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READING LUTHER

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What Was Luther's World Like?

The boy grew up in exciting, harsh, and violent times.

JAMES M. KITTELSON

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Luther Haus Eisenach - Dwelling house of Martin Luther

Luther lived in exciting times, the era of Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, Copernicus, and Columbus. Even today, the splendor of life at a Renaissance court excites the imagination.

However, the young man and his family were utterly untouched by the era's larger events. Not a single Luder was aware of Columbus's voyages. None knew of the glories of Renaissance art and literature until much later. Instead, they endured the harsh realities of life in northern Europe, where violence was part of everyday life.

A local drought, a terribly wet spring, or an early frost could force grain prices up as much as 150 percent over the previous year. Many people were reduced to begging for food.

Peasants often sought recourse for grievances not in the courts but with fists, knives, and clubs. Beggars and the homeless—which included many maimed, insane, and intellectually disabled individuals—were so numerous that authorities on the west bank of the Rhine would periodically round them up and drive them over to the east bank. From there, other soldiers would march them deep into the Black Forest and on to central Germany.

The Plague stalked Europe at the time. In Strasbourg, to take one local example, it took the lives of 16,000 of the 25,000 inhabitants and left deserted 300 villages in the region.

If this was an age of death, it was also an age of pilgrimages, saints, and relics. The search for spiritual security colored everything. Christ was often pictured on a throne with a lily (resurrection) coming from one side of his head and a sword (damnation) coming from the other. The burning question was, "How can I avoid the sword and earn the lily?"

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The Accidental Revolutionary

In his quest for spiritual peace, Luther had no idea he'd leave his world in turmoil.

JAMES M. KITTELSON

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"The Protestant Reformers" by Anonymous

An adviser to sixteenth-century tourists remarked that people who return from their travels without having seen Martin Luther and the pope "have seen nothing." This man later became a bishop of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and one of Luther's opponents.

Another person read Luther's works and declared, "The church has never seen a greater heretic!" But upon reflection he exclaimed, "He alone is

right!" This man became a reformer, and Luther regularly made private confession to him.

How could one friar and professor evoke such conflicting reactions?

The answer is simplicity itself. This man, who continues to speak after half a millennium, either taught the core of the Christian faith correctly or is still leading souls astray. As he himself put it, "Others before me have contested practice. But to contest doctrine, that is to grab the goose by the neck!"

Unspectacular Childhood

Contrary to some romantic speculations, Luther's childhood had almost nothing to do with his becoming a revolutionary theologian. He was born almost in transit on November 10, 1483, at Eisleben (about 120 miles southwest of modern Berlin), where both parents may have worked as domestic servants.

Within the year, the family moved to Mansfeld, where his father, Hans Luder (as it was locally pronounced), found work in the local copper mines. Hans quickly climbed, perhaps with the help of relatives, to ownership or part-ownership of several mines and smelters. He even became a member of the city council. Cranach's painting of the elderly Luder shows him in a fine woven coat with a fur collar.

"Others before me have contested practice. But to contest doctrine, that is to grab the goose by the neck!"

Luther remembered his childhood in part for (in today's terms) its physical abuse. He was beaten by both his mother and father in truly frightening ways. He became so estranged from his father on one occasion that Hans sought *his* forgiveness. But Hans did come to his son. As Luther also remembered, "He meant well by me." Perhaps the strict discipline reflected no more than a family that willed to be successful, and was so. There was certainly nothing unusual about it.

There is also no evidence of anything unusual or rebellious about the family's piety. Margaretha, Luther's mother, shared the common superstitions of the time. For example, she blamed the death of one of her

sons on a neighbor, whom she regarded as a witch. Hans joined in seeking a special indulgence for the local parish church. As a youngster, Luther imbibed a religion in which one had to strive for future salvation just as one had to work for material survival.

A Far-Sighted Decision

In this setting, two unspectacular matters set Luther apart.

First, Hans (who could have satisfied himself with having the lad learn to read, write, and cipher, and then go into the family business) sent the boy to Latin school and finally on to the University of Erfurt. In making this farsighted decision, Hans was ambitious not just for his son, but also for the entire family. If he succeeded, young Luther would become a lawyer, who, whether in the church or at court, could then provide handsomely for both parents and siblings.

Second, the youth who left home before his fourteenth birthday proved to be extraordinarily intelligent. He earned both his baccalaureate and master's degrees in the shortest time allowed by the statutes of the University of Erfurt. He proceeded directly to the faculty of law. He proved so adept at disputations (public debates that were the principal means of learning and teaching) that he earned the nickname "The Philosopher." Hans was so pleased that he gave his son the costly gift of the central text for legal studies at the time, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

From Law to Legalism

Unfortunately for Hans's plans, the fledgling law student began to have doubts about the status of his soul and, with them, the career his father had securely set before him. In 1505, when Luther was not yet 22, he took an officially sanctioned, yet unexplained, leave from the university. He visited his family to seek, it appears, their advice about his future. On his return to Erfurt, as Luther fought his way through a severe thunderstorm, a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him.

"Help me, St. Anne!" Luther screamed. "I will become a monk!"

After his vow to St. Anne, the familiar patroness of miners, Luther spent several weeks discussing his decision with friends. Then, in July 1505, as was the requirement upon entering monastic life, he gave away all his possessions—his lute, on which he was proficient; his many books, including the "*Corpus Juris Civilis*"; his clothing and eating utensils—and entered the Black Cloister of the Observant Augustinians. As was customary, he endured more than a month of examining his conscience and being interrogated by the appropriate authorities before proceeding to the novitiate (a further year of scrutiny before becoming a friar).

By all evidence, Luther was extraordinarily successful ("impeccable" was a later description) as an Observant Augustinian, just as he had been as a student. He did not simply engage in prayer, fasts, and ascetic practices (such as going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself), he pursued them earnestly. As he later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

He became a priest within fewer than two years of entering the Black Cloister. He was sent to Rome as the traveling companion for a senior brother on crucial business for the Observants in Germany. In addition, his superiors ordered him to undertake the study of theology so he could become one of the order's teachers.

Worthy of Study

At this moment Luther began to be someone worthy of study in his own right. The fears and anxieties that drove him into the Black Cloister left him during his first year or so there, but then they intensified. Although he sought to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, he found no consolation. He was increasingly terrified of the wrath of God: "When it is touched by this passing inundation of the eternal the soul feels and drinks nothing but eternal punishment."

