

EDITORIAL ESSAY

Martin Luther and the Reformation: A Reflection on the Five-Hundredth Anniversary

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I once quipped in a class that I wondered if the Martin Luther portrayed in some books would even be able to recognize the Martin Luthers of other works. Would Erik Erikson's sexually repressed, rebellious Luther recognize the confident and assertive Luther of the recent popularly aimed biography *How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World*?¹ The five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation seems an apt moment to reflect a bit on the place and significance of Martin Luther in the Reformation and the church. The anniversary year will see at least a half-dozen new biographies, numerous conferences, and nearly ubiquitous commemorations. As we mark this year, what portraits are now being drawn? What conclusions? Is there any hope of synthesis and common representation, or shall we each have our own Luther, few of whom recognize the other? Since the last centennial of the Reformation, scholarship on the Reformation generally and Luther specifically has emerged from the tight quarters of confessionalized history. In 1917, there were no commemorations. Luther was celebrated by Protestants and lamented by Roman Catholics. There was little in the way of neutral ground between those two poles. In 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican issued a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of

¹ Compare Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: The Norton Library, 1962) and Stephen J. Nichols, *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007).

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Justification. In 2016, Pope Francis traveled to Sweden to participate in a joint commemoration of the Reformation with a Lutheran (and female) bishop. Such would have been unthinkable in 1917, or 1817, or 1617. As Luther has been released from the confessionalized walls that held him so long, what image do we see now? In what follows, I would like to reflect on three aspects of the “new” or “newer” Luther that has emerged.

The Reformer!

In Leipzig in 1617, an artist created a broadsheet in remembrance of the Reformation. It depicts a dream of Frederick the Wise. While Frederick sleeps, he sees a monk write the words *Von Ablass* (“On Indulgences”—the actual title of the *Ninety-Five Theses*) with a large quill across a church door. The quill magically reaches all the way to Rome, where it pierces a lion’s head (a play on the name of the pope in 1517, Leo X), and continues on until it finally topples the tiara from the pope’s head (fig. 1).² According to the text below the picture, Frederick had this dream on the night of October 30, 1517, and related it to his younger brother the next morning. The next morning would have been October 31, 1517—the day that Luther walked to the chapel door of Wittenberg’s Castle Church and posted the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Even Jan Hus’ supposed prophecy that, one hundred years following his death, God would raise up a new reformer who would not be able to be silenced is in the dream. So many aspects of the actual story of Luther and Wittenberg and the famous door are in this dream that one would think it impossible for anyone to believe it actually predated the events of 1517. And yet in the mid-nineteenth century, Merle d’Aubigné could relate the dream as “no doubt true.”³

Look in nearly any older biography of Luther or discussion of the Reformation and you will see Martin Luther called “the Reformer.” Reformer is always capitalized, and that capital letter speaks volumes about how he was understood in that era. There stood the solitary Great Man, his work reified into a demarcation of identity and authority. The church through the centuries may well have had reform movements and reformers, but Luther alone was the Reformer. He loomed large not just over the sixteenth century, but over all of the church’s past—and present. This is the Luther of mythology, a titan figure of monumental proportions. We have

² “Göttlicher Schriftmessiger, woldenckwürdiger Traum...”, 1617. Images and more information on the broadsheet can be found at the British Museum.

³ J. H. Merle d’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Henry White (New York: American Tract Society, 1853), 1:277.



Figure 1. A depiction of the dream that God would raise up a new reformer who would not be silenced. ©The Trustees of the British Museum

always known that Luther as a titan figure dates to the sixteenth century. The work of framing the events of 1517 in either providential or demonic terms began quite early. In 1521, Hans Baldung made an etching of Luther with the Dove of the Holy Spirit alighting on him that appeared in a pamphlet regarding the Diet of Worms (fig. 2).⁴ Not to be outdone, Johannes Cochlaeus had a woodcut done of Luther as a Hydra of sin and heresy for his 1529 anti-Luther tract, “Seven-Headed Luther” (fig. 3).⁵ We have also always known that Luther participated in some of this self-fashioning. More than once he framed his early actions in ways that clearly echoed the calls of Old Testament prophets. Three of the most famous episodes come from Luther’s own much later recollections and helped frame his call in divine and providential terms. It was not until 1539, for example, that we first hear

⁴ The image appears on the reverse side of the title page. Martin Luther, *Acta et res gestae* (Strassbourg: Schott, 1521).

⁵ The image is attributed to Hans Brosamer and appears on the title page. Johannes Cochlaeus, *Septiceps Lutherus: ubiq[ue] sibi, suis scriptis, co[n]trari[us], in visitatione[m] Saxonica[m]*, (Leipzig: Valentinus Schumann, 1529).



