

MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546)

“The righteous man shall live by faith.”¹

—Romans 1:17 (see also Galatians 3:11
and Habakkuk 2:4)

The Seeds of Reform. “Predecessors of the Reformation,” on this web site, discusses how and why the Roman Catholic Church had become corrupted by the time of the 14th and 15th centuries. The Church’s desperate need for money encouraged simony² and the abuse of indulgences.³ Church leaders were often far more carnal than their parishioners. The Church needed correction.

Unfortunately, the Church seldom tolerated dissent within its own ranks. Even before the Inquisition,⁴ the Church punished those whom it considered heretics (i.e., those who failed to conform to established Church doctrines), sometimes imposing torture, imprisonment, excommunication,⁵ and even death. As early as 385 A.D., the Church burned the Spanish bishop Priscillian and some of his followers as heretics.

In later centuries, the term “heresy” also encompassed those who openly opposed the corruption which infested the Church. Arnold of Brescia was hanged in Rome in 1155 for preaching that priests and other Church leaders should live in poverty rather than in sin. In southern France, 20,000 Albigensian “heretics,” including women and children, were massacred in the city of Béziers in about 1209. Their sin primarily consisted of a desire to see the Church return to the simplicity and poverty of the first century disciples. In the late 13th century, Dolcino of Novara was so distressed by the evils he saw in the Church leadership that he accused the Pope of being the wicked harlot of the Book of Revelation.⁶ The Church reacted, from 1304 to 1307, by attacking Dolcino’s followers, executing those who surrendered, burning his confidante, Margherita of Trento, and publicly torturing Dolcino and one of his followers, Longino, before finally burning them at the stake. The Church executed John Hus (1415) and Girolamo Savonarola (1498) for verbally attacking the Church’s lust for money.⁷

In part through such ferocity, the Church suppressed the efforts of reformers for several centuries. But in the 16th century, the reform movement exploded, causing changes inside and outside the Church. And the primary leader of that movement was Martin Luther.

Luther’s Youth. Martin was born on November 10, 1483, in the town of Eisleben,⁸ in eastern Germany.⁹ He was the first child of Hans and Margaret Luther, who moved to Mansfield before Martin’s first birthday. Although Hans Luther came from peasant stock, he made a comfortable—indeed, a prosperous—living working in the mines of Mansfield. By the time Martin reached eight years of age, Hans had

become a member of the town council, and operated his own mines and smelting furnaces. Martin's mother, the former Margaret Ziegler, came from a family of burghers in the town of Eisenach.

Both parents were devout Catholics and brought their son up in the Church. They imposed a strict discipline, which included the occasional beating, but they tempered this with abundant love. Martin's parents taught him the prevailing Church orthodoxy: that Christ was a stern and wrathful judge who would exact a terrible and eternal punishment for violations of God's laws, and that a person must rely upon the grace of God and the intercession of the saints to save him from this dreaded fate.

Entering school at age 8, Martin learned Latin and became a good student. At age 13, his parents sent him to school for a year in the town of Magdeburg, where he learned logic, rhetoric, dialectic, doctrine, and theology. He also learned—as was customary among students—poverty and hunger. Here in Magdeburg, the Brethren of the Common Life¹⁰ educated young Martin in Catholic orthodoxy through their lessons, and demonstrated devout Christian piety through their lives.

There followed three years of schooling in his mother's hometown of Eisenach. Martin sang in church choirs in both Mansfield and Magdeburg, and continued to do so in Eisenach. But now his musical education, as well as his interest in the religious life, was deepened by the influence of the church vicar, John Braun. Hans Luther had often dreamed of Martin becoming a lawyer, but he now began to dream of the priesthood.

Martin as Monk and Priest. In 1501, Martin entered the greatest German university of the time, Erfurt. With his father's wealth paying the bills, Martin earned his bachelor's degree in 1502 and his master's degree in 1504. He felt a calling to the monastic life, perhaps prompted in part by the periods of deep depression he experienced during his university days, but he feared or respected his father too much to avoid enrolling in law school in May 1505.

The following month (June 1505), Luther had a near-death experience that changed his life and the course of history. Caught in a thunderstorm near Stotterheim, a nearby bolt of lightning flung him off his horse. Cowering in terror, Martin vowed to enter a monastery if St. Anna, the patron saint of miners, would spare his life.¹¹ Of course, he survived, and on July 17, 1505, he kept his vow by entering the Erfurt monastery, part of the Augustinian order of monks. This decision angered Hans Luther, but he could not persuade his son to change his mind.¹² In September 1506, Martin took his final vows as a monk.

