

A CRITIC AT LARGE

# HOW MARTIN LUTHER CHANGED THE WORLD

*Five hundred years after he started the Reformation, his ideas and his ornery personality remain as potent as ever.*

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Luther's reforms succeeded because of his energetic, charismatic personality. Illustration by Nick Little

*Clang! Clang!* Down the corridors of religious history we hear this sound: Martin Luther, an energetic thirty-three-year-old Augustinian friar, hammering his Ninety-five Theses to the doors of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, in Saxony, and thus, eventually, splitting the thousand-year-old Roman Catholic Church into two churches—one loyal to the Pope in Rome, the other protesting against the Pope's rule and soon, in fact, calling itself Protestant. This month marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's famous action. Accordingly, a number of books have come out, reconsidering the man and his influence. They differ on many points, but something that most of them agree on is that the hammering episode, so satisfying symbolically—loud, metallic, violent—never occurred. Not only were there no eyewitnesses; Luther himself, ordinarily an enthusiastic self-dramatizer, was vague on what had happened. He remembered drawing up a list of ninety-five theses around the date in question, but, as for what he did with it, all he was sure of was that he sent it to the local archbishop. Furthermore, the theses were not, as is often imagined, a set of non-negotiable demands about how the Church should reform itself in accordance with Brother Martin's standards. Rather, like all "theses" in those days, they were points to be thrashed out in public disputations, in the manner of the ecclesiastical scholars of the twelfth century or, for that matter, the debate clubs of tradition-minded universities in our own time.

If the Ninety-five Theses sprouted a myth, that is no surprise. Luther was one of those figures who touched off something much larger than himself; namely, the Reformation—the sundering of the Church and a fundamental revision of its theology. Once he had divided the Church, it could not be healed. His reforms survived to breed other reforms, many of which he disapproved of. His church splintered and splintered. To tote up the Protestant denominations discussed in Alec Ryrie's new book, "Protestants" (Viking), is almost comical, there are so many

of them. That means a lot of people, though. An eighth of the human race is now Protestant.

The Reformation, in turn, reshaped Europe. As German-speaking lands asserted their independence from Rome, other forces were unleashed. In the Knights' Revolt of 1522, and the Peasants' War, a couple of years later, minor gentry and impoverished agricultural workers saw Protestantism as a way of redressing social grievances. (More than eighty thousand poorly armed peasants were slaughtered when the latter rebellion failed.) Indeed, the horrific Thirty Years' War, in which, basically, Europe's Roman Catholics killed all the Protestants they could, and vice versa, can in some measure be laid at Luther's door. Although it did not begin until decades after his death, it arose in part because he had created no institutional structure to replace the one he walked away from.

Almost as soon as Luther started the Reformation, alternative Reformations arose in other localities. From town to town, preachers told the citizenry what it should no longer put up with, whereupon they stood a good chance of being shoved aside—indeed, strung up—by other preachers. Religious houses began to close down. Luther led the movement mostly by his writings. Meanwhile, he did what he thought was his main job in life, teaching the Bible at the University of Wittenberg. The Reformation wasn't led, exactly; it just spread, metastasized.

And that was because Europe was so ready for it. The relationship between the people and the rulers could hardly have been worse. Maximilian I, the Holy Roman Emperor, was dying—he brought his coffin with him wherever he travelled—but he was taking his time about it. The presumptive heir, King Charles I of Spain, was looked upon with grave suspicion. He already had Spain and the Netherlands. Why did he need the Holy Roman Empire as well? Furthermore, he was young—only seventeen when Luther wrote the Ninety-five Theses. The biggest trouble, though, was money. The Church had incurred enormous expenses. It was warring with the Turks at the walls of Vienna. It had also started an ambitious building campaign, including the reconstruction of St.

Peter's Basilica, in Rome. To pay for these ventures, it had borrowed huge sums from Europe's banks, and to repay the banks it was strangling the people with taxes.

