

## ENDORSEMENTS

“In *The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther*, I found a Luther of whom little is told: a Luther who loved an inerrant Scripture, a Luther who preached a glorious gospel, a Luther who was passionate for God’s glory and God’s people, a Luther who was willing to suffer for the cause. I am convinced that Steve Lawson has come closer to capturing the heart of Luther’s passions and desires as a gospel minister than anyone else. Here I found encouragement for my heart as I carry out my weekly ministry: read this and find encouragement for yours.”

—DR. SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS, senior minister,  
First Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi  
Author, *God’s Grand Design:  
The Theological Vision of Jonathan Edwards*

“With the quincentenary of the Reformation just around the corner, the publication of Steven Lawson’s *The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther* could not be more timely. Indeed, with the modern church very much in need of the very kind of preaching Dr. Lawson portrays here, this book’s message is perhaps more vital than at almost any time since the days of Luther. Highly recommended.”

—DR. GEORGE GRANT, pastor,  
Parish Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
Author, *The Micah Mandate: Balancing the Christian Life*

“Here is a profile of Luther the preacher in all his red-blooded roughness and desperate, dogged faithfulness. Steven Lawson has captured the spirit of this volcanic Reformer superbly, and the result is deeply stirring. This is a most welcome book for today, when the church is in such desperate need of reformation. May it help to rouse a generation of Luthers.”

—DR. MICHAEL REEVES, head of theology,  
Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, UK  
Author, *The Unquenchable Flame:  
Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*

The Heroic Boldness *of*

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# Martin Luther

## **The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles**

Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

*The Expository Genius of John Calvin*

by Steven J. Lawson

*The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards*

by Steven J. Lawson

*The Mighty Weakness of John Knox*

by Douglas Bond

*The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon*

by Steven J. Lawson

*The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther*

by Steven J. Lawson



A **Long Line of Godly Men** Profile

The Heroic Boldnes *of*

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# Martin Luther

STEVEN J. LAWSON

 *Reformation Trust* A DIVISION OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES, ORLANDO, FL

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This book is dedicated  
to a lifelong, faithful friend,

Ty Miller

whose firm commitment to Jesus Christ  
and extraordinary leadership skills  
have helped launch OnePassion Ministries,  
a work devoted to the advancement of the truth  
of the Word of God around the world.

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# Followers Worthy to be Followed

**D**own through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men, those whom He has mightily used at critical junctures of church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures, trophies of God’s grace, have had much in common.

Certainly each man possessed stalwart faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ, but more can be said. Each of them held deep convictions as to the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in championing

the doctrines that magnify the sovereign grace of God in His saving purposes in the world. To a man, they upheld the essential truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

How did these truths affect their lives? Far from paralyzing them, the doctrines of grace enflamed their hearts with reverential awe for God and humbled their souls before His throne. Moreover, the truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to further the cause of Christ on the earth. This fact should not surprise us, as history reveals that those who embrace these truths are granted extraordinary confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision of Him, they step forward and accomplish the work of many men, leaving a godly influence on generations to come. They arise with wings like eagles and soar over their times in history. Experientially, the doctrines of grace renew their spirits and empower them to serve God in their divinely appointed hours.

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles aim to highlight key figures from this procession of sovereign-grace men. It is the purpose of this series to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were stalwart followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

The famed German Reformer Martin Luther is the focus of this volume. In a day when the church greatly needed to hear the truth, Luther’s voice thundered with holy boldness throughout Europe. Amid the doctrinal declines of that hour, Luther spoke courageously, asserting an unwavering allegiance

FOLLOWERS WORTHY TO BE FOLLOWED

to Scripture alone. This Reformer was filled with audacious bravery as he confronted the church in Rome with its departure from the true saving gospel. His singular commitment to biblical truth became the driving force behind the Reformation. As the Lord empowered Luther, his pulpit became one of the most clarion sounding boards for His Word this world has ever witnessed. For these reasons, Luther remains eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

May the Lord use this book to greatly embolden you so that, like Luther, you will leave an indelible mark on this world for God. Through this profile, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be full of Scripture, and thereby emboldened in your ministry for Him.

*Soli Deo gloria!*

—*Steven J. Lawson*  
Series editor

# The Call for a New Reformation

October 31, 1517, is a pivotal date in church history, one on which the course of human events in Western civilization dramatically turned. On that date, Martin Luther, a relatively obscure professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg, Germany, nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the front door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This one-time Augustinian monk was registering his protest against the abuses of the sale of indulgences by the papacy. No one that day foresaw the firestorm Luther was about to unleash. This one bold act proved to be “the shot heard around the world” that launched the Protestant Reformation.