The monastery of Erfurt enforced a very strict discipline. The monks taught the prevailing wisdom of the Church, in which Luther had been raised: that a man could attain righteousness through his own will and action. So Luther sought peace with God through asceticism. He prayed, fasted, and read and studied the Bible

intensely. But he did not find peace. Instead, he only gained a greater appreciation for the unapproachable righteousness of God, and for his own unworthiness. He was too devoted to the faith to give up the struggle, but too honest to claim victory over sin. He soon discovered another way.

Justification By Faith. The Church ordained Luther as a priest in about April 1507, and he sang his first Mass on May 2nd of that year. During the following year, he studied the writings of St. Augustine and Paul, who each spoke from experience about the tremendous power of sin—but also about Christ’s mercy and grace. Luther gradually began to rely upon the cross of Christ, rather than upon his own efforts, to obtain God’s forgiveness.

Luther himself felt that the decisive moment came some years later, during a series of lectures in 1515 on Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*. Luther suddenly seized upon the words in Romans 1:17—“The righteous man shall live by faith.” He realized at last that he did not have to **earn** God’s love or God’s favor through his own righteous conduct; he merely had to trust God for the salvation already provided through Jesus Christ. Thus the doctrine of “justification by faith” was reborn. Indeed, Luther believed that **only** faith could justify a person in God’s eyes—that no amount of good works could earn God’s approval. To Luther, good works are not the cause of a person’s salvation, but the fruits of it. The Christian obeys God out of gratitude and love for what God has freely given.

Professor Luther. In 1508, the Augustinians moved Luther to the monastery in Wittenberg, a small town of about 3,000. The vicar for the Augustinian order in Saxony, John von Staupitz, was also the dean of the theological school at the fledgling University of Wittenberg,¹³ and he wanted Luther for the faculty. This required Luther to study for his doctoral degree in theology, which he received in October, 1512.

In the midst of this study, in 1510 or 1511, Luther and two other members of the order traveled to Rome. There he saw the culmination of centuries of corruption in the Church: pious Christians were held in contempt by the Roman people, and the Papacy was consumed by luxury and immorality. Perhaps Luther’s own description is sufficient: “So great and bold is Roman impiety that neither God nor man, neither sin nor shame, is feared. All good men who have seen Rome bear witness to this; all bad ones come back worse than before.”

Beginning in 1513, Luther performed the duties of a university professor of theology. He emphasized the role of grace and faith, but also severely criticized the Pope and the church leadership for their selfishness, greed, and immorality. And he criticized the nobility for their oppression of the poor. Luther spoke in simple, straightforward terms his listeners could easily understand. He became an immensely popular lecturer. The following year, he began preaching in the town church, and

became an immensely popular preacher. In May 1515, the Augustinians made Luther vicar for 10 monasteries, adding significantly to his multiplying responsibilities. Fortunately, Luther was a tireless worker.

The 95 Theses. Luther's criticism of the Church reached a climax on October 31, 1517. Stirred to action by the selling of indulgences in nearby towns, Luther prepared a list of 95 statements he wished to debate and defend. (The popular story is that he posted them on the church door—which served as the university bulletin board—but many historians dispute whether this actually occurred.)

The 95 statements criticized many accepted Church teachings and practices concerning indulgences—and especially their sale. Echoing John Wyclif, Proposition #82 asked: “Why does not the Pope empty purgatory from charity?”¹⁴ Another proposition pointed out that a charitable gift to the needy is a better deed than the purchase of an indulgence. Luther even challenged the Pope's authority over Purgatory and his ability to release *any* soul from it. To Luther's surprise, these “95 Theses,” as they came to be called, were immediately published in Latin and Greek, and circulated throughout Europe.

The Pope at the time was Leo X.¹⁵ He had been made a cardinal at age 13 or 14, and was elected Pope before he was even ordained as a priest. Unknown to Luther, his archbishop, Albert of Brandenburg, owed Leo a considerable debt. (Some say Albert owed this money as a bribe for his appointment as archbishop, but others claim it was merely an arrearage of church taxes.) To pay off this debt, Leo granted Albert the privilege of selling the indulgences to which Luther objected.¹⁶ The proceeds from the sales were to be split between Albert and Leo, with Albert's portion being used to pay off the debt. When Luther's opposition sharply diminished sales, Albert complained to the Pope.