It has often been said that, fundamentally, Luther gave us "modernity." Among the recent studies, Eric Metaxas's "Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World" (Viking) makes this claim in grandiose terms. "The quintessentially modern idea of the individual was as unthinkable before Luther as is color in a world of black and white," he writes. "And the more recent ideas of pluralism, religious liberty, self-government, and liberty all entered history through the door that Luther opened." The other books are more reserved. As they point out, Luther wanted no part of pluralism—even for the time, he was vehemently anti-Semitic—and not much part of individualism. People were to believe and act as their churches dictated.

The fact that Luther's protest, rather than others that preceded it, brought about the Reformation is probably due in large measure to his outsized personality. He was a charismatic man, and maniacally energetic. Above all, he was intransigent. To oppose was his joy. And though at times he showed that hankering for martyrdom that we detect, with distaste, in the stories of certain religious figures, it seems that, most of the time, he just got out of bed in the morning and got on with his work. Among other things, he translated the New Testament from Greek into German in eleven weeks.

Luther was born in 1483 and grew up in Mansfeld, a small mining town in Saxony. His father started out as a miner but soon rose to become a master smelter, a specialist in separating valuable metal (in this case, copper) from ore. The family was not poor. Archeologists have been at work in their basement. The Luthers ate suckling pig and owned drinking glasses. They had either seven or eight children, of whom five survived. The father wanted Martin, the eldest, to study law, in order to help him in his business, but Martin disliked law school and

promptly had one of those experiences often undergone in the old days by young people who did not wish to take their parents' career advice. Caught in a violent thunderstorm one day in 1505—he was twenty-one—he vowed to St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, that if he survived he would become a monk. He kept his promise, and was ordained two years later. In the heavily psychoanalytic nineteen-fifties, much was made of the idea that this flouting of his father's wishes set the stage for his rebellion against the Holy Father in Rome. Such is the main point of Erik Erikson's 1958 book, "Young Man Luther," which became the basis of a famous play by John Osborne (filmed, in 1974, with Stacy Keach in the title role).

Today, psychoanalytic interpretations tend to be tittered at by Luther biographers. But the desire to find some great psychological source, or even a middle-sized one, for Luther's great story is understandable, because, for many years, nothing much happened to him. This man who changed the world left his German-speaking lands only once in his life. (In 1510, he was part of a mission sent to Rome to heal a rent in the Augustinian order. It failed.) Most of his youth was spent in dirty little towns where men worked long hours each day and then, at night, went to the tavern and got into fights. He described his university town, Erfurt, as consisting of "a whorehouse and a beerhouse." Wittenberg, where he lived for the remainder of his life, was bigger—with two thousand inhabitants when he settled there—but not much better. As Lyndal Roper, one of the best of the new biographers, writes, in "Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet" (Random House), it was a mess of "muddy houses, unclean lanes." At that time, however, the new ruler of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, was trying to make a real city of it. He built a castle and a church—the one on whose door the famous theses were supposedly nailed—and he hired an important artist, Lucas Cranach the Elder, as his court painter. Most important, he founded a university, and staffed it with able scholars, including Johann von Staupitz, the vicar-general of the Augustinian friars of the German-speaking territories. Staupitz had been Luther's confessor at Erfurt, and when he

found himself overworked at Wittenberg he summoned Luther, persuaded him to take a doctorate, and handed over many of his duties to him. Luther supervised everything from monasteries (eleven of them) to fish ponds, but most crucial was his succeeding Staupitz as the university's professor of the Bible, a job that he took on at the age of twenty-eight and retained until his death. In this capacity, he lectured on Scripture, held disputations, and preached to the staff of the university.

He was apparently a galvanizing speaker, but during his first twelve years as a monk he published almost nothing. This was no doubt due in part to the responsibilities heaped on him at Wittenberg, but at this time, and for a long time, he also suffered what seems to have been a severe psychospiritual crisis. He called his problem his *Anfechtungen*—trials, tribulations—but this feels too slight a word to cover the afflictions he describes: cold sweats, nausea, constipation, crushing headaches, ringing in his ears, together with depression, anxiety, and a general feeling that, as he put it, the angel of Satan was beating him with his fists. Most painful, it seems, for this passionately religious young man was to discover his *anger* against God. Years later, commenting on his reading of Scripture as a young friar, Luther spoke of his rage at the description of God's righteousness, and of his grief that, as he was certain, he would not be judged worthy: "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners."

