



MARTIN LUTHER  
Reformation  
Giant,  
Part II

“Luther at Erfurt”  
by Joseph Noel Paton

When we concluded our study of Luther last time, we saw that he had been summoned to a meeting with Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg, where he was to repent of his heretical beliefs and teachings



against the pope and the authority of the church hierarchy, and specifically that the pope had no authority to institute a dogma teaching justification through any means other than Christ.

- Luther refused to recant, or renounce his beliefs.
- Cajetan was supposed to arrest Luther if he did not recant, but he did not.
- Luther slipped away from Augsburg at night, with the help of a Carmelite monk.
- In January 1519, at Altenburg in Saxony, the papal *nuncio* (or representative) Karl von Miltitz adopted a more conciliatory approach. Luther made certain concessions to the Saxon, who was a relative of the Frederick the Elector, and promised to remain silent if his opponents did.

- The theologian Johann Eck, however, was determined to expose Luther's doctrine in a public forum.
- Eck was a German Scholastic theologian, Roman Catholic priest, and early counterreformer who was among Martin Luther's most important theological opponents.
- In June and July 1519, Eck staged a disputation, or debate, with Luther's colleague Andreas Karlstadt at Leipzig, and invited Luther to speak as well.
- Luther's boldest assertion in the debate was that Matt. 16:18 does not confer on popes the exclusive right to interpret scripture, and that therefore neither popes nor church councils were infallible.

- To help us better understand the controversy between Luther and his followers, on the one hand, and the pope, the Catholic Church, Catholic theologians and Catholic theology, on the other hand, we need to understand the concept of the *magisterium*.
- The *magisterium* of the Catholic Church is the church's authority or office to give authentic interpretation of the Word of God, "whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition."
- According to the 1992 [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), the task of interpretation is vested uniquely in the pope and the bishops.

- According to the Catholic Catechism, Scripture and church tradition "make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church", and the *magisterium* is not independent of this, since "all that it proposes for belief as being divinely inspired is derived from this single deposit of faith."
- The content of Christ's divine revelation, as faithfully passed on by the Apostles, is called the Deposit of Faith, and consists of both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

- Throughout the Middle Ages, support for the primacy of the pope (spiritually and temporally) and his ability to speak authoritatively on matters of doctrine grew significantly.
- Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303), in the papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, asserted that the spiritual world, headed on earth by the pope, has authority over the temporal world, and that all must submit themselves to the authority of the pope to be saved.
- The work of Church councils were also included as part of the *magisterium*.

- Luther's challenges to the existing order in the church world also were challenges to the social and political order in emerging European nations during the 1500s.
- Remember there was no idea of separation of church and state in Luther's time.
- Instead, everyone accepted the idea of *Christendom*, which means that (virtually) everyone in a geographic area is Christian.
- There might be small groups of non-Christians (predominately Jews and Muslims), but the overall society is Christian and is in subjection to the church.

- Political rulers were supposed to be in subjection to the authority of the pope and the Catholic Church.
- *Christendom* came into being when the Roman Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., proclaiming toleration for the Christian religion throughout the Roman Empire.
- Constantine called the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. whose Nicene Creed included belief in "one holy catholic and apostolic Church." Emperor Theodosius I made Nicene Christianity the state church of the Roman Empire with the Edict of Thessalonica of 380 A.D.

“As pressure on Luther increased, those monks who chose to associate with him took risks. Rome knew that when he attacked canon [church] law, the legal foundations of the church that were a foundation of so much of European life, Luther was disobeying the church as well as its secular counterpart, the civil authority that enforced ecclesiastical edicts. Officials could seize him in the name of church and empire and put him to death. Friends and enemies alike were puzzled to see how Luther could be as productive as he was in the face of such threats and hazards.”