The command to study academic theology meant he could investigate his struggles intellectually. He later commented that he went "where my temptations took me," meaning that he dared to investigate the issues that most troubled him. But it was slow going: "I did not learn my theology all at

once....but like Augustine through much study, teaching, and writing."

In the process, Luther's attacks of doubt about his salvation became objective realities that he studied—almost in the manner that a mathematician puzzles over a difficult problem.

The Horns of Luther's Dilemma

As a beginning theology student, Luther was taught the prevailing orthodoxy, and parts of his early lectures as a professor show he believed it.

His teachers, following the Bible, taught that God demanded absolute righteousness, as in the passage "Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." People needed to love God absolutely and their neighbors as themselves. They should have the unshakable faith of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son.

He was confessing his sins and performing his penance out of the intensely human instinct to save his own skin.

Furthermore, when they were not perfect, people were to repent in a fully contrite manner, not for the selfish purpose of saving themselves. And where the individual couldn't be absolutely righteous, the church would step in with the grace of the sacraments.

Luther later remarked, "I was so drunk, nay, submerged in the doctrines of the pope that I could have happily killed (or cooperated with anyone who killed) whoever took but a syllable of obedience away from him."

Luther, however, was plagued by one problem, and it eventually drove him away from what he had been taught. Human beings were incapable of the selfless acts and states of mind the Scriptures required. The most crushing to Luther was the perfectly scriptural obligation to be contrite, to repent.

In the late Middle Ages, repentance most commonly occurred in the course of sacramental confession and penance, according to which the sinner confessed, was forgiven, and then performed penitential acts that completed the process. But Luther knew that in the midst of this most crucial act, he was at his most selfish. He was confessing his sins and

performing his penance out of the intensely human instinct to save his own skin. Yet because of the human tendency to sin, one could hardly confess enough.

This critical issue remained vivid in Luther's mind. He commented later, "If one were to confess his sins in a timely manner, he would have [had] to carry a confessor in his pocket!" As his teachers knew, this fact could lead to despair (or as it was believed then, the sin against the Holy Spirit). In Luther's case it occasionally did.

Who Could Be Righteous?

During his early years, whenever Luther came to the famous "Reformation text"—Romans 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word *faith*, but to the word *righteous*. Who, after all, could "live by faith"? Only those who were already righteous. The text was clear on the matter: "the righteous shall live by faith."

Luther remarked, "I hated that word, 'the righteousness of God,' by which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner." The young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous—and he knew it. During this turmoil, Luther often approached Johann von Staupitz, his superior, about his doubts, sins, and outright hatred of a righteous God. He came so often that Staupitz once commanded him to go and commit a real sin: "You want to be without sin, but you don't have any real sins anyway ... the murder of one's parents, public vices, blasphemy, adultery, and the like. These are sins. ... You must not inflate your halting, artificial sins out of proportion!"

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

Contradicting Everything

The critical moment (or rather, moments) in Luther's life resulted from a decision by his superiors. They, and Staupitz in particular, ordered him

to take his doctorate and become a professor of the Bible at Wittenberg University. Depending upon one's point of view, this was either one of the most brilliant or stupid decisions in the history of Latin Christianity.

Luther resisted the call, saying, "It will be the death of me!" but he finally relented. He soon acquired his mature self-identity as a professor or *doctor ecclesiae* (teacher of the church), behind which he frequently took refuge, even to the point of commonly signing his name, *D. Martinus Lutherus*.

More important, the revolution in his theological thinking occurred in the professor's lecture hall and study from 1513 to 1519. Luther began by reinterpreting the righteousness of God and then extended this interpretation to the central issues in Christian theology.

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

This is a remarkable sentence. The last clause is what Luther was taught; it was the prevailing orthodoxy: God judges by his righteousness. But the first clause—God gives us righteousness—he would teach increasingly. In fact, a little later during these very lectures, he utterly rejected the common doctrine and asserted instead that all the attributes of God—"truth, wisdom, salvation, justice"—were "the things with which he makes us strong, saved, just, wise."

On the heels of this change came others. The church was no longer the institution that boasted apostolic succession; instead it was the community of those who had been given faith. Salvation came not by the sacraments as such but by their role in nurturing faith. The idea that human beings had a spark of goodness (enough to seek out God) was not a foundation of theology but was taught only by "fools" and "pig theologians." Humility was no longer a virtue that earned grace but a necessary response to the gift of grace. Faith no longer consisted of assenting to the church's teachings but of trusting the promises of God and the merits of Christ.

In short, Luther worked a revolution that contradicted everything he had

been taught. Like certain revolutions in our own time, it lay there, ready to explode, and even the principal was unaware of its potential.

Chain Reaction

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

Indulgences were documents prepared by the church and bought by individuals either for themselves or on behalf of the dead. As a result, the living purchaser or the deceased would be released from purgatory for a certain number of years. In the second instance, a plenary, or total, indulgence would release a person altogether and was seldom offered. In any case, the money from indulgence sales was used to support church projects, such as, in the case of Tetzel's sales, the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Tetzel carefully orchestrated his appearances to excite public interest. He crafted his sermons to delight and persuade, often ending with the now famous, "Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"

Luther simply wanted to question the church's trafficking in indulgences. He challenged all comers to debate the practice in proper academic fashion. But events snatched the matter from his hands.

His *95 Theses* were translated into the common language and spread across Germany within two weeks. Luther was asked to debate the underlying theological issues at Heidelberg, during the Augustinians' regular meeting in spring 1518. He then underwent an excruciating interview with Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg that fall. It was so painful, as Luther recalled it, that he could not even ride a horse, because his bowels ran freely from morning to night.

Faceoff over Authority

Luther had good reason to be anxious. The issue quickly became not

indulgences, or even Tetzel's indulgences (which were extraordinary by any estimate), but the authority of the church: Did the pope have the right to issue indulgences?

The substance of the original matter—whether humans could draw on the treasury of Christ's merits, deposited with the church, to alter their standing with God—was of little concern to Luther's opponents. In fact, they were repeatedly forbidden to debate it with him. The question was instead whether the church could declare that it was so and rightly expect obedience.

In brief, Luther declared that 'a simple layman armed with the Scriptures' was superior to both pope and councils without them.

The core issue became public at the Leipzig Debate in late June 1519, a magnificent occasion. Students from Wittenberg came armed with staffs. The local bishop tried to forbid the debate, and Duke George of Saxony, who sponsored it, set out an armed guard to guarantee it would proceed in an orderly fashion. In the end, it became apparent Luther was working a revolution that struck the church itself.

In brief, Luther declared that "a simple layman armed with the Scriptures" was superior to both pope and councils without them. Luther thus richly merited the bull [papal document] threatening excommunication that came in mid-1520. He responded by burning both the bull and the canon law.