There were good reasons for an intense young priest to feel disillusioned. One of the most bitterly resented abuses of the Church at that time was the so-called indulgences, a kind of late-medieval get-out-of-jail-free card used by the Church to make money. When a Christian purchased an indulgence from the Church, he obtained—for himself or whomever else he was trying to benefit—a reduction in the amount of time the person's soul had to spend in Purgatory, atoning for his sins, before ascending to Heaven. You might pay to have a special Mass said for the sinner or, less expensively, you could buy candles or new altar cloths for the church. But, in the most common transaction, the purchaser simply paid an agreed-upon amount of money and, in return, was given a document saying that

the beneficiary—the name was written in on a printed form—was forgiven *x* amount of time in Purgatory. The more time off, the more it cost, but the indulgence-sellers promised that whatever you paid for you got.

Actually, they could change their minds about that. In 1515, the Church cancelled the exculpatory powers of already purchased indulgences for the next eight years. If you wanted that period covered, you had to buy a new indulgence. Realizing that this was hard on people—essentially, they had wasted their money—the Church declared that purchasers of the new indulgences did not have to make confession or even exhibit contrition. They just had to hand over the money and the thing was done, because this new issue was especially powerful. Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar locally famous for his zeal in selling indulgences, is said to have boasted that one of the new ones could obtain remission from sin even for someone who had raped the Virgin Mary. (In the 1974 movie “Luther,” Tetzel is played with a wonderful, bug-eyed wickedness by Hugh Griffith.) Even by the standards of the very corrupt sixteenth-century Church, this was shocking.

In Luther’s mind, the indulgence trade seems to have crystallized the spiritual crisis he was experiencing. It brought him up against the absurdity of bargaining with God, jockeying for his favor—indeed, *paying* for his favor. Why had God given his only begotten son? And why had the son died on the cross? Because that’s how much God loved the world. And that alone, Luther now reasoned, was sufficient for a person to be found “justified,” or worthy. From this thought, the Ninety-five Theses were born. Most of them were challenges to the sale of indulgences. And out of them came what would be the two guiding principles of Luther’s theology: *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*.

**S***ola fide* means “by faith alone”—faith, as opposed to good works, as the basis for salvation. This was not a new idea. St. Augustine, the founder of Luther’s monastic order, laid it out in the fourth century. Furthermore, it is not an idea that fits well with what we know of Luther. Pure faith, contemplation, white light:



surely these are the gifts of the Asian religions, or of medieval Christianity, of St. Francis with his birds. As for Luther, with his rages and sweats, does he seem a good candidate? Eventually, however, he discovered (with lapses) that he could be released from those torments by the simple act of accepting God's love for him. Lest it be thought that this stern man then concluded that we could stop worrying about our behavior and do whatever we wanted, he said that works *issue* from faith. In his words, "We can no more separate works from faith than heat and light from fire." But he did believe that the world was irretrievably full of sin, and that repairing that situation was not the point of our moral lives. "Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger," he wrote to a friend.

The second great principle, *sola scriptura*, or "by scripture alone," was the belief that only the Bible could tell us the truth. Like *sola fide*, this was a rejection of what, to Luther, were the lies of the Church—symbolized most of all by the indulgence market. Indulgences brought you an abbreviation of your stay in Purgatory, but what was Purgatory? No such thing is mentioned in the Bible. Some people think that Dante made it up; others say Gregory the Great. In any case, Luther decided that *somebody* made it up.

Guided by those convictions, and fired by his new certainty of God's love for him, Luther became radicalized. He preached, he disputed. Above all, he wrote pamphlets. He denounced not only the indulgence trade but all the other ways in which the Church made money off Christians: the endless pilgrimages, the yearly Masses for the dead, the cults of the saints. He questioned the sacraments. His arguments made sense to many people, notably Frederick the Wise. Frederick was pained that Saxony was widely considered a backwater. He now saw how much attention Luther brought to his state, and how much respect accrued to the university that he (Frederick) had founded at Wittenberg. He vowed to protect this troublemaker.

