon was a shrewd and tireless scholar, a master of many subjects. At the same time, he was a bewildering combination of contradictory qualities. Although a gentle and irenic man who won not only respect but also firm friendship from his students, he could unleash a tempest to rage and crackle around the ears of a dullard who had spent the evening in a tavern rather than at his books. He displayed what Luther regarded as a naive trust in astrology and refused to accept a call to England because of a prophecy that he would die by drowning if he went on a sea voyage to the north.

In 1521 Melancthon published the first edition of his most important theological book, the *Loci Communes* (essentially "basic concepts"), a discussion of Lutheran theology and a manual of the fundamental principles of Luther's thought. Melancthon did not attempt to walk his own independent way. And yet from the very beginning, there were differences.

For Luther, transformed Christians had no need of the law or of rule books to tell them what to do. A good tree bears good fruit automatically; one does not need to read a botany book to an apple tree to save it from possible confusion. Melancthon, on the other hand, was very wary of this situational approach, explaining in some detail the place of the law in making the

Christian life holy. Also, in contrast to Luther's insistence that Scripture has a center from which it must be understood, Melancthon quoted and used all Scripture as if it were of equal authority.

In later editions of Melancthon's book these deviations from Luther became even more pronounced, and the philosophy of Aristotle regained a position of prominence. Luther, who insisted on a theology of the cross, opposed all philosophical theology. Melancthon, however, took up the tools of philosophy to ground, clarify, and order the biblical theology of Luther. Under him the scope of doctrines to be believed widened increasingly until they embraced the whole Bible understood in the light of the three ecumenical creeds and the teaching of Luther.

Luther's idea that the Gospel is a message of divine judgment and grace, so clearly elucidated in the first edition of the *Loci*, became at least partially obscured. The Gospel became for Melancthon a system of truths that it is our duty to accept. Sound doctrine became one of the marks of the church. The church is composed of "those who hold pure doctrine and agree in it."

Whatever their differences, the fates of the two men were inextricably bound together. Melancthon was Luther's companion and coworker at the Leipzig disputation in 1519 and the Marburg Colloquy in 1529.

While Luther was an outlaw under the ban of the empire, Melancthon represented Lutherans at Augsburg and wrote the *Augsburg Confession*, one of the fundamental confessional documents of the Protestant Reformation. Though Luther was impatient with what he regarded as Melancthon's diplomatic equivocations at Augsburg, he nevertheless approved of the *Confession*.

Melancthon's theological development infuriated some of Luther's other disciples, who attempted to drive a wedge between Luther and Melancthon. When Luther died, they sprang once more to the attack.

Melancthon faced them with a weary resignation. He had not wished to become a theologian in the first place. He was, after all, a professor of Greek and the classics. The whole world seemed to be seized with madness, and he prayed for deliverance from the "fury of the theologians." On April 19, 1560, he died peacefully in his home in Wittenberg. ¶

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# The man who painted the Reformation

Much of what we know about the physical appearance of Luther, his family, his friends, and other leaders of the German Reformation comes from the art of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), German painter and master of woodcuts.

Cranach, son of artist Hans Maler, was born in Kronach (modern-day Bavaria) and apprenticed to his own father as a youngster. Little else is known about his early life, but in 1502 he emerged in Vienna signing his work not “Lucas Maler” but “Lucas Cranach” after his hometown. In 1505 he became court painter to Frederick the Wise of Saxony. He moved to Wittenberg where he not only created paintings, woodcuts, and engravings for the court, but also supervised the general design of court festivities—essentially, a wedding planner for the sixteenth century.

In the early days of the Reformation, Cranach joined the Lutheran cause and became Luther’s friend. Cranach made at least five portraits of Luther; portraits of Luther’s parents, wife, and daughter Magdalena; portraits of Elector Frederick and his chaplain, Georg Spalatin; and views of the town and Castle Church of Wittenberg. He also illustrated the first edition of Luther’s German translation of the New Testament.

Cranach’s illustrations of the Book of Revelation were so impressive that one of Luther’s opponents

**HOLD STILL, WAIT YOUR TURN** A 19th-c. artist imagines Cranach painting one of his five portraits of Luther. Melancthon stands in the background.

borrowed them for his *own* translations of the New Testament. The ironic result was a Catholic version of the Scriptures with illustrations of Rome as the Babylon of the Apocalypse!

A banker as well as an artist, Cranach rose in Wittenberg society as much through his shrewd business sense as through his artistic talent; both were considerable. Though he loved Luther, Cranach worried that the man’s generosity could get him in financial trouble. He once refused to honor a financial promise Luther had made. Luther’s response: “At least you can’t accuse me of stinginess.”