His Three Most Important Essays

Luther then spelled out the practical consequences of his theology. That summer he wrote what are arguably his three most important treatises: *The Address to the Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,* and *On the Freedom of a Christian*. With these three essays he set himself and his (by now) many sympathizers in opposition to nearly all the theology and practice of late medieval Christendom.

In the first, he urged rulers to take the necessary reform of the church into their own hands, while arguing that all Christians were priests.

In the second, he reduced the seven sacraments first to three (baptism, the Lord's Supper, and penance), then to two, while radically altering their character.

In the third, he told Christians they were free from the law (in particular the laws of the church), while they were bound in love to their neighbors.

"I Will Not Recant"

The Diet of Worms, held in the spring of 1521, was thus in one sense little more than the backwash from a ship that had already set to sea. The Holy Roman emperor Charles V (who was also Charles I of Spain) had never been in Germany. He called the Diet, or meeting, in order to meet the German princes, whom he scarcely knew by name and desperately needed to court. But this friar by the name of Luther also needed to be addressed.

Luther left Wittenberg to attend the Diet convinced he would finally get the hearing he had requested in 1517. As he was ushered into the Diet, Luther was awed to see Emperor Charles V himself. He was surrounded by his advisers and representatives of Rome, Spanish troops decked out in their parade best, electors, bishops, territorial princes, and representatives of great cities. In the midst of this august assembly sat a table with a pile of books.

Luther was asked if he had written the books, and if there was a part of them he wished to recant. He was taken aback; this was not going to be a debate but a judicial hearing. Luther became confused, stumbled, and begged for another day: "This touches God and his Word. This affects the salvation of souls. ... I beg you, give me time."

He was given one day, and back in his quarters he wrote, "So long as Christ is merciful, I will not recant a single jot or tittle."

The next day's business at the Diet delayed Luther's return until evening. Candlelight flickered off the crowd of dignitaries jammed into the great hall.

He was asked again, "Will you defend these books all together, or do you wish to recant some of what you have said?" Luther replied with a short speech, which he repeated in Latin.

There were three kinds of books in the stack, he declared. Some were about

the Christian faith and good works, and these he certainly wouldn't retract. Some attacked the papacy and to retract these would be to encourage tyranny. Finally, in some he attacked individuals (and, Luther admitted, perhaps too harshly), but still these couldn't be retracted because these people defended papal tyranny.

Surely, the reply came, one individual could not call into doubt the tradition of the entire church! Then the examiner declared, "You must give a simple, clear, and proper answer. ... Will you recant or not?"

Luther replied, "Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds of reasoning ... then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

Then he probably added, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."

Knight George

When negotiations over the next few days failed to reach any compromise, Luther was condemned. Still he was granted safe conduct, as he was promised before he came, but only for another twenty-one days.

But as Luther and his companions made their way back to Wittenberg, four or five armed horsemen plunged out of the forest, snatched Luther from his wagon, and dragged him off, half running and half stumbling. In short order, he was told that it was his own prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, who had abducted him to keep him safe. He soon arrived at the Wartburg, one of Frederick's castles. Luther was an outlaw; anyone could kill him with out fearing reprisals from an imperial court of law.

Luther despised his enforced stay at the Wartburg. As "Knight George" (his new identity), he now ate like a nobleman, and his new diet upset his alimentary canal. He missed his friends in Wittenberg, and he hated being removed from the fray. He even made plans to seek a call to the University of Erfurt where he would be outside the elector's jurisdiction. That failed, but he did manage to commandeer a horse and make a flying trip to Wittenberg, from which he returned much relieved at the course of events among his friends.

In spite of his complaints about enforced solitude and his own "laziness," Luther's ten months on ice were among the most productive of his life. The theological and scholarly works continued, with his touching and almost autobiographical *Commentary on the Magnificat*, the uncompleted *Postillae*, and the translation of the New Testament, of which he did a rough draft within eleven weeks.

But what began with his lectures and the *95 Theses* was now turning into a popular movement. He felt obliged to respond to people's practical questions. He did so in treatises such as *On Confession: Whether the Pope Has the Authority to Require It*, *On the Abolition of Private Masses*, and above all, *On Monastic Vows*.

The last stands as one of the most extraordinary works ever written by a public figure. Throughout Germany, and at Wittenberg in particular, monks and nuns were fleeing their monasteries and cloisters—some for reasons of conscience and some for the sake of convenience. To despise the religious was becoming commonplace. At the same time, defenders of the old church insisted upon the inviolability of monastic vows.

Fully consistent with his *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther took a middle road. The sole question was whether and how one could best serve the neighbor. If one did so in holy orders, then one should remain. On the other hand, monastic vows were not binding, and if one could serve the neighbor better outside the monastery or cloister, then one should live in the world. The freedom to serve thus became a hallmark of the Reformation in Lutheran Germany.

His Controversial Decisions

As his revolution expanded, Luther was increasingly thrust into the public arena. He openly returned to Wittenberg, in early spring of 1522, and without asking the elector's permission, retook his pulpit and preached on the obligation to love the neighbor. The decision to return grew from his conviction that the inchoate reform movement there (some asserted that Christians *mus*t marry and the monks and nuns *must* become laypeople) was not respecting Christian freedom or weak consciences.

In time Luther was forced to make further decisions, many of which are still controversial.

When unrest resulted in the Peasants' War of 1524–1525, he first condemned the princes and then exhorted them to crush the revolt.

When Erasmus, the famous humanist scholar, doubted that the truth could be known about whether humans had free will, Luther replied that "the Holy Spirit is not a skeptic" and accused Erasmus of being no Christian at all.

When the Swiss reformers Zwingli and Oecolampadius questioned whether Christ's body and blood were really in the elements of the Lord's Supper, Luther replied, "Mere physics!" and helped inflame the controversy that ultimately divided the Lutheran and Reformed churches.

His Promethean effort to create a new clergy and reformed church also brought the civil authorities more directly into the daily governance of the church.

His decision to marry a runaway nun, Katharina von Bora, scandalized many. For Luther, the shock was waking up in the morning with "pigtails on the pillow next to me."

Of the continuing efforts to create the German Bible, he said, "If God had wanted me to die thinking I was a clever fellow, he would not have gotten me into the business of translating the Bible."

Throughout these decisions and actions, Luther exhibited amazing consistency. The hallmark of his life is the way he joined his forceful personality and his forceful doctrine. For him, doctrine was never a merely intellectual or scholarly matter. Instead, it was life itself. In the preface to the *Large Catechism*, he urged Christians to read and reread their catechisms, for "in such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and fervor." He wanted all Christians to become people taught by God.

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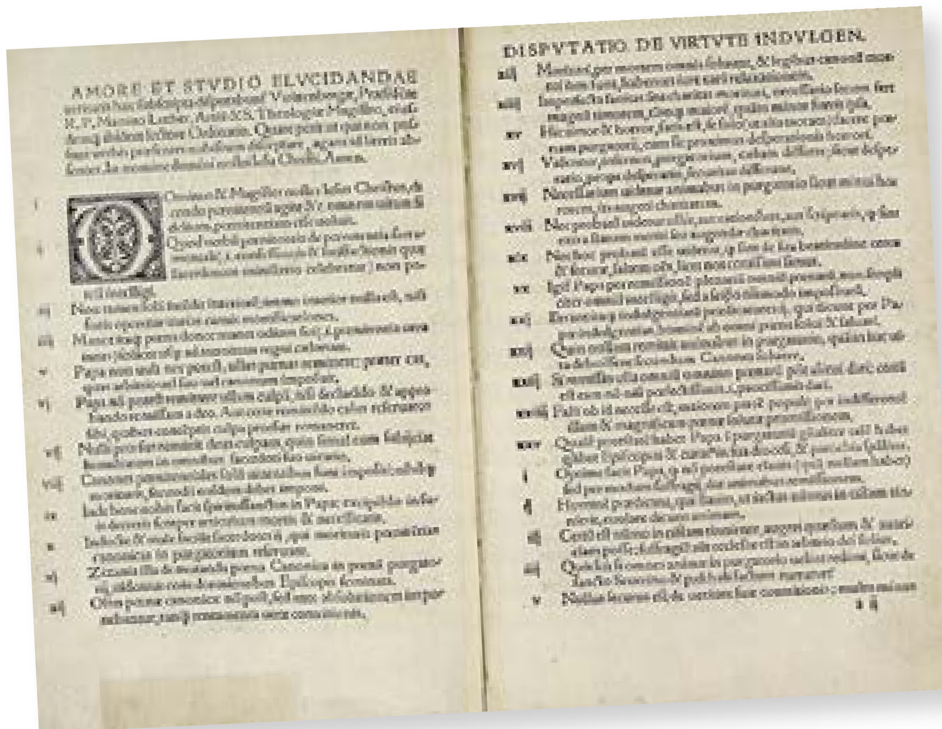
Dr. Luther's Theology

A young professor's startling insights into the graciousness of God.

TIMOTHY GEORGE


AMORE ET STVDIO ELVCIDANDAE

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PUBLIC DOMAIN

One day in 1511, Luther and his monastic mentor, Johann von Staupitz, sat under a pear tree in a garden near their cloister at Wittenberg. The vicar-general told young Luther he should become a professor of theology and preacher. Luther was taken aback. "It will be the death of me!" he objected.

"Quite all right," said Staupitz. "God has plenty of work for clever men like you to do in heaven!"

Luther did receive his doctor's degree—just over a year later, on October 18, 1512. That day he also received a woolen beret, a silver ring, two Bibles (one closed, the other open), and a commission to be a "sworn doctor of Holy Scripture." He took that commission seriously. It guided his theology and his career as a reformer. Years later he declared, "What I began as a Doctor, I must truly confess to the end of my life. I cannot keep silent or cease to teach." In his view, the Reformation happened because the pope tried to hinder him from fulfilling his vocation of expounding the Scriptures.

Dying to Be a Theologian

Though he held a doctor's degree, Luther was no mere member of the learned guild of scholastic theologians. His theology grew out of his anguished quest for a gracious God. For Luther, theology was not simply the academic study of religion. Rather, it was a lifelong process of struggle and temptation. As Luther never tired of saying, only experience makes a theologian. "I did not learn my theology all at once," he said, "but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me. ... Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living—nay, dying and being damned—make a theologian."

Out of Luther's struggles emerged a theology that shook the foundations of medieval Christendom. Though Luther appreciated the protests made by such forerunners as John Wycliffe of England and John Hus of Bohemia, he recognized his own efforts as qualitatively different. "They attacked the life," he said. "I attack the doctrine."

For example, Luther's protest against Tetzel's sale of indulgences in 1517 did more than call for church reform. It challenged the church's identity. In this sense, Luther emerged as the most radical of all sixteenth-century reformers. His radical views can be crystallized in three statements on Scripture, faith, and grace.

Sola Scriptura: Scripture Alone

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther declared his conscience captive to the Word of God. But that declaration did not mark his decisive

theological break with the Church of Rome. That had happened two years earlier, in July 1519, at Leipzig.

Luther's opponent in the Leipzig Debate was an accomplished professor at the University of Ingolstadt, John Eck. In German, Eck means corner, and he boxed Luther into one. He forced Luther to admit that popes and church councils could err, and that the Bible alone could be trusted as an infallible source of Christian faith and teaching.

For Luther, theology was not simply the academic study of religion. Rather, it was a lifelong process of struggle and temptation.

Under duress, Luther articulated what would come to be the formal principle of the Reformation: all church teaching must be normed by the Bible. The following year, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther stated: "What is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed." Late medieval theologians placed Christian tradition alongside the Bible as a source of church doctrine. Luther emphasized instead the primacy of Scripture.

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

For Luther, the church does not take priority *ove*r the Bible; instead, the church is the creation *of* the Bible. It is born in the womb of Scripture. "For who begets his own parent?" Luther asked. "Who first brings forth his own maker?"

Arguably, Luther's greatest contribution to the Reformation was his translation of the Bible into German. He wanted common people—the farm boy and milkmaid—to "feel" the words of Scripture "in the heart."

Luther held a high view of the inspiration of the Bible, calling it once "the Holy Spirit book." But what truly distinguished his exegesis was his ability to make the text come alive. For him, Bible stories were not distant historical acts but living current events, as we see in his treatment of Gideon: "How difficult it was for [Gideon] to fight the enemy at those odds. If I had

been there, I would have messed in my breeches for fright!" Thus, for Luther, the Bible is no mere depository of doctrine. In it, a living God confronts his people.

Sola Fide: Faith Alone

Martin Luther developed his understanding of justification amid the moralism and mysticism of late medieval religion. He made strenuous efforts to find a gracious God, doing penance according to the dictates of scholastic theology. Ultimately he became frustrated to the point of despair.

