The REFORMATION

CAMERON A. MACKENZIE
The Reformation is no longer portrayed as a singular event of the sixteenth century. While the sixteenth-century reforms were certainly motivated primarily by theological issues, the many discrete dimensions in the social and political spheres of the time contributed greatly to this monumentally transforming event in Western civilization. Indeed, personalities also come into play. Cameron MacKenzie offers a wonderfully broad perspective of this crucial time in history as he engages both the geopolitical and theological features of the Reformation.

What began as a quiet protest against indulgences—made by an unknown Augustinian friar at a new university in an inconspicuous town of northern Germany—quickly, almost miraculously, transformed from gentle ripples of spiritual concern to a political and theological tsunami, affecting all of the European world and, rightly understood, all of Christendom. Until those initial events in Wittenberg, the Holy Catholic Church was fairly united under the papacy. Political and theological decisions emanated from the papal throne and the Curia. Even when political powers seemed to have the upper hand, the papal presence was felt by all. Martin Luther’s voice of protest, beginning with his expressed disapproval of papal powers in Italy, echoed through the hallways of the great political leaders of the Holy Roman Empire. It is this connection between political power and reformation renovation that this present volume so beneficially describes.

With the vestiges of the Holy Roman Empire disappearing, there was little unity among the various developing nation-states of the sixteenth century. A strong and centralized governing authority was lacking in the person of Emperor Charles V. Germany—if such a national label can be ascribed to the political situation there—consisted of several dozen independent duchies, provinces, walled-cities, free imperial cities, wealthy bishoprics, and a variety of local dioceses and archdioceses, each vying for political power and often personal gain.

Economic and social forces were changing rapidly, though somewhat invisibly to the peasants and commoners who worked the soil or toiled in the guildhalls. Yet the Germanic regions were the economic hub of Europe. Natural resources, such as copper and lumber, produced a growing number of up-and-coming peasants, as exemplified by Martin Luther’s father, Hans. Craftsmen, artisans, and local merchants organized themselves into guilds and exerted political and economic muscle under their receptive dukes and nobles. Located in the heart of the Holy Roman Empire, the German territory became a significant source of wealth, both revenue and resources, for the papacy.

Not just in Germany, where Elector Frederick the Wise provided Luther with exceptional political and personal protection, but throughout Europe as well, the Reformation was having an impact on more than religious values. Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin used military and economic pressures upon Zurich and Geneva for their more theonomous approach to reform. King Henry VIII of England is noteworthy for his usurpation of ecclesiastical power for his own regime. Even Italy, which boasted the Papal States, was an amalgam of small, “independent” kingdoms and duchies trying to defend themselves against the French, but by midcentury it, too, was dominated by Spain. The Roman Church in Scandinavia saw its power and influence dissipate in the midst of political discord. The church and the state were increasingly seen as having distinct areas of oversight; temporal and spiritual power were coming under the purview either of priests and prelates or kings and territorial councils.

Finally, papal abuses had come to a head during these years, particularly under the Medici-related popes (Leo X and Clement VII), who saw themselves more as Italian princes governing their Papal States than as models of spirituality. Cries for reform of both monasteries and the papacy reverberated not merely in Germany but also in Spain, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and the British Isles—England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

The political and theological world was rife for reform. And reform it got in the persons of Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and even Henry VIII of England. What follows in this book explores not only the theological but also the political dimensions that flowed from a university in Wittenberg to create what we know as “the Reformation.”

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Students of the Reformation need not search far for scholarly books and articles that examine this extraordinary period of history in depth. An abundance of scholarly literature is available, and more continues to be produced within academic circles. Contemporaries of the period recognized the monumental moment in which they lived, and writers and researchers have delved into the topic from an array of angles and approaches ever since. Is another survey of the Reformation really necessary? Cameron MacKenzie has convincing reason to believe so and is particularly well-suited for the task.

The commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, generally regarded as the trigger that sparked so much of the Reformation era that followed, is as propitious an occasion as any for a fresh look at the movement begun in the sixteenth century. But what Cameron MacKenzie brings to this project is so much more than merely another perspective on a familiar topic. The events of the sixteenth century changed the world, and the world has continued to change as a result. Our topic, therefore, is timely for reasons that go beyond an anniversary celebration. The relevance of the church to contemporary culture does not render the church’s history irrelevant. To the contrary, connections to the times in which we live are deeply rooted in the experiences of others who have gone before us. We can better understand where we are the more we appreciate where we have been.

Yet awareness of the rudiments of Christian faith and theology has dramatically declined in our own post-Reformation and post-Christian culture. If general familiarity with the Bible can no longer be assumed even among church members, we can presuppose they have even less familiarity with the history of the Church—including even those who belong to congregations whose doctrine and confessions were shaped by the Reformation. In other words, the author anticipates an audience who may not be so well acquainted with the Reformation. Indeed, Dr. MacKenzie writes for people likely to be introduced to the Reformation for the first time.

Cameron MacKenzie’s career as a seminary professor spans more than three decades. His love for the subject matter is palpable. In equal measure, Professor MacKenzie consistently demonstrates ready interest in his students. He has stimulated many in their understanding of Church history in general, and the Reformation era in particular, because he is an engaged and enthusiastic teacher. The same combination of passion for the topic and desire to encourage learners’ understanding is amply evident in the pages that follow. For those who have had the privilege of studying with him, MacKenzie stands out as a model scholar and teacher. Now, many more will experience the same inspiration and insight by reading this book.

It should be noted that Cameron MacKenzie is a man of great faith. No approach to history or historical writing is without bent or bias, and it is helpful for the reader to know that the author approaches his topic as a Christian, indeed a pastor and theologian of the Lutheran Church. Nevertheless, MacKenzie’s approach to the subject (which produced no little controversy or discord among the original actors or among those who followed in their tradition) is remarkably fair and objective. Balanced perspective and effective prose are essential for good history and for good historical writing. Of course, that is to be expected from a good historian. Certainly, MacKenzie is a good historian, a fine writer, a respected scholar, and an effective teacher. The blend of those gifts is shared here to our generation’s great benefit.

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This book is the result of over thirty years of teaching Reformation history at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana. To colleagues, administrators, staff, and students, I wish to express my appreciation for creating an institution where I could preach and teach, talk and listen, and write about Luther, Calvin, and all the rest who populate the pages of this book. I am especially grateful to the staff of the Wayne and Barbara Kroemer Library for their help in locating resources for this undertaking. It would have been impossible without them. My students especially have endured my lectures and then raised questions to which they often received overly long answers not only without complaining but often with enthusiasm and always with politeness and patience.

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I am also grateful to two more good friends, Dr. Patrick Ferry and Dr. Timothy Maschke. Both are also experts on the Reformation. They have taken time in their already busy lives to write splendid forewords for this book. So I thank them very much for their kind words on behalf of my efforts here presented.

