

What Is the Lutheran Church? (Or: Did a Diet of Worms Really Trigger the Reformation?)

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Martin Luther, born in 1483, was a German Augustinian monk, theologian, priest, and prolific hymn writer. His father, Hans Luder, was a miner who had done well enough that he owned a copper mine and managed a second mine. Hans wanted his eldest son to be a lawyer and sent Martin to university toward that end.

In 1505, when he was a 21 year old student, Martin was caught in a ferocious thunderstorm while traveling back to the University of Erfurt, on horseback, after a visit to his home. Lightning struck the ground near him and his horse. Terrified, Martin cried out, "Help me, Saint Anne! I will become a monk!"

Who is Saint Anne? She was the mother of Mary and the grandmother of Jesus. And she is, among other things, the saint who protects miners. So, of course, her name would have come to Martin's lips when he needed protection.

Martin did survive the storm, and made good on his word. He left the university and, fifteen days after his close encounter with a lightning bolt, entered St. Augustine's Monastery in Erfurt.

His father was not pleased.

At the monastery, Martin applied himself so diligently to fasting, prayer, frequent confession, and generally trying to make himself righteous in the eyes of God that his superior finally said: "This young man needs something else to think about!"— or something to that effect— and instructed Luther to return to academic study.

In 1507 Luther was ordained as a priest, and in 1508 he began teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg. He continued his studies, ultimately earning a doctorate in theology in 1512, and eventually becoming chair of theology at the university. In 1515 he was made the provincial vicar of Saxony and Thuringia, a position that made him responsible for visiting and overseeing the eleven monasteries in this province.

Luther was good at this theology stuff, and an earnest seeker. He had questions and looked to the Bible for answers.

This got him in trouble.

The more Luther studied, the more he began to question some of the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church of his day. He especially raised questions about what it takes to attain salvation. In this connection, he began to protest the sale of indulgences, the purchase of which was supposed to shorten the time a person spent in purgatory before being admitted to Heaven.

In 1516, a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel was made the Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany. Tetzel preached on behalf of a special plenary indulgence. Half the proceeds garnered by these sales went to the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Tetzel is said to have preached that, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." And the indulgences sold like hotcakes.

Although he, himself, had gone to extremes— particularly in the monastery— to make himself righteous before God, Luther's understanding of the New Testament had, by this time, led him to the conclusion that salvation could not be earned, by any means— much less by doling out money. Martin had come to believe that a person could only be saved by God's grace, and all one has to do to receive this grace is to have faith in Jesus as the savior. And certainly God didn't make it easier for the rich than the poor to get to heaven.

On October 31, 1517, the Protestant Reformation was kicked off as Luther sent a letter to the Archbishop of Mainz objecting to the Church's sale of indulgences, and enclosed a treatise titled, "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," otherwise known as his 95 theses. Lore has it that he nailed his theses to the church door in Wittenberg, which may or may not be literally true. (But you may have noticed that— true fact— they have been *taped* to *this* church door— the door to our sanctuary.)

In addition to the archbishop, Luther probably also sent his tract to some other bishops. Although he wrote in Latin (intending his work for a scholarly audience), the theses were soon translated into German and, with the help of the printing press (invented by Gutenberg in 1439), copies of the document spread throughout Germany within a couple of weeks, and began to spread to other parts of Europe.

The theses were also sent on to the Pope, Leo X.

In late 1517, after he issued his 95 theses, Martin began to sign letters to some in his academic circle using a Greek name, Martinus Eleutherios, meaning something like "Martin the Free" or "Martin the Liberator." He continued to sign this name through early

1519, after which he went by the name, "Luther," apparently adopting a form more accessible to those outside academia.

In 1518 Martin was charged with heresy, and in 1520, the Pope issued a decree warning Luther that he'd be excommunicated if he didn't renounce 41 sentences from his writings. Luther publicly set fire to this papal bull. In 1521, the Pope made good on his word, excommunicating Luther.

Martin was summoned to appear, a few months later, before the Diet of Worms (spelled like "worms"), a general assembly of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire in the town of Worms, with Emperor Charles V presiding. Luther arrived expecting a good theological discussion. Instead, his writings were placed before him, and he was asked whether they were his and invited to repudiate their contents.

Luther said, yes, these were his books. As for the second question, he asked for a day to reflect on it. He spent the day praying, consulting with others, and thinking. The next day, he returned and said:

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

Five days later the Emperor issued the Edict of Worms, outlawing Luther and banning his writings. One paragraph of the Edict states:

For this reason, we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favor the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said, Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work.

Knowing that Martin was in grave danger, he was whisked out of Worms by coach headed toward Wittenberg. Passing through the forest, he was accosted by masked men in the guise of highway robbers. The men had been sent by Elector Frederick III of

Saxony as a ruse to help him escape. They brought him to Wartburg Castle at Eisenach in Thuringia. Here he grew a beard and posed as one named Junker Jörg— Knight George.

While in hiding, he translated the New Testament— until then only available in Greek and Latin— into German. The handy-dandy printing press enabled its dissemination, so that lay people no longer had to depend on priests and others of the Church to tell them what was in the holy book. He translated the entire New Testament in ten weeks, after which he began work on the Old Testament. His New Testament translation is considered by many to be his most important contribution. Luther, himself, wrote, “Let them destroy my works! I deserve nothing better; for all my wish has been to lead souls to the Bible, so that they might afterwards neglect my writings. Great God! if we had a knowledge of Scripture, what need would there be of any books of mine?”