Martin Luther, Martin Marty, pg. 56

- On 15 June 1520, the Pope warned Luther with the papal bull (edict) *Exsurge Domine* that he risked excommunication unless he recanted 41 sentences drawn from his writings, including the Ninety-five Theses, within 60 days.
- That autumn, Johann Eck proclaimed the bull in Meissen and other German towns.
- Karl von Miltitz, the papal nuncio, attempted to broker a solution, but Luther, who had sent the Pope a copy of On the Freedom of a Christian in October, publicly set fire to the bull and other decretals at Wittenberg on Dec. 10, 1520.

- Luther defended the burning of the papal bull in Why the Pope and his Recent Book are Burned and Assertions Concerning All Articles.
- Pope Leo X on January 3, 1521, in the bull *Decet Romanum Pontificum*, excommunicated Luther.
- Ironically, Luther maintained that he, and those who sided with him, should remain members of the Christian community.
- The fact of his excommunication forced him to re-think what the Christian community is, and how believers are related to it.

- The enforcement of the ban on the Ninety-Five Theses fell to the secular authorities.
- On April 18, 1521, Luther appeared as ordered before the Diet of Worms. This was a general assembly of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire that took place in Worms, a town on the Rhine.
- The Diet was in session from Jan. 28 to May 25, 1521, with Emperor Charles V presiding. Prince Frederick III, Elector of Saxony, obtained a safe conduct for Luther to and from the meeting.
- Johann Eck, Luther's nemesis, led the proceedings.



Luther's writings were laid out on a table.

- Eck asked Luther if the books were his, and whether he stood by their contents. He confirmed he was their author, but requested time to think about the answer to the second question.
- He prayed, consulted friends, and gave his response the next day:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”

(From Martin Brecht’s biography of Martin Luther)

- Over the next five days, private conferences were held to determine Luther's fate.
- The Emperor Charles V presented the final draft of the Edict of Worms on May 25, 1521, declaring Luther an outlaw, banning his literature, and requiring his arrest:
- "We want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic."
- It also made it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter. It permitted anyone to kill Luther without legal consequence.

With the continuing protection of Frederick the Elector, Luther departed Worms for Wittenberg. But he never made it to Wittenberg. He was supposedly abducted by highway men, who took him to the Wartburg Castle at Eisenach.



- Frederick saw to it that Luther would be hidden in the Wartburg Castle, to continue his work, protected from Rome.
- During this time Luther worked diligently on translating the New Testament from Greek into German.
- He also wrote many works on doctrine, and continued his written attacks on corrupt practices in the Catholic Church.
- In *On the Abrogation of the Private Mass*, he condemned as idolatry the idea that the mass is a sacrifice, asserting instead that it is a gift, to be received with thanksgiving by the whole congregation.

- Luther's essay *On Confession, Whether the Pope has the Power to Require It* rejected compulsory confession and encouraged private confession and absolution, since "every Christian is a confessor."
- In November 1521, Luther wrote *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*. He assured monks and nuns that they could break their vows without sin, because vows were an illegitimate and vain attempt to win salvation.
- While Luther was hiding, studying and writing in the Wartburg, his supporters were continuing to overturn Christendom as it had been known.

- Andreas Karlstadt, one of Luther's university colleagues, supported by the ex-Augustinian Gabriel Zwilling, embarked on a radical program of reform in Wittenberg in June 1521, exceeding anything imagined by Luther.
- On Christmas Day 1521, Karlstadt performed the first reformed communion service. He did not elevate the elements of communion, wore secular clothing during the service, and purged all references to sacrifice from the traditional Mass.
- He shouted rather than whispered the words of institution ("This is my body...", etc.) in German instead of Latin, rejected confession as a prerequisite for communion, and let the communicants take both bread and wine on their own during the Communion.

- In early January 1522, the Wittenberg city council authorized the removal of imagery from churches and affirmed the changes introduced by Karlstadt on Christmas.
- Karlstadt wrote his thesis "On the Removal of Images and That There Should Be No Beggars Among Christians" in 1522, shortly after this authorization from the city council.
- Karlstadt actively participated in *iconoclasm*.
- On Jan. 19, 1522, Karlstadt married Anna von Mochau, the fifteen-year-old daughter of a poor nobleman.