Cranach lost his job as court painter when his boss, now Elector Johann Frederick, Frederick the Wise’s nephew, was defeated in battle and captured in 1547. Elector Johann was freed in 1552, and Cranach along with him, but he died soon after. His sons Hans and Lucas the Younger, as well as other disciples in his workshop, carried on his artistic memory and continued to produce artwork for the court. —*Paul Thigpen and the editors. A shorter version of this sidebar appeared in CH issue 34.*

# The man who yielded to no one

ERASMUS “LAID THE EGG THAT LUTHER HATCHED” MANY SAID. WHY AREN’T WE CELEBRATING HIS 500TH ANNIVERSARY?

**David C. Fink**

IN 1508 Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) ran out of money while on a research trip in Italy. Already 40 years old (or 43: his date of birth remains disputed), priest and scholar Erasmus, the illegitimate son of a priest and a doctor’s daughter, was just beginning to emerge as a rising star in the learned circles of northern European humanists. Humanists were scholars who wanted to revive the literary heritage of ancient Greece and Rome.

Erasmus’s reputation was based on hard work. His *Enchiridion of the Christian Soldier* established his reputation as a spiritual and educational reformer. *Enchiridion* means “that which is held in the hand”—at once a “handbook” and a “dagger.” The title hints at the central thrust of Erasmus’s work as a reformer: renewed spiritual intensity among lay Christians, honed to a fine edge by a deeper engagement with Scripture and by wielding the dagger of prayer.

Erasmus had also published his own Latin translation of the New Testament, began a corrected version of its Greek text, and issued a collection of some 4,000 proverbs and maxims culled from ancient Greek and Latin literature. Erasmus’s laborious scrutiny of such ancient manuscripts made him a household name wherever classical literature was taught in Europe.

Being a household name did not, however, pay the bills in 1508. So Erasmus moved to northern Italy and accepted a job as tutor to 18-year-old Alexander Stewart and his younger brother, illegitimate sons of James IV of Scotland. By all accounts Erasmus and Alexander, installed by his father as archbishop of St. Andrews despite his young age, got on famously. Before his departure for Scotland in 1509, the archbishop gave his tutor a token of his affection: a signet ring bearing the image of Terminus, the ancient Roman god of bounds.



Erasmus adopted the god’s image and motto—*Nulli concedo* (“I yield to no one”)—as his own. It was a strange choice for a faithful Catholic priest whose earlier writings movingly commended imitating Christ’s simple humility. Indeed several of his friends thought it smacked of arrogance.

But Erasmus explained that the words were those of the god, not his own, and as such stood as a reminder of the inescapable bounds placed on human life by death—the final conqueror who really would yield to



**TUTOR TO ROYALTY** *Left:* Erasmus took a tutoring job because he needed money, but ended up with a friend and a lifelong motto.

**HE SAID WHAT?** *Right:* Erasmus's translation of the New Testament departed from the text of the Latin Vulgate, authorized for Catholic worship and study, in significant ways.

no one. He received a bitter reminder of this in 1513, when his protégé Alexander accompanied his father the king on an invasion of England, only to be cut down at Flodden Field.

## THE RUTHLESS POPE

That same year brought another death, though, which Erasmus greeted with glee. Julius II (pope from 1503 to 1513) was widely regarded as one of the most ruthless popes of his era. He focused his tremendous personal energy on making secure the defense of the Papal States (the territory on the Italian peninsula ruled directly by the pope), as well as recovering lands lost to rival powers Venice and France.

In 1506 Erasmus had witnessed the triumphal entry of *Giuliano il terribile* ("Julius the terrible") into Bologna after a long and grueling siege of the city. "I could not help groaning within myself," he wrote, "when I compared these triumphs, at which even lay princes would have blushed, with the majesty of the apostles, who converted the world by the majesty of their teaching."

Not all contemporaries were so dismayed. In the year of Julius's death, a little-known—at least at that time—Florentine politician named Niccolò Machiavelli wrote admiringly: "All these enterprises prospered with him, and so much the more to his credit, inasmuch as he did everything to strengthen the church and not any private person." Machiavelli's appreciation would echo through history in *The Prince*, a handbook for rulers on how to win power and get ahead in life.

Erasmus held a far dimmer view. Within a year of Julius's death, an anonymous—and vicious—satire began circulating. Though Erasmus never owned up to having written *Julius Excluded from Heaven*, most modern critics see his fingerprints all over it. The dialogue is set outside the gates of heaven, where Julius and his genius (guardian angel) come face to face with the limits of papal power:

**Julius:** What the devil is this? The doors don't open? Somebody must have changed the lock or broken it.

**Genius:** It seems more likely that you didn't bring the proper key; for this door doesn't open to the same key as a secret money-chest. . . .