Luther States the Case for Protestantism. First the Augustinians, and later representatives of the Pope, investigated Luther. No action was taken against him, however, until he went beyond the limits of the Church's tolerance in a series of debates in 1518—for he insisted that the ultimate authority in all matters of faith was the Bible, rather than the Pope or even church councils. **Here then was the heart of the conflict in the Reformation: the Protestants' reliance upon individual interpretation of the Bible vs. the Catholic Church's insistence that only the Church and the Pope could authoritatively say what the Scriptures meant.**¹⁷

In 1520, Luther went even further by publishing two pamphlets explicitly stating his theological views. Luther's determined stance prompted Pope Leo to issue an order—called a Papal bull—on June 15, 1520,¹⁸ declaring as heresy Luther's opposition to the sale of indulgences, and calling upon Luther to recant within 60 days or be excommunicated. Luther's response was twofold: (1) he published three more pamphlets over the next five months, stating and defending his beliefs, and (2)

on December 10, 1520, he publicly burned the Papal bull on a bonfire outside Wittenberg.

In Luther's pamphlets, he continued to assert his opposition to the Church's teaching that only the Pope may authoritatively interpret Scripture. Instead, Luther declared that all believers have the right and the duty to seek God's will by reading and interpreting God's Word for themselves.¹⁹ Practicing what he preached, Luther attacked many Church traditions and practices because he found them unsupported, or even contradicted, by the Scriptures. For example, he emphasized faith in God as the key to salvation, rather than confession, penance, and "good works."²⁰ Luther challenged the inerrancy of the Pope, and opposed sending German money to pay for papal extravagance. Agreeing with Henry VIII in England, though for different reasons, Luther favored the elimination of papal authority from civil and religious affairs outside of Italy (such as appointments to Church offices, trials of Church officials, etc.). Luther even criticized such long-established practices as priestly celibacy, transubstantiation,²¹ and monastic vows.

Excommunication and Trial. On January 3, 1521, Pope Leo ordered Luther's excommunication. According to Church law, this order meant that Luther should be immediately executed as a heretic, without benefit of a trial or even an opportunity to defend himself. Fortunately for Luther, however, he lived in an area of the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany) ruled by Frederick the Elector, who refused to allow such injustice to one of his subjects.

In April 1521, Charles V²² summoned Luther to appear before the Imperial Diet, in Worms. When representatives of the Church called upon Luther to recant his writings, he invited them to prove that his writings were contrary to Scripture. But in the absence of such proof, he would not back down: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe."

In response to charges that his writings were inconsistent with Church teachings, Luther responded that such teachings were neither infallible nor entitled to greater authority than the Scriptures. For Luther, not even the Pope could trump the Bible: "If we should begin to heal our dissensions by damning the Word of God, we should only turn loose an intolerable deluge of woes." One version of his speech says that he closed by saying, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise." After a few more days in Worms, during which he adamantly refused to compromise his position, Luther started back to Wittenberg. He didn't arrive.

Kidnapped! Along the way, Luther's party was stopped by armed horsemen, who rode away with him. To the world, Luther disappeared for a time, and many supposed him dead. Later, he wrote to family and friends to assure them he was well, but would not disclose his location. In fact, Frederick the Elector had planned this

“abduction” to protect Luther from feared assassination or capture. As Frederick no doubt expected, in May, 1521, Charles V issued the Edict of Worms, which condemned Luther as a heretic, ordered all Germans to surrender him for punishment, banned his writings, and threatened any who provided him with assistance.

Frederick arranged to have Luther reside at the castle of Wartburg, near his mother’s home of Eisenach, where he lived almost alone. During his one-year stay there, Luther translated the New Testament into German, and also wrote many sermons and pamphlets in defense of his cause. Among other issues, he wrote in opposition to the monastic vows he himself had taken earlier in life, and against the priestly celibacy he had lived under most of his life. But he was often very unhappy and yearned to be back with his friends.

Free Again. In early March 1522, Luther made the perilous journey back to Wittenberg. In part, Luther felt compelled to return by the need to counter some of the excesses of his more radical adherents, who had smashed church altars and destroyed pictures of the saints. Back in Wittenberg, Luther and his longtime friend, Philip Melanchthon, ²³ prepared a statement of Luther’s theology, entitled “Theological Commonplaces.” This detailed presentation of Luther’s ideas, each with scriptural support, was a tremendous advance for his cause. On most issues, Luther and Melanchthon either took a moderate stance or favored each individual’s freedom to decide the issue for himself in light of the Scriptures. Above all, Luther urged his followers to act in love.