Things came to a head in 1520. By then, Luther had taken to calling the Church a brothel, and Pope Leo X the Antichrist. Leo gave Luther sixty days to appear in Rome and answer charges of heresy. Luther let the sixty days elapse; the Pope excommunicated him; Luther responded by publicly burning the papal order in the pit where one of Wittenberg's hospitals burned its used rags. Reformers had been executed for less, but Luther was by now a very popular man throughout Europe. The authorities knew they would have serious trouble if they killed him, and the Church gave him one more chance to recant, at the upcoming diet—or congregation of officers, sacred and secular—in the cathedral city of Worms in 1521. He went, and declared that he could not retract any of the charges he had made against the Church, because the Church could not show him, in Scripture, that any of them were false:

Since then your serene majesties and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, plain and unvarnished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or clear reason, for I do not trust in the Pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything.

The Pope often errs! Luther will decide what God wants! By consulting Scripture! No wonder that an institution wedded to the idea of its leader's infallibility was profoundly shaken by this declaration. Once the Diet of Worms came to an end, Luther headed for home, but he was "kidnapped" on the way, by a posse of knights sent by his protector, Frederick the Wise. The knights spirited him off to the Wartburg, a secluded castle in Eisenach, in order to give the authorities time to

cool off. Luther was annoyed by the delay, but he didn't waste time. That's when he translated the New Testament.

During his lifetime, Luther became probably the biggest celebrity in the German-speaking lands. When he travelled, people flocked to the high road to see his cart go by. This was due not just to his personal qualities and the importance of his cause but to timing. Luther was born only a few decades after the invention of printing, and though it took him a while to start writing, it was hard to stop him once he got going. Among the quinquennial books is an entire volume on his relationship to print, "Brand Luther" (Penguin), by the British historian Andrew Pettegree. Luther's collected writings come to a hundred and twenty volumes. In the first half of the sixteenth century, a third of all books published in German were written by him.

By producing them, he didn't just create the Reformation; he also created his country's vernacular, as Dante is said to have done with Italian. The majority of his writings were in Early New High German, a form of the language that was starting to gel in southern Germany at that time. Under his influence, it did gel.

The crucial text is his Bible: the New Testament, translated from the original Greek and published in 1523, followed by the Old Testament, in 1534, translated from the Hebrew. Had he not created Protestantism, this book would be the culminating achievement of Luther's life. It was not the first German translation of the Bible—indeed, it had eighteen predecessors—but it was unquestionably the most beautiful, graced with the same combination of exaltation and simplicity, but more so, as the King James Bible. (William Tyndale, whose English version of the Bible, for which he was executed, was more or less the basis of the King James, knew and admired Luther's translation.) Luther very consciously sought a fresh, vigorous idiom. For his Bible's vocabulary, he said, "we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street," and, like other writers with such aims—William Blake, for example—he ended up with something songlike. He loved alliteration

—“*Der Herr ist mein Hirte*” (“The Lord is my shepherd”); “*Dein Stecken und Stab*” (“thy rod and thy staff”)—and he loved repetition and forceful rhythms. This made his texts easy and pleasing to read aloud, at home, to the children. The books also featured a hundred and twenty-eight woodcut illustrations, all by one artist from the Cranach workshop, known to us only as Master MS. There they were, all those wondrous things—the Garden of Eden, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob wrestling with the angel—which modern people are used to seeing images of and which Luther’s contemporaries were not. There were marginal glosses, as well as short prefaces for each book, which would have been useful for the children of the household and probably also for the family member reading to them. These virtues, plus the fact that the Bible was probably, in many cases, the only book in the house, meant that it was widely used as a primer. More people learned to read, and the more they knew how to read the more they wanted to own this book, or give it to others. The three-thousand-copy first edition of the New Testament, though it was not cheap (it cost about as much as a calf), sold out immediately. As many as half a million Luther Bibles seem to have been printed by the mid-sixteenth century. In his discussions of *sola scriptura*, Luther had declared that all believers were priests: laypeople had as much right as the clergy to determine what Scripture meant. With his Bible, he gave German speakers the means to do so.