**Julius:** I didn't have any other key but this; I don't see why we need a different one. . . .

**Genius:** I don't either; but the fact is, we're still on the outside.

St. Peter responds to Julius's demands for admit-



tance by reminding him that "this is a fortress to be captured with good deeds, not ugly words." When Julius proudly describes a nearly exhaustive catalog of vices as his qualifications for entry, St. Peter responds with mounting horror:

**Peter:** Oh, madman! So far I have heard nothing but the words of a warlord, not a churchman but a worldling, not a mere worldling but a pagan, and a scoundrel lower than any pagan! You boast of having dissolved treaties, stirred up wars, and encouraged the slaughter of men. That is the power of Satan, not a pope. Anyone who becomes the vicar of Christ should try to follow as closely as possible the example provided by Christ. In him the ultimate power coincided with ultimate goodness; his wisdom was supreme, but of the utmost simplicity. . . . If the devil, that prince of darkness, wanted to send to earth a vicar of hell, whom would he choose but someone like you? In what way did you ever act like an apostolic person?

**Julius:** What could be more apostolic than strengthening the church of Christ?

**Peter:** But if the church is the flock of Christian believers held together by the spirit of Christ, then you seem to me to have subverted the church by inciting the entire world to bloody wars, while you yourself remained wicked, noisome, and unpunished. . . . Christ made us servants and himself the



head, unless you think a second head is needed. But in what way has the church been strengthened?

**Julius:** . . . That hungry, impoverished church of yours is now adorned with a thousand impressive ornaments.

**Peter:** Such as? An earnest faith?

**Julius:** More of your jokes.

**Peter:** Holy doctrine?

**Julius:** Don't play dumb.

**Peter:** Contempt for the things of the world?

**Julius:** Let me tell you: real ornaments are what I mean. . . . Regal palaces, spirited horses and fine mules, crowds of servants, well-trained troops, assiduous retainers—

**Genius:** —high-class whores and oily pimps—

**Julius:** —plenty of gold, purple, and so much money in taxes that there's not a king in the world who wouldn't appear base and poor if his wealth and state were compared with those of the Roman pontiff. . . .

The word picture of Julius in this exchange is a grotesque caricature, but the issues in dispute were real enough. They were the central planks in Erasmus's reforming agenda: the importance of earnest faith and holy doctrine for the Christian life, along with contempt for the world and, above all, an imitation of the life of Christ. Against these Erasmus set the cynicism and political ambition of an institutional mentality. Julius had identified the church wholly with its exterior trappings—and ultimately, with himself—rather than with its true spiritual nature.

Erasmus did not take issue with church doctrine, but rather with the seductions of power, the beguiling distractions of materialism, and a forgetfulness of

**WISDOM, NOT POWER, NEEDED** *Left:* In this woodcut from *Julius Excluded*, the worldly pope finds he's brought the wrong key.

**PLENTY OF GOLD AND PURPLE** *Right:* Julius commands several artists, including Michelangelo, to build the Vatican and St. Peter's.

God's eternal judgment that ought to keep all human aspirations within their proper limits. The whole comedy of the dialogue results from Julius's incredulity, at first bemused and then enraged, at having found that the key of worldly power will not unlock the door of wisdom, the gateway to heaven.

## RETURNING TO THE SOURCES

Erasmus's practical solution centered on a return to the sources of Christian faith and piety: the church fathers and, above all, the New Testament. During his life he produced editions of the writings of Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Irenaeus, Ambrose, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, and Jerome, including biographical information and translations into Latin of those fathers who had written in Greek.

More controversially, he produced an edition of the Greek New Testament. In its second edition (1519), he added a fresh Latin translation and an explanation of how textual readings were arrived at, especially in difficult passages. Humanists and reform-minded scholars celebrated this *Novum Testamentum Omne*, though many found its amended readings unsettling. Erasmus's friend Thomas Linacre, after first reading the New Testament in Greek, is reported to have remarked, "Either this is not the gospel, or we are not Christians."



Erasmus took considerable heat from conservative theologians suspicious of the ways in which his Greek text undermined the language of the Vulgate, the Latin translation used in Catholic worship and as the basis for theological writings. Erasmus's translation changed its wordings in some crucial places. But if the Western church had not erupted in a conflagration over the teachings of an obscure Augustinian friar in 1517, it is likely that little would have ever come of such complaints.

In the wake of Luther, critics charged that by tinkering with textual foundations, Erasmus was giving aid and comfort to a dangerous new theology that virtually scrapped the medieval church's sacramental system.

Take Matthew 4:17, rendered in the Vulgate as "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say: 'Do penance [*paenitentiam agite*], for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Erasmus's Greek, however, replaced "Do penance" with the single word, *metanoiete*—"Repent!"

### LAYING A THEOLOGICAL EGG

In 1518, writing to his friend and mentor Johannes Staupitz, Luther explained the impact of this altered reading on his own theological development before he wrote the *95 Theses*:

It happened that I learned—thanks to the work and talent of the most learned men who teach us Greek and Hebrew with such great devotion—that the word *poenitentia* means *metanoia* in Greek. . . . While this thought was still agitating me, behold, suddenly around us the new war trumpets of indulgences and the bugles of pardon started to sound.