Figure 2. The events of 1517 were quickly framed as providential by some artists, such as Hans Baldung. Courtesy of the Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

of the thunderstorm that struck him with terror, resulting in the pledge to Saint Anne to become a monk. Almost a decade ago, Volker Leppin of Tübingen called into question the validity of such an event, but just this year, Lyndal Roper has included it in her new biography of him, seeing in it a manifestation of the existential terrors arising in other places in his life at that time.⁶ Luther's reflections on the so-called Tower Experience are

⁶ Compare Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), 29; and Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Luther* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016), 47. Leppin's biography has recently been translated into English: Volker Leppin, *Martin Luther*, trans. Rhys Bezzant and Karen Roe (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).



Figure 3. Others, such as Johannes Cochlaeus, cast the same events in demonic terms. Courtesy of the Richard C. Kessler Reformation Collection, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

even later, coming just a year before his death. According to Luther's telling, he rediscovered the message of the gospel—of justification by faith—while alone, ruminating on the opening passages of Romans in light of Augustine's theology. There, the Holy Spirit aided him to see righteousness in a new light—righteousness not as a thing to be earned, but as a thing to be received by grace alone. In other places, specifically his *Table Talks*, Luther fleshed out the story in more detail. It is in the *Table Talks*, for example, that we learn the ruminating took place in the tower. Most often, this is thought to be the tower of the castle, since his friary did not and does not really have a tower, and the castle's tower is one of Wittenberg's most famous sites. At other times, Luther recollected that the rediscovery happened in the tower's privy while he sat, occupied. Heiko Oberman wrote this about the importance of this location:

Must the trail of the Reformation be followed this far? There is a dignified way out: by cloaca Luther did not mean the toilet, but the study up in the tower above it. That, however, would be to miss the point of Luther's provocative statement. The cloaca is not just a privy, it is the most degrading place for man and the Devil's favorite habitat. Medieval monks already knew this, but the Reformer knows even more now: it is right here that we have Christ, the mighty helper on our side. No spot is unholy for the Holy Ghost; this is the very place to express contempt for the adversary through trust in Christ crucified.⁷

I have recently cast doubt on whether this event ever happened by chronicling the very slow and evolutionary development of Luther's views on justification throughout his lectures on the Psalms and Romans from 1514 to 1518.⁸

The most famous of the titan moments must be the one we mark this year—the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*. In 1968, Erwin Iserloh argued in his book *The Theses Were Not Posted* that while Luther certainly mailed a copy of the famous theses to Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz, he did not nail them to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. This led to many jokes about the theses being posted, but not “posted” (a joke that really only works in English). More importantly, it led to nearly a half century of consideration of this event. For most of my adult life, Iserloh's thesis has been accepted. Some argued for a modified version of the story, wherein Luther still nailed the theses to the door of the chapel, but that this was really not a big deal—the door was used as a bulletin board, and so posting theses for debate there was neither unusual nor revolutionary. Indeed, I have said such things myself in class before. More recently, archival evidence—the discovery of a more contemporaneous account than Philip Melancthon's remembrance (who was not even in Wittenberg in 1517)—seems to give credence to the posting. And again, my own recent study forced me to reconsider the evidence. I now think it probably did happen and that it was a dramatic act. Luther had a flair for the dramatic, as evidenced by his famous retort to the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms, and so a theatrical posting of the theses is not out of character for Luther. But the location; Luther's developing understandings of justification, penance, and indulgences; and the date all point to an actual, dramatic posting. The door on which they were posted might have sometimes served as a bulletin board,

⁷ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 155.

⁸ David M. Whitford, “Erasmus Openeth the Way before Luther: Revisiting Humanism's Influence on the Ninety-Five Theses and the Early Luther,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 96, no. 4 (2016): 516–40.

but on October 31, it would have been stripped bare and made ready for the next day, when hundreds of pilgrims would walk through the door to visit the vast collection of relics housed inside the church, and thereby earn indulgences. The date was the day before All Saints', the most important day of the year for visiting relics. And finally, his sermons from the same time show a man angry at the misuse of penance. Luther was an angry man in October 1517, and—as his later life makes abundantly clear—an angry Luther was often a dramatic Luther.