Noted church historian Philip Schaff has said that next to the beginning of Christianity, the Protestant Reformation was “the greatest event in history.”<sup>1</sup> It was an unprecedented

## THE HEROIC BOLDNESS OF MARTIN LUTHER

movement, a far-reaching, history-altering season when the invisible hand of God impacted not only individuals and churches, but entire nations and cultures. The Reformation was a series of strategic events involving many people in many places. At its core, it was an attempt to bring the church back to the singular authority of Scripture and the purity of the gospel.

At the birth of this epic movement, Luther became its leading figure and driving force. With the aim of restoring the Word of God to the life of the church, Luther used every legitimate means to make known the truths of Scripture. His strategies included writing books, tracts, pamphlets, and letters, as well as classroom lectures, public debates, and heated disputations in churches and universities. But his chief means of producing reform was the pulpit. Luther was, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asserts, “pre-eminently a great preacher.”<sup>2</sup>

That Luther’s preaching played such a significant role in establishing the Reformation should come as no surprise: “A revival of true preaching has always heralded these great movements in the history of the Church,” writes Lloyd-Jones. “And, of course, when the Reformation and the Revival come they have always led to great and notable periods of the greatest preaching that the Church has ever known.”<sup>3</sup> This was undeniably true of the sixteenth-century pulpit during the Protestant movement.

Writing in *A History of Preaching*, E. C. Dargan notes that the Reformation was propelled chiefly by the preaching of the Word of God. A virtual army of preachers was unleashed

upon a slumbering Europe. The Reformers awakened the Continent and the British Isles by restoring the primacy of the preaching of the Word. Dargan writes:

The great events and achievements of that mighty revolution were largely the work of preachers and preaching; for it was by the Word of God, through the ministry of earnest men who believed, loved and taught it, that the best and most enduring work of the Reformation was done. And, conversely, the events and principles of the movement powerfully reacted on preaching itself, giving it new spirit, new power, new forms, so that the relation between the Reformation and preaching may be succinctly described as one of mutual dependence, aid and guidance.<sup>4</sup>

John Broadus, a noted nineteenth-century professor, identifies four distinguishing marks of the Reformation. Each of these is critical to our understanding of Luther and the Protestant movement.

First, the Reformation was *a revival of preaching*. Broadus notes that during the Middle Ages, preachers were exceptions to the rule.<sup>5</sup> The Roman Catholic Church had subjugated the pulpit to a subordinate, peripheral role. In its place were the Mass, rituals, and ceremonies. But the Reformation, Broadus writes, was marked by “a great outburst of preaching, such as had not been seen since the early Christian centuries.”<sup>6</sup> All of

the Reformers were preachers, not merely authors and lecturers. These valiant figures restored the pulpit as the primary means of grace in the church.

As Dargan explains: “Among the reformers, preaching resumes its proper place in worship. . . . The exposition of Scripture becomes the main thing. . . . Preaching becomes more prominent in worship than it had been perhaps since the fourth century.”<sup>7</sup> The Reformation historian Harold Grimm affirms this view, writing: “The Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the sermon. . . . The role of the sermon in making the Reformation a mass movement can scarcely be overestimated.”<sup>8</sup> Roland Bainton, a Luther scholar, also agrees: “The Reformation gave centrality to the sermon. The pulpit was higher than the altar.”<sup>9</sup> As Lloyd-Jones observed, in every great movement of God, preaching is central. The Protestant Reformation was no exception.

Second, it was *a revival of biblical preaching*. Broadus notes that the Protestant movement did not merely bring back preaching per se, but a certain kind of preaching—*biblical* preaching, that is, *expository* preaching. He writes: “Instead of long and often fabulous stories about saints and martyrs, and accounts of miracles, instead of passages from Aristotle and Seneca, and fine-spun subtleties of the Schoolman, these men preached the Bible. The question was not what the Pope said; and even the Fathers, however highly esteemed, were not decisive authority—it was the Bible.”<sup>10</sup> Once again, the pulpit reigned in the church by the preaching of God’s Word.

In the sixteenth century, Broadus explains, “The preacher’s one great task was to set forth the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Word of God.”<sup>11</sup> Everything else the preacher did was secondary. With this new emphasis came a deeper study of the Bible: “Preachers, studying the original Greek and Hebrew,” he writes, “were carefully explaining to the people the connected teachings of passage after passage and book after book . . . , [giving them] a much more strict and reasonable exegesis than had ever been common since the days of Chrysostom.”<sup>12</sup> Dargan adds: “The glory of Reformation preaching was its use of Scripture. In the hands of the reformers, the Word of God, again . . . rules the pulpit . . . as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice.”<sup>13</sup>

Third, it was *a revival of controversial preaching*. Broadus explains that as the Reformers preached the Bible, controversy inevitably followed. They maintained not only *sola Scriptura*—“Scripture alone”—but *tota Scriptura*—“all Scripture.” The Reformers believed that every truth was to be preached from their pulpits. Every hard saying was to be expounded. Every sin was to be exposed. After centuries of apostasy, the full counsel of God was suddenly preached, which brought unavoidable conflict in a slumbering church. Broadus rightly states, “Religious controversy is inevitable where living faith in definite truth is dwelling side by side with ruinous error and practical evils.”<sup>14</sup> The preaching of the Reformers disrupted the status quo of the day. Critical issues were confronted. Sacred cows were butchered.