The Peasant Revolt. During 1524, a new crisis arose. German peasants in the south rebelled against the nobility’s oppressive, unjust, and often arbitrary treatment of them. Led by Thomas Müntzer (or Munzer), the peasants robbed, burned, and murdered their way northward. Luther sympathized with the rebels’ motives, but not their methods. Although he had championed the rights of the peasants for years in his preaching and in his writings, he also strongly favored obedience to the civil authorities, as counseled by Paul and Peter. ²⁴ Thus, Luther opposed the peasants’ violent practices.

Luther traveled to the rebellious areas and spoke repeatedly with both sides, warning the nobles about their unjust past treatment of the peasants, but urging the rebels to end the violence. He also visited the wounded and the ill. In the end, neither side listened, and Luther sided with the nobles, who decimated the peasant army near Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525. In southern Germany, the scene of the uprising, many regarded Luther as a traitor. As a result, much of southern Germany rejected Luther and remained loyal to the Catholic Church.

Luther Takes a Wife. Luther’s opposition to monastic vows and the celibacy of the priesthood led many German monks and nuns to give up the monastic life and seek marriage. Some of the nuns came to Wittenberg, asking for assistance and/or

guidance from Luther. He contacted their families for help or tried to get husbands for them. In 1525, one of these former nuns became his wife.

Catherine von Bora had been a nun since the age of 16, but she ran away from the convent when she was 24. Settling in Wittenberg, she got engaged to one of the university students. Two years later, however, the student left and married someone else. Catherine remained in Wittenberg, where she attracted Luther's interest. They were married on June 13, 1525. She was 26; he was 42. Luther did not marry for love, but he seems to have found it. Catherine bore him 6 children (Hans, Elizabeth, Magdalene, Martin, Paul, and Margaret), and brought a joy to his life that he had never known before. They were always short of money, for Luther never accepted payment for any of his writings or his teaching, but affection between Martin and Katie was never in short supply.

The Birth of the Protestant Church. In the final 20 years of his life, Luther devoted himself to nurturing the churches which had accepted his reformation. He advocated the education of all believers, and to promote this he encouraged his followers to create religious literature for children as well as adults. Luther even dreamed of compulsory public education for all children—with an emphasis upon the Bible, of course—and he did what he could to propel the dream toward reality.

Luther visited the churches in Saxony, lending each his knowledge and advice. He wrote a catechism (i.e., an instruction manual) for the new religion. He authored an order of worship for a Lutheran Mass, in German, which emphasized preaching and hymn-singing. Luther then composed numerous hymns for his new worship service. He also completed a translation of the entire Bible into German; this edition was read by hundreds of thousands of Germans, thanks to Gutenberg's printing press.²⁵ But Luther stayed out of the political arena, where the battles between Catholicism and Lutheranism were increasingly being fought.

Luther's followers won a limited freedom of religion in 1526, when the Imperial Diet unanimously agreed to let each province determine for itself whether or not to enforce the Edict of Worms, and whether or not to permit Luther's "reformed worship," or Lutheranism. The Germans interpreted this law as giving each nobleman the authority to regulate religious affairs in his province. But in 1529, Charles V forced the Diet to substantially reverse the decree of 1526. The Diet guaranteed religious toleration to Catholics in Lutheran areas, but denied such toleration to Lutherans in Catholic areas. Delegates from Lutheran provinces argued that the unanimous decision of the Diet in 1526 could not be reversed by a simple majority. For this reason, they declared the 1529 action illegal, and filed a formal protest against it. Thus they received the name, "Protestants." Fortunately for the Lutherans, Charles V was too busy fighting wars to bother with strictly enforcing the decree of 1529.²⁶

In 1530, Charles V, hoping to promote a reconciliation between the new faith and the old, asked the Lutherans to present a formal statement of their religious views and their disputes with Catholicism. The Lutherans chose Melancthon to write their response. After consultations with Luther and other Lutherans, Melancthon prepared what became known as the Augsburg Confession, and presented it to the Diet at a meeting in Augsburg. Luther could not attend this or any other official meetings, due to the Edict of Worms. The Augsburg Confession failed to achieve the reconciliation Charles V had hoped for,²⁷ but it became a standard for Lutheran belief.

Luther always found his strength in God. When his son, Hans, almost died from the plague in 1527, Luther celebrated this divine strength in his most famous hymn: *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. Similarly, Luther found peace in the midst of his despair when little Elizabeth died in infancy in 1527; when his father, Hans, passed on in 1530; and, perhaps most crushing of all, when his daughter, Magdalene, lost her life in 1542 at the tender age of 14. Little Magdalene died in her father's arms, as he wept and prayed for her.