During his 10 month stay at Wartburg Castle, Luther also wrote. And wrote, and wrote....

Meanwhile, back in Wittenberg, colleagues and supporters of Luther’s busied themselves carrying out ecclesiastical reforms. The reforms became radical beyond Luther’s intentions and eventually led to violent iconoclasm. In 1522, Luther returned to Wittenberg, preached sermons against violence, and worked to make the reform movement more peaceful.

In the coming years, among numerous other accomplishments, Martin advocated for education for all and encouraged people to write, play, and sing hymns. He personally wrote dozens of hymns. Probably the most well known is “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” which made it into our own gray hymnal. In 1525 he married a former nun, setting a precedent for marriage among Protestant clergy.

Luther had intended to reform the Church, not to split it; but, despite this original aim, from 1526 on his efforts were largely spent organizing what became the first Protestant church.

Writer Clayton Craby summarizes Luther’s life story saying: “From a budding lawyer, to a neurotic monk, to a bold reformer, Martin Luther’s life had a powerful impact on the Protestant Reformation and the whole of world history.”

(“The Life of Martin Luther: A Brief Biography of the Reformer,”

<https://reasonabletheology.org/the-life-of-martin-luther-a-brief-biography-of-the-reformer/>)

Martin died in 1546.

What were Martin Luther's main doctrinal teachings? As we heard before, Luther believed we can't earn God's favor by works. In fact, he believed that works committed *in order* to get into God's good graces are, themselves, sins. The centerpiece of his teaching was "the 3 solas": "*Sola Gratia*," or (God's) grace alone; "*Sola Fide*," or Faith alone—which is to say faith in Jesus as the Savior; and "*Sola Scriptura*," or Scripture alone. "Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Scripture alone." Luther held the Bible up as the only source of revelation. No person or institution is an infallible source of divine truth. He believed in the "universal priesthood of believers," and preferred private confession to confession to a priest. In contrast to the seven sacraments of Catholicism, Luther acknowledged only two as true sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. Luther's and Lutherans' views on these two differ significantly from Roman Catholic doctrine, but we needn't get into those weeds here.

Lutheran churches on our continent today are divided into more than 40 different denominations. But most of these churches belong to one of the three largest of these denominations: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, or ELCA; the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod; and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

The website for this church with whom we're sharing space states that, "Epiphany Lutheran Church is a congregation of the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA)."

Of the three largest Lutheran denominations, the ELCA is the most religiously liberal, the other two being significantly more conservative. According to the Wikipedia article on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, "Most ELCA Lutherans are theologically moderate-to-liberal, although [it] has a sizable conservative minority." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical_Lutheran_Church_in_America)

By extension, the ELCA is also the most ecumenical of these denominations.

Now let's turn to the building we're meeting in.

You're probably aware that this space was a very old stone barn, which was converted into a church in the 1960s. An article in the *Baltimore Sun* from 1993 stated: "The steps

at the church's front door stands where tractors went up an earthen ramp to deliver hay for storage, and Sunday school is held where animals once lived in their stalls.”

(“Epiphany Lutheran Church celebrates 35 years of fellowship,” by Jean Leslie, *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan. 18, 1993,

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1993-01-18-1993018035-story.html>)

I'd like to ask *you*, now, about some of what we find *in* this space. We'll begin with just a few pieces of the Lutherans' liturgical furnishings.

[Ask about/explain the following:]

- Altar
- Communion rail
- Baptismal font

Now I'd like us to think about some of the symbols in this space.

- a. First, let's consider the shape of this sanctuary, and specifically the shape of the ceiling: Of course, it's barn shaped. But what else does it remind you of? ([Boat shaped.] *It's not unusual for the ceiling of a Christian church sanctuary to be shaped like an inverted boat. Why might this be? [Boats often show up in the NT. Some of the apostles were fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James, and John); Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17, "I will make you fishers of men." Also, in Genesis the story of Noah's Ark. Only those on the ark were saved. The church is seen as an ark that carries us safely through life to our final destination.]*)
- b. Now let's turn to the most prolific and obvious symbol here: The crosses. Where do you see crosses? [Incl. crosses on communion rail + the large cross on the roof.] And what do the crosses symbolize?
- c. Now let's check out the stained glass windows. What do we see there? [Dove/holy spirit and manger.]
- d. [Chi Rho: Point out on one of the windows + the altar. - Looks like an X and a P, but it's First two letters of ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (Christos).]
- e. [On the altar cloth: Looks like IHS, but it's ΙΗΣ. Symbolizes Jesus, as the first three letters of ΙΗΣΟΥΣ (Jesus).]

- f. [Carving on the pulpit: Winged lion, winged ox, winged man, and an eagle. 4 evangelists (authors of the gospels): Matthew = winged man; Mark = lion; Luke = ox; John = eagle. These creatures appear in Ezekial and Revelations.]

- g. [Eagle on lectern: The eagle is the symbol of John the Evangelist, who begins his gospel by declaring that Jesus is the Word of God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So, it makes sense that a lectern, from which scriptures are read, would bear the symbol of the eagle.]

- h. [Bookmark paraments on the pulpit and lectern:
 - Trinity
 - Alpha and omega: First and last letters of the Greek alphabet - Mentioned three times in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 22:13, God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (NEB)]

And, with that, we'll bring our shortcut romp through Lutheranism to a close.