This was no simple task, Dargan affirms: “The stern conflict which the reformers had to wage with error demanded abilities and training of no mean order. The task of Protestantism was not easy.”<sup>15</sup> However, the theological errors they had to oppose “served to quicken and render more earnest the preaching of the reformers.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, their preaching was “largely polemical and doctrinal.”<sup>17</sup> They wielded the Word of God like a sharp, two-edged sword that tore down and struck dead. However, the Word they preached also built up and made alive.

Fourth, it was *a revival of preaching on the doctrines of grace*. Broadus finally notes that biblical preaching in the Reformation elevated the truths of the sovereignty of God in salvation: “The doctrine of divine sovereignty in human salvation was freely proclaimed by all the Reformers.”<sup>18</sup> In-depth biblical preaching always sets forth the doctrines of grace because they are so repeatedly taught throughout Scripture. A return to biblical preaching necessitates a return to preaching divine sovereignty in man’s salvation. The two are inseparably linked. Broadus adds, “Protestantism was born of the doctrines of grace, and in the proclamation of these the Reformation preaching found its truest and highest power.”<sup>19</sup> In the Protestant movement, biblical preaching reclaimed the high ground of sovereign grace.

The lofty teaching of God’s supreme authority in saving grace shook Europe and beyond, serving as a launching pad for the Protestant cause. In teaching these God-exalting

doctrines, the Reformers resurrected the core teaching of Scripture that salvation is entirely of the Lord. In fact, these bold preachers asserted that the true church is comprised of the total number of God's elect—no more and no less.

Standing at the headwaters of the Reformation was Martin Luther. This bold German Reformer became one of the greatest preachers in this remarkable time. His pulpit proved to be the first strong pulse in the heartbeat of the Protestant movement, pumping life into the body of Christ. Luther unleashed God's Word on the European continent with the force of an electrical storm. The thunder and lightning of his biblical exposition were powerful in shaping this movement.

The focus of this book is Luther's bold biblical preaching. A mighty force for God, he was one of the most fearless individuals who ever served the church. Luther was unflinchingly courageous as he stood in the pulpit. The reason he was so brave is that he was thoroughly biblical. His heroic valor arose from his deep convictions, which sprang from sound doctrine. As a mighty expositor of the Scriptures, Luther left a rich legacy of pulpit excellence. Therefore, in these pages, our purpose is to examine his life and pulpit ministry. Specifically, why was he so bold in his preaching, and how did that boldness evidence itself?

Before we proceed, I must thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series from church history. I remain grateful for Greg Bailey, director of publications, who has done a

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masterful job editing this manuscript. Chris Larson continues to be instrumental in overseeing this series. And I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my association with my former professor, Dr. R. C. Sproul.

I am indebted to Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Alabama, which I serve as senior pastor. No pastor has as much freedom to serve Christ on such a broad scale as I have. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and the congregation, who encourage me in my extended ministry.

I want to express my gratitude for my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Keith Phillips, a fellow pastor at Christ Fellowship, who helped edit this manuscript. I also want to thank Mackay Smith for his help in preparing this book.

Finally, I thank God for my family's support in my life and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, remain pillars of strength for me.

Whether you are a layperson or a preacher, may the Lord use Luther's example to embolden your commitment to the cause of Christ and to the furtherance of His gospel. In these days, when there is a crying need for boldness both in the pulpit and the pew, may we see the restoration of Christ's church to her pristine purity through a new reformation.

—*Steven J. Lawson*  
Mobile, Alabama  
July 2012

# Luther's Life and Legacy

*In order to understand the genius and history of the German Reformation, we must trace its origin in the personal experience of the monk who shook the world from his lonely study in Wittenberg, and made pope and emperor tremble at the power of his word. . . . Of all the Reformers Luther is the first. He is so closely identified with the German Reformation that the one would have no meaning without the other. His own history is the formative history of the church which is justly called by his name and which is the incarnation and perpetuation of his genius.<sup>1</sup>*

—PHILIP SCHAFF

Whenever God moves powerfully in His church, He first raises up a pivotal leader, a chosen instrument through whom He brings needed reformation and revival. Such a heroic figure stands as an evangelical Atlas, uniquely empowered by

## THE HEROIC BOLDNESS OF MARTIN LUTHER

God to uphold a new work in a new day by giving it spiritual direction and dynamic impetus. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, there emerged such a man.