It is small wonder that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched" quickly became a common saying.

Erasmus himself was anything but pleased by these developments. Lampooning a bellicose and spend-thrift pope like Julius after he was safely dead was one thing; uprooting, as Luther had done, a centuries-old set of devotional practices that formed the bedrock of Catholic piety was quite another. Erasmus saw himself as calling the church to return to the sources of its own most profound insights; Luther he regarded as a dangerous radical.

As battle lines hardened between Catholics and reformers in the years following the indulgence



**IF THEY HAD ONLY LISTENED**  
Artist Hans Holbein captured Erasmus in a thoughtful mood; a medal by Quentin Massys also paired him with Terminus (*below*).

controversy, Erasmus faced mounting pressure from both sides to declare his loyalties. Despite his sympathies with many aspects of the new reform movement, and especially with the reformers' scathing criticisms of the church's corrupt practices, Luther's gospel—and his personality—were too much for Erasmus to swallow.

Erasmus publicly broke with Luther in 1524 over the bondage of the human will, but neither Luther nor his conservative critics were content to leave him in peace.

Erasmus spent the last 12 years of his life watching the study of classical and patristic literature he had labored so long to promote co-opted by increasingly militant Protestants or falling into disrepute among increasingly reactionary Catholics.

In a print (*above*) made about a year before his death, Erasmus stands by a bust of that old god Terminus. Despite their lavish background, the two are flanked by a pair of scowling gods, arms folded, forbidding a return to the times of plenty. The expression on the face of Erasmus is one of thoughtful pensiveness, as though having reached the limit of—his wits? his intellectual powers? his life?—he now stands contemplating an unknown and uncertain future.

Terminus, by contrast, wears a mocking grin. Erasmus himself strove for reform, yet resisted the reformers. Caught between the forces of a divisive Protestantism and Catholic reaction, Erasmus never fully yielded to either side. His hopes for a renewal of Christendom through a return to the sources of Christian faith and piety were dashed against the rocks of confessional conflict. Death and schism triumphed in the end. ☐



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# After the revolution

THE BEGINNING OF THE REFORMATION WAS NOT THE END OF LUTHER'S TROUBLES

Mark U. Edwards Jr.

MARTIN LUTHER spent the early years of the Reformation battling the Roman Catholic establishment. But it wasn't long before the fledgling movement was battling itself.

In the mid-1520s Luther was forced to respond to the first major splits within the Protestant ranks. He faced a popular uprising known as the Peasants' War. At the peak of the uprising, expecting imminent death, Luther decided to further break with tradition: he married. Then he became increasingly involved in building what became Lutheranism. And in his final years, convinced he was living in the last days of the world, he issued violent treatises against all the enemies of God as he saw them—Catholics, “fanatical” Protestants, Turks, and Jews.

It is one thing to picture a new vision of the Christian faith, but it is quite another to give this vision form to pass down through generations. Luther's turbulent later years began with a major turning point in 1525.

## CREATING A CHURCH

In that year Luther married 26-year-old former nun Katharine von Bora (see “Momentous vows,” pp. 28–32, and “Mother of the Reformation,” p. 33). From their inauspicious beginning, Martin and Katie developed love and respect for each other; Luther called his favorite Pauline epistle, Galatians, “my Katharine von Bora.”

In 1529, to define Lutheran beliefs, Luther issued the *Small Catechism* and the *Large Catechism*. These taught the fundamentals of Lutheran Christianity to a population distressingly ignorant of even the basics of the faith. A great lover of music, Luther also wrote numerous hymns, many of which are still sung today—the most famous being “A Mighty Fortress.”

In 1530 Luther's colleague Philipp Melancthon (see “Preachers, popes, and princes,” pp. 39–44) penned an enduring summary of the Lutheran faith in the *Augsburg Confession*. The *Confession* was meant to approach the Roman Catholic position as closely as possible without surrendering any crucial issues. It summed up the Lutheran position and listed Catholic abuses that Lutherans felt needed to be corrected (for



**A LASTING LEGACY** Luther's imposing figure still watches over the city of Wittenberg in this monument.

example, prohibiting clergy to marry and withholding the Eucharistic cup from the laity). The *Confession* remains a defining doctrinal statement for the Lutheran branch of Christianity.

As institutional Lutheranism developed, Lutheran political leaders gained increasing influence. In 1531 the Schmalkaldic League, an alliance of Protestant princes, was formed to defend German states that subscribed to Lutheranism against possible Roman Catholic attack. In 1536 Lutherans and Protestants in southern Germany reached a concord on the Lord's Supper. The southern German Protestants accepted the Lutheran insistence that Christ's body and blood were received in the Lord's Supper even by the “unworthy,”





**DEJA VU** Above: Martin Luther lived as a married man in this former cloister in Wittenberg where he had once lived as a monk.