Luther's "discovery of the gospel," as it has been called, came during his scholarly labors as a *Doctor in Biblia*. The pivotal text was Romans 1:17. "At last, as I meditated day and night on the relation of the words 'the righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written, the righteous person shall live by faith,' I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; and this sentence, 'the righteousness of God is revealed,' to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'the righteous person lives by faith.' This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself. From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light. ... And now, where I had once hated the phrase, 'the righteousness of God,' I began to love and extol it as the sweetest of phrases, so that this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise to me."

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

According to the medieval understanding of justification, which was derived from Augustine, a person gradually receives divine grace, eventually healing sin's wounds. But in his mature doctrine of justification, Luther abandoned the medical image of *impartation* for the legal language of *imputation*: God accepts Christ's righteousness, which is alien to our nature, as our own. Though God does not actually remove our sins—we are at the same time

righteous and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*)—he no longer counts them against us.

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

Medieval theologians considered faith one of the three theological virtues, along with hope and love. They emphasized faith's cognitive content and saw it as a virtue formed by love. But to Luther, such faith is not sufficient for salvation. (Even demons have it, Paul wrote.) Truly justifying faith—*fiducia*, Luther called it—is something more. It means taking hold of Christ, hearing and claiming God's promise, and apprehending our acceptance by God in Jesus Christ.

Sola Gratia: Grace Alone

Moderns often see Luther as the apostle of human freedom and the father of rugged individualism. But this view misunderstands his theological "Copernican revolution." Copernicus' calculations removed earth—and thus, humanity—from the center of created reality. Likewise, Luther's theology changed humanity's place in the process of salvation.

[...] Luther's theology changed humanity's place in the process of salvation.

For Luther, salvation was anchored in the eternal inscrutable purpose of God. Luther anticipated the human-centeredness of later Protestant piety and guarded against it by insisting that God's grace comes from outside ourselves. Faith is not a human possibility, nor a dimension of the religious personality; it is a radical and free gift of God.

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

Luther's doctrine of divine sovereignty in human salvation came to fullest expression in his famous debate with Erasmus over grace, free will, and predestination. For Erasmus, humans, though fallen, remain free to respond to grace and thus cooperate in their salvation.

Luther, however, saw the human will enslaved by sin and Satan. We think we are free, he contended, but we only reinforce our bondage by indulging in sin. Grace releases us from this enslaving illusion and leads us into "the glorious liberty of the children of God." God wants us to love him freely. But that is only possible when we have been freed from captivity to Satan and self.

Solo Christo: Christ Alone

Like later reformer John Calvin, Luther believed that dogmatics (the study of religious dogma) could not be divorced from polemics (the art of argumentation). The gospel was besieged by foes without and within the Christian church. It could be set forth, then, only in opposition to competing claims.

Each *sola* faced an enemy: *Scripture alone,* against Scripture subordinated to a false understanding of tradition; *faith alone,* against works-dependent righteousness; and *grace alone,* against a theology of human merit.

"Contemplate Christ given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better."

Stated positively, each *sola* affirmed the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christ is the sole content of Scripture and the principle for selectivity within Scripture. Luther criticized the Epistle of James because it did not proclaim Christ sufficiently. "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching," he wrote. "Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it!"

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

a mirror of the Father's heart."

Likewise, the doctrine of grace can be approached only through the cross, through the "wounds of Jesus" to which Staupitz had directed the young Luther in his early struggles. As Luther advised Barbara Lisskirchen, a woman who worried she was not among God's elect, "The highest of all God's commands is this, that we hold up before our eyes the image of his dear son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Every day he should be the excellent mirror wherein we behold how much God loves us and how well, in his infinite goodness, he has cared for us in that he gave his dear Son for us. ... Contemplate Christ given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better."

Luther's legacy does not lie foremost in the saintliness of his life. His warts were many; his vices sometimes were more visible than his virtues. Luther's true legacy is his insight into the gracious character of God. "What else was Luther," asked Karl Barth, "than a teacher of the Christian church whom one can hardly celebrate in any other way but to listen to him?"

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Reinventing Family Life

STEVEN OZMENT

For a thousand years, the single, celibate life had been upheld as the Christian ideal. Sex, though grudgingly permitted inside marriage, was not to be enjoyed. As Jerome declared in the fourth century, "Anyone who is too passionate a lover with his own wife is himself an adulterer."

Then came Luther.

Luther elevated marriage and family life; in one scholar's words, he "placed the home at the center of the universe." His teaching and practice were so radical, so long-lasting, some scholars have argued that other than the church "the home was the only sphere of life which the Reformation profoundly affected."

In this excerpt from Protestants: *The Birth of a Revolution* (Doubleday, 1992), Dr. Steven Ozment introduces Luther's views on women, sex, marriage, divorce, and children. If Luther's ideas seem tame today, it is only because so many people have accepted them.

When we think of Martin Luther, we understandably think first of the monk and theologian who wanted to reform the church, a great man of God seemingly obsessed with sin and the Devil and lost in otherworldly pursuits. But the monk and the theologian who wrote the *95 Theses* was also a husband and the father of six children.

While still a celibate priest, Luther wrote extensively on marriage. He portrayed marriage as an institution as much in crisis as the church and no less in need of reform. He described marriage as "universally in awful disrepute," with peddlers everywhere selling "pagan books that treat of nothing but the depravity of womankind and the unhappiness of the estate of marriage."

Luther was a leading defender of the dignity of women and the goodness of marriage. He is well-known for his jesting comments, "Women have narrow shoulders and wide hips. Therefore they ought to be domestic; their very physique is a sign from their Creator that he intended for them to limit their activity to the home." Luther, however, also deserves to be known as the century's leading critic of Aristotle's depiction of women as botched males. Luther also criticized the church fathers (Jerome, Cyprian, Augustine, and Gregory) for "never having written anything good about marriage."

Chastising Chastity

Like the church fathers, the clergy of the Middle Ages were obsessed with chastity and sexual purity. Augustine portrayed sexual intercourse in Paradise as occurring without lust and emotion. A vernacular catechism from 1494 elaborates the third deadly sin (impurity) under the title, "How the Laity Sins in the Marital Duty." According to the catechism, the laity sin sexually in marriage by, among other things, having sex for the sheer joy of it rather than for the reasons God has commanded, namely, to escape the sin of concupiscence and to populate the earth.

Luther and the first generation of Protestant clerics rejected the tradition of ascetic sexuality in both their theology and their lives. This rejection was as great a revolution in traditional church teaching and practice as their challenge of the church's dogmas on faith, works, and the sacraments. They literally transferred the accolades Christian tradition heaped on the religious in monasteries and nunneries to marriage and the home. When Jerome, writing in the fourth century, compared virginity, widowhood, and marriage, he gave virginity a numerical value of 100, widowhood, 60, and marriage 30. "Faith, not virginity, fills paradise," the Wittenberg pastor Johannes Bugenhagen retorted in the 1520s.

When Protestant towns and territories dissolved cloisters and nunneries, they believed they were freeing women from sexual repression, cultural deprivation, and domination by male clergy and religious. Among the leaders of the Reformation, it was widely believed that in most cases women had been placed in cloisters against their will.

Luther actively encouraged fathers to remove their daughters from convents. In 1523, for example, he praised Leonhard Koppe, who successfully plotted the escape of his daughter and eleven other nuns, among them Katherine von Bora, Luther's future wife. Koppe regularly delivered herring to the cloister and apparently smuggled the sisters out in empty herring barrels. Luther published a pamphlet account of the deed, comparing Koppe's freeing of the sisters with Moses' deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt. Where the Reformation succeeded, new laws prohibited boys and girls from entering cloisters, and monks and nuns wishing to marry received permission immediately to do so.

Luther liked to turn traditional criticisms of women and marriage back onto the clerical critics. He once described marriage, for example, as the only institution where a chaste life could be maintained, and he insisted that "one cannot be unmarried without sin," arguments that baffled the defenders of celibacy. Nothing seemed to Luther to be a more natural and necessary part of life than marriage. "Marriage pervades the whole of nature," he disarmingly pointed out, "for all creatures are divided into male and female; even trees marry; likewise, budding plants; there is also marriage between rocks and stones."

Finding a Companion

Luther had a high regard for the ability of women to shape society by molding its youth and civilizing its men through the institution of marriage. "A companionable woman brings joy to life," he told his table companions one evening. "Women attend to and rear the young, administer the household, and are inclined to compassion; God has made them compassionate by nature so that by their example men may be moved to compassion also."

Once Luther told a visiting Englishman that he should learn German

from Luther's wife, Katie, because she was the more fluent, indeed, "the most eloquent speaker of the German language." On more than one public occasion, Luther described Katie as his "lord." "I am an inferior lord," he would say, "she the superior; I am Aaron, she is my Moses." He bore her outspoken criticism of his poor business instincts with respect and good humor. Once he concluded, "If I can survive the wrath of the Devil in my sinful conscience, I can withstand the anger of Katherine von Bora."

Luther also acknowledged his respect for Katie's abilities in his last will and testament. Ignoring the German practice of appointing a male trustee to administer a deceased husband's estate for his widow and children, he directly designated her "heir to everything."

Katie earned such respect from her husband, whom she excelled in virtually all worldly matters. She became a model housewife and an accomplished businesswoman. To increase their income, she remodeled the old cloister in which she and Martin lived so that it would accommodate up to thirty students and guests. She also expanded the cloister garden and repaired the cloister brewery. She became locally famous as a herbalist, and her beer was so renowned that Luther once took samples to the electoral court. He dubbed her "the morning star of Wittenberg," as her day began at 4:00.

Luther obviously meant it when he said "there is no bond on earth so sweet nor any separation so bitter as that which occurs in a good marriage." His comments on marriage leave the impression of an experienced husband who had given the matter a lot of thought. Take, for example, the following analysis: "In the beginning of a relationship love is glowing hot; it intoxicates and blinds us, and we rush forth and embrace one another." But once married, we tend to grow tired of one another, confirming the saying of Ovid: "We hate the things that are near us, and we love those that are far away."

"A wife is easily taken," he added, "but to have abiding love, that is the challenge. One who finds it in his marriage should thank the Lord God for it. Therefore, approach marriage earnestly and ask God to give you a good, pious girl, with whom you spend your life in mutual love. For sex [alone] establishes nothing in this regard; there must also be agreement in values and character."

According to Luther, both he and Katie had "begged God earnestly for grace and guidance" before they married. They had in fact had a long association with

each other in Wittenberg between 1523 and 1525. (This engendered much gossip, as Luther was a constant visitor at the home of Lucas Cranach, where Katie, a renegade nun under Luther's supervision, lodged. According to Catholic pamphleteers, he and Katie "lived together" in Wittenberg before they married.)

Permitting Divorce

Because of the importance attached to companionship in marriage, the reformers endorsed for the first time in Western Christendom genuine divorce and remarriage. Although they viewed marriage as a spiritual bond transcending all other human relationships, a marriage could definitively end this side of eternity and a new one begin for separated spouses. In his earliest writing on such matters, Luther expressed "great wonder" that the church forbade people irreconcilably separated and living apart because of adultery to remarry. "Christ," he pointed out, "permits divorce for adultery and compels none to remain unmarried [thereafter], and St. Paul would rather have us [re]marry than burn [now with lust and later in hell]."

In the medieval church, divorce had meant only the separation of a couple from a common bed and table, not the dissolution of the marriage bond and a right to marry again. So long as both lived, a divorced couple remained man and wife in the eyes of the church and were so treated by law where the church prevailed. In practice, this meant that the turmoil of a failed marriage might never end for a couple.

Protestants, by contrast, generally permitted divorce and remarriage on five grounds: adultery, willful abandonment, chronic impotence, life-threatening hostility, and willful deceit (such as when a presumed virgin is discovered after marriage to have given birth previously to an illegitimate child). Most Protestant writers sympathized with the position of the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer, who declared no proper marriage to exist where affection was not regularly shared and all conversation had ceased.

Protestant marriage courts did not permit divorce and remarriage to occur without first making every effort to reunite an estranged couple and revive the dead marriage. All concerned deemed reconciliation preferable to divorce in every case.

When a table companion once expressed to Luther the belief that adulterers should be summarily executed, Luther rebuked him with a local example of how harsh punishment had done more harm than good to a couple. A pious wife, who had borne her husband four children and had never been unfaithful, one day committed adultery. For the transgression, her enraged husband had her publicly flogged.

Afterward, Luther, Pastor Bugenhagen, and Philipp Melanchthon tried to persuade the couple to reconcile. The husband was willing to take her back and let bygones be bygones, but the wife had been so humiliated by the flogging and the resulting scandal that she abandoned her husband and children, wandered away, and was never seen again. "Here," Luther comments, "one should have pursued reconciliation before punishment." Chronic and willful public adultery, however, was treated harshly and without regret.