Final thanks must go to my wife, Meg, the love of my life as well as my life companion. In projects such as these, she always functions as my “cheerleader in chief” by encouraging me to keep at it even when I feel as if I’ve exhausted both my time and my energy. I can’t imagine what I would be like without her, but I know it wouldn’t be good.

I have dedicated this book to my grandchildren. My hope is that someday one or another of them will come to enjoy the story of the Reformation as much as I do. My prayer is that they will always believe in and serve the God of the Reformers, who raised up Martin Luther and the rest to proclaim His saving Word to a world that needed to hear it.
INTRODUCTION

Writing about the Reformation of the sixteenth century never stops. Books and articles appear all the time. However, Reformation anniversaries are especially important catalysts for the production of new works devoted to the subject. The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s famous protest against the sale of indulgences—a moment that began the events that together we call the Reformation. So we can expect a flood of books, articles, videos, seminars, webinars, and conferences devoted to one or another aspect of the religious upheaval that transformed Christianity in the West during the 1500s. The Reformation is one such contribution to marking this milestone in history.

Of course, Luther’s “famous protest” may not be all that famous today. Many churchgoers (but not all) may know something about the Reformation. After all, mastering Church history is not a prerequisite for church membership. And then, too, there are many outside the institutional church who would find the Reformation fascinating if they only knew about it. This book is for people like these, whether church members or not. It is an introduction to the topic, aimed at providing basic information about Christianity in early modern Europe, when the one church to which “everybody” belonged began breaking up into alternative versions of the faith, such as Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic.

This book’s focus is on churchmen and statesmen, reformers and rulers. On the one hand, theologians and church leaders defined Christianity in terms of doctrine and life—what people should believe and how they should behave. However, they came up with different and often contradictory descriptions of what it meant to be Christian. On the other hand, temporal authorities—kings, nobles, and city councils—decided which of those descriptions would prevail in their territories. They used civil power to establish an official church in their lands. The result was a variety of churches instead of just one.

Of course, the 1500s were not the first time someone challenged an “official” version of the faith, but it was the first time that so many challengers succeeded not only in convincing large numbers of followers but also in establishing new churches that replaced the old in many places. Because of the printing press Johannes Gutenberg had invented in the middle of the previous century, new churches as well as established ones defined themselves by written confessions of faith. By the end of the sixteenth century, therefore, being a Christian in
German Saxony meant adhering to the Book of Concord; in Bavaria, however, the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent defined the faith. These two confessional statements differed from each other significantly, even radically, but in both Saxony and Bavaria, it was the state that enforced the confession.

Besides those confessions of the faith that prevailed in one place or another, other forms of Christianity arose, but they failed to gain legal recognition. And illegal kinds of Christianity almost always became persecuted kinds of Christianity. Because reformers relied on rulers, and rulers used force, religious violence of various types was also a major characteristic of this period. This resulted in a period of martyrdom, a time when many people died for their faith. Another result of this religious violence was conflict—wars of “religion” fought not only for religion but also for dynasty, wealth, influence, and power. Sorting through such complexities is an important feature of this book.

The Reformation, however, is not for experts. That is evident in the almost complete absence of a scholarly apparatus (footnotes, bibliography, and the like). It does, of course, make extensive use of the work of experts—those who have mined the sources, producing data that constitutes the story of the Reformation. Without the work of Reformation scholars, this book would be impossible. But to make it as readable as possible, I have left out the references as well as discussions of issues that only academicians are likely to appreciate—for example, should we refer to the “Reformation” or “Reformations”? (The singular emphasizes the epoch, the plural the various visions of reform that make the epoch so interesting and also so influential.)

“History” and “story” are connected by more than spelling. The events of the Reformation make for entertaining reading, but my hope is that readers of this book will also find them edifying. Although there is much to criticize in the words and actions of those who made history in the sixteenth century, there is also much to admire, especially the commitment of so many to Jesus and therefore to the Christian faith (in whatever form). In a society like ours, in which Christian commitment is withering, perhaps Reformation history will lead readers to think again about their own relationship with God and the place of Jesus Christ in their own lives.
Martin Luther (1483–1546). Theologian who forever changed Christianity when he began the Evangelical Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe. This portrait, painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1523, is one of the last times Luther was shown still wearing monastic robes. In 1524, he set those aside forever.
THE MAN AND THE MOMENT
Martin Luther was on trial again—this time at the Diet of Worms in April 1521. Summoned into the presence of Emperor Charles V, Luther, already condemned as a heretic by the church, boldly refused to retract his writings. This moment was a turning point both for the man and for history.

Up until this time, Luther had been hoping for support for his new beliefs from authorities in the Holy Roman Empire. A fair hearing before fair-minded men such as the emperor would convince anyone he was in trouble only for following the Scriptures instead of the corrupt practices and doctrines of the Roman hierarchy, the pope, and members of his councils. But that did not happen at Worms. Instead, Luther’s case was adjudicated quickly, perhaps too quickly. The authorities presented Luther with a single question: Would he retract what he had written? And he presented them with an unequivocal answer: No.

When negotiations over the next week or so also came to nothing, the emperor decided against Luther completely. An edict was issued condemning Luther as an outlaw and ordering his books to be burned. The empire had spoken. Or had it? As was generally true in the Middle Ages, it remained so in the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V (r. 1519–56): political power was exercised at many levels below that of the emperor by a wide variety of political entities. The most powerful of these were the seven “electors” of the Holy Roman Empire. When the imperial throne fell vacant, who had the right to choose the next emperor? Charles IV made it official by the Golden Bull of 1356. There were seven electors: the archbishops of Trier, Mainz, and Cologne; the duke of Saxony; the count palatine of the Rhine; the margrave of Brandenburg; and the king of Bohemia.

The Holy Roman Empire

All his life, Martin Luther lived and worked in the Holy Roman Empire, which is quite a misleading name for the state. Obviously not “holy,” nowhere near Rome, and not much of an empire, the Holy Roman Empire was a feudal monarchy in the heart of Europe (more or less what we think of as Germany today). The head of state was an emperor, chosen by electors, seven major princes of the realm, whenever the throne fell vacant. The elective character of the monarchy guaranteed the emperor would have to share power with others.

The empire comprised a couple hundred smaller territorial entities, each with its own local head, often a nobleman with a title such as “count,” “duke,” or “knight”—but not always. Of course, some of the noblemen were much more important than others. There were also imperial cities, which were, for the most part, self-governing and independent of the local nobility. Ecclesiastical territories were another complication. These were ruled by high church officials, such as bishops. When the emperor wanted to consult a wide spectrum of opinion in his empire, he could summon a “diet.” Such assemblies consisted of representatives from the principal territories—ecclesiastical or secular, including imperial cities. By the sixteenth century, diets included approximately 30 lay princes, 120 church officials, and representatives from 65 cities.
The Holy Roman Empire about 1520.
(who actually selected each new emperor). Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise (r. 1486–1525), was one of them. He was also Luther’s protector.

In an era when no one thought of the church as separate from the state, rulers such as Frederick were supposed to use their power to protect and advance the Christian religion. Frederick’s involvement with the Luther case was inevitable. He and his counterparts throughout the Holy Roman Empire and, indeed, throughout Europe played crucial roles in the Reformation. But how did it all begin in the first place—and who was Martin Luther?

**REMAINDER OF TEXT**

**Martín Luter, el Monje**

Based on Luther’s background, no one would have guessed what he would become. He was born in 1483 to a family of German peasants. His father, Hans, had begun life as a poor man but did well in copper mining and became the owner of a smelter. Therefore, he had the means to provide an education for his gifted son, including university, with the expectation that he would become a lawyer. Much to his father’s disappointment, however, Martin decided to forego law studies to become a monk out of concern for his own soul.

In Luther’s day, people worried about their relationship to God, who was often portrayed as a demanding judge. Many believed a monastic lifestyle provided the best opportunity for becoming right with God. In fact, no less a theologian than Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) had compared becoming a monk to a second Baptism.

But Luther did not find the peace of mind he hoped for. Instead, he came to the conviction that when he entered the monastery, he had not escaped the sin that separated him from God and merited damnation. Luther had brought the sin along with him, right there in his own heart. The more he tried to live a life that could earn forgiveness from God, the more he experienced alienation from God, who—Luther believed—was asking more of him than he was capable of doing. While Luther lived a good and pious life outwardly, in accordance with the rules of his religious order, in his heart he came
to resent God—indeed, hate God—on account of His impossible demands.

In virtual despair of ever being reconciled with God, Luther was rescued by his spiritual advisor and superior in the monastery, John Staupitz, who sought to turn Luther’s attention away from himself and toward Jesus. Staupitz also concluded that the young monk could do more than worry about his spiritual well-being. Staupitz put Luther to work as a professor of theology at the newly founded University of Wittenberg in Saxony, the domain of Frederick the Wise.

Strictly speaking, the Augustinian Hermits, the religious order to which Luther belonged, were not monks but mendicants (“friars”) whose mission included service to the church in the world rather than complete separation behind monastic walls. In Luther’s case, that meant teaching at the university and preaching in the town church. Not long after his move to Wittenberg

Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), one of the best known of medieval theologians. He remains influential even in modern times.

John Staupitz (ca. 1469–1524) helped Frederick the Wise found the University of Wittenberg and became dean of its theological faculty.

St. Anne with her daughter, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus as a baby. When Luther was almost struck by lightning on July 5, 1505, he called out to St. Anne (the patron saint of miners, his father’s vocation) and promised her he would become a monk. This painting is by Albrecht Dürer (one of the great artists of the period), probably from around 1519. Dürer became an enthusiastic follower of Luther.
from Erfurt, where he had first joined the Augustinians and where he had received his education in liberal arts and theology, Luther accepted the post of town preacher. This involved him in applying biblical texts to the lives of ordinary people, not just his colleagues in the monastery.

Luther became a doctor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. In the classroom, therefore, he taught his students the Bible. In his studies as both preacher and teacher, Luther came under the influence of the Scriptures; and through the Scriptures, he came to a new understanding of God and Christian faith. Of course, much went into Luther’s development as a theologian—his education, the influence of Staupitz, his life as a mendicant—but Luther himself always maintained that his Reformation insights were due to the clear teachings of the Bible. The Bible alone as the source and standard of Christian doctrine became a watchword of the Reformation.

But what did Luther discover in the Scriptures? First of all, and basic to everything else, was the love of God for sinners. God was not only and primarily demanding toward people, but He was also merciful and forgiving—so much so that He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to suffer and die as humanity’s substitute, to bear the penalty for sin in the place of those who had committed it. No one could have compelled God to
do this. He did it willingly and freely. He made a way out of the morass into which human beings had thrust themselves, beginning with Adam and Eve and then continuing in every generation since.

That God sacrificed His Son was not precisely new to Martin Luther. One can hardly read the New Testament and miss the crucifixion. But what separated Luther from other theologians at the time was his emphasis on faith. Luther no longer taught what was typical of the times—namely, that God forgives the sins of those who demonstrate their love for Him through good works as defined by the church. Instead, Luther maintained that one received forgiveness—and everything that flowed from forgiveness, including eternal life—exclusively through faith. This was not because faith was of itself a saving work but because of the object of faith, Jesus Christ. Because in Christ God had done everything necessary for salvation, human beings were not required to try to earn their salvation by performing works of love or by obligations of God’s Law or by the works of the church. God had done it all. God had promised this in the Scriptures, and the way to receive a promise was simply to believe it. For Luther, salvation meant solely relying on what Christ had done. Love and good works would follow as the evidence of such faith, not as saving merits before God.

We call this justification by faith alone, and it, too, would characterize the Evangelical movement. It was the center of Luther’s theology.

Of course, it took a while for Luther to come to his new understanding of Christianity. It did not happen all at once, and even today historians argue about the timing of his development. But when Luther finally arrived at this point, he received not only an enormous sense of personal relief but also a desire to share his insights with others, especially his students and colleagues at the university. So Luther became a reformer first of all in his role as a professional theologian.

The Problem of Indulgences

The Reformation as a public event, however, arose out of Luther’s pastoral concern for people as well as his professional concern for the truth. Both considerations lay behind his decision to prepare his Ninety-Five Theses in the fall of 1517. These theses presented...
The Weimar Altarpiece, begun by Lucas Cranach the Elder but completed by his son Lucas Cranach the Younger in 1555. As its name suggests, it stands above the altar in Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Weimar, Germany. In addition to its powerful presentation of what Luther considered the heart of the Christian religion—the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ—the painting is also a personal confession of faith by the elder Cranach.

In the center panel, Cranach has placed himself to the right of the cross (from the viewer's perspective), between John the Baptist and Martin Luther. The blood of Jesus Christ pours directly on the artist's head to signify his being purified from his sins by the Savior. On one side of Cranach, John the Baptist is pointing with one hand to Christ on the cross and with the other to the Lamb at the foot of the cross, who is carrying a transparent banner on which is written (in Latin), “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). On the other side of Cranach is Martin Luther, with an open Bible in his hand. He is pointing to three verses (in German): 1 John 1:7 (“The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin”); Hebrews 4:16 (“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”); and John 3:14 (“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”).

In the background of the painting, one can see Moses pointing to the Law in conversation with others, death and a demon driving a sinner into hell, the angel announcing the adoration of the Savior. Above them floats a curtain with an acronym: VDMIÆ, Latin for the Reformation motto “The Word of the Lord endures forever.” In the right-hand panel, John Frederick's three sons are also worshiping the Christ.

The dominant image in the foreground includes both the crucified Christ in the center on the cross and with the other to the lamb at the foot of the cross, who is carrying a transparent banner on which is written (in Latin), “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). On the other side of Cranach is Martin Luther, with an open Bible in his hand. He is pointing to three verses (in German): 1 John 1:7 (“The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin”); Hebrews 4:16 (“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”); and John 3:14 (“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”).

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“Believe in God; believe also in Me,” Jesus said (John 14:1). From the center panel, the eyes of the risen Jesus meet ours and so invite us to believe in Him. The other set of eyes that meet ours belongs to Cranach, the painter. His feet face in the direction of Christ. But he has turned from his adoration of Christ to look at us also, inviting us to believe and be saved along with Him.

Leo X (1475–1521) was pope from 1513–21.
By 1517, a Dominican monk by the name of John Tetzel was selling indulgences in the neighborhood of Wittenberg—though not in Wittenberg itself, since Elector Frederick did not appreciate the competition and had forbidden the sale throughout Electoral Saxony. After all, there were indulgences already available in Wittenberg attached to Elector Frederick’s own collection of relics (sacred objects connected to the saints), which were housed in the Castle Church. Furthermore, Frederick’s and Albert’s families were rivals for power in the empire. Nonetheless, Tetzel came close to Wittenberg and made full use of Albert’s instructions, encouraging folks to buy forgiveness and release their loved ones from purgatory by means of indulgences.

But when Luther heard of what Tetzel was promising, he became outraged at what he considered a gross denial of the scriptural teaching regarding real repentance and a gross exaggeration of what an indulgence could accomplish. He therefore resolved to present his objections to both theologians and authorities of the church. He prepared ninety-five theses—each of them a brief assertion, just a sentence or so—designed to address the theology and practice of indulgences.

The Ninety-Five Theses

Written in Latin and (probably) posted on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (on or about October 31, 1517), the theses were aimed at professional theologians like Luther himself. But more significant to what happened next, Luther also submitted them to church administrators, such as Albert, who could actually do something about indulgences. In addition, Luther sent them to a few people in other parts of Germany whom he knew shared his concerns. Some of these people decided to make the theses available to a wider audience by translating them into German. They were also printed for consideration by others who were interested in cleaning up the church.

But what was the big deal about this posting? Why did anyone think a larger reading public would want to know Luther’s arguments against the indulgence sale—and why did Archbishop Albert send a copy of the theses to Rome?

The Ninety-Five Theses did not present Luther’s new convictions about salvation through faith in Jesus. In fact, historians still debate whether Luther had yet reached that point in his own understanding of Scripture. So the Ninety-Five Theses may have initiated the Reformation, but they did not do so on account of offering a new version of Christianity. Instead, the situation was much simpler. The Ninety-Five Theses became a sensation because (1) they challenged the power of the pope to affect the situation of souls in purgatory and (2) because they accused
wealthy churchmen of robbing poor Germans to pay for their churches. The new St. Peter’s Cathedral was intended for Rome, but in 1517, Italy was the wealthiest part of Europe.

The theses made sophisticated arguments about the nature of Christian repentance, but you didn’t have to be a theologian to appreciate Luther’s critique, especially when he employed the pointed language that would characterize his polemics for the rest of his life. For example, Luther maintained in Thesis 82 that people were asking questions such as “Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial.” Or again, Theses 27 and 28, “They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory. . . . It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone” (LW 31:27–28, 175, 176).

As a result of their publication, the Ninety-Five Theses initiated a major controversy in the Church. Many sided with Luther in his protest against the trafficking of indulgences; many sided with the Church. The importance of the theses lay not so much in the arguments that they presented as in the medium through which they were disseminated. Luther’s statement of the problem was bold and direct; it captured the imagination of ordinary people in a way that intellectual arguments rarely do.

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Historians do not agree. The evidence for the posting on October 31, 1517, does not come directly from Luther but from two of his friends, neither of whom was in Wittenberg at the time, and from someone who was only a choirboy in Wittenberg at the time. Such witnesses would not invent such a detail. However, they might just assume it, for in Wittenberg, public notices were often placed on the church doors (perhaps attached by wax, not nailed). Popular representations of Luther’s posting them—like the contemporary picture to the right—often make too much of this act. It was not a heroic act of defiance, and we don’t even know that Luther personally posted them. He might have had someone do it for him. Luther’s sending his theses to ecclesiastical supervisors and others was more responsible for initiating the Reformation than was his publicizing them to the university community in Wittenberg.
advanced but rather in the reaction evoked. New issues emerged and other voices spoke out. Church officials took steps to silence Luther, but temporal rulers, such as Frederick, took steps to protect him and help advance his cause. No settlement of the issues proved possible. The result was the Reformation.

The debate that followed the Ninety-Five Theses soon made it clear that Luther’s notion of Christianity—salvation, authority, the Church, and so on—was much different not only from Pope Leo’s and those loyal to him but also from the vast majority of churchmen in the late Middle Ages. Significantly, it was the process itself of investigation, accusation, and defense the theses began that both revealed and shaped the new theology. For example, when Archbishop Albert sent a report to Rome, the pope asked the Augustinian Hermits to do something about their wayward friar, but their man on the scene, the head of the order in Germany, was none other than John Staupitz! Instead of dissuading Luther or insisting that he apologize, Staupitz provided him with the opportunity to present the fundamentals of his new theology without once raising the issue of indulgences.
salvation centered on Christ’s work, not everything is done already.” Or again, “The law says ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is done already.” Or again, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ” (LW 31:41). Clearly, in these theses, the Reformer was beginning to articulate a view of everything. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is done already.” Or again, “The law says ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is done already.” Or again, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ” (LW 31:41). Clearly, in these theses, the Reformer was beginning to articulate a view of salvation centered on Christ’s work, not unknown theologian. This event was Luther’s trial before Cardinal Cajetan, the pope’s representative in the empire.

Luther’s Trial before Cajetan

In August 1518, papal officials demanded that Luther appear in Rome on a suspicion of heresy—namely, his challenging ecclesiastical authority and the pope’s power of the Keys. This summons upset Luther greatly, for going to Rome could have meant a death sentence. But at the intervention of Frederick, the church authorities agreed to let Luther’s interrogation occur at Augsburg in Germany, where representatives of the empire had recently gathered. Cajetan, too, was present, so it was a convenient time and place for him to discharge orders from Rome and conduct the proceedings against Luther.

The mendicant monk appeared before the cardinal on three separate occasions during the second week of October. What Cajetan was seeking in these “conversations” was Luther’s acceptance of the church’s authority to settle the questions about doctrine and practice that were agitating him. In other words, Luther should simply give in and admit he was wrong because the church (really, the pope) had determined the matter. That was its job, not Luther’s. What Luther sought, however, was proof he was wrong—that his teaching violated authentic church doctrine, not just papal pronouncements.

Not surprisingly, their dialogue went nowhere. Also not surprisingly, the outcome was worse for Luther than it was for his interrogator. Cajetan’s orders were either to reconcile the accused with Rome or to place him under arrest. It was especially ominous that the cardinal had finally dismissed Luther by telling him not to come back unless he was ready to retract his heretical statements! A few days later, Luther left Augsburg secretly by night, afraid that arrest was imminent. By the end of the month, he was back in Wittenberg. He was safe. Or was he?

Luther’s fate was in the hands of his elector, Frederick the Wise. From the beginning of Luther’s career in Wittenberg, Frederick had acted on behalf of the controversial professor. He had even paid Luther’s (considerable) expenses when he took his doctorate. At Augsburg, Frederick had been heavily engaged in seeing to it that Luther was treated fairly and on German soil, but those efforts had now failed to settle the matter. After Luther’s flight, Cardinal Cajetan sent the elector a letter in which he condemned Luther’s doctrine and demanded that Frederick ship Luther to Rome or, at the very least, expel him from Saxony. So what was Frederick going to do?

Luther fully expected exile. This was not unreasonable. Elector Frederick was proud of the university he had founded, and one of his advisors, Georg Spalatin, was close to Luther. But part of Frederick’s reputation for “wisdom” came from the
skill with which he avoided unnecessary quarrels, and why would he want an argument with the pope? Furthermore, Frederick was not a "Lutheran." He was a medieval Catholic who had gone on pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a young man and who for many years had built up an enormous relic collection in Wittenberg that, he believed, would shorten his purgatory time. There is little reason, then, to think that he knew or cared much about the doctrines for which Luther was in trouble.

Luther waited for the ax to fall. He prepared to leave and said goodbye to his friends. So when Frederick acted, he surprised not only Luther himself but also many others. Elector Frederick decided he would continue his protection of the professor. Luther could stay—at least for now.

What Luther did not know was that both the pope and the elector had matters in common besides him. And it was these other matters that were working in Luther's favor, at least politically. In particular, the old emperor, Maximilian, was dying. An election for a new one would have to take place, and Frederick would cast one of the seven votes. Furthermore, in the days and months before a new man came to the throne, Frederick would be an imperial vicar—a little like an acting emperor. We should not exaggerate what this meant—the vicar was not going to lead a crusade against the Turks. But nonetheless, Luther's protector, already important in the empire, was even more so in 1519 and 1520.

A—perhaps even the—leading candidate for the throne was the reigning emperor's grandson, Charles, who was already duke of Burgundy and king of Spain. Many, including Pope Leo, preferred a weaker, more compliant figure, maybe even Frederick the Wise. As it turned out, Charles prevailed at the election in 1519 and was installed in 1520. He remained on the imperial throne for the next thirty-five years. But who knew that when Emperor Maximilian breathed his last on January 12, 1519? Certainly not the pope.

So, instead of insisting upon a resolution of the Luther case, the pope and his councilors backed off. At that moment, they saw no advantage in pressing Frederick about his wayward professor. Political considerations had already led to their concession that Cajetan should examine Luther in Augsburg instead of Rome. Now, they agreed to an effort at mediation under the auspices of a special envoy to the elector, Karl von Miltitz, a Saxon nobleman but also a servant of the pope. Von Miltitz arrived in Wittenberg with a present long promised to Frederick from the pope, a "golden rose" (blessed with an indulgence, of
Karlstadt after the town of his birth, was dean of the theological faculty at the University of Wittenberg when Luther arrived in 1512 to teach theology. Karlstadt did not immediately embrace Luther’s “new” theology when Luther presented it in a disputation in 1516. But he soon changed his mind on the basis of works by St. Augustine and became an enthusiastic advocate for Luther’s views. After Luther’s return from the Wartburg in 1522, however, Karlstadt and Luther had a severe falling out and so went their separate ways in theology as well as location. After several moves, Karlstadt ended up teaching in Basel.

**The Leipzig Debate**

That theological development reached a major stage in distinguishing Luther from the Church of Rome at the Leipzig Debate in July 1519. This episode involved three others who played critical roles over the course of the Reformation. First, there was Luther’s opponent John Eck (1486–1543), a principal defender of the old religion for more than two decades after the Ninety-Five Theses. A second figure was Luther’s companion Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541), a colleague at Wittenberg and Eck’s original combatant at Leipzig. Finally, there was the debate’s sponsor, Duke George of Saxony (1471–1539), Frederick’s cousin and ruler of the neighboring territory (“ducal” Saxony as opposed to “electoral”). He would also become one of Luther’s fiercest foes among the German nobility.

So what was the debate about? As was typical of these affairs, the two sides had agreed to a set of theses that summarized the subject matter of the course, and with a proposal that Luther should receive yet another hearing, but this time before a disinterested German bishop. It took the pope’s representative a long time to deliver the rose, but at last, it was forthcoming. Von Miltitz never could, however, deliver on his proposal regarding Luther.

Nonetheless, the negotiations took time; and even though a part of von Miltitz’s strategy was to require silence from Luther and his opponents, that proved impossible. So the controversy continued, and the rhetoric heated up. Luther’s opponents called him a heretic, and by 1520, Luther himself was calling the pope “antichrist.” In the course of defending his new beliefs about the pope, Luther’s theology was also developing.

**John Eck (1486–1543) was a major opponent of the Reformation from its outset until his death. Soon after the Leipzig Debate, he went to Rome and helped draft the papal bull against Luther. At the Diet of Augsburg (1530), he was the main author of the Confutation that Charles V accepted instead of the Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans.**

**Duke George of Saxony (1471–1539) fought a losing battle against the Reformation.**

When the Leipzig Debate was over, both sides, of course, claimed victory. Luther returned to Wittenberg and resumed his usual occupations—teaching, preaching, and by this time also publishing. Although it’s fair to say the Reformation spread primarily through the oral word, especially if we think of how the ordinary—and mostly illiterate—people came into contact with the new ideas, we must also recognize the impact of the printing press. This new technology made it possible to spread one’s ideas much more widely and easily than manuscript copies of written work could ever do. And Luther used the medium of print masterfully. In fact, he became a best-selling author, and during the first years of the Reformation, no other author came close to him in terms of the number of copies printers produced and people read.

Why was this? First, Luther was writing what people wanted to read. The age was a religious one, so people were interested in the topic. For a long time before Luther, there had been a great deal of criticism directed at the clergy at all levels—monks, priests, bishops, and popes. But Luther’s approach to long-standing abuses was unique. He went after church teachings, not churchmen’s faults (at least not exclusively), and aimed at recovering the true Gospel and encouraging true piety. Luther thought that rescuing consciences burdened by works, totally ineffectual for salvation, was more important than simply
In the summer of 1519, Luther’s reformation passed another milestone at the Leipzig Debate. The debate was originally arranged for Luther’s colleague Andreas Karlstadt to argue with John Eck, but Luther received permission from the debate sponsor, Duke George of Saxony, to enter the fray as well. When he did, the question at hand was the nature of the pope’s authority in the church—was it divinely established in the Scriptures? Eck, of course, could cite all kinds of traditional authorities, but Luther asserted that Scripture was the only infallible authority in Christianity and that popes, councils, and theologians were all subject to mistakes and errors. In fact, Luther even maintained that the Council of Constance (1414–18) had erred in its condemnation of some of the positions of John Hus. Thus, Luther was making a direct attack upon the authority of the institutional church and its head, the pope. From Luther’s point of view, it was obvious that the Word of God should trump all human authorities, but from Eck’s point of view, Luther’s position was pure heresy.

Luther as Hercules Germanicus by Hans Holbein the Younger (1519) presents Luther as a German hero (“German Hercules”). He has overcome Aristotle and a number of Scholastic theologians and is about to club Jacob Hochstraten, the German inquisitor. Around his neck, Luther has hung a lion’s pelt bearing the papal tiara, a clear reference to Pope Leo X.
Strictly speaking, Johannes Gutenberg (d. 1468) did not "invent" printing, but he went well beyond what anybody else had ever done before. He invented a mold for casting large quantities of quality type and a new kind of press (modeled after those used in wine and paper making). He also developed a better ink (oil-based) and a metal alloy for the type. These inventions and improvements were found nowhere else in Europe and were unknown in China, where moveable type had been used for centuries. By the time of Luther, printing presses modeled after Gutenberg’s were found in several places—and many more would soon come. The printing press made it possible for Luther’s works to be produced in unprecedented quantities.
The Man and the Moment

Luther castigated the greed, lust, hypocrisy, and pride of the clergy. He also promoted an internal piety of repentance, faith, and prayer that manifested itself in helping one’s neighbor instead of carrying out supposedly pious but spiritually pointless activities such as counting beads or lighting candles.

Second, Luther knew how to write in two languages: Latin for the educated and German for everyone else. His prose was vigorous and lively, clear and to the point. When anyone read Luther, they never came away confused about where he stood. But Luther did even more. He employed a new format for his ideas—the pamphlet. You didn’t have to invest a fortune in either money or time when reading Luther. You didn’t even have to read all that well because printers accompanied the text with woodcuts, illustrations that put into pictures what Luther was saying with words. In fact, you didn’t have to read at all, since readers read aloud to those who were interested. Therefore, the combination of format, style, and subject matter magnified Luther’s influence through the printing press.

Luther’s publications in 1519 and 1520 also document rapid changes in his theology as he explored the ramifications of his scriptural and Gospel principles for other topics. Three treatises from 1520 are noteworthy milestones in demonstrating Luther’s new thinking.

The first of these was his Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, in which Luther called upon the new emperor, the princes, and other temporal rulers in Germany to correct conditions in the church. The list of abuses was an old one and so was the...
failure of church authorities to deal with them; secular rulers had been complaining about that failure for decades. What was new about Luther’s appeal was his doctrine regarding the priesthood of all believers, which he used to justify lay intervention into the management of the church. Luther taught that the church consisted of all believers—not just the clergy—and that all have been called to serve God, principally in their respective callings. This even included secular rulers, who had authority over churchmen in secular matters. However, even in spiritual matters, when there was an emergency, such as churchmen refusing to carry out their responsibilities, other Christians, especially Christian rulers with their God-given authority, were obliged to see to it that those responsibilities were carried out. In this way, Luther began to lay the foundations for a reformation in which temporal rulers would play a significant and often decisive role.

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church was Luther’s reassessment of the sacramental system that had developed in the Medieval Church. As Luther reviewed each of the traditional sacraments from a strictly biblical perspective, he ended up reducing their number from seven to two: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The others lacked either a divine institution or—a more important—a divine promise of the forgiveness of sins. For Luther, that promise was the whole point of a sacrament, and since it was a promise, a person could take advantage of it only by faith. Christ alone had merited salvation, and God distributed that merit solely through His Word. Therefore, at the heart of each sacrament was the Word—accompanied, it is true, by a divinely appointed earthly element (water, bread, and wine), but still the Word of forgiveness that must be believed.

Luther’s enthusiasm for Baptism was virtually euphoric because, he argued, God used it to convey everything for salvation that one would ever need: the complete forgiveness of sins. Hence, Luther argued that one should understand the Christian life as a continual return to Baptism—in the face of your everyday sins and weaknesses, you simply go back to what God has promised: “Believe and be baptized, and you will be saved.” Period.

Luther also retained infant Baptism—after all, a person’s age could not nullify God’s institution—but when it came to the Lord’s Supper, he rejected an essential element in the medieval teaching: the sacrifice of the mass. This, he thought, perverted the purpose of the sacrament from a gracious word of forgiveness into a meritorious work of the priest. Luther accepted the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the sacrament because it was biblical, but not transubstantiation, because it was not. Transubstantiation was the “official” explanation that the bread and wine completely turned into the body and blood even if they continued to look, taste, and smell like bread and wine. At most, argued Luther, transubstantiation was an opinion, derived from philosophy and not the Scriptures. Therefore, it could not be binding on consciences. Also on biblical grounds, Luther recommended communing the laity with both the bread and wine, contrary to contemporary practice, which was communing the laity with bread only.
Luther was ambiguous about penance. Although he completely rejected the whole medieval apparatus that required confession to a priest and works of satisfaction, he recognized a biblical basis for Christians’ confessing their sins to one another and hearing a word of forgiveness. Luther valued this very highly. But since such a confession accompanied by such an absolution still lacked a visible element and because it simply returned a person to the blessings of his or her Baptism, Luther finally decided not to call it a sacrament in this treatise.

The third of these remarkable treatises from 1520 is *The Freedom of a Christian*. In this work, Luther summarized the entire Christian religion under two headings: faith and love. At the outset of the work, he phrased them provocatively in the form of a paradox regarding liberty and servitude, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (LW 31:344). By the end of the treatise, Luther had resolved the paradox and expressed his theme plainly and eloquently,

*We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love.* (LW 31:371)

Martin Luther was not the first to notice differences between Christianity as the Bible described it and Christianity as the Medieval Church practiced it. Well before the Ninety-Five Theses, scholars such as John Colet in England and Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples in France were part of a reform movement in the Church called “Christian Humanism.” “Humanism” came to prominence in the Renaissance as a movement back to the languages and literature of Rome and Greece. Humanists admired the writing style and the literary content of what they read from antiquity and thought to renew contemporary culture by using the works of men such as Cicero and Plato as standards and inspirations for their own. They were often very critical of medieval methods and writings characteristic of Scholasticism in the medieval universities. *Christian* humanists agreed with and otherwise shared humanist cultural values but added to them by also advocating the renewal of Christian culture by a return to the sources of true religion, the New Testament and the Church Fathers.