**OLD PRIEST, NEW PREACHER** Left: Protestant cartoons argued that their preachers proclaimed, "So says God," while priests could only say, "So says the Pope."

While Luther took part in all these political and religious maneuverings, he still continued his theological and pastoral labors. In 1534 he and his colleagues completed their German translation of the Bible, which has greatly influenced German language and literature ever since. Luther also lectured on biblical books from both the Old and New Testaments, helping the University of Wittenberg prepare the hundreds of new pastors now needed to bring the Reformation to the grassroots.

and Lutherans let drop the question whether this also applied to the "godless." Not incidentally the agreement also regularized a military alliance between these northern and southern parties.

In 1539 Luther produced a famous treatise on the doctrine of the church, arguing that it could not depend upon church fathers and the councils to establish its faith, but only on Holy Scripture. Councils had no authority to introduce matters of faith or new works, but only to defend faith and good works found in Scripture.

Meanwhile in 1535 Pope Paul III had announced a general council to settle the growing schism. It took 10 years before it actually convened at Trent [more on this in an upcoming issue—Editors]. Protestant princes rejected the Council of Trent for religious and political reasons, although some Protestant theologians, including Luther, argued that Lutheran princes should attend.

## ORDERING OBEDIENCE

By his own admission, Luther was an angry man. Anger was his defining sin. But when directed against the enemies of God, it helped him, he said, to write well, to pray, and to preach: "Anger refreshes all my blood, sharpens my mind, and drives away temptations."

Though he knew his harshness and anger offended some, Luther retorted: "I was born to war with fanatics and devils. Thus my books are very stormy and bellicose. I must root out the stumps and trunks, hew away the thorns and briar, fill in the puddles. I am the rough woodsman, who must pioneer and hew a path."

Luther's anger grew as he aged, as evidenced in his vitriolic attacks on the Peasants' War of 1525. In 1524 some German peasants rebelled. Reformation ideas were one possible cause, although economic oppression



**SMALL CATECHISM, BIG PLANS** Luther's catechisms instructed the faithful, giving Protestant parents resources to raise Protestant children.

acknowledged Christ is truly present, but this spiritual presence was not tied to the bread and wine; it depended upon the faith of the communicants.

Luther believed Christ's words "This is my body. . . . This is my blood. . . ." mean that Christians receive the body and blood of Christ "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. For Luther, to call this into question was to deny the promise of Christ and undercut the Incarnation. He believed the essence of the Gospel was at stake (see "Christ present everywhere," pp. 23–25).

Luther and other reformers gathered in Marburg in 1529 to hammer out an agreement—but none was reached. Luther angrily denounced his opponents, saying he could no more accept their position than deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

But even this was not Luther's last vehement denunciation. In the years just before his death, he issued several ferocious (and for admirers both then and now, embarrassing) treatises. Why were they so fierce?

### ATTACKING THE DEVIL

Luther's reading of the Bible convinced him that practically from the beginning of the world, there had been a perpetual struggle between the true and false church. What happened to the prophets and apostles could and would happen to the church of his day. Naturally Luther concluded the papacy was the Antichrist. Protestant opponents were "false brethren," like those who had plagued the true prophets and apostles. The Turks, who threatened Europe from the east, were for him a clear sign of the end times: they represented Gog and the little horn in the Book of Daniel. Jews were suffering God's wrath for rejecting the true Messiah.

Behind all these members of the false church, Luther thought, looms the Devil, the father of lies. Often Luther directed his attacks not at his human opponents but at the Devil, whom he saw as their master. Of course, for Luther no language was too harsh when attacking the Devil.

It would be tempting to dismiss these writings as aberrations, as "medieval remnants," or as the simple products of old age or ill health, but these "last testaments" accurately express Luther's views and are integral to his theology. Luther's poor health and old age may have exacerbated his anger, but these attacks are consistent, in content and passion, with his earlier writings.

In Luther's later years, his health, delicate even as a monk, gradually declined. He suffered from constipation, diarrhea, hemorrhoids, dizziness, ringing in his ears, an ulcer on his leg, kidney stones, and heart problems. He also experienced bouts of depression (battles

was involved as well. Little by little, the uprising spread among the peasants' weary and oppressed comrades.

The peasants listed Luther as an acceptable arbiter of their demands, and he attempted to mediate. Luther first blamed the unrest on rulers who persecuted the Gospel and mistreated their subjects. Many of the peasants' demands were just, he said, and for the sake of peace, the rulers should accommodate them.

On the other hand, Luther warned the peasants that they were blaspheming Christ by quoting the Gospel to justify their secular demands. In fact, he argued, the Gospel teaches obedience to secular authorities and the humble suffering of injustice (see "The political Luther," pp. 34–36).