Regarded as the father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther towered over his own time and became a giant of church history. This monk and professor pioneered the extraordinary movement to restore the purity of the gospel after centuries of corruption by the Roman Catholic Church. So enormous was his giftedness that he once was described as an “ocean,”<sup>2</sup> and many consider him to be the most significant European figure of the second millennium.<sup>3</sup> As the undisputed leader of the German Reformation, Luther ignited the flames that soon engulfed the continent of Europe and spread to the British Isles and the Colonies in America.

Luther was a fearless champion of truth in a day of monumental change. Described as “the German Hercules,”<sup>4</sup> he was blessed with a towering intellect, a magnetic personality, and enormous boldness to confront the challenges of his time. He appeared on the world scene as one made for the battle. When the conflict raged the hottest, Luther stood the strongest. In the fierce fray, he held his ground as an erupting volcano, spewing forth red-hot biblical truths on the surrounding landscape.

Simply put, Luther was dauntless, seemingly impossible to subdue. When he spoke, it was to express strong beliefs anchored to the immutable truths of God’s Holy Word. He possessed an indomitable spirit that revealed itself in his fearless personality.

PRIMARILY A PREACHER

In the tempestuous days of the Reformation, the centerpiece of Luther's ministry was his bold biblical preaching. Fred W. Meuser writes: "Martin Luther is famous as reformer, theologian, professor, translator, prodigious author, and polemicist. He is well known as hymn-writer, musician, friend of students, mentor of pastors, and pastor to countless clergy and laity. Yet he saw himself first of all as a preacher."<sup>5</sup> Luther gave himself tirelessly to this priority. E. Theodore Bachmann adds, "The church . . . is for Luther 'not a pen-house, but a mouth-house,' in which the living Word is proclaimed."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Luther wrote voluminously, yet he never put his written works on the same level with his proclamation of God's Word. He maintained, "Christ Himself wrote nothing, nor did He give command to write, but to preach orally."<sup>7</sup> By this stance, Luther strongly underscored the primacy of the pulpit.

Luther's commitment to the pulpit can be clearly seen in his preaching activities. On most Sundays, he preached two or three times, and, by his own admission, "Often I preached four sermons on one day."<sup>8</sup> In addition, he usually preached at least two to three times during the week, sometimes more. On religious holidays, he preached twice a day. His relentless drive in this work is seen in the staggering number of sermons he preached—seven thousand between 1510 and 1546.<sup>9</sup> That is almost two hundred sermons per year, or four per week. Throughout his ministry, Luther preached, on average, one

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sermon every two days.<sup>10</sup> Some twenty-three hundred of these biblical expositions survive in written form.<sup>11</sup>

Whenever Luther traveled away from his home in Wittenberg, he was asked to preach, and he complied even to the point of exhaustion. Moreover, he constantly preached to students in his home. Even in 1528, a year marked by the Black Plague, Luther preached some two hundred sermons. He claimed to have equaled the activity of an army of preachers: “No longer am I only Luther, but Pomeranus, too, an official, a Moses, a Jethro and what not? All things to all men.”<sup>12</sup> This is to say, in his preaching, he did the work of a host of men. So, in order to understand Luther, we must examine him as a preacher.

First, however, it is essential that we consider Luther the man. Who was this prolific figure in history? What was his background? What forces shaped his life and deepened his convictions? How did God use him as the chief Reformer of his day?

## OBSCURE BEGINNINGS

Born in the little town of Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483, Martin Luther came from hard-working stock. His father, Hans Luder—the name was later Latinized to the more familiar “Luther”—was a copper miner who eventually acquired some wealth through a shared interest in mines and smelting furnaces. His mother was a pious but superstitious Roman Catholic, who raised him under the strict disciplines of the church.

## LUTHER'S LIFE AND LEGACY

Martin's stern father groomed him from his early years to be a lawyer. Obediently, Martin pursued an education, first at Eisenach (1498–1501), then at the prestigious University of Erfurt (1502–1505), where he received bachelor's and master's degrees. Even in these early years, Luther gave evidence of a formidable mind equipped with exceptional abilities in study and analysis. His mental command would shine brightly during the Reformation.

Despite his father's desire, Martin did not become a lawyer. In July 1505, after one month of legal studies, the twenty-one-year-old Luther was caught in a severe thunderstorm, and a lightning bolt knocked him to the ground. Fearful for his salvation, he cried out to the Catholic patroness of miners: "Help me, St. Anna, and I will become a monk."<sup>13</sup> Despite angry opposition from his father, he kept this commitment. Two weeks later, he entered the most rigorous and austere of the seven monasteries in Erfurt—that of the Augustinian order of friars. By this dramatic step, Luther set off on a quest to find acceptance with God.