Both spiritually and socially, Lutheran theology held the community formed by a husband and a wife to be society's most fundamental. The marriage bond was too important to be allowed to stand when all conversation, affection, and respect between a husband and a wife had irretrievably broken down. The same bond was also too important to allow a marriage to die without a fight to save it.

Raising Children

Luther had six children (Hans, Elizabeth, Magdalene, Martin, Paul, and Margaretha), whom he subjected to high moral standards and strict discipline. "My greatest wish," he once confided at table, "is that none of my children become lawyers," a sentiment that expressed his association of lawyers, along with Jews and papists, with a legalistic frame of mind that knew nothing of charity toward others or salvation by faith.

Luther could be a stern father. Once he punished Hans, his eldest, for an unspecified but serious moral lapse by forbidding him to be in his father's presence for three days. At the end of this period, he required the boy to write a letter begging his father's forgiveness, to which letter Luther replied that he would sooner have his son dead than ill-bred.

Nevertheless, Luther urged parents always to discipline their children with forethought and caution, taking into account the unique personality of each. Once he explained his entrance into the monastery as a cowardly act that had resulted from his parents' too strict discipline, which he believed had rendered him timid. He did not think the discipline wrong or the punishment undeserved. But he accused his parents of not taking sufficiently into consideration the effect of their punishment on him.

If a parent's reaction to the death of a child may be taken as a commentary on parental character, Luther was a deeply loving father. When Elizabeth died at 8 months, he commented "I so lamented her death that I was exquisitely sick, my heart rendered soft and weak; never had I thought that a father's heart could be so broken for his children's sake." Magdalene's death in 1542 at age 13 overwhelmed him. He wrote to his friend Justus Jonas, pointing out that while he and his wife should be thanking God that Magdalene was now "free of the flesh and the Devil," neither could do so. "The force of our natural love is so great that we are unable to do this without crying and grieving in our hearts ... [and] experiencing death ourselves ... The features, the words, and the movement of our living and dying daughter, who was so very obedient and respectful, remain engraved in our hearts; even the death of Christ ... is unable to take all this away as it should. You, therefore, please give thanks to God in our stead."

Returning home from her funeral, he tried to console himself by declaring that he had always been more merciful to girls than to boys, because girls needed more care and protection than boys, and that he now gladly gave Magdalene to God because he knew that God would provide her all the care and protection she needed, adding pitiably: "but in my human heart, I would gladly have kept her here with me."

The theologian and man of faith was also a husband and a father who taught that "no power on earth is so noble and so great as that of parents." The success of his Reformation was, arguably, most unambiguous in the domestic sphere.

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Division Is Not Always a Scandal

What to think of the 45,000 denominations that rose from the Reformation.

JENNIFER POWELL MCNUTT

IMAGE: LAROSLAV NELIUBOV / SHUTTERSTOCK

Not every Christian is celebrating the Reformation's anniversary this year. It's not just Catholics who have reservations; many Protestants do as well. Our enthusiasm for the Reformation's emphasis on Scripture as the highest and final authority does not mean we can ignore how Scripture repeatedly decries division in the church.

Paul, for example, rebuked the Corinthians, "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow

Christ.' Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:12–13). It sounds an awful lot like the eight different congregations on Main Street.

Should we wholeheartedly celebrate the Reformation when one of its main legacies seems to be so much division?

Paul noted four factions in the Corinthian church. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity counts 45,000 denominations around the world, with an average of 2.4 new ones forming every day. The center has an admittedly broad definition of *denomination*, but even a dramatically lower count will be absurdly high in light of Jesus' prayer in John 17 that we all might be one. It makes some wonder about the Reformation. As one theologian lamented, "Isn't this the movement that drove the church into the churches?" Should we wholeheartedly celebrate the Reformation when one of its main legacies seems to be so much division?

Rethinking that Memorable Story

The problem seems to have surfaced early on. No other theological matter of the Reformation has provoked more dispute than the Eucharist, and no other historical event has more reinforced the idea that Protestantism is divisive by nature than the Marburg Colloquy.

Perhaps you have heard the story: Martin Luther, the leader of the Wittenberg reformers, met with Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss reformers, in October 1529 at Marburg Castle. The two early Reformation leaders had been exchanging their theological views in letters, and now they met face to face for the first time. Over the course of those few days, theological division proved insurmountable.

The most well-known moment cited to illustrate Protestant fragmentation is when Luther pulled out his knife in the heat of dispute and carved into a wooden table Jesus' words from the Last Supper, "This is my body." Luther's actions have come to represent a permanently divided legacy between Protestant Christians that continues to this day.

That story is dramatic, memorable, and persistent. But it didn't quite happen that way. Marburg was a significant event, but not for the reasons

so often believed. Rethinking that moment can help us better understand Protestant divisions.

Luther and Zwingli's first face-to-face encounter was by no means an easy one, particularly given their contentious exchange in print before the meeting. It didn't help that colloquy members spoke different dialects of German. Eyewitness reports of the meeting attest to personality clashes as well as cultural and linguistic misunderstandings.

The theological crux was indeed the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. What is most often misunderstood, however, is that neither party questioned *whether* Christ was present during the Eucharist but *how* Christ was present. They only differed as to whether he was present spiritually or physically. Although uniformity over this doctrine prevented political alliance, it did not, in fact, obstruct Protestant theological fellowship at Marburg.

Marburg shows us that if part of the legacy of the Reformation is the existence of tens of thousands of denominations, then the ability to remain in communion, is just as much a part of that legacy.

As Martin E. Lehmann (translator of the seven colloquy reports) notes, overall "the colloquy was conducted with courtesy and in an amicable spirit." According to the most reliable report (Caspar Hedio's eyewitness account), when disagreement over Christ's presence reached an impasse, Zwingli declared, "The early fathers, even if they disagreed, nevertheless did not condemn one another." In turn, Luther declared to Zwingli, "Let us look to the future! If we cannot agree on everything, we can still enter into fellowship."

At the close of their conversations, Luther thanked Zwingli, asked forgiveness for his sometimes sharp words, and reiterated his desire "that their common cause unite them mutually." Zwingli responded "almost weeping" to express how deeply he desired "his friendship and seeks it even now."

These overlooked exchanges indicate how the desire for friendship prevailed over the meeting as Reformation leaders agreed to stop their "vehement and sharp polemics against one another" and to keep seeking the Holy Spirit in prayer for right understanding.