As unrest spread Luther began to side with the princes. In May 1525 he wrote *Against the Robbing and Murdering Horde of Peasants*, in which he urged the princes to "smite, strangle, and stab [the peasants], secretly or openly, for nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you and a whole land with you."

Luther had his way. The peasants were brutally suppressed, and Luther's advocacy of their violent repression remains controversial to this day.

### FIGHTING FOR THE FAITH

Next Luther turned his wrath and attention to a controversy over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Other reformers—Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich, John Oecolampadius of Basel, and Martin Bucer of Strasbourg—denied Christ's physical presence in the bread and wine. They





**PUTTING DOWN A MAD DOG** Above : The Peasants' War brought rulers and subjects into conflict; Luther eventually sided with the rulers.

**ALREADY SPLITTING UP** Left: At the Marburg Colloquy, reformers tried to reach an agreement on the Lord's Supper, but failed.

with the Devil, he called them); and the question, "Are you alone wise?" gnawed at him.

But his many maladies hardly slowed his productivity. Excluding Bible translations, Luther produced some 360 published works from 1516 to 1530. From 1531 to his death, he added another 184 to this incredible total. At the same time, he lectured regularly at the university, preached for long stretches in the parish church, wrote hundreds of letters, advised German princes, and closely followed the events of his day.

In a letter of January 1546, Luther described himself as "old, decrepit, sluggish, inactive, and now one-eyed," hoping for a "well-deserved rest" but still overloaded with writing, speaking, acting, and doing. A week later he was off on business once again, making his third trip to Mansfeld to mediate a dispute between Mansfeld's two rulers. On February 18, on this trip, he died in Eisleben. In his pocket were the beginning pages of a projected manuscript against Roman Catholics. To his last breath, the "rough woodsman" was resisting "Satan's monsters."

In another pocket, though, another slip of paper was found. Perhaps Luther carried it to remind himself of his limitations:.

No one can understand Virgil in his *Bucolics* unless he has been a herdsman for five years. No one can understand Virgil in his *Georgics* unless

he has been a farmer for five years. No one can fully understand Cicero in his letters unless he has spent twenty-five in a great commonwealth.

Let no one think that he has sufficiently tasted Holy Scripture, unless he has governed the churches with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles, for a hundred years.

Touch not this divine Aeneid. Rather, fall on your knees and worship at its footsteps.

We are beggars, that's the truth. ☐

*Mark U. Edwards Jr. is an advisory member of the faculty of divinity at Harvard Divinity School and the author of Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–46 and Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther. This article is adapted from CH 39.*

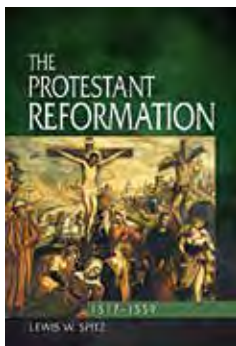
Stay tuned for the next issue in CH's Reformation series, publishing in May 2016, which will introduce many people who "stirred up the kingdom" by taking Reformation ideas into the political realm—peasants who revolted, a priest who led a Swiss alliance, and a new group who rejected cooperation between church and state. Read their stories and many more as we continue to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

# Recommended resources

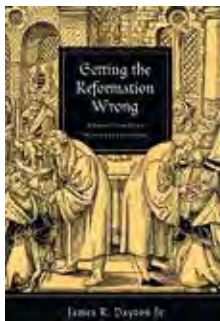
WHERE SHOULD YOU GO TO UNDERSTAND LUTHER AND THE EARLY REFORMATION? HERE ARE SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CH EDITORIAL STAFF AND THIS ISSUE'S AUTHORS

## BOOKS

• Since this is our first of four issues on the Reformation, we'll start with some survey histories. (A more complete list is available in our blog post dated July 5, 2014). The most magisterial of these is probably Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Reformation: A History* (2003), a massive work that goes from 1490 to 1700 and covers all aspects of many reform movements across Europe. Some other classics include Hans Hillerbrand's *The Division of Christendom* (2007; it has extensive coverage of the theological issues at stake); Euan Cameron's *The European Reformation* (1991); and Lewis Spitz's *The Protestant Reformation, 1517–1559* (1985).

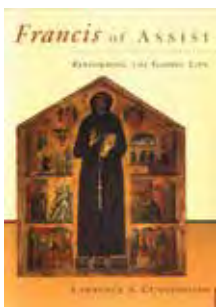


• If you want to start with something a little shorter and more accessible, James Payton's *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Common Misunderstandings* (2010) gives a closer and more nuanced look at many things we think we know.



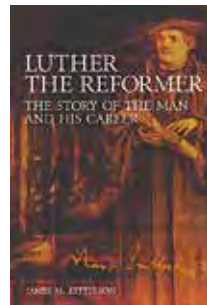
• Surveys focusing on the Reformation in Germany include Thomas Brady, *German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400–1650* (2009) and Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities* (1975).