## ENTERING THE PRIESTHOOD

Luther was driven, even obsessed, to find salvation through his own efforts. He said: "When I was a monk, I wearied myself greatly for almost fifteen years with the daily sacrifice, tortured myself with fastings, vigils, prayers, and other very rigorous works. I earnestly thought to acquire righteousness

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by my works.”<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere he wrote: “I tortured myself with prayer, fasting, vigils and freezing; the frost alone might have killed me.”<sup>15</sup> In short, Luther was determined to find salvation from God through rigorous asceticism.

However, he quickly discovered he could not do enough to merit God’s approval. He later realized these efforts were driven by a faulty view of God and Christ: “What else did I seek by doing this but God, who was supposed to note my strict observance of the monastic order and my austere life? I constantly walked in a dream and lived in real idolatry, for I did not believe in Christ: I regarded Him only as a severe and terrible Judge portrayed as seated on a rainbow.”<sup>16</sup> He began to see that he could never achieve moral perfection before a holy God. This soul-sobering reality caused him to begin to despair of salvation.

In 1507, Luther was ordained as a priest. When he celebrated his first Mass as a priest that same year, he was awestruck at the thought of transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic teaching that the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ when they are blessed by a priest. Luther almost fainted with fear. He confessed: “I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, ‘Who am I that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? For I am dust and ashes and full of sin, and I am speaking to the living, eternal and true God.’”<sup>17</sup> Holy terror crushed him, only exacerbating his struggle for acquittal by God.

## LUTHER'S LIFE AND LEGACY

The next year, Luther began to teach theology as a junior lecturer. At this time, he came under the spiritual influence of Johannes von Staupitz (1460–1524), teacher of Bible at the university and vicar-general of the Augustinian friars in Saxony. A devoted teacher of Augustinian theology, Staupitz first introduced Luther to God's sovereignty in salvation. As Luther's confessor, he also listened as his young disciple recounted his every sin, sometimes for hours at a time. Luther knew that the holy God demanded moral perfection, but he could not attain such a standard. What was he to do?

### DISILLUSIONED WITH ROME

In an effort to ease Luther's burden, Staupitz sent him on an official trip to Rome (1510). Luther hoped to find peace there by visiting sacred sites and venerating supposed relics of Christianity, but instead he discovered the gross abuses and masked hypocrisies of the priests. He became disillusioned with the corruption of the Roman church and disenchanted by the pilgrimages to adore religious relics. These objects included the rope with which Judas supposedly hanged himself, a reputed piece of Moses' burning bush, and the alleged chains of Paul.

Yet worse, it was claimed that the *Scala Sancta* ("the Holy Stairs"), the very steps that Jesus had descended from Pilate's judgment hall, had been moved to Rome, and that God would forgive the sins of those who crawled up the stairs on their knees, kissing each step. Luther dutifully climbed

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the stairs in the appointed manner, but when he reached the top, he despaired: “At Rome, I wished to liberate my grandfather from purgatory, and went up the staircase of Pilate, praying a *pater noster* on each step; for I was convinced that he who prayed thus could redeem his soul. But when I came to the top step, the thought kept coming to me, ‘Who knows whether this is true?’”<sup>18</sup>

A despondent Luther returned to Erfurt and transferred to the University of Wittenberg. There, he received his doctor of theology degree (1512) and became *lectura in Biblia*—lecturer in Bible. Luther would keep this teaching position until his death thirty-four years later. In this role, he diligently expounded the Scriptures. First, he taught Psalms (1513–1515), then Romans (1515–1516), Galatians (1516–1517), and Hebrews (1517–1519). But the more Luther studied Scripture, the more perplexed he became. He could not understand how a sinful man could be made right in the sight of a holy God.

## CONTROVERSY OVER INDULGENCES

In 1517, Pope Leo X authorized indulgences in Germany for those who gave alms to fund the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. An indulgence is a reduction of punishment for sin, granted by the Roman Catholic Church after a sinner has made confession and performed certain works or prayers. However, Leo’s indulgences were crassly marketed. The chief

agent in the peddling of these indulgences was an itinerate Dominican named John Tetzel. A superb salesman, Tetzel knew how to manipulate public interest. He entered towns in a solemn procession, bearing aloft the papal coat of arms with the papal proclamation of indulgence on a gold-embroidered velvet cushion. A cross was erected in the marketplace. As a crowd gathered, Tetzel preached on heaven, hell, and purgatory. He told his audience that through the purchases of indulgences, they could free their deceased loved ones from purgatory.<sup>19</sup> Tetzel would call out:

