

Join me in singing this famous hymn.

A strong castle is our God,  
 A good defense and weapon.  
 He helps us become free from every misery  
 That has now affected us.  
 The old evil enemy  
 Is now in earnestness with his intents.  
 Great Power and much deception  
 Are his terrible armament  
 On earth is not its likeness.<sup>1 2</sup>

It doesn't flow very well, does it? But this is the original version of Luther's beloved hymn. This morning we are taking a snapshot look at the life of Martin Luther. If you are newer to Grace. I do these once a year around Reformation Day. Here is the list of prior biographies I have done.

William Tyndale, b. 1536  
 Ulrich Zwingli, b. 1484  
 David Brainerd, b. 1718  
 George Whitefield, b. 1714  
 Amy Carmichael, b. 1867  
 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, b. 1906  
 Benjamin Rush, b. 1746  
 Fanny Crosby, b. 1820  
 Richard Baxter, b. 1615  
 J. Gresham Machen, b. 1881  
 Elizabeth Elliot, b. 1926  
 Richard Wurmbrand, b. 1909

Martin Luther, b. 1483

I have to admit, covering Luther was a little intimidating. Luther is not only the father of the reformation and one of the most influential people in all of human history, but it is impossible to cover him in one message. So I'll do my best to cover the highlights and draw some faith lessons from his life.



Luther himself describes his early years. “My father was a poor miner and my mother carried the wood from the forests on her back; they both worked their flesh off their bones in order to bring up their children.”<sup>3</sup> His parents were largely the product of their day, which meant regular and severe beatings. Somehow, their son was able to have an incredibly positive outlook on his parents. “They meant it well from the depths of their hearts, but they did not know how to distinguish the

dispositions to which punishment is to be adapted.”<sup>4</sup> My interpretation would be that whatever failings they had, Luther knew that his parents loved him.

But he did not feel the same way about God. He felt nothing but fear and terror.

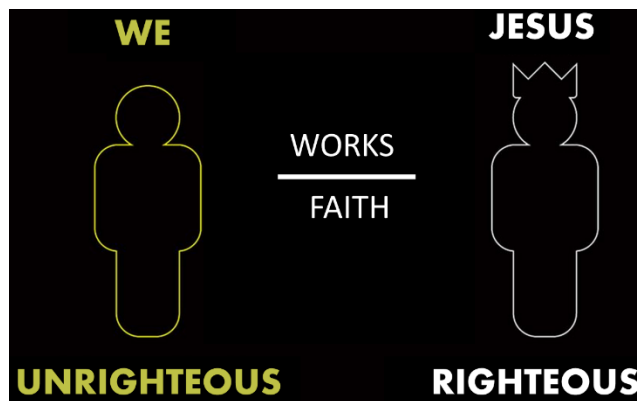
From early childhood I was accustomed to turn pale and tremble whenever I heard the name of Christ mentioned, for I was taught to look upon him as a stern and wrathful judge. We were taught that we ourselves had to atone for our sins, and since we could not make sufficient amends, or do acceptable works, our teachers directed us to the saints in heaven, and made us call upon Mary the mother of Christ and implore her to avert from us Christ’s wrath, and make him inclined to be merciful to us.<sup>5</sup>

This fear was in full effect when Luther was caught in a severe thunderstorm in the forest and was thrown from his horse. He had been planning to study to be a lawyer, but he took this frightening experience to be a sign from God that he was supposed to become a monk. However, regardless of how much he studied or how much he exerted himself, he felt even more distant from God’s love and forgiveness. One historian summarized these years.

He became the most fastidious of all of the monks in the monastery. He dedicated himself to the sacraments, fasting, and penance. He even performed acts of self-punishment like going without sleep, enduring cold winter nights without a blanket, and whipping himself in an attempt to atone for his sins. Reflecting on this time of his life, he would later say, “If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I.” Even his supervisor, the head of the monastery, became concerned that this young man was too introspective and too consumed with questions about his own salvation.<sup>6</sup>

Luther himself described the cause of his fear.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. 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>7</sup>



Luther was exactly right—but only half right. He rightly understood his sinful condition. He understood that Jesus was righteous and he was unrighteous. Luther had a correct diagnosis of the problem but an incorrect solution—a solution of good works. There are only a few options when you are faced with the perfect holiness of God. Some people hate this, as did Luther, but instead of trying harder they conclude that God is not really that holy and is certainly not wrathful.

God is love, he does not punish. The Roman Catholic Church had taught that works were the answer to the sin problem. Yes, they admitted that faith was also necessary but once you add works to the equation, faith becomes almost irrelevant.

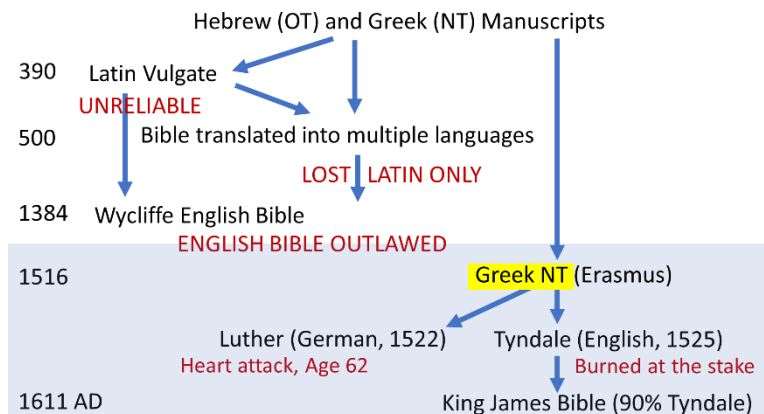
And here's how they got there. They emphasized works over faith because they first emphasized tradition over Scripture.



Luther eventually put Scripture in its rightful place, but there was another man whom God used to begin the process. Johann von Staupitz. He had genuine care for Luther. Luther wrote, "If Dr. Staupitz, or rather God through Dr. Staupitz, had not helped me out of my trials I would have drowned in them and would have been in hell long ago."<sup>8</sup> He not only cared for his soul but providentially, he appointed him as a professor of the Bible at Wittenburg. This is when Luther began to study the Bible for himself. It was the first step in his personal reformation which would lead to the Reformation of Germany and the world. For this, we need a brief history of how the Scriptures were passed down since the early church. The first Bible that could be read by the common people was the Latin Vulgate, but it was never a very reliable translation. The original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts were translated into multiple languages, but after about 500 AD,

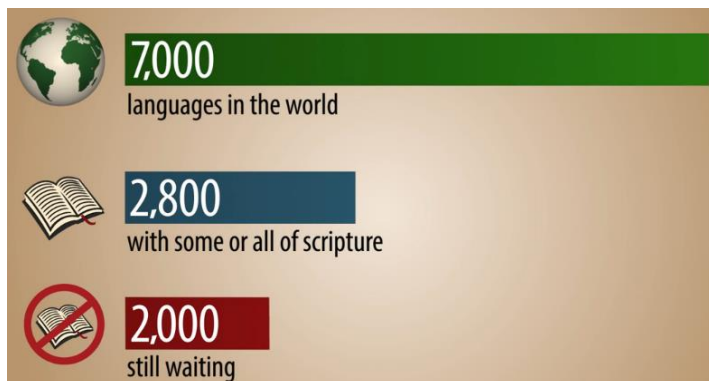
most of those were lost.<sup>9</sup> The church propagated the Vulgate and since they controlled the process, eventually, this was the only translation that remained. And of course, most people could not read Latin. The Bible was first translated into English by Wycliffe, but soon after it was declared illegal.

Providentially, two very important events happened. First, Erasmus



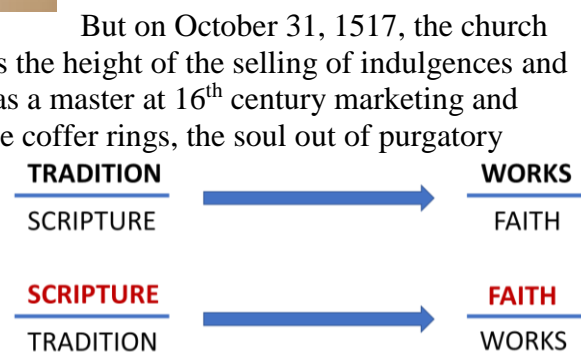
Luther's study where he translated the NT into German

press was invented (designated by the blue area) which made dissemination of the Scriptures and eventually, Luther's writings, into the hands of the common person. Luther used Erasmus' Greek NT to translate the New Testament into German in 1522. Three years later, William Tyndale translated the entire Bible into English. As a reward for his efforts, he was burned alive at the stake.



Translating the Bible remains the frontline of missions to this day. Almost half of the languages in the world still do not have any portion of the Bible in their own language. Once Luther had access to the Scriptures and a insatiable drive to study the Bible, Luther took the one-thousand year old emphasis on tradition as primary and flipped it on its head.

But on October 31, 1517, the church still held tradition as the highest authority. This was the height of the selling of indulgences and the chief proponent Johann Tetzel. (VