



THE LEGACY OF LUTHER

Edited by R.C. SPROUL *and* STEPHEN J. NICHOLS



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“I did nothing; the Word did everything.”

—MARTIN LUTHER

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1483 Born in Eisleben, Nov. 10
- 1492–98 Attends school at Mansfield, Magdeburg, and Eisenach
- 1501–5 Attends University of Erfurt; receives BA (1502), MA (1505)
- 1505 Makes vow during thunderstorm, July 2; enters Augustinian monastery
- 1507 Ordained
- 1509 Receives BA in Bible; begins lecturing at Erfurt on the arts
- 1510 Makes pilgrimage to Rome
- 1511 Transfers to Augustinian monastery at Wittenberg
- 1512 Receives doctorate in theology; appointed to faculty of theology at Wittenberg
- 1513–17 Lectures on Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews
- 1517 Posts Ninety-Five Theses on church door, Oct. 31
- 1518 Heidelberg Disputation, April 25
- 1518 Examined by Cardinal Thomas Cajetan at Augsburg
- 1518–19 Possible date of conversion
- 1519 Debates Johann Eck at Leipzig, July 4–14
- 1520 Writes *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*
- 1520 Receives *Exsurge Domine*, papal bull excommunicating him
- 1521 Appears before Diet of Worms, April 17–18

- 1521 Placed under imperial ban, condemned as a heretic and an outlaw, May
- 1521–22 In exile at Wartburg Castle; translates New Testament into German
- 1522 Returns to Wittenberg
- 1524 Publishes first hymnal
- 1525 German Peasants' War
- 1525 Marries Katharina von Bora, June 13
- 1525 Writes *On the Bondage of the Will*
- 1527 Plague strikes Wittenberg; Luther's house becomes a hospital
- 1527 Writes "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"
- 1529 Attends Marburg Colloquy, Oct. 1–4
- 1529 Writes Small Catechism
- 1530 Diet of Augsburg; Luther is unable to attend
- 1530 Augsburg Confession written by Philip Melancthon
- 1534 Publishes complete German Bible
- 1537 Writes Smalcald Articles
- 1543 Writes *On the Jews and Their Lies*
- 1545 Writes *Against the Papacy at Rome, Founded by the Devil*
- 1546 Preaches last sermon at Wittenberg, Jan. 17
- 1546 Dies in Eisleben, Feb. 18; buried at Wittenberg

PART ONE

LUTHER'S LIFE

Chapter One

A GRACIOUS GOD AND A NEUROTIC MONK

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

On January 17, 1546, Martin Luther preached what would be his last sermon from the pulpit of the Castle Church (*Schlosskirche*) in Wittenberg. That same day, he wrote to a friend. He complained of the infirmities of his age: “I am writing, my James, as an old man, decrepit, sluggish, tired, cold, and now also one-eyed.” He then sighs, “. . . and as a man who now that he has died would be given the highly deserved rest (as it seems to me) he was hoping for.”¹ He would not be left in peace, however.

Luther’s hometown of Eisleben faced a crisis. A dispute threatened the civil order and even the ecclesiastical order. Worn out as he was, Luther decided to travel to his hometown to settle the dispute. He set out from Wittenberg with his three sons and a few servants. They first made it as far as Halle. Ice and storms made crossing the rivers a challenge. Luther imaginatively named the chunks of ice that floated threateningly toward their ferry, alternating between Anabaptist opponents and Roman Catholic bishops and popes. He might have been half-dead, but his humor was fully intact.

1 To Jacob Probst, January 1546, in *Luther’s Works, Vol. 50: Letters III*, eds. Gottfried G. Krodel and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 284–85. All references hereafter to *Luther’s Works*, American edition, are abbreviated *LW*.

Halle was the home of Luther's longtime associate Dr. Justus Jonas. Since the debate at Leipzig in 1519, Jonas had been one of Luther's closest disciples. Jonas stood by him at the Diet of Worms. While Luther was in exile at Wartburg Castle, Jonas moved the Reformation forward at Wittenberg. Now, Jonas would accompany Luther on his final trip.

Luther and his enlarged traveling party made a triumphal entry into Eisenach. The hometown hero was welcomed with cheering crowds and escorted by a cavalcade. He preached that Sunday, January 31.

But the journey had taken its toll. Luther wrote to his beloved Katie of bitter winds and freezing rains, not to mention all those threatening chunks of ice. Luther was severely ill. An out-of-control fire, right outside of Luther's room, also threatened his life. His room itself was precarious. Plaster fell from the walls, which loosened a few of the stones from the wall. One stone, reported to be the size of a pillow, came rather close to falling on his head. These misadventures gave reason for Katie to grow anxious back at home. She fired off letters full of worry. So Luther wrote back, letting her know he missed her and adding, "I have a caretaker who is better than you and all the angels; he lies in the cradle and rests on a virgin's bosom, and yet, nevertheless, he sits at the right hand of God, the almighty Father."²

Luther wrote those words on February 7. Eleven days later, he died. Eisenach, the town of his birth, became also the town of his death. Justus Jonas preached his funeral sermon. The crowd spilled out of the church and filled the square. Luther's three sons would accompany their father's body back to Wittenberg, where more crowds would gather to pay their final respects.

Just before he died, Luther preached from his deathbed what would be his last sermon. The "sermon" consisted of simply quoting two texts, one from the Psalms and one from the Gospels. Luther cited Psalm 68:19: "Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation." Then he cited John 3:16. Our God is indeed a God of salvation, and that salvation comes through the work of His Son. Luther could be at peace, though he was physically racked and surrounded by conflict.

Luther was not always at peace, and he didn't always think of God as the God of salvation. He initially feared God, at one point even muttering that he hated God. He was anxious throughout the early decades of his life. During these years, his life was far more struggle than rest. Prior to his "Reformation

2 To Mrs. Martin Luther, Halle, January 25, 1546, in *LW*, 50:302.

breakthrough” and his conversion, which likely took place in 1519, he was deeply troubled. Luther’s life began in Eisleben in darkness. His life came to an end in Eisleben in the full light of the gospel. But this journey and this story are so much greater than one man. This singular story affected the whole of human history.

When Luther was born in Eisleben on November 10, 1483, there were only two options: a person either followed the ways of the Roman Catholic Church or was a pagan. When Luther died, on February 18, 1546, there was a new church in England. There was a new church in the Swiss city-states. And there was a new church in his own German lands. Two principles distinguished these churches from the church in Rome. The first principle concerned Scripture, while the second concerned the doctrine of salvation, specifically, the doctrine of justification. These two ideas express the essence of Reformation theology.

This essay tells the story of Luther’s journey from darkness to light, a journey that took him from Eisleben to his heroic stand at Worms. It is a theological journey, a journey toward the Reformation planks of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*. It is also a literal journey, with a few key stops along the way. Six places in particular stand out during these early years of Martin Luther, from his birth in 1483 until his stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521: Eisleben, Erfurt, Rome, Wittenberg, Heidelberg, and Leipzig. Each one represents a milestone not only in Luther’s journey out of darkness, but also in the history of the Reformation itself.

Eisleben: Hometown

Hans and Margarethe Luder welcomed their first child, a son, into the world on November 10, 1483. The next day, they took him to the church to be baptized. November 11 was the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, the fourth-century Roman soldier turned monk and bishop. So this young couple left the church with their baby baptized and named Martin Luder.

Hans Luder left the farmlands of his family to make what he hoped to be his fortune at the booming business of copper mining. He was what we would today call an entrepreneur. He risked what little money they had in acquiring rights for a mine and then labored relentlessly in attempts to pull profits from it. He even took on what amounted to a second job by managing another mine. His industry and tenacity paid off, gaining him a certain level of esteem in the town. Meanwhile, Margarethe managed the home. Without

knowing for certain, historians believe Luther had eight siblings. Soon after Martin's birth, the family moved to Mansfeld.

As the oldest, and the primogeniture, it fell to Martin Luder to advance his family's standing. Martin would have to keep moving the family up the social and economic ladder. His parents worked hard so that he could have the education and the opportunities they had never had.

According to the custom of the time, young Martin would have attended Mass with his family. He would have been confirmed and would have partaken of his first Eucharist (the wafer only, not the cup, as was then the practice). The Luder family would have had their family shrine, centered around St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, according to tradition. Presumably, they would have been just as religious as the next family.

The Gospel accounts do not name Mary's mother. But that did not stop tradition. In the second century, an apocryphal text named the *Gospel of James*, written around 150, circulated purported details of Mary's childhood and life, identifying her mother as Anne. The church would reject this text as pure fiction. Still, that did not stop tradition. By the late medieval centuries, St. Anne had become the patron saint of miners. It was said that her womb was the source of two great jewels—Mary, and then, later, from Mary's womb, Jesus. A belief that was more superstition than theology held that honoring St. Anne would bring protection and prosperity to those who sought to bring jewels and treasure forth from mines. This was young Martin's theological and spiritual milieu.

Martin Luder's first schooling was at the town school in Mansfeld. Around his fourteenth year, he left Mansfeld for studies at Magdeburg and then headed off to Eisenach. His mother had come from Eisenach, and there were still relatives there. Martin could get the occasional family meal at one of their homes.

Eisenach would come to play a significant role later in Luther's adult life. Wartburg Castle overlooks the town of Eisenach. At the Wartburg, Luther assumed the name *Junker Jorg* while he was hiding in the aftermath of the Diet of Worms and his arranged kidnapping. That was in 1521. But back in the 1490s, Worms and his assumed persona of Knight George were a world away.

Erfurt: Becoming a Monk

During the course of his early studies, young Martin excelled, distinguishing himself from his classmates. These accomplishments opened the door

for him to study at Erfurt. By the time Luther started there, the university was already more than a century old. The town, with a population hovering around twenty thousand, had industry, trade, and an extensive network of monasteries and churches. By 1502, Martin had earned his bachelor's degree. Three years later, he took his master's degree. He also took a Latinized form of his last name. He was now Martin Luther. He stayed in Erfurt, preparing for his doctorate in law.

Amid all of these academic accomplishments, Luther experienced intense struggles in his soul. No matter how much he experienced success, he could not escape the anxiety he felt. The German word for this anxiety is *Anfechtung*. It could be translated as "trial" or "affliction." Roland Bainton expresses the difficulty in grasping this word when he observes, "There is no English equivalent." *Anfechtung* refers to a deeply seated soul struggle. Bainton adds, "It may be a trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man."³ For Luther, we need to use the plural, *Anfechtungen*, as these crises of the soul came often. As his contemporaries did, Luther looked at spirituality and salvation as a contest between sins and merits. And it was a contest he nearly always lost.

In the summer of 1505, Luther traveled to his family's home in Mansfeld for an extended visit. On his way back to Erfurt, he got caught in a violent thunderstorm. He presumed the storm to be God's judgment on his soul. While at his family's home, he more than likely spent time before the family altar, the shrine to St. Anne. Now, in the clutches of the storm, he cried out to her, "Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk!" She was the only mediator he knew.

A stone to the east of Stotternheim marks the place. Luther's appeal to St. Anne is carved in the face of the granite. When Luther survived the storm and made his way back to Erfurt, he kept the words of promise. He turned his back on the law and became a monk.

Writing many years later, Luther confessed that if ever a monk could get to heaven by monkery, he was that monk. He did not leave his soul struggles behind when he entered the monastery. They followed him and, in fact, intensified. He later testified, "I tortured myself with praying, fasting, keeping vigils, and freezing—the cold alone was enough to kill me—and I inflicted upon myself such pain as I would never inflict again, even if I could."

3 Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 42.

Johann von Staupitz was the vicar general of the Augustinian Order in Germany. Reports of Luther's legendary struggles in the monastery eventually made their way to Staupitz, who took an interest in the earnest and intense young monk. Staupitz was already moving away from some of the emphases of medieval Roman Catholicism, and he nurtured Luther's continued interest in reading Augustine directly.⁴ Staupitz was also deeply concerned for Luther in the midst of his spiritual struggles. Recognizing Luther's academic abilities, Staupitz sent him to Wittenberg for biblical studies and theology. Luther took a BA in 1509, then returned to Erfurt to teach. Yet the distractions of academics did nothing to abate the struggles.

Rome: Holy City, Artistic Wonder, or Vanity Fair?

In 1510, Staupitz decided to send Luther on a pilgrimage to Rome. The Augustinian Order and the monasteries in Erfurt needed to renew their credentials. Staupitz thought this a fine occasion for Luther to be cured of his *Anfechtungen*. At it turns out, Staupitz miscalculated.

Rome plays a crucial role in the New Testament. Paul spent his final years there and, as we learn from tradition, was martyred there. So was Peter. The crown jewel of the New Testament is the epistle to the Romans. Rome was the capital city of a vast empire. Over the centuries, of course, Rome's stature continued to grow, as did the stature of the bishop of Rome. No longer one among many hundreds of bishops, the bishop of Rome eventually borrowed a title from the Caesars: *pontifex maximus*, the supreme priest.

The pope during Luther's visit, Julius II, was a patron of the arts. He commissioned the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica. Up to that point, the Basilica of St. John Lateran had served as the church's center, or "ecumenical mother." Pope Julius II set his sights on St. Peter's, across the Tiber. Julius also commissioned Michelangelo to begin painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, a project that lasted from 1508 until 1512, coinciding with Luther's visit. Cardinals around Rome were also busy building palaces and cathedrals of their own. Church officials also called upon Raphael and a galaxy of other artists to adorn walls and ceilings, design buildings, and erect sculptures.

In 1510, Rome, the Holy City, was becoming the artistic wonder of the whole of the Western world. It was also a city of high debauchery. One historian describes the city this way: "Overall the life of Roman high society,

4 Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 28.

both lay and clerical, was marked by a spirit of worldliness, moral laxity, and ostentatious luxury, in an unending round of banquets, parties, and hunts.”⁵ And, in 1510, Luther made his journey here.

Rome was roughly eight hundred miles directly south of Erfurt. Luther would have stopped at monasteries along the way. These monasteries were strategically placed to house pilgrims as they made their way from various places across Europe to the Holy See. Luther would have visited many shrines along the way, and he would have spent most of the hours of the pilgrimage in prayerful contemplation and meditation—all in preparation for this visit to the Holy City. He would have traversed the Alps through Germany, through the Swiss city-states and on to Italy. When he reached Rome, he would have gone through the ancient Aurelian Walls and across the Piazza del Popolo, Rome’s northern public square. By the time Luther made his way down to the Basilica of St. John Lateran, he would have seen enough to make his stomach turn. Prostitutes, public lewdness, and hawkers of all sorts of wares would have pestered him along the cobbled city streets.⁶

One of the focal points for pilgrims to Rome was the *scala sancta*. Here, Luther’s disillusionment reached its apex. These twenty-eight marble steps are believed to be the very steps that led up to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem—the very steps Jesus walked on the way to His trial. Emperor Constantine had them removed and relocated to Rome, a gift to his rather pious mother, Helen. Today, they are housed in their own building across the street from St. John Lateran. In 1510, there would have been a table set up at the base of the steps where priests collected coins and handed out indulgences. Pilgrims, after they had turned over a few coins, would climb the steps on their knees, praying the rosary as they shuffled up and down. Luther waited his turn and then joined the stream of penitent pilgrims.

When Luther reached the top, no spiritual awakening greeted him. No waves of peace rolled gently over his soul. All he could say was, “Who knows whether it is so?”⁷ Years later, he had a much more scathing review of Rome: “This city has become a harlot.” He went on to say that he would not have believed it had he not seen it. Needless to say, Staupitz did not receive a

5 Agostino Borromeo, “Rome,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3:448.

6 One can not help draw an allusion to Christian’s walk through “Vanity Fair” in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, though what Luther actually saw was far worse than what Bunyan imagined.

7 Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 51.

favorable report, and his young charge was slipping even further away. The neurotic monk was becoming even worse.

Wittenberg: Fountainhead of the Reformation

In desperation, Staupitz sent Luther back to Wittenberg for more studies. He entered the Black Cloister of the Augustinian Order in 1511. He completed his doctoral studies. To qualify for his doctorate, he had to master the preeminent theological text of the day, Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. This text had a profound and far-reaching impact on Luther, but the impact did not come through Lombard's teachings or conclusions. Instead, the impact came through the figure Lombard quoted: Augustine. B.B. Warfield would later say that the Reformation was nothing short of the recovery of Augustine's doctrine of salvation.⁸ Once Luther earned his doctorate, he took his place on the theology faculty at the University of Wittenberg.

Thanks to his exposure to Augustine, Luther took one step forward and two steps back in his understanding of sin. He learned that our problem is not *sins* in the plural. This quantifying of sin gets to the heart of the eclipse of the gospel in later medieval Roman Catholicism. If sin is quantified, then we look to merits or graces as the remedy. Baptism atones for original sin, or the sin of Adam that was imputed to us. What remains is our actual sins. Again, the quantity of sins is the issue. And so, the other sacraments, in addition to the sacrament of baptism, come into play. Through penance, it is possible to undo the effects of our sins.

Indulgences arose through the evolution of the doctrine and practice of penance. These documents allowed for the skipping of a few steps in the process of being restored to the good graces of the church (and thus, of God). Penance for sin entails going to confession and receiving absolution (pending, of course, the completion of the tasks prescribed by the priest). Having done the penance, one could then attend Mass and receive the grace of the Eucharist. Or, alternatively, one could skip all these steps through the simple purchase of an indulgence.

Indulgences first appeared during the Crusades. According to the Roman Catholic Church, going on a crusade was certainly a work worthy of the forgiveness of sins. But some noble families did not want to risk losing their sons in the process. Consequently, they could pay someone to go on a

8 Benjamin B. Warfield, "Studies in Tertullian and Augustine" in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1930), 4:130, 131, 285, 411.

crusade in the son's place—they could purchase an indulgence. The practice of buying indulgences evolved over the centuries until it reached its nadir in the sixteenth century, on the eve of Luther's stand against the Roman Catholic Church.

The idea of the quantity of sins led to a similar notion of the quantity of grace, or graces. In this view, some people have more graces than they need; they are deemed *saints* by the Roman church. Their grace, their works of supererogation (works above and beyond), are stored in a treasure chest in heaven. Of course, Mary is "full of grace" and, consequently, stands at the head of this line of saints. This expression "full of grace" (from the Vulgate's translation of Luke 1:28) had come to mean that Mary possessed a great quantity of grace that could be applied to those who prayed to her or applied to the penitent who sought her out.

The pope holds the keys to this treasury of graces, and the sacraments—all controlled by the church—are the means by which those graces reach the people. All of these graces come to the penitent ultimately because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. The question is, how do those graces get mediated to the sinner? The medieval Roman answer was loud and clear: those graces only come through the church. Grace is not immediate; that is, it does not come without a mediator. Grace can only come through the church. Again, the pope holds the keys. It is at this point that Luther enters the discussion.

What Luther learned about sin from Augustine upset this entire superstructure. He learned that we are sinners at the root (*radix*, from which we derive the English word "radical," is the Latin word).⁹ That's one step forward. We are sinners, and God is holy. Luther saw all this poignantly. He was a sinner through and through, and he knew this to be true. God is holy and righteous through and through, which he also knew to be true. A sinner could never please a holy God. Luther writes, adding some color as only he can:

For this reason it is plain insanity to say that a man of his own powers can love God above all things and can perform the works of the law according to the substance of the act, even if not according to the intentions of Him who gave the commandment, because he is not in a state of grace. O fools. O pig-theologians.¹⁰

⁹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 70–72.

¹⁰ *LW*, Vol. 25: *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 261.

Not even the most assiduous monk of all time can do anything to please God. This realization led Luther to this pronouncement:

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.¹¹

The years between 1511 and 1517 were likely the hardest years of what was a hard-lived life. Luther had his routines. He would lecture at the university. Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony, had not only built up the city and the Castle Church, but had also used his considerable wealth to establish Wittenberg’s place among the constellation of European universities. No expense was spared, scholars were rewarded, and the university grew in stature.

Frederick marveled at his professor of theology. Luther was a scintillating lecturer, capable of both incisive thinking and good humor. If you have ever read Erasmus’ satire on the church at this time, *In Praise of Folly*, you know that there was much fodder for comedic moments. Luther’s wit, coupled with these opportune times, meant that his students would be well entertained. Humor, especially sarcasm, tends to reveal realities that are more tragic than comedic. So it was in this case. Luther was troubled because these were dark times.

As the summer of 1517 came to an end and students filed back into the classrooms for fall semester lectures, Frederick announced his plans to reveal the latest relics he had acquired for the Castle Church. Through the remarkable invention of the printing press, he published a catalog of these relics. November 1, 1517—All Saints’ Day—was set aside as the day to unveil these new relics to the public.

Luther was troubled. He was even more troubled by what had recently come from Rome. After Julius II’s death in 1513, Leo X ascended the papal throne. Leo expanded on the quest to make Rome the artistic center of the

11 Martin Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” *LW, Vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 336–37. This text was written in 1545 by Luther as he recalled his conversion.

Western world. The writer Alexander Dumas famously quipped that under Leo X, “Christianity assumed a pagan character.”¹² Leo inherited debt from his predecessor and plunged the church even further into the red through his lavish and extravagant tastes. Among those who received his patronage were the artists Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, Correggio, Titian, Andrea del Sarto, Fra Bartolomeo, Giulio Romano, and Ariosto, and the author of *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli. With an exhausted treasury, Leo needed a way to raise funds.

The solution was a deal with Albert, archbishop of Magdeburg. Albert wanted to obtain the archbishopric of Mainz. It was unlawful under canon law to hold two bishoprics, however, so Albert needed a papal dispensation. And to pay for the expenses related to his elevation at Mainz, Albert had had to take out a loan. Leo granted permission, in exchange for half of the money Albert raised to pay back his loan.

To raise the money, Albert recruited the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel to carry out an unprecedented sale of indulgences. As he traveled through the German lands, Tetzel’s retinue would announce his impending arrival with much fanfare, and upon arriving in a town, he would preach on the pains of hell and the dangers of purgatory in the town square. Those who heard his message of judgment were well primed to purchase the offered indulgences to help offset their just-highlighted wicked deeds.

Before long, Tetzel set up shop across the Elbe River from Wittenberg. Frederick (not wanting competition with his relics and the associated indulgence sales) would not allow Tetzel to enter his territory, but Luther’s parishioners were crossing the river and purchasing indulgences all the same.¹³ This created a pastoral crisis for Luther. His parishioners had a piece of paper that meant they no longer had to go to confession in order to go to Mass. Luther, their parish priest, was compelled to administer the sacrament to them because of that piece of paper. He knew they were eating “unworthily.” He also knew there was little he could do about it. That little piece of paper they held had the pope’s seal.

These two fronts—the relics at Wittenberg and Tetzel’s indulgence sale—bore down hard on Luther. As a scholar, he took up his primary weapon, the pen, and wrote a series of theses that called for a debate within the church to discuss these practices. By the time he was done, his list numbered ninety-five.

12 Alexander Dumas, *The Cenci* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), 362.

13 Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 76.

On October 31, 1517, All Hallow's Eve, or the eve before All Saints' Day, Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg. The first salvo was fired. The theses that highlighted the financial aspects of the indulgence sale hit a ready audience. Bainton tells us, "This polemic would evoke a deep *Ja wohl* among the Germans, who for some time had been suffering from a sense of grievance against the venality of the Italian *curia*." Bainton adds, though, that "the financial aspect was the least in Luther's eyes."

Thesis 92 probably best expresses the aspect of indulgences that was the most virulent in Luther's eyes. He declared, "Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Peace, peace,' and there is no peace!"¹⁴ Sucking money from German peasants was one thing; giving them a false gospel was another altogether.

Luther prefaced the Ninety-Five Theses with these words, revealing his motivation: "Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light." He then turned his attention immediately to the idea of penance. The first thesis declares, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance." In the second thesis, he says "repentance" cannot mean "penance."¹⁵

The importance of this distinction is tied to Luther's newfound access to the New Testament's original language. The year before Luther posted his theses, Erasmus had published his Greek New Testament. It was actually a parallel text, with the Latin Vulgate in one column and the Greek text in another. This was an unprecedented publishing event. And it led Luther right back to the source of all theology, right back to the original text. When Luther examined the Greek text, he noticed something striking at Matthew 4:17. The Latin Vulgate translated the Greek word meaning "repent" as *poenitentiam agite*, or "do penance." Luther knew this to be a mistranslation. Penance is about an outward act, or multiple outward acts. Repentance is a whole-souled heart change that results in outward acts of obedience. This mistranslation of the Vulgate set up a domino chain that fell in a tragically wrong direction. Instead of falling in line as the next domino in the chain, Luther went back to the source and began building his theology from there.¹⁶

There is no way Luther could have calculated the impact that the nailing

14 *Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2002), 47.

15 *Ibid.*, 23.

16 *Ibid.*, 22.

of the Ninety-Five Theses to the church door would have. He certainly did not fully appreciate the ramifications of it at the moment. But soon, those ramifications rolled in like wave upon wave. Things would need to be torn down before they could be built back aright.

Luther sent a copy of the theses to Albert. Remember, Luther cared deeply about his church and he longed for an open debate. Albert then sent a copy to Rome. Luther wanted a debate. But he got far more. Within months, controversy swirled.

Heidelberg: The Cross Alone

Nestled along the Rhine River, Heidelberg was the site for the General Chapter, or assembly, of the Augustinian Order in May 1518. Staupitz, the general vicar (or head) of the order, seized this moment for Luther to speak to the crisis caused by the Ninety-Five Theses. Luther responded by drafting a new set of theses, the Twenty-Eight Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation.¹⁷ Though far less known than the theses nailed to the church door, these theses are the most important text during this period of Luther's development. At one point in his life, Luther would declare, "*Crux sola est nostra theologia*," meaning, "The cross alone is our theology." That singular expression crystalizes what Luther was aiming at in the Twenty-Eight Theses at Heidelberg.¹⁸

Before enumerating the theses, Luther wrote a short introductory paragraph as a preface. The preface is essential for understanding the work as a whole. Luther starts off by noting that he distrusts "completely our own wisdom," and so he relies on and draws from "St. Paul, the especially chosen vessel and instrument of Christ, and also from St. Augustine, his most trustworthy interpreter."¹⁹

The Latin expression *ad fontes*, "to the sources," served as the Renaissance battle cry. It meant going back to the originals, or the fountainheads. This can be seen in the revival of Greco-Roman architecture and art. It can be seen in the desire to read Plato and Aristotle directly, instead of reading layers of medieval interpretations of Plato and Aristotle. In theology, it meant

17 After the twenty-eight "theological" theses, Luther adds a dozen more "philosophical" theses disparaging Aristotle. Technically, there were forty theses at the Heidelberg Disputation.

18 See Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 39.

19 Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 30. For the full text and a current scholarly discussion of the Heidelberg Theses, see also *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 67–120.

reading the Bible, and Augustine too, rather than reading layers of commentary on the primary sources. *Ad fontes* of the Renaissance is mirrored in the counterpart *sola Scriptura* of the Reformation. Luther's short preface declares the sources of his teaching—Paul and Augustine. He also admits—and we need to see this—that the hearers and readers of the Twenty-Eight Theses will have to determine how “well or poorly” Luther deduced them from Paul and Augustine. Luther's source, however, was the fountainhead. It was the “source” that led him to see how wrong the practice of penance became back in October 1517. The more Luther looked to the sources, the more wrong he saw in the church of his day.

After the short paragraph preface comes the Twenty-Eight Theses. They compare and contrast what Luther calls a “theologian of glory” and a “theologian of the cross.” Typically, we associate glory, especially the glory of God, with good things. In this case, however, Luther sees a theologian of glory as a bad thing. A theologian of glory is the same as the false prophet who declares peace in thesis 92 of the Ninety-Five Theses. In Heidelberg thesis 21, Luther writes, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.” In using the term *glory*, Luther is talking about the inane idea that humanity itself has its own glory, or that humanity has the ability to please God and to perform righteousness. This idea leads the theologian of glory to disdain God's grace. Divine grace is the good thing that a theologian of glory calls evil. In short, the theologian of glory exults in human ability and in works-righteousness.

Standing in contrast to the theologian of glory is the theologian of the cross. The theologian of the cross starts with us—more specifically, with our misery. Thesis 18 reads, “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.” Consequently, thesis 25 informs us, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.”

The theologian of glory actually does far worse than call grace evil. The theologian of glory, the one who trusts in human ability and trusts in the accumulation of merits and works, actually despises Christ.

Then, in the last of the Twenty-Eight Theses, Martin Luther writes what very well may be the most beautiful sentence he ever wrote: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.” The love of God will never find anything pleasing to it in us, because we are all sinners who are unrighteous and utterly distasteful to the Holy God. And so, God makes us righteous. He (re)creates us.

One of the young monks sitting in the audience listening to Luther present and debate the Twenty-Eight Theses was Martin Bucer (1491–1551). Historian David F. Wright observes, “This experience was [Bucer’s] evangelical conversion.”²⁰ Bucer went on to be the leader of the Reformation at Strasbourg. Young Calvin desired to study there, but was stopped at Geneva for a season. When Geneva expelled Calvin, he finally got his wish and spent the years from 1538 to 1541 with Bucer. The effects of the Twenty-Eight Theses were far-reaching.

They were also near-reaching, and they led to yet another disputation for Luther at Augsburg with Cardinal Thomas Cajetan in October 1518. Cajetan demanded that Luther recant. In the middle of the night, Luther fled on horseback, returning to the safe protection of Frederick the Wise at Wittenberg.²¹

Sometime during this period, Luther was converted. The actual date of his conversion is disputed. Some place it before the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses; some put it before the Heidelberg Disputation. It is highly likely, however, that Luther’s conversion came in 1519. In reading the whole of the Ninety-Five Theses, it is clear that Luther still held on to a number of formative Roman Catholic doctrines. At that point, he was not in favor of jettisoning the whole of it; he sought instead to correct and purify it from the corruptions that he saw as creeping in during the 1200s through the early 1500s. The corruption culminated in the indulgence sale of Tetzel and Albert and the relic exhibit at Wittenberg. There is also Luther’s own testimony that his “breakthrough” came while he was lecturing through the Psalms a second time. Those lectures were given in the early months of 1519. Many years later, in 1545, Luther reflected on his conversion, and offered up an extraordinary account of this event, one that hinges on understanding the difference between the active and the passive. So, Luther tells us:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skilful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul’s epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about

20 David F. Wright, “Martin Bucer,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 91.

21 Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 93–97.

the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed” that had stood in my way. For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they call it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.

Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scripture from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.²²

22 Martin Luther, preface to *LW*, 34:336–37.

This is the gospel. This is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The key here is that Luther is passive. Christ takes on his sin. Christ achieves righteousness, in His obedience in His life and in His death on the cross. This was Luther's discovery. Christ did it. All of it.

This monumental moment occurred in 1519. Another monumental event that occurred that year was a debate with Johann Eck at the city of Leipzig.

Leipzig: Scripture Alone

Leipzig, the foremost city in Saxony, hosted a lengthy disputation from June 27 through July 17, 1519. Rome had dispatched Johann Eck to argue its side. Eck and Luther had become aware of each other in the spring of 1517. Very quickly, Eck had moved against Luther. Eck agreed to debate Luther, but not directly. He would debate Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. Though born three years after Luther, Karlstadt was a professor at Wittenberg and served as Luther's "doctor-father" or supervising professor during Luther's earning of his doctorate. Luther would very quickly outpace his master, however.

Eck and Karlstadt disputed from June 17 through July 3. Eck emerged the victor. Luther could be silent no more and set about disputing Eck from July 4 until July 17. While many topics were debated, they kept circling back to the papacy and papal authority.

Eck excelled on this point, being thoroughly committed to papal primacy as a divine right.²³ The debate then turned to the church fathers. Luther made the case that many of the early church fathers had no understanding of a primate, or a pope over the bishops. The dispute focused on Athanasius for quite a while. Eck asserted but could offer no evidence that Athanasius looked to Rome or to a pope for guidance.

Then Luther made the pronouncement, "No Christian believer can be forced [to believe an article of faith] beyond Holy Scripture."²⁴ That was enough for Eck. By not yielding to papal authority, Luther had aligned himself with the "Bohemian." The reference, of course, was to Jan Hus. Hus had been condemned as a heretic and martyred in 1415. Because Hus was condemned, Luther would be guilty by association.

Two things resulted from Leipzig. One was the formulation of the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura*. The other was the beginning of the end of

²³ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

Luther's tenure as a monk in good standing in the Roman Catholic Church. Luther returned to Wittenberg and to his classroom, his pulpit, and his study.

The summer and fall of 1520 proved to be rather busy for Luther. He wrote three treatises: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (August), *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (October), and *On the Freedom of a Christian* (November). He was also condemned by the church. Pope Leo X issued the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which called on the Lord to expel Luther, the wild boar, from the vineyard of the church for trampling underfoot the gospel. History is full of ironies, but not many more acute than Leo's words in the papal bull. Luther responded to the papal bull by burning it. That action would lead him to yet another significant town in the journey of his life.

On to Worms: Conclusion

Luther's journey from Eisleben to Erfurt to Rome to Wittenberg to Heidelberg and to Leipzig eventually led him to the town of Worms.