Do not you hear the voice of your wailing dead parents and others who say, "Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain. From this you could redeem us with a small alms and yet you do not want to do so." Open your ears as the father says to the son and the mother to the daughter . . . "We created you, fed you, cared for you and left you our temporal goods. Why are you so cruel and harsh that you do not want to save us, though it only takes so little? You let us lie in flames so that only slowly do we come to the promised glory."<sup>20</sup>

Tetzel's most famous line was, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."<sup>21</sup>

When news of this deception reached Luther, he was deeply disturbed. On October 31, 1517, he nailed a list of

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ninety-five statements to the front door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, proposing a public debate about the sale of indulgences. Unknown to Luther, his students took the document to a printer, who published it. As though carried on angels' wings, copies were immediately distributed throughout Saxony. Soon, all Germany was aroused by Luther's ideas. The document Luther had nailed to the door became known as the Ninety-five Theses. Some of them read as follows:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," [Matt. 4:17], He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
  
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
  
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by assenting to God's remission; though, to be sure, he may grant remission in cases reserved to his judgment. If his right to grant remission in such cases were despised, the guilt would remain entirely unforgiven.
  
21. Thus those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by the papal indulgences.

53. They are enemies of Christ and of the pope, who bid the Word of God be altogether silent in some Churches, in order that pardons may be preached in others.

54. Injury is done the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on pardons than on this Word.

62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

79. To say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal arms, which is set up [by the preachers of indulgences], is of equal worth with the Cross of Christ, is blasphemy.<sup>22</sup>

When news of the theses reached the pope, he denounced Luther for preaching dangerous doctrines and summoned him to Rome. When Luther refused to appear, he was ordered to Augsburg to stand before Cardinal Thomas Cajetan, a distinguished Italian theologian. As the pope's representative to the Imperial Diet, the general assembly of the Holy Roman Empire, Cajetan demanded that Luther recant, return to the heart of the church, and stop his disruption. Luther refused to recant and stated that the pope could err in his ecclesiastical pronouncements.<sup>23</sup> He insisted that the pope's claims be

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established by Scripture. Not since John Hus had anyone spoken so daringly against papal authority—and Hus had been executed. Luther left Augsburg in fear of his life and returned to Wittenberg under the protection of Elector Frederick III of Saxony.

### GATES OF PARADISE OPENED

In this brewing firestorm, Luther came to a dramatic breakthrough.<sup>24</sup> Amid his soul struggle, he became focused on Romans 1:17, “for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Previously, Luther had understood the righteousness of God mentioned in this verse to mean His active, avenging justice that punishes sinners. He admitted that he hated the righteousness of God, according to this understanding. But while sitting in the tower of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Luther meditated upon this text, wrestling with its meaning. He writes:

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

his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.<sup>25</sup>

Suddenly, as though a ray of divine light had shone into his darkened heart, Luther grasped the true meaning of the text—the righteousness of God is received as a gift by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Luther confessed:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.<sup>26</sup>

In this dramatic conversion, Luther came to realize that sinful man is not saved by his good works. Rather, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to sinners on the basis of faith alone. Luther called this a "foreign righteousness," meaning it is alien to man. Such righteousness comes from outside of him

and is freely given by God. By this realization, justification by faith alone—*sola fide*—became the material principle of the Reformation, namely, the very matter of the gospel.

### ENTERING FIERY ORDEALS

Luther preached this truth in a landmark sermon, “Two Kinds of Righteousness.”<sup>27</sup> In this bold exposition, he asserted: “Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, He Himself becomes ours. . . . Such a faith is called ‘the righteousness of God.’ . . . This is the righteousness given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam.”<sup>28</sup> In this sermon, Luther proclaimed that which had been virtually lost for a thousand years, namely, the gospel of grace.

This message of justification by faith alone directly clashed with Rome’s message of justification by faith *and* works. A fiery controversy erupted. Luther was ordered to appear in Leipzig for a disputation with another imposing Catholic figure, the master theologian of Rome, Martin Eck. At the heart of this debate was the issue of indulgences, and the authority and infallibility of the pope. In this debate, Luther was outspoken; he denied the infallibility of church councils and rejected papal authority: “I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. . . . Councils have contradicted each other. . . . A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be

believed above a pope or council. . . . For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and council.”<sup>29</sup> By this daring confession, Luther struck the very live nerve of authority in the church—the question of whether supreme authority lies with the pope or with Scripture.

On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo issued a papal bull, an edict that was sealed with a *bulia*, or red seal. It declared that if Luther did not repent, he would be excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church within sixty days. Forty-one of Luther's beliefs were judged heretical. The papal edict begins: “Arise, O Lord, and judge Your cause. A wild boar has invaded Your vineyard.”<sup>30</sup> The pope's denunciation depicted Luther as an unrestrained, out-of-control animal that needed to be removed from the church.