- Other supporters of the reform advocated for *iconoclasm* along with Karlstadt.
- Iconoclasm is the belief in the importance of the destruction of religious icons, paintings, statues and other religious art.
- This was in response to the understanding of the prohibition of idolatry and the manufacture and worship of graven (sculpted) images of God from the Second Commandment.
- The reforms provoked disturbances, including a revolt by the Augustinian friars against their prior, the smashing of statues and images in churches, and denunciations of the magistracy.



After secretly visiting Wittenberg in early December 1521, Luther wrote *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion*.

Luther's room in the Wartburg where he translated the New Testament into German.

- Wittenberg became even more volatile after Christmas when a band of visionary zealots, the so-called Zwickau prophets, arrived, preaching revolutionary doctrines such as the equality of man, adult baptism, and Christ's imminent return.
- When the town council asked Luther to return, he decided it was his duty to act.
- Luther secretly returned to Wittenberg on March 6, 1522. He wrote to the Elector: "During my absence, Satan has entered my sheepfold, and committed ravages which I cannot repair by writing, but only by my personal presence and living word."

- For eight days in Lent, beginning on the First Sunday in Lent (March 9, 1522), Luther preached eight sermons, which became known as the "Invocavit Sermons".
- In these sermons, he hammered home the primacy of core Christian values such as love, patience, charity, and freedom, and reminded the citizens to trust God's word rather than violence to bring about necessary change.
- Luther said: "Do you know what the Devil thinks when he sees men use violence to propagate the gospel? He sits with folded arms behind the fire of hell, and says with malignant looks and frightful grin: "Ah, how wise these madmen are to play my game! Let them go on; I shall reap the benefit. I delight in it."

- But Luther reminded his hearers: “But when he (the Devil) sees the Word running and contending alone on the battle-field, then he shudders and shakes for fear.”
- The effect of Luther's intervention was immediate.
- After the sixth sermon, the Wittenberg jurist Jerome Schurf wrote to the Elector: "Oh, what joy has Dr. Martin's return spread among us! His words, through divine mercy, are bringing back every day misguided people into the way of the truth.”
- Luther began working for a more conservative emphasis in the Reform of the Church.

- But despite his victory in Wittenberg, Luther was unable to stifle the radicalism that was breaking out in many lands.
- Preachers such as Thomas Müntzer and Zwickau prophet Nicholas Storch found support amongst poorer townspeople and peasants between 1521 and 1525.
- There had been revolts by the peasantry on a smaller scale since the 1400s.
- Luther's pamphlets against the Church and the hierarchy, often worded with "liberal" phraseology, now led many peasants to believe he would support an attack on the upper classes in general.

- For example, Luther said, "Therefore I declare that neither pope nor bishop nor any other person has the right to impose a syllable of law upon a Christian man without his own consent."
- Revolts broke out in Franconia, Swabia, and Thuringia in 1524, even drawing support from disaffected nobles, many of whom were in debt.
- Gaining momentum under the leadership of radicals such as Thomas Müntzer in Thuringia, and Hipler and Lotzer in the south-west, the revolts turned into war.
- During a tour of Thuringia, Luther became enraged at the widespread burning of convents, monasteries, bishops' palaces, and libraries.

- In *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, written on his return to Wittenberg, Luther gave his interpretation of the Gospel teaching on wealth, condemned the violence as the devil's work, and called for the nobles to put down the rebels like mad dogs.
- Without Luther's backing for the uprising, many rebels laid down their weapons; others felt betrayed. Their defeat by the Swabian League at the Battle of Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525, followed by Thomas Müntzer's execution, brought the revolutionary stage of the Reformation to a close.