Luther's End and Legacy. Luther's health became progressively worse during the final years of his life, but he continued to perform his duties. His final act was to mediate a dispute between two nobles in Eisleben. Luther was able to settle the dispute after several weeks, but he suffered a stroke and died during the journey home, on February 18, 1546. He was 62. During his final moments of life, he repeated John 3:16 three times: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Then he quoted Jesus on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."²⁸

Martin Luther drastically altered the progress of Christianity in western Europe. Other Protestant leaders, such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), John Calvin (1509-1564), John Knox (ca. 1505-1572), and others, would carry the Protestant movement in different directions, some in Luther's own lifetime. Yet nearly all of the Protestant leaders who came after him were influenced by Luther to some degree. The Protestant movement grew out of the Reformation Luther led. And the dramatic successes of Protestantism forced the Roman Catholic Church to eventually eliminate the corruption and abuses Luther had fought against, resulting in the revitalization of that long-established Church. Without Luther, Christianity might look very different today.

Sources:

- (1) *Martin Luther: The Great Reformer*, by Edwin P. Booth (1995).
- (2) *The Story of Civilization, Volume IV (The Age of Faith)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1950).
- (3) *The Story of Civilization, Volume V (The Renaissance)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1953).
- (4) *The Story of Civilization: Volume VI (The Reformation)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957).
- (5) *World History Series: The Reformation*, by Sarah Flowers (1996).
- (6) *A History of Christianity, Volume II (Reformation to the Present, A.D. 1500 to A.D. 1975)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (7) *Exploring Church History*, by Howard F. Vos (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1994).
- (8) The following articles in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, found at:
“Martin Luther”: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09438b.htm>
“Brethren of the Common Life”:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04166b.htm>
“Emperor Charles V”:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03625a.htm>
“Leo X”:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09162a.htm>
“Clement V”:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04020a.htm>
- (9) The following articles in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*:
“Martin Luther”:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_luther#Monastic_and_academic_life
“Dulcinian”:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dulcinian>

Endnotes for “Martin Luther”:

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

² Simony refers to the buying and selling of church offices, such as those of Bishop, Cardinal, and even Pope. The term gets its name from Simon the Magician, who sought to buy the gifts of God. See Acts 8:18-23.

³ In Catholic doctrine, an indulgence relieved a person of the need to perform penance in Purgatory for sins committed on earth. An indulgence therefore had nothing to do with salvation. However, those who sold indulgences often exaggerated their benefits, leading purchasers to believe that they had bought salvation, or even the right to sin with impunity. For more on indulgences, see the article, “Predecessors of the Reformation,” on this web site.

⁴ See the article, “Predecessors of the Reformation,” on this web site, for a discussion of the Inquisition.

⁵ Since at least the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Church had taught that no one could be saved apart from Mother Church. “Excommunication” meant to be cut off from the Church. This practice was based on such Scriptures as Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, which encouraged Christians to expel from their midst those who insisted on behaving improperly. A person who had been excommunicated from the Church could not attend worship services or receive any of the sacraments, including communion. Other Christians were forbidden to associate with the excommunicate, and were often forbidden to even give him food, drink, or lodgings. But far worse than all of this, the excommunicated individual, in the Church’s view, could not be saved, and therefore was condemned to eternal damnation.

⁶ See Revelation, chapter 17.

⁷ For more on John Hus and Girolamo Savonarola, see “Predecessors of the Reformation,” on this web site.

⁸ The geography of the German towns and cities which are important in Luther’s life is as follows:

Eisleben, his birthplace, is located about 35 miles northwest of Leipzig.

Mansfield, his childhood home, is less than 10 miles northwest of Eisleben.

Magdeburg, where Luther spent a year in school, is about 40 miles north of Eisleben.

Erfurt, where Luther attended university and later became a monk, is about 60-70 miles southwest of Leipzig.

Eisenach, his mother’s hometown, where Luther spent 3 years of schooling, is about 30 miles due west of Erfurt.

Wittenberg, where Luther spent most of his life, is about 40 miles north-northeast of Leipzig, and about 50-60 miles south-southeast of Berlin.

Worms, the site of the Imperial Diet, is located along the Rhine River in western Germany,

east of Luxembourg, and about 15 miles north of Mannheim.

⁹ Throughout this article, the term, “Germany,” refers to the geographic region in central Europe, rather than the nation of Germany, which did not exist in Luther’s day. The German Empire was founded in 1871.