• Finally, it is worth reading in tandem two books on Protestantism's spread from the 1500s to the 2000s that come from very different theological perspectives: Catholic Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* (2012) and Protestant Alister McGrath's *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution* (2007).

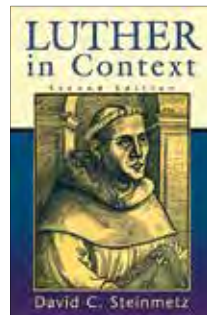


• You can read more about some other attempts at “course corrections” mentioned in this issue in G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923) and *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1933); Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (2004); and Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (1984).

• The classic biography of Luther is Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand* (originally published in 1950 and reprinted many times since). Some other excellent biographies worth consulting are Heiko Obermann's *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (2006); Martin Marty's *Martin Luther: A Life* (2008); and James Kittelson's *Luther the Reformer* (2003).

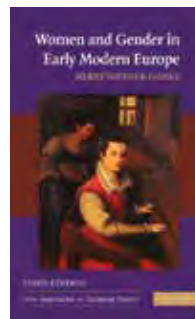


• Good introductory theological treatments of Luther include Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther* (1966); Timothy Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (2009); and Mark U. Edwards Jr., *Luther's Last Battles* (1983) and *Luther and the False Brethren* (1975).



• The people surrounding Luther are brought vividly to life in David C. Steinmetz's *Luther in Context* (2002) and *Reformers in the Wings* (2001), which features some lesser-known folks whom you'll meet throughout all four issues in our CH series.

• Biographies of Katie Luther include Ernst Kroger, *Mother of the Reformation* (2013) and Rudolf and Marilyn Markward, *Katharina von Bora: A Reformation Life* (2002). Also check out Merry Wiesner-Hanks's study of women in the Reformation era, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (2008) and Roland Bainton's three-book series on women in the Reformation (most relevant to this issue is *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* [1973]). And finally, read Luther in his own words from *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (1958).





## CHRISTIAN HISTORY ISSUES

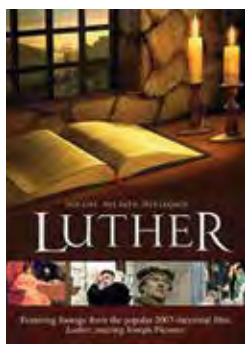
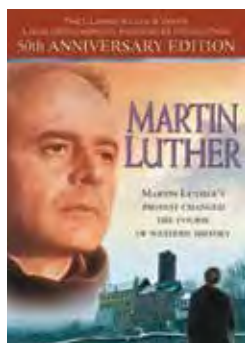
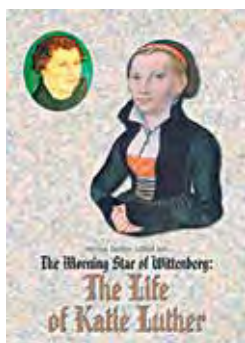


CH has no shortage of issues related to the Reformation. Here are some focusing on Luther and on his medieval background. All are available to read on our website, and many are available for purchase.

- *History of Worship*
- 34 *Martin Luther: The Early Years*
- 39 *Martin Luther: The Later Years and Legacy*
- 49 *Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*
- 73 *Thomas Aquinas*
- 94 *Building the City of God*
- 110 *Callings*

## VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO

Videos related to this topic include *Here I Stand*; *Martin Luther* (1953 black-and-white feature film); *Martin Luther* (PBS drama); *Luther* (2003 feature film); *In the Footsteps of Martin Luther*; *Luther—His Life, His Path, His Legacy*; *Opening the Door to Luther*; *Where Luther Walked*; and *The Morning Star of Wittenberg—The Life of Katie Luther*.

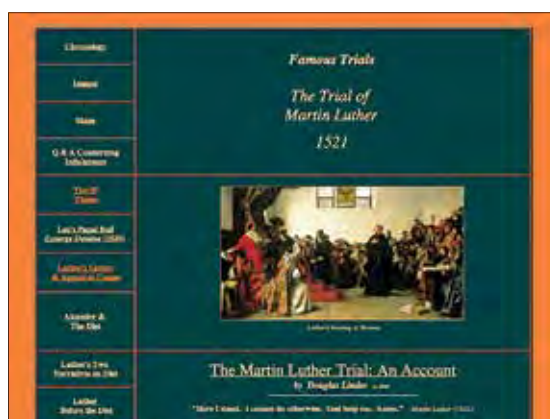


## WEBSITES

(Read this issue online for direct links to all websites.) Many primary sources related to the history of the

Reformation, including the 95 *Theses*, can be found at Christian Classics Ethereal Library, the H. Henry Meeter Center Post-Reformation Digital Library (PRDL, which actually includes many Reformation-era texts as well), and the Medieval Sourcebook and Modern History Sourcebook hosted at Fordham University. A list of secondary sources, many of which are available as free ebook PDFs, is also available at PRDL.