In honor of the five-hundredth anniversary, the excellent German art-book publisher Taschen has produced a facsimile with spectacular colored woodcuts. Pleasingly, the book historian Stephan Füssel, in the explanatory paperback that accompanies the two-volume facsimile, reports that in 2004, when a fire swept through the Duchess Anna Amalia Library, in Weimar, where this copy was housed, it was “rescued, undamaged, with not a second to lose, thanks to the courageous intervention of library director Dr. Michael Knoche.” I hope that Dr. Knoche himself ran out with the two volumes in his arms. I don’t know what the price of a calf is these days, but the price of this facsimile is sixty dollars. Anyone who wants to give himself a Luther quincentennial present should order it

immediately. Master MS's Garden of Eden is full of wonderful animals—a camel, a crocodile, a little toad—and in the towns everyone wears those black shoes like the ones in Brueghel paintings. The volumes lie flat on the table when you open them, and the letters are big and black and clear. Even if you don't understand German, you can sort of read them.

**A**mong the supposedly Biblical rules that Luther pointed out could not be found in the Bible was the requirement of priestly celibacy. Well before the Diet of Worms, Luther began advising priests to marry. He said that he would marry, too, if he did not expect, every day, to be executed for heresy. One wonders. But in 1525 he was called upon to help a group of twelve nuns who had just fled a Cistercian convent, an action that was related to his reforms. Part of his duty to these women, he felt, was to return them to their families or to find husbands for them. At the end, one was left, a twenty-six-year-old girl named Katharina von Bora, the daughter of a poor, albeit noble, country family. Luther didn't want her, he said—he found her “proud”—but she wanted him. She was the one who proposed. And though, as he told a friend, he felt no “burning” for her, he formed with her a marriage that is probably the happiest story in any account of his life.

One crucial factor was her skill in household management. The Luthers lived in the so-called Black Monastery, which had been Wittenberg's Augustinian monastery—that is, Luther's old home as a friar—before the place emptied out as a result of the reformer's actions. (One monk became a cobbler, another a baker, and so on.) It was a huge, filthy, comfortless place. Käthe, as Luther called her, made it livable, and not just for her immediate family. Between ten and twenty students lodged there, and the household took in many others as well: four children of Luther's dead sister Margarete, plus four more orphaned children from both sides of the family, plus a large family fleeing the plague. A friend of the reformer, writing to an acquaintance journeying to Wittenberg, warned him on no account to stay with the Luthers if he valued peace and quiet. The refectory table

seated between thirty-five and fifty, and Käthe, having acquired a large market garden and a considerable amount of livestock (pigs, goats), and now supervising a staff of up to ten employees (maids, a cook, a swineherd, et al.), fed them all. She also handled the family's finances, and at times had to economize carefully. Luther would accept no money for his writings, on which he could have profited hugely, and he would not allow students to pay to attend his lectures, as was the custom.

Luther appreciated the sheer increase in his physical comfort. When he writes to a friend, soon after his marriage, of what it is like to lie in a dry bed after years of sleeping on a pile of damp, mildewed straw, and when, elsewhere, he speaks of the surprise of turning over in bed and seeing a pair of pigtails on the pillow next to his, your heart softens toward this dyspeptic man. More important, he began to take women seriously. He objects, in a lecture, to coitus interruptus, the most common form of birth control at the time, on the ground that it is frustrating for women. When he was away from home, he wrote Käthe affectionate letters, with such salutations as “Most holy Frau Doctor” and “To the hands and feet of my dear housewife.”

Among Käthe's virtues was fertility. Every year or so for eight years, she produced a child—six in all, of whom four survived to adulthood—and Luther loved these children. He even allowed them to play in his study while he was working. Of five-year-old Hans, his firstborn, he wrote, “When I'm writing or doing something else, my Hans sings a little tune for me. If he becomes too noisy and I rebuke him for it, he continues to sing but does it more privately and with a certain awe and uneasiness.” That scene, which comes from “Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval” (Oxford), by the German historian Heinz Schilling, seems to me impossible to improve upon as a portrait of what it must have been like for Luther to have a little boy, and for a little boy to have Luther as a father. Luther was not a lenient parent—he used the whip when he felt he needed to, and poor Hans was sent to the university at the age of seven—but when, on his travels, the reformer passed through a town that was having a fair he liked to buy presents for

the children. In 1536, when he went to the Diet of Augsburg, another important convocation, he kept a picture of his favorite child, Magdalene, on the wall of his chamber. Magdalene died at thirteen. Schilling again produces a telling scene. Magdalene is nearing the end; Luther is holding her. He says he knows she would like to stay with her father, but, he adds, “Are you also glad to go to your father in heaven?” She died in his arms. How touching that he could find this common-sense way to comfort her, and also that he seems to feel that Heaven is right above their heads, with one father holding out a hand to take to himself the other’s child.

One thing that Luther seems especially to have loved about his children was their corporeality—their fat, noisy little bodies. When Hans finally learned to bend his knees and relieve himself on the floor, Luther rejoiced, reporting to a friend that the child had “crapped in every corner of the room.” I wonder who cleaned that up—not Luther, I would guess—but it is hard not to feel some of his pleasure. Sixteenth-century Germans were not, in the main, dainty of thought or speech. A representative of the Vatican once claimed that Luther was conceived when the Devil raped his mother in an outhouse. That detail comes from Eric Metaxas’s book, which is full of vulgar stories, not that one has to look far for vulgar stories in Luther’s life. My favorite (reported in Erikson’s book) is a comment that Luther made at the dinner table while in the grip of a depression. “I am like a ripe shit,” he said, “and the world is a gigantic asshole. We will both probably let go of each other soon.” It takes you a minute to realize that Luther is saying that he feels he is dying. And then you want to congratulate him on the sheer zest, the proto-surrealist nuttiness, of his metaphor. He may feel as though he’s dying, but he’s having a good time feeling it.

The group on which Luther expended his most notorious denunciations was not the Roman Catholic clergy but the Jews. His sentiments were widely shared. In the words of Heinz Schilling, “Late medieval Christians generally hated and despised Jews.” But Luther despised them dementedly, ecstatically. In his

1543 treatise “On the Ineffable Name and the Generations of Christ,” he imagines the Devil stuffing the Jews’ orifices with filth: “He stuffs and squirts them so full, that it overflows and swims out of every place, pure Devil’s filth, yes, it tastes so good to their hearts, and they guzzle it like sows.” Witness the death of Judas Iscariot, he adds: “When Judas Schariot hanged himself, so that his guts ripped, and as happens to those who are hanged, his bladder burst, then the Jews had their golden cans and silver bowls ready, to catch the Judas piss . . . and afterwards together they ate the shit.” The Jews’ synagogues should be burned down, he wrote; their houses should be destroyed. He did not recommend that they be killed, but he did say that Christians had no moral responsibilities to them, which amounts to much the same thing.

This is hair-raising, but what makes Luther’s anti-Semitism most disturbing is not its extremity (which, by sounding so crazy, diminishes its power). It is the fact that the country of which he is a national hero did indeed, quite recently, exterminate six million Jews. Hence the formula “From Luther to Hitler,” popularized by William Montgomery McGovern’s 1941 book of that title—the notion that Luther laid the groundwork for the slaughter. Those who have wished to defend him have pointed out that his earlier writings, such as the 1523 pamphlet “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew,” are much more conciliatory in tone. He seemed to regret that, as he put it, Christians had “dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs.” But making excuses for Luther on the basis of his earlier, more temperate writings does not really work. As scholars have been able to show, Luther was gentler early on because he was hoping to persuade the Jews to convert. When they failed to do so, he unleashed his full fury, more violent now because he believed that the comparative mildness of his earlier writings may have been partly responsible for their refusal.

Luther’s anti-Semitism would be a moral problem under any circumstances. People whom we admire often commit terrible sins, and we have no good way of explaining this to ourselves. But when one adds the historical factor—that, in



Luther's case, the judgment is being made five centuries after the event—we hit a brick wall. At the Nuremberg trials, in 1946, Julius Streicher, the founder and publisher of the Jew-baiting newspaper *Der Stürmer*, quoted Luther as the source of his beliefs and said that if he was going to be blamed Luther would have to be blamed as well. But, in the words of Thomas Kaufmann, a professor of church history at the University of Göttingen, “The Nuremberg judges sat in judgment over the mass murderers of the twentieth century, not over the delusions of a misguided sixteenth-century theology professor. . . . Another judge must judge Luther.” How fortunate to be able to believe that such a judge will come, and have an answer.

Luther lived to what, in the sixteenth century, was an old age, sixty-two, but the years were not kind to him. Actually, he lived most of his life in turmoil. When he was young, there were the *Anfechtungen*. Then, once he issued the theses and began his movement, he had to struggle not just with the right, the Roman Church, but with the left—the *Schwärmer* (fanatics), as he called them, the people who felt that he hadn't gone far enough. He spent days and weeks in pamphlet wars over matters that, today, have to be patiently explained to us, they seem so remote. Did Communion involve transubstantiation, or was Jesus physically present from the start of the rite? Luther, a “Real Presence” man, said the latter. Should people be baptized soon after they are born, as Luther said, or when they are adults, as the Anabaptists claimed?

When Luther was young, he was good at friendship. He was frank and warm; he loved jokes; he wanted to have people and noise around him. (Hence the fifty-seat dinner table.) As he grew older, he changed. He found that he could easily discard friends, even old friends, even his once beloved confessor, Staupitz. People who had dealings with the movement found themselves going around him if they could, usually to his right-hand man, Philip Melanchthon. Always sharp-tongued, Luther now lost all restraint, writing in a treatise that Pope Paul III was a

sodomite and a transvestite—no surprise, he added, when you considered that all popes, since the beginnings of the Church, were full of devils and vomited and farted and defecated devils. This starts to sound like his attacks on the Jews.

His health declined. He had dizzy spells, bleeding hemorrhoids, constipation, urine retention, gout, kidney stones. To balance his “humors,” the surgeon made a hole, or “fontanelle,” in a vein in his leg, and it was kept open. Whatever this did for his humors, it meant that he could no longer walk to the church or the university. He had to be taken in a cart. He suffered disabling depressions. “I have lost Christ completely,” he wrote to Melanchthon. From a man of his temperament and convictions, this is a terrible statement.

In early 1546, he had to go to the town of his birth, Eisleben, to settle a dispute. It was January, and the roads were bad. Tellingly, he took all three of his sons with him. He said the trip might be the death of him, and he was right. He died in mid-February. Appropriately, in view of his devotion to the scatological, his corpse was given an enema, in the hope that this would revive him. It didn't. After sermons in Eisleben, the coffin was driven back to Wittenberg, with an honor guard of forty-five men on horseback. Bells tolled in every village along the way. Luther was buried in the Castle Church, on whose door he was said to have nailed his theses.

Although his resting place evokes his most momentous act, it also highlights the intensely local nature of the life he led. The transformations he set in motion were incidental to his struggles, which remained irreducibly personal. His goal was not to usher in modernity but simply to make religion religious again. Heinz Schilling writes, “Just when the lustre of religion threatened to be outdone by the atheistic and political brilliance of the secularized Renaissance papacy, the Wittenberg monk defined humankind's relationship to God anew and gave back to religion its existential plausibility.” Lyndal Roper thinks much the same. She quotes Luther saying that the Church's sacraments “are not fulfilled when they are taking place

but when they are being believed.” All he asked for was sincerity, but this made a great difference. ♦

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*Joan Acocella was a staff writer at The New Yorker from 1995 until her death, in 2024.*

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