- Martin Luther married Katharina von Bora in 1525, one of twelve nuns he had helped escape from the Nimbschen Cistercian convent in April 1523, when he arranged for them to be smuggled out in herring barrels.
- "Suddenly, and while I was occupied with far different thoughts," he wrote to Wenceslaus Link, "the Lord has plunged me into marriage." Katharina was 26 years and Luther was 41 years old.



- Some priests and former members of religious orders had already married, including Andreas Karlstadt and Justus Jonas, but Luther's wedding set the seal of approval on clerical marriage.
- He had long condemned vows of celibacy on Biblical grounds, but his decision to marry surprised many, not least Philip Melanchthon, who called it reckless.
- Luther had written to George Spalatin on Nov. 30, 1524, "I shall never take a wife, as I feel at present. Not that I am insensible to my flesh or sex (for I am neither wood nor stone); but my mind is averse to wedlock because I daily expect the death of a heretic."

- Luther and his wife moved into a former monastery, "The Black Cloister," a wedding present from the new elector John the Steadfast (1525–32).
- They embarked on what appears to have been a happy and successful marriage, though money was often short.
- Katharina bore six children, two of whom did not live into adulthood.
- Katharina ran a farm and took in boarders to help support the family.
- Luther told a friend, "My Katie is in all things so obliging and pleasing to me that I would not exchange my poverty for the riches of Croesus."

- By 1526, Luther found himself increasingly occupied in organising a new church. His Biblical ideal of congregations choosing their own ministers had proved unworkable.
- According to Luther biographer Roland Bainton: "Luther's dilemma was that he wanted both a confessional church based on personal faith and experience and a territorial church including all in a given locality. If he were forced to choose, he would take his stand with the masses, and this was the direction in which he moved."

- In other words, Luther essentially continued the idea of *Christendom* even though he was laying the foundation for a new church.
- From 1525 to 1529, he established a supervisory church body, laid down a new form of worship service, and wrote a clear summary of the new faith in the form of two catechisms.
- To avoid confusing or upsetting the people, Luther avoided extreme change. He also did not wish to replace one controlling system with another.
- He concentrated on the church in the Electorate of Saxony, acting only as an adviser to churches in new territories, many of which followed his Saxon model.

- In response to demands for a German liturgy, Luther wrote a German Mass, which he published in early 1526. He did not intend it as a replacement for his 1523 adaptation of the Latin Mass but as an alternative for the "simple people", a "public stimulation for people to believe and become Christians."
- Luther based his order on the Catholic service but omitted "everything that smacks of sacrifice", and the Mass became a celebration where everyone received the wine as well as the bread.
- Details such as the Mass vestments, altar, and candles were made optional, allowing freedom of ceremony.

- Luther continued to develop the German translation of the Bible.
- He used the German dialect spoken at the Saxon chancellery, intelligible to both northern and southern Germans. He intended his vigorous, direct language to make the Bible accessible to everyday Germans, "for we are removing impediments and difficulties so that other people may read it without hindrance."
- Published at a time of rising demand for German-language publications, Luther's version quickly became a popular and influential Bible translation.

- Luther was a prolific hymnodist, authoring hymns such as "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" ("A Mighty Fortress is our God"), based on Psalm 46, and "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her" ("From Heaven Above to Earth I Come"), based on Luke 2:11–12.
- Luther's hymns were included in early Lutheran hymnals and spread the ideas of the Reformation.
- Luther's hymns inspired composers, such as Johann Sebastian Bach, to write music.
- In later life, Luther continued to preach, write and engage in various controversies.

- Luther suffered from numerous ailments in his later life.
- Luther's last sermon was delivered at Eisleben, his place of birth, on 15 February 1546, three days before his death.
- An stroke deprived him of his speech, and he died shortly afterwards at 2:45 a.m. on February 18, 1546, aged 62, in Eisleben, the city of his birth. He was buried in the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg, in front of the pulpit. Nearly 30 years before he had nailed the 95 Theses to the door of this same church.