### TAKING UP A POLEMICAL PEN

Rather than back down, Luther courageously wrote three polemical treatises in defiance of the pope. In July 1520, Luther wrote *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. The pope and his priests, he protested, had built artificial walls to protect themselves from any reform. Though the pope and his hierarchy claimed they alone had the power to interpret Scripture, Luther maintained the priesthood of all believers:

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes,

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lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. . . . All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. . . . [The] claim that only the pope may interpret Scripture is an outrageous fancied fable.<sup>31</sup>

Two months later, Luther issued *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. This work attacked the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic faith. He vehemently denied the saving efficacy of the Mass. Likewise, Luther recognized as valid sacraments only baptism and the Lord's Supper, denying the other five sacraments practiced by Rome. He further opposed Rome for withholding Communion from the laity and for teaching that the Mass is a sacrifice offered to God: "What is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed."<sup>32</sup> By this confession, Luther again asserted that supreme authority rests in Scripture alone.

Luther wrote a third tract against the pope the following month, November 1520. Titled *Freedom of the Christian Man*, this work taught the doctrine of justification by faith alone in direct contradiction of Roman dogma. Luther wrote:

Even Antichrist himself, if he should come, could think of nothing to add to its [the papacy's] wickedness. . . . A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful ser-

vant of all, subject to all. . . . He needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone abundantly confers all those things. . . . All sin is swallowed up by the righteousness of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

At last, Luther responded to the papal bull. On December 10, 1520, he invited a large crowd outside the city walls of Wittenberg, where he brazenly burned the pope's excommunication decree and other books of church law. This audacious act was an unprecedented defiance. Thomas Lindsay writes, "It is scarcely possible for us in the twentieth century, to imagine the thrill that went through Germany, and indeed through all Europe, when the news spread that a poor monk had burnt the Pope's Bull."<sup>34</sup> Like the fires in Luther's soul, the embers of reformation were growing hotter. However, this bold act made Luther a marked man.

## SUMMONED TO WORMS

The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V demanded that Luther appear before the Imperial Diet in order to officially recant. Despite warnings from friends, Luther fearlessly traveled to the city of Worms, where the Diet was meeting. Before the political and ecclesiastical powers of the day, Luther was shown his books on a table. Johann Eck, an official of the archbishop of Treves, pressed him: "Will you retract them? Yes or no." Sensing the magnitude of the moment, Luther asked

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for time. The next day, April 18, 1521, he replied with his now-famous words:

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 I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.<sup>35</sup>

By this bold assertion, Luther declared the Bible to be the ultimate authority above popes and councils. The ax had been laid to the root (Matt. 3:10). Charles V condemned Luther as a heretic and placed a price on his head. When Luther left Worms, he had twenty-one days for safe passage to Wittenberg in order to put his affairs in order. But as he traveled, he was kidnapped by his supporters, who hid him in the Wartburg Castle near Eisenach.

Realizing the central importance of the Scriptures, Luther gave himself to translating the New Testament from Desiderius Erasmus' Greek New Testament<sup>36</sup> into the German language. He stated, "I shall be hiding here until Easter . . . and translate the New Testament into German, an undertaking our friends request. . . . I wish every town would have its interpreter, and

that this book alone, in all languages, would live in the hands, eyes, ears, and hearts of all people.”<sup>37</sup> Luther published his German New Testament on September 21, 1522, a remarkable gift to his countrymen. This translation work caused the Reformation fires to spread even swifter.

Luther was asked to explain the mounting success of the Reformation. He responded with unwavering confidence in God's Word: “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept . . . the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.”<sup>38</sup> The Protestant movement was founded on Scripture alone and therefore could not be stopped.

## MARRIAGE, MINISTRY, AND MUSIC

The forward movement of truth always causes friction. A heated debate soon erupted between Luther and Erasmus, the great humanist scholar, over the nature of salvation. On September 1, 1524, Erasmus released *Diatribes on the Freedom of the Will*, opposing Luther's denial of man's free will. Luther intentionally delayed his response and, at the age of forty-two, married Katherine von Bora in April 1525. She was a twenty-six-year-old escaped nun who was equally committed to the Reformation cause. Luther claimed he married to upset the pope and “make the angels laugh and the devils weep.”<sup>39</sup> Their union brought six children and much joy to Luther.

This happy family life would help ease the mounting stresses of his expanding ministry.

In December 1525, Luther answered Erasmus, issuing his magnum opus, a masterful polemic titled *The Bondage of the Will*, which denied the freedom of the human will. This sixteenth-century classic is one of the most important books ever written. In it, Luther thanked Erasmus for not troubling him with trivial matters, but for addressing the core issue of the Reformation, namely, how a sinner finds salvation in Christ. The book is a strong declaration of the sovereignty of grace in salvation.