You can read more about Luther's life at the German site Luther.de and see a re-created transcript of the Diet of Worms at the website Famous Trials. *The*



*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has a good explanation of Luther's theology and an extensive list of secondary sources. And Project Wittenberg attempts to collect texts and information not only about Luther but about later Lutheran theologians as well.

If you are interested in images of the Reformation, Pitts Theology Library at Emory University has a great collection of Reformation-era woodcuts, and the Cranach Digital Library has resources related to the career and artwork of Lucas Cranach. (Some of the artwork at the site is shown below).



Refo500 is a good source not only for news about events related to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation but also for links to resources and an interactive timeline of the Reformation. Finally, you can search back issues of the *Sixteenth Century Journal* for more on the Reformation and its aftermath (though articles require a fee to read). 



# THE MARTIN LUTHER DVD COLLECTION

## Martin Luther

This 1950s dramatic black-and-white classic film of Martin Luther's life was originally released in theaters worldwide and nominated for an Academy Award. It is a magnificent depiction of Luther and the forces at work in the surrounding society that resulted in his historic reforming efforts. This ever-popular film traces Luther's life from a guilt-burdened monk to his eventual break with the Roman church. Drama, 105 minutes.

DVD – #4623D, \$14.99

## Here I Stand

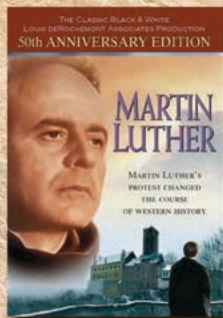
Award-winning producer and director T. N. Mohan goes to Germany to tell the story of its most famous son, whom he interprets from an overtly Protestant perspective. In this two-hour special, we come to understand Luther, his motivation, the turning points in his life, the issues he confronted, the opposition that sought to defeat him, and the profound changes brought about under his leadership and ministry. Documentary, 129 minutes.

DVD – #500778D, \$19.99

## Martin! God Loves You

*Martin! God Loves You* visualizes the story of Martin Luther and the Reformation especially for children ages 7 to 12. It features lighthearted illustrations and dramatic narration. Documentary, 30 minutes.

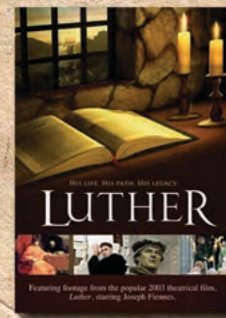
DVD – #500914D, \$19.99



## Luther: His Life, His Path, His Legacy

This comprehensive documentary traces the footsteps of the great reformer and reflects upon the places that have become inseparably connected with his name. The program features stunning dramatic footage from the 2003 theatrical film, *Luther*, along with interviews with experts discussing his life and work. Documentary, 90 minutes.

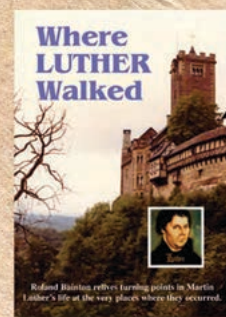
DVD – #501581D, \$19.99



## Where Luther Walked

How did Martin Luther, who sought only the quiet of a monastery, become a pivotal figure in Western history? Why did he object so strongly to indulgences? These and many other topics are addressed in this captivating, on-location documentary with the late Dr. Roland Bainton, longtime professor at Yale University, master storyteller, and author of *Here I Stand*. 30 minutes.

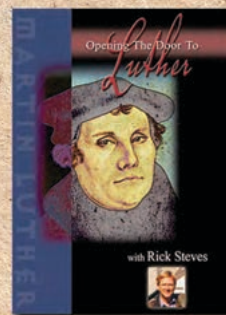
DVD – #501218D, \$14.99



## Opening the Door to Luther

Join popular public television travel host Rick Steves on an unforgettable trip to Germany's "Lutherlands." From Eisleben, where Luther was born, to Wittenberg, where he taught and preached, we learn about the tumultuous events of the Reformation and the monk at the center of it all. Documentary, 30 minutes.

DVD – #500951D, \$14.99

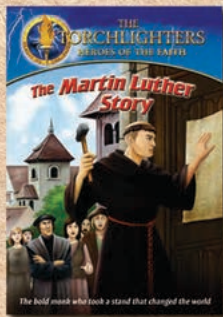


All 6 DVDs above for only \$29.99 (use #97554D) with coupon code **CHM115**

## COMING IN 2016!

### Torchlighters: The Martin Luther Story

Filled with suspense and intrigue, this fifteenth episode in the *Torchlighters* collection brings the faith-building message of the Reformation to children and teens through action-packed animation. 30 minutes.



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