The colloquy in fact produced a theological statement written by Luther and signed by Zwingli and his Reformed constituencies. They grounded their extensive agreement first and foremost in the essential beliefs of "the entire Christian church throughout the world"—that is, in the earliest councils' doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity. Having stressed their commonality with Western Christian theology and shared Protestant theology, they stressed charity in their disagreements. "At this time, we have not reached an agreement as to whether the true body and blood of Christ are bodily in the bread and wine," Luther said. "Nevertheless, each side should show Christian love to the other side."

Marburg shows us that if part of the legacy of the Reformation is the existence of tens of thousands of denominations, then the ability to remain in communion, share core theological affirmations, and interact in friendship and mission is just as much a part of that legacy. Evangelicalism—a movement made up of Christians from a variety of denominations—is evidence of that legacy today. We may disagree over many matters that require separate fellowships and teams, but we can pray and work together in Christ's name nonetheless.

And yet we are undeniably faced with a multiplicity of denominations the likes of which Luther, Zwingli, and the Reformers almost certainly could not have imagined. What is the reason for Protestant denominations?

The Variety of Church Divisions

The explosion of Protestant denominations is mostly due to lay believers gaining greater access to Scripture, which ushered in an era of "interpretive pluralism" that in turn led to a multiplicity of church structure. And yet other forces, which have little to do with Protestantism as such, also shaped the emerging Protestant church: local politics, the rise of the vernacular, and the doctrine of Christian freedom.

From the start, Protestant traditions diverged as they became regionally focused. This was due more to political alliances than to theology. Reformers overwhelmingly aligned themselves with the ruling governments—city councils, nobles, and monarchs—out of the conviction that the state was also given a calling to ensure the reform of the church. For

example, when it became clear that Pope Leo X had no intention of calling a reforming council, Luther empowered the German nobility to encourage church reform through his affirmation of the "priesthood of all believers." Soon most Protestant reform efforts became closely tied to particular regions and their political authorities. Consequently, the Reformation developed differently in different contexts. (After the Reformation, of course, Protestantism continued to work with the state in ways that made it difficult to distinguish the culture's idea of a good citizen from the church's idea of a good Protestant.)

At the same time, Protestant unity often transcended political divisions. In some cases, Protestants extended camaraderie to any seeking refuge from hostile governments. Fleeing the reign of Mary Tudor ("Bloody Mary," a moniker she earned for persecuting Protestants), Scottish Reformer John Knox found safe haven in Protestant strongholds like Frankfurt and Geneva. This kept movement figures and reform efforts connected across regions.

Meanwhile, for the radical wing of Protestantism that included Anabaptists, escaping persecution became a way of life. They found safe haven under more tolerant governments such as those in Strasbourg and Moravia (for a time). Nonetheless, dogged persecution (yes, admittedly by other Protestants—not a happy part of our legacy) led many Anabaptists to emphasize Christians' separation from the world. That emphasis in turn insulated and isolated certain Protestant groups, which furthered denominational distinctives.

A rising emphasis on the vernacular—the language or dialect spoken by ordinary people—played another key role in multiplying churches and church families. At the Leipzig Disputation in 1519, Luther elevated the authority of Scripture above the papacy and church councils. A year later he followed this with an affirmation of the "priesthood of all believers." Such insights reinforced the importance of all people having access to the gospel message in their tongue. As access to Bibles in many common languages dramatically increased and Christians translated, interpreted, and debated key biblical ideas, the number of denominations increased, too.
Finally, there is the doctrine of Christian freedom. When Luther declared at the Diet of Worms in 1521 that his "conscience was captive to the Word of God," he set in motion a principle that allowed for conscientious objection to church structure and belief according to personal convictions grounded

in Scripture. For some, this alone is the root cause of Protestant interpretative pluralism.

Yet many forget that Protestant Reformers stressed that Scripture provided readers and listeners with a *sufficient* knowledge of God to ensure human salvation by the power of the Holy Spirit. They distinguished between sufficient knowledge and complete knowledge, allowing them to affirm that some theological matters were essential and others were not. This did not lead to uniformity, but it helped Protestants recognize that not every interpretive difference based on conscience had the same impact on Protestant fellowship. This is exactly why we can still talk about Protestant denominations as Protestant and not each another major branch of Christendom. Matters of conscience can both unite and divide.

Denominationalism is not merely a product of Protestantism. But this does not mean that Protestant division is never a scandal. Those who have lived through a church divorce know what grief, hardship, and disillusionment it entails. Some churches never recover from the severing of relationships, the loss of trust, and the damaging of Christian witness.

While we cannot sweep away the presence of sin in the church, and while we deeply regret many church splits, there are times when division is clearly the more faithful way. When the church turns its back on the authority of Scripture, when church leaders commit crimes that devastate the church's ministry and witness, when the church no longer proclaims Jesus Christ's death and resurrection—these are moments when the church has truly lost its way. Reform sometimes entails starting afresh.

Yet there is one more point to consider: Luther never encountered a united church.

Protestantism's Challenging Dynamic

Medieval church practice and theology before and during Luther's time was far more diverse than is often assumed. Looking beyond the West, we need to also recognize that there are four main branches of the worldwide Christian church. While the Great Schism of 1054 between the East and the West is often mentioned here, in fact, the challenge of ensuring worldwide Christian

unity was a struggle from the earliest Christians on, and it continues to be a struggle for all the branches of Christianity today whether in the West or the East. Recent controversies with the Antiochian Orthodox churches attest to that reoccuring struggle.

With a worldwide Christian perspective, the predominate reason for difference among Christian groups comes to light: The earthly church is always contextual in nature. It must function in a particular time, space, nation, culture, and language. At the same time, it is called by God to proclaim a divinely revealed message that attests to the person and work of Jesus Christ for all time, space, nations, cultures, and languages.

This challenging dynamic binds the Protestant tradition as much as any other Christian tradition. The persistence of the church's many branches illustrates the power with which it has gone forth into all the nations: Christianity has never looked exactly the same in every time and space. Nor has one hierarchy governed it.

Contextualizing the church is not a scandal or a weakness. On the contrary, the ability to adapt to context has been one of Christianity's greatest strengths. The engrafting of the Gentiles into the promises of God through Jesus Christ was the start of embracing the diversity of God's children. From that point on, Christianity's spread throughout the world into different cultures, contexts, and people groups became a global story.

This global story is as much the story of Western Protestants and Catholics as it is the story of the Eastern Orthodox and the Christians of the Southern hemisphere. All of these stories are enmeshed and intertwined as well as distinctly contextual. How could they not be when Scripture tells us that God's intention through his Son, Jesus Christ, was to provide the way for all who believe in him "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)? We are not just members of our local church but members of Christ's global church that spans both time and space. The true scandal would be failing to recognize this truth.

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