In this work, Luther maintained that sin renders man completely unable to choose salvation. He explains: “The human will is placed between the two [riders] like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills. . . . If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.”<sup>40</sup> The Devil is the rider of the unconverted man, Luther said. Satan restrains that man’s will from believing in Christ. God, on the other hand, is the Rider of the will of the one whom He brings into a state of grace.

By 1527, Luther showed signs of becoming weary in the battle for truth. He was stricken by tightness in his chest, dizziness, and fainting spells. He experienced weakness so severe that he feared he was about to die. Luther lamented: “I spent more than a week in death and in hell. My entire body was in

pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation.”<sup>41</sup> Compounding his weakness, the Black Plague swept through Germany. Many fled, but Luther chose to remain in Wittenberg and opened his home as a hospital. Amid the crisis, he almost lost his young son to death. At this soul-crushing time, he wrote his most famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” based on Psalm 46. God is “a bulwark never failing,” he wrote, whose “kingdom is forever.” Without doubt, God was the inexhaustible source of Luther’s strength.

## CHURCH UNITY AND DIVISIONS

Through Luther’s writings, the Reformation spread, and the major cities of Germany embraced the new cause.<sup>42</sup> His influence expanded to the surrounding countries. University students in England at Oxford and Cambridge were reading his works and being won to Christ and the cause of the Reformation. The same was true in France at the Universities of Paris, Orléans, and Bourgeois. Young men came from around Europe to learn from this great Reformer and to sit under his biblical preaching.

But the movement soon suffered its first major disagreement. A conflict arose over the nature of the Lord’s Supper. The Reformers emphatically rejected the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation. However, they were divided over the Supper’s true nature. Luther taught consubstantiation, that

the body and blood of Christ are present with the elements. Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, maintained that the elements are simply a memorial of Christ's body and blood. (Later, John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, would insist on the spiritual presence of Christ in Communion.) To settle the division, the Marburg Colloquy (1529) was called. Luther and Zwingli faced each other and argued their positions, but agreement could not be reached.

To help with the mounting demands on Luther, Elector John the Steadfast gave him the monastery in Wittenberg in which to live (1532). It was a three-story building with forty rooms on the first floor alone. There Luther lived and hosted his students and many visitors. His dinner dialogues with guests in the monastery home were compiled into his *Table Talk*.

For the duration of his life, Luther maintained a grueling workload. He tirelessly gave himself to lecturing, preaching, teaching, writing, debating, and leading. But this labor came at a high price physically. Each conflict extracted something from him and left him weaker. The mounting stress of the Reformation weighed on his aging shoulders. Due to uric acid stones, severe arthritis, heart problems, and digestive disorders, Luther's friends feared he would die in 1537. His poor health caused his writing production to drop dramatically. But the Lord restored his health and enabled him to continue his workload. In 1541, he again became seriously ill and thought he would pass from this world. Yet God's gracious hand once again raised him up to continue the work of reform.

## FAITHFUL TO THE END

On January 23, 1546, Luther traveled to Eisleben, his hometown, to arbitrate a family dispute between two brothers, the counts of Mansfield. Through his mediation, the two reconciled. However, Luther, sixty-two years old and weary of the many demands on his life, fell ill. Knowing the end was near, he wrote his last will and testament. It began with the words, "I am well known in heaven, on earth, and in hell,"<sup>43</sup> a true statement of the result of his bold stance throughout his life.

In his last moments, Luther was asked by his friend Justus Jonas, "Do you want to die standing firm on Christ and the doctrine you have taught?" He answered emphatically, "Yes!" Luther's last words were: "We are beggars. This is true."<sup>44</sup> He died in Eisleben on February 18, 1546, within sight of the font where he was baptized as an infant.<sup>45</sup> Luther's body was carried to Wittenberg as thousands of mourners lined the route. Church bells tolled for their fallen leader.

Luther was buried, appropriately, in the Castle Church of Wittenberg. This was the very church where, twenty-nine years earlier, he had nailed his Ninety-five Theses. His final resting place was immediately below the pulpit, where he had so often stood to preach the Word. His wife, Katherine, wrote: "For who would not be sad and afflicted at the loss of such a precious man as my dear lord was. He did great things not just for a city or a single land, but for the whole world."<sup>46</sup> The influence of her husband did, indeed, reach around the globe.

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Given such an extraordinary life, we must ask: What was the driving force of Luther's ministry? What made him so powerful in the pulpit? What were the distinctive features of his dynamic preaching? What were the core commitments that shaped his bold proclamation of the Word? In the chapters that follow, we will consider some of the factors that undergirded Luther's heroic boldness in preaching.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The focus of Dr. Lawson's ministry is the verse-by-verse

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Dr. Lawson and his wife, Anne, have three sons and a daughter. They live in Mobile.