¹⁰ The Brethren of the Common Life was a semi-monastic community founded by Geert De Groote (1340-1384). Unlike monks, they took no vows. After Groote’s death, the Brethren become renowned for their scholarship, and opened free schools throughout Germany and the Netherlands. By 1500 they had as many as 2,000 students, but the schools gradually died out in subsequent centuries.

¹¹ Luther’s decision may have been more complex than this episode would imply. Different sources present other motives for his choice, including the hope for a less difficult life, and the death of a friend at about this same time.

¹² Hans apparently became reconciled to the idea later that same year, after losing both of his younger sons to the Plague.

¹³ The University of Wittenberg had been founded only six years earlier, in July, 1502.

¹⁴ In other words, if the Pope has the authority to release souls from Purgatory—as claimed by the sellers of indulgences—why not simply do so out of Christian love, without requiring any form of payment?

¹⁵ Pope Leo X (birth name Giovanni de Medici) was born on December 11, 1475. He became Pope on March 11, 1513, at the age of 38, and served until he died from malaria on December 1, 1521. His free-spending proclivities created cash-flow problems and left the Papacy deeply in debt.

¹⁶ The archbishop placed John Tetzel, a Dominican monk, in charge of selling the indulgences.

¹⁷ The Catholic position had developed during the Middle Ages, when the smartest and best educated minds of Europe were clergymen. At that time, most people outside of the Church—even the nobility—could not read or write. In such a climate of ignorance, the Church’s reluctance to allow individuals to construe the Scriptures for themselves is understandable. Nor is it surprising that Church leaders in Luther’s day wanted to maintain this policy, which had preserved Church unity in Western Europe through many centuries. The subsequent fragmentation of Protestantism only confirmed their worst fears.

¹⁸ The *Catholic Encyclopedia* gives the date of this bull as July 15, 1520, rather than June.

¹⁹ This belief in the right of each individual to judge for himself or herself what the Scriptures mean

is often termed the “priesthood of all believers,” for only the priest and other clergymen held such individual freedom and responsibility in the Roman Catholic Church of Luther’s day.

²⁰ In the fifth pamphlet, entitled *The Freedom of the Christian Man*, published in November, 1520, Luther declared: “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.” Luther explained that the Christian man, justified by faith, is free from bondage to sin, law, and the need to try to “earn” salvation by good works. But he must use his new-found freedom to serve God with a grateful heart, by living the life of love and service exemplified by Christ.

²¹ In communion, the Roman Catholic Church taught that the bread and wine were miraculously transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. This is the doctrine of transubstantiation. In Luther’s day, this doctrine was used to justify denying the cup to all but priests, lest a layman’s clumsiness should result in Christ’s “blood” being spilled. Luther believed that Christ’s body and blood are somehow present in the bread and wine, but that they do not thereby cease to be bread and wine. This position is called consubstantiation. But the more fundamental dispute involved Luther’s desire to give both bread and wine to lay persons, in opposition to Church custom.

²² Charles V (1500-1558) was the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Spain. He was the grandson of the late Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, through their daughter, Joanna, and was the son of Phillip, Duke of Burgandy. At the time Charles summoned Luther, the Emperor was only 20 years old.

²³ 1497-1560

²⁴ See, for example, Romans 13:1-4, Titus 3:1, and 1 Peter 2:13-14.

²⁵ Gutenberg’s printing press had produced the first printed Bible in 1456.

²⁶ The Ottoman Turks had defeated the Byzantine Empire in 1453, and by 1529 were close to Vienna (Austria). France, fearing Charles’ power (as ruler in Spain, Holland, and Germany), made an alliance with the Turks to try to weaken him. Faced with enemies on both sides, Charles needed the support of all of his subjects. Thus, he could not afford to alienate Luther’s supporters by ordering his delivery to the Inquisition.

²⁷ The opposition of Charles V to Protestantism eventually led to war between the German Catholics and Protestants in 1547. At first the Catholics gained the upper hand, but France (ironically, a Catholic nation) came to the aid of the German Protestants, who defeated the Emperor and the Catholics in 1552. The resulting Peace of Augsburg, in 1555, restored the right of each German noble to determine which religion—Catholicism or Lutheranism—would prevail in his territories.

Meanwhile, during the 16th century Lutheranism spread to Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. In each of these countries, Lutheranism became the dominant religion, supplanting Catholicism almost completely. Lutheranism also became the leading religion in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

²⁸ See Luke 23:46.