Worms was the location of the imperial diet set to meet on and off from the end of January through the end of May 1521. Leo, of course, ordered Luther to come to Rome. Frederick the Wise simply refused to send him. Luther was a German citizen and he would face his accusers on German soil.

Luther arrived at Worms on April 16 to cheering crowds, excluding the papal authorities. On April 17, Luther appeared before the diet. In front of Luther was a large table, upon which was spread out a collection of his writings. The presiding officials demanded only two things: Luther's confession that he was the author of these books and his recantation of their contents. Luther was caught off guard. He had been promised safe passage and he expected a debate. Now, he realized he would get neither. He hesitated and asked for a day to consider his reply. The night of April 17, 1521, was passed in prayer. As with the vigils he kept as a monk, Luther prayed through a struggle. But unlike those previous vigils, this one was not followed by crushing anxiety and the throes of *Anfechtungen*. Luther instead emerged from his chamber and took the steps to his place before the diet in confidence and security and peace.

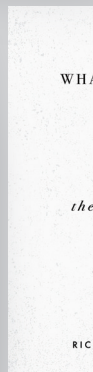
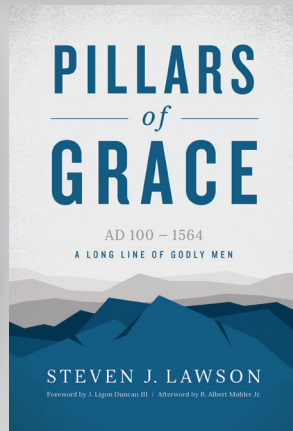
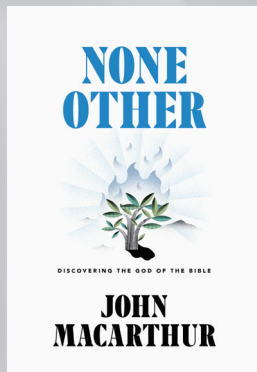
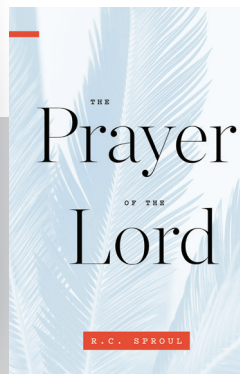
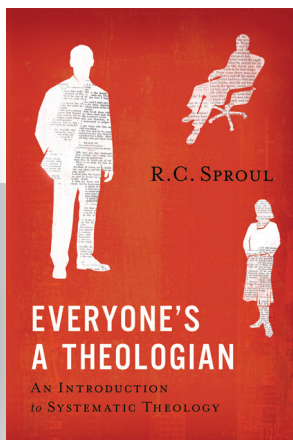
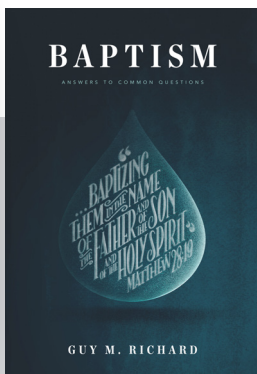
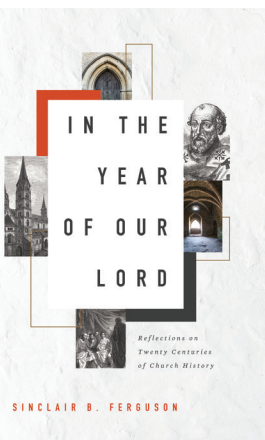
"Here I stand," he declared.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, geography plays an interesting role. Augustine leaves North Africa, wanders through various cities, including Rome, and ends up at Milan, where he is converted. He then returns home to Hippo

Regius in North Africa. Augustine made a literal journey. Yet, he also made a metaphorical journey, much like Adam once did. Adam was at home in the garden in Eden, and he was then expelled, wandering “east of Eden.” The theological term for this separation is *alienation*. One of the Greek words for sin is *planaō*, from which we get the word *planets*, objects that wander through the solar system. The wandering is paradise lost. Then comes Christ, the second Adam and, through Him, we can return home. The theological word for this return is *reconciliation*.

Luther’s journeys through each of these cities were literal, and they color in the picture of his life. They also chronicle a larger picture in that they reveal the development of Luther’s theology and the development of the Reformation itself. Yet these journeys and these cities are also a metaphor. Luther leaves Eisleben and struggles, even rages, against God. He experiences alienation. At his death, he returns home. He is no longer at war, but he is at peace with God. There he not only stands; there he also rests.

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MEET MARTIN LUTHER

He was one of the most influential men of his day. The movement that began with his posting of the Ninety-Five Theses reshaped Europe, redirected Christian history, and recovered the truth of God’s Word. Five hundred years later, what is Luther’s legacy? In this volume, Drs. R.C. Sproul, Stephen J. Nichols, and thirteen other scholars and pastors examine his life, teaching, and enduring influence. Meet Martin Luther, the audacious Reformer who, out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, set the world ablaze.



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