Probably the best known of the Christian humanists in his own day—and certainly in ours—was Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1467–1536). In works such as *The Praise of Folly* (1511), Erasmus used his skills as a satirist to show just how far contemporary churchmen had departed from the piety of the New Testament. In works such as *The Handbook of the Militant Christian* (1503), Erasmus promoted what he called “the philosophy of Christ”—a way of life open to all Christians, laymen as well as clergy, that emphasized the morals that Jesus taught in the Gospels and that Paul promoted in his epistles.

To promote their case for reform, Christian humanists put into print the works of Church Fathers such as St. Augustine and St. Jerome. Erasmus himself published for the first time the New Testament in the original Greek, along with his own Latin translation and copious annotations on the text. Luther used Erasmus’s Greek New Testament as the foundation for his own New Testament in the German language. Although Luther and Erasmus shared some of the same concerns and many of the same enemies, they were in fundamental *disagreement* about Christianity. Erasmus believed man could cooperate with grace in leading a life that pleased God; Luther believed man’s will was completely enslaved to sin, helpless and hopeless apart from God’s grace in Christ. After Erasmus publicly wrote against him, Luther responded with his *Bondage of the Will* (1525). Additionally, Luther was excommunicated, but Erasmus died in communion with the Church.

*Desiderius Erasmus* by Hans Holbein the Younger (1523).
In this work, Luther revealed just how far his new way of thinking had come. On the one hand, he was unhesitatingly expressing a radical view of Christian liberty. On account of the saving work of Jesus, a Christian was absolutely free not only from sin, death, and Satan but also from God’s Law and all good works. A person’s standing before God depends entirely and exclusively upon faith in the Savior. On the other hand, new freed from concerns about good works, and faith alone. Luther’s sincerity, however, for by the time Luther was composing his letter, the pope was threatening Luther with excommunication. The church’s case against Luther was coming to a close.

From the end of 1518 and throughout 1519, nothing much happened to resolve the ecclesiastical proceedings against Martin Luther. Von Miltitz proved unable to arrange a new hearing, and officials in Rome weren’t doing much either. But by the middle of the year, the politicking over the imperial election was over. Even more important, the Leipzig Debate had revealed Luther’s new thinking about the origins and nature of the pope’s position in the Church, and Luther was developing a large and influential following, both lay and clergy. There was little question that Rome would have to address decisively this challenge to papal authority. Furthermore, early in 1520, John Eck, Luther’s Leipzig foe, decided to move to Rome and make sure church bureaucrats knew how great the stakes really were.

The Papal Bull

So the stage was finally set for the last act of the real-life drama, “The Church against Martin Luther”—or should it be the other way around? In any case, the situation facing Luther was extremely serious. In Rome, Eck and papal theologians prepared a list of particulars against him—forty-one statements, all but one of which were direct quotations from Luther’s writings. By June 15, 1520, the particulars had become official by means of a papal bull, which was an official decree by the pope. This bull became known as the Exsurge Domine, the first two words of the text in Latin. Petitioning God (and the entire communion of saints), Pope Leo described the threat this way:

Arise, O Lord, and judge thy cause.... Foxes have arisen which want to devastate thy vineyard, where thou hast worked the wine-press. At thy ascension into heaven thou hast commanded the care, rule and administration of this vineyard to Peter as head and to thy representatives, his successors, as the Church triumphant. A roaring sow of the woods has undertaken to destroy this vineyard, a wild beast wants to devour it. *

The bull condemned Luther’s teachings regarding penance and indulgences, the authority of the pope, purgatory, good works, and free will, among other topics. But it missed something: it did not explicitly mention justification by faith alone.

Threatening excommunication if Luther did not change his mind, the bull gave him sixty days to reconsider. But when did the clock start ticking? Certainly not when the bull was ratified in Rome, for how could Luther even know what was going on so far away? No, only when officials had posted the bull at three cathedral churches in Saxony did the church consider Luther officially notified of its contents. The pope appointed two men to publish (or


Exsurge Domine, promulgated on June 15, 1520, by Pope Leo X “against Martin Luther and his followers.” The “bulla” specifies forty-one propositions by which Luther’s work is declared “condemned, reproubated, and rejected,” and orders all of Luther’s published works to “be burned publicly and solemnly in the presence of the clerics and people.” Leo gave Luther and his “supporters, adherents, and accomplices” sixty days in which to cease “publishing books and pamphlets concerning some or all of their errors.”

First edition of The Freedom of a Christian. This is the German edition. Luther also wrote and published a Latin version—both in 1520 just about the same time he was under threat of excommunication.
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Rome left no doubt about its final judgment. On January 3, 1521, it issued a bull of excommunication against Luther by name. Significantly, it also pronounced excommunication upon Luther’s unnamed “protectors.” This meant Frederick the Wise, among others, but Frederick ignored the threat and continued taking steps to protect his professor. He turned to the emperor in the hopes that the young ruler would not only defy those demanding Luther’s condemnation under both imperial and church law, but also grant Luther a hearing before reputable scholars despite his excommunication. It was a tough sell that Frederick could not quite accomplish. But his efforts did lead to Luther’s moment at the Diet of Worms.

The Diet of Worms

Emperor Charles V had a lot to think about, and the Luther affair was only one of the issues. Moreover, he was still rather inexperienced in the ways of his own empire. The assembly he summoned for Worms in early 1521 (such assemblies are called “diets” in English) was the first he would attend. The second was Augsburg, 1530, at which Luther was on his way. So far, the electors. What should the emperor do? Like other politicians before and since, he compromised. Luther would get his hearing—kind of. After lengthy negotiations in the first months of 1521 (these negotiations involved, among others, the emperor, Charles V; the elector Frederick the Wise; and the pope’s representative, Jerome Aleander), Charles issued a summons to Luther to appear before the diet. It included an assurance that Luther could travel to and from Worms without fear of arrest. In fact, an imperial herald both delivered the “invitation” and accompanied Luther back to Worms. The summons arrived at the end of March. A few days later, Luther was on his way. So far, the elector had prevailed in protecting Luther. But what would happen when Luther appeared before the diet? No debate, no discussion. Just one request: that he recant. But if he wanted to recant, he could have done so in Wittenberg. He didn’t have to go to Worms.

It took about three weeks for Luther and a handful of friends and associates to arrive in Worms. On the way, he learned that the emperor had already issued a mandate against his writings on account of their unchristian character. Clearly, it was not going to be smooth sailing in Worms, but the journey sometimes felt more like a triumphal procession than a Via Dolorosa. Luther compared it to Palm Sunday. The crowds were enthusiastic and Luther even had opportunities to preach. Not bad for a heretic.

Luther entered Worms on April 16, and much to the chagrin of Aleander, the people poured out into the streets to greet him. After Luther had settled into temporary living quarters, he was besieged by visitors, including several of the nobility. The next morning, functioning as a priest, he heard confession and celebrated mass. An imperial marshal also informed him that his appearance before the diet had been scheduled for that afternoon.

Luther did not lack for advisors, including a lawyer provided by the elector. Perhaps this is the reason for the somewhat anticlimactic conclusion to Luther’s first session. When it came time for Luther’s interrogation before the emperor himself, the first question asked was whether he acknowledged the books published in

Standing just outside Wittenberg at the Elster Gate, with university students and colleagues, Luther publicly burned the pope’s decree that he was a heretic—The papal bull Exsurge Domine. Other documents were also tossed into the flames, including works by John Eck and Hieronymus Emser, two of Luther’s fiercest critics. Perhaps most significantly, the bonfire also consumed a copy of Canon Law, the Catholic Church’s rule book that governed every facet of church life.


his name (and piled on a table); the second was whether he would retract any of their contents. But before Luther could answer even the first, his lawyer intervened and insisted the titles be read. Then, after acknowledging the books as his own, Luther proceeded to the second question—and asked for time to think about it!

Was this a suggestion of the lawyers? Was Luther overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation? Was he surprised his interrogators had not asked him about the specific points for which the church had condemned him? We really don’t know. But they gave him his time. In making his request, Luther had acknowledged that answering the question was a matter of God’s Word and of his own salvation. In granting his request, the imperial official warned him to consider the consequences of persisting in his heresy. He had a day to think it over.

And think it over he did, despite the many visitors who showed up again to pledge their support. Late in the day on Thursday, April 18, Luther once again stood before the emperor and the great leaders of the realm. Once again, the emperor’s man asked him to state clearly and without equivocation whether he would persist in his teachings or whether he would now recant. This time, Luther gave his reply. He spoke boldly and loudly for all to hear—and in both German and Latin for all to understand.

His answer was careful. He argued his works were of different kinds, some of them simple presentations of Christian truth that even his opponents would have to acknowledge. He could hardly disavow those. But other works were attacks upon the papacy and papists who were tormenting the consciences of Christians by their decrees and false doctrines. These were the same ones who were devouring the property and possessions of the German people. He could not retract those works either, for doing so would encourage such godlessness. Finally—and here Luther made his only concession—a third group of books went after individuals who advocated or defended false doctrine and attacked him. Sometimes he had written too harshly, which was not fitting for a professor and monk. Nonetheless, he could not retract those works either, for even if he had written too harshly, which was not fitting for a professor and monk. Nonetheless, he could not retract those works without seeming to affirm the errors they condemned and so promoting the papal tyranny.

In this way, Luther set the stage for his final appeal to the Word of God that was the judge of all doctrines and the guide for all consciences. If he had taught wrongly, Luther said, then someone should show him so by the Scriptures. He reminded his hearers that teaching God’s Word did not mean peace. Christ had said that He had come with a sword. For the empire to go against the Word in the interests of peace and unity would mean disaster. There was no other choice. We must fear God alone.

At this point, the emperor’s spokesman again urged Luther to retract his false teachings. Like other heretics, he maintained, Luther persisted in elevating his own opinions above the fathers and teachers of the church. It was simply arrogance on his part to challenge what the church had decided. Therefore, he asked Luther to answer the question again, but this time simply and unambiguously: Would he recant?

And again, Luther answered.

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 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 I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. In this way, Luther set the stage for his final appeal to the Word of God that was the judge of all doctrines and the guide for all consciences. If I had taught wrongly, Luther said, then someone should show him so by the Scriptures. He reminded his hearers that teaching God’s Word did not mean peace. Christ had said that He had come with a sword. For the empire to go against the Word

Luther had taken his stand, and there he would remain whatever the cost—and whatever was coming next.

The famous phrase “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise” appears in just one account of those that were later printed at Wittenberg, so historians are uncertain of its authenticity. There is good evidence that Luther said, “I cannot do otherwise. May God help me!”
The Luther Monument in Worms is a grand commemoration of the Reformation. It also reveals much about the religious sentiments of the era in which it was produced. It is one of the world’s largest Reformation monuments, and donations from all over the world made it possible. Ernst Rietschel, a nineteenth-century German sculptor who was famous for his monumental works, designed it. It was officially unveiled in 1868.

Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” inspired Rietschel’s design. Walls imitating those of a castle enclose three sides of an elevated square surface (each side about forty feet long). The walls display coats of arms for towns and cities that were a part of the Evangelical Movement. There are twelve major statues on the monument, but the figure of Luther at the center towers above all the rest. He is dressed in a preacher’s robe and is holding a Bible with one hand while the fist of the other rests upon it.

On the base of the Luther statue are eight low-relief sculptures, two on each side: two electors, two Lutheran theologians, two Lutheran knights, and two Reformed theologians (Zwingli and Calvin). At each of the corners of the base of the Luther pedestal is a seated representation of a medieval “forerunner” of the Reformation (Savonarola, Waldo, Wycliffe, and Hus), each of them from a different place (Italy, France, England, and Bohemia, respectively). At each corner of the monument square is a raised pedestal. The two in front of Luther support statues of Frederick the Wise and Philip of Hesse. On the corners behind the Reformer are humanist scholars Johannes Reuchlin (a Hebrew scholar) and Philip Melanchthon. Interestingly, Reuchlin did not embrace Luther’s cause, even though he was a longtime target of church officials before the Reformation. On the three walls halfway between the corners are female figures, each a symbol of a German city identified with a significant event in Reformation history: Augsburg for the Peace of 1555, Speyer for the Protest of 1529, and Magdeburg for its devastation in 1631 during the Thirty Years’ War.

Though the Worms monument had no place for Catholic reformers, neither is it strictly Lutheran. Not only are Zwingli and Calvin a part of the display, but medieval reformers like Wycliffe and Savonarola also did not teach the same doctrine as Luther. Instead of Lutheran orthodoxy, therefore, the monument is a tribute to nineteenth-century liberal values. As one observer put it, “The Luther monument at Worms will stand through the ages, not as a glorification of polemic dogma but as an everlasting testimony of the right of private judgment, of liberty of conscience and of the supreme worth of sincerity in religious faith.”