The First Modern Man

In 1950, when Roland Bainton first published his magisterial biography, *Here I Stand*, the nation was in the grips of the Red Scare.⁹ Hollywood had blacklists, and Bainton's Luther stood for the individual conscience—defiant and unyielding in the face of tyranny or oppression. Bainton stood in a long line of interpreters of not just Martin Luther, but also John Calvin and the Reformation in general. Courses on the Renaissance and Reformation were popular on college campuses across the United States, and these two movements represented the fulcrum upon which the coarse, dark, and oppressive medieval age gave way to the Enlightened democratic modern age. In this telling, Martin Luther—the defender of the individual conscience—was the first truly modern man. Indeed, even the way Bainton tells his story crescendos at the Diet of Worms, the bulk of the book leading up to that moment before Emperor Charles V. The rest of the book rushes through the next two and a half decades at record pace, an afterthought or postlude to the moment when the medieval era shattered.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the late Heiko Oberman began to push back against this representation. Across nearly a dozen books, Oberman slowly and methodically demonstrated that Martin Luther was not the modern man people thought he was. Instead, he was a decidedly medieval man. Oberman's Luther was a man consumed by the concerns not of the Enlightenment, which he would neither have recognized nor welcomed, but of the medieval church. Oberman's biography of Luther, *Martin Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, tells this story in convincing fashion. Oberman's Luther does not crescendo at Worms—but in the tower toilet scene quoted above. There he confronts the devil and walks away, in ways both figurative and literal, saved. Sin, death, and the devil—those enemies of the Christian discussed in such detail in early medieval theology—arise

⁹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950).

in Oberman's Luther to assail him and plague him with *Anfechtungen*, until finally he is driven to despair and the cross. There in the cross, he finds Christ and solace. The modern man is hardly to be seen in Oberman.

In many ways, the medieval Luther still predominates in modern scholarship. Lyndal Roper's Luther, as depicted in her new psycho-history, would recognize Oberman's Luther far more quickly than he would recognize Bainton's. The medieval Luther might well find his apex in the very recent Luther biography by Cardinal Walter Kasper.¹⁰ Kasper, former head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and a major participant in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues, describes a Luther who is fully embedded in late medieval mysticism and reform. Luther was "a reformer but not the Reformer," and he was a very, very Catholic reformer at that! Kasper declares rather boldly that "Luther was right," in many of his critiques of the medieval church and in some of his theological assertions. More recently, Pope Francis echoed his friend by noting that "Luther's intentions were not wrong."¹¹ That statement is not quite the same as saying he was right, but neither is it the simple denunciation of a heretic. In Kasper's telling, one walks away with the question, "how then did all this come to take place?" How did the Reformation—Luther's excommunication and imperial ban—happen? It happened for reasons so very, very medieval—the denunciations of rival monastic orders. The story of the medieval church abounds in squabbles, theological arguments, and denunciations between (and sometimes within) monastic orders: the Spiritual Franciscans denounced the decadent Benedictines, the Augustinians denouncing them both and so on and so on. In this telling, Luther the Augustinian attacked (rightfully) the abuses and abusive techniques of the Dominican Johannes Tetzel. Some Augustinians rallied to Luther's defense—even giving him a platform in early 1518 at their national meeting to further expand on his views. Meanwhile, Dominicans rushed, if not to Tetzel's personal defense, to the defense of the power of indulgences. Indeed, many of Luther's earliest and fiercest opponents were all Dominicans: Eck, Prierias, and Cochlaeus. Kasper's Reformation is a reformation of tragedy. A missed opportunity. A division wrought by misunderstanding and self-serving, rather than a desire to serve Christ in the world. Here, I would argue, the medieval Luther pendulum has swung too far. If Bainton's Luther is a bit too modern, a bit too Enlightened, Kasper's Luther

¹⁰ Walter Kasper, *Martin Luther: An Ecumenical Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 2016).

¹¹ Said during an interview on a plane from Armenia to Rome, June 6, 2016, <http://www.las-tampa.it/2016/06/26/vaticaninsider/eng/the-vatican/the-pope-on-brexit-no-to-balkanisation-but-we-need-a-new-european-union-vj94ZnoFQTdjk8kQK4BZpK/pagina.html>.

is too far in the other direction. Bainton's representation of Luther as the defender of conscience was purposeful and served his age. Kasper's Luther is the same. Kasper hopes, indeed has dedicated his life's work, to heal the wounds of the divided church. In doing so, he has on some level reduced the level of agency in each of the players. Luther the Augustinian was a voice crying in the wilderness, but he was dragged to excommunication against his will. Eck and Prierias come across as Dominicans dedicated to the defense of their orders and the papacy at all cost. The men, even Luther, become caricatures.

The pendulum, however, has also begun to swing back in the other direction. At a recent meeting of the American Historical Association, the Reformation and global historian Merry Wiesner-Hanks presented a survey of recent global history textbooks. Luther, the Great Man of the Reformation, comes to the fore in these textbooks. His religious convictions take pride of place, and he did help forge the modern era. Likewise, the biography of Luther by Heinz Schilling, soon to be released in English, argues against Luther as Great Man forging a new era. And yet, even Schilling's subtitle: *Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, gives notice to his thesis.¹² Luther may not be the sole architect of the modern world, but he was one of them, perhaps even the most important. His rebellion did help bring the medieval world to a crashing end.

The Reformation

In 1996, Boston University professor Carter Lindberg published his popular textbook on the Reformation with a then-provocative new title: *The European Reformations*. Textbooks are not a genre known for having a thesis, let alone a provocative one, but Lindberg's has both. There was not one, uniform Reformation defined by Martin Luther that Catholics rejected and fought against (thus no Counter-Reformation), nor did Calvinists simply adopt and amend Luther. They ought to be viewed as Reformations in their own right. Certainly there are elements of countering Luther in the Catholic Reformation, and aspects of developing upon him among the Reformed. And yet, these are movements solely responding to or developing upon Luther. The nomenclature of Reformations was meant to signal their independence from Luther and their significance in their own right.

Lindberg's terminology has quickly gained acceptance and has, indeed, overtaken the idea of the Reformation. Carlos Eire's 2016 book,

¹² Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in einer Zeit des Umbruchs* (Munich: Beck, 2013).

Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650, is now rather representative of the current field.¹³ There have been some who have laid claim to the older title. Diarmaid MacCulloch's 2003 work, *The Reformation: A History*, is the most traditional, though it is rich in detail and length.¹⁴ Brad Gregory's provocative *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, published in 2012, also embraces the idea of a solitary Reformation in that he sees the various movements that came out of Wittenberg as in some way all connected to it.¹⁵ Gregory's book is provocative not in its understanding of the unity of the Reformation, but in what he argues the Reformation unleashed. Gregory explores how the Reformation helped to create the modern world, how contemporary realities "have been *and are still being shaped* by the distant past."¹⁶ Here Gregory harkens back to Karl Holl's so-called Luther Renaissance of the early twentieth century. Holl, too, saw Luther as a transitional figure—from the dark medieval past of superstition and papal corruption to the modern world. Holl saw this as a positive. For Gregory, the turn to the modern is largely negative. By fracturing the medieval claim to univocal truth as interpreted by the church through the *Corpus Christianorum*, the Reformation shattered any claims to absolute truth. In doing so, it unleashed a series of unintended consequences—thus the title. Gregory's ills, laid at the feet of Luther, include polarized politics and culture wars, rampant and overly acquisitive consumerism, and a culture in which morality is cut loose from ethics and becomes a mere construction. Luther's reforms "remain substantially necessary to an explanation of why the Western world today is as it is."¹⁷ The Reformation lies at the heart of modernity's ills. If Holl, however, was too Whiggish in one direction, Gregory is too pessimistic in the other, and Luther was not the prime mover to modernity that either would like him to be. A generation of scholarship from Heiko Oberman to Volker Leppin has attempted to correct the Holl "Luther Renaissance" narrative and to locate Luther in the medieval world in which he lived, rather than in the modern world. Both Holl and Gregory, however, look too much to the present and neglect the world in which Luther actually lived.

¹³ Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

¹⁵ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Conclusion: Portrait or Picasso?

Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, just a few months past his sixty-second birthday. On the day he died he was the most famous man in Europe. He was Europe's first best-selling author, who alone helped keep many printers in business. People knew his name from St. Andrews, Scotland, in the north, to Madrid in the south; from Ireland to Poland. His death was met with grief and weeping or jubilation and celebration. He was either a Third Elijah, a prophet called to bring the church back to godly religion, or the greatest heresiarch the church ever encountered. He was either loved or hated; hero or villain. There were few who sat indifferent. On the day he died, the portraits painted of him border on the dystopian, a Picassoesque painting in vivid and bright, dark, and ominous hues. Five hundred years later, does the picture look any different?

Despite the various different interpretations of Luther, I think a more coherent picture can be drawn of him today. Though one still finds in Evangelical Protestant circles representations of Luther in providential and heroic frames, they are now the exception. Likewise, with Roman Catholics. Though some websites and conservative Catholic publications lamented Francis' visit to Stockholm or reiterated Luther's status as a heretic, they too are the exception. What has emerged certainly over the century since the last centennial is a greater appreciation of Luther as a person—brilliant, provocative, mercurial, passionate, stubborn, gregarious at times, petty at others, a deep lover of friends, a ferocious enemy to others—but still just a man who lived, and loved, and worked. A man who cried bitterly on the day his daughter died in his arms. A man who celebrated the death of Ulrich Zwingli in battle at forty-five. A man who went out of his way to welcome new visitors to Wittenberg. But also a man who said some of the most vile things about Jews one can read. Many of these traits made the Reformation possible and gave him the courage of his convictions and the fortitude to follow those convictions all the way to the gallows if necessary. But they also made possible some of his, and the Reformation's, less laudable events and circumstances. When Luther turned on you, it could be fierce and often was irrevocable. The Reformation was not his sole creation. It was a continent-wide event that included, yes, John Calvin and Zwingli, but also Teresa of Avila and Ignatius. That being said, it is impossible to see the Reformation without him. He was not a revolutionary so much as a catalyst. A deeply medieval man, who nevertheless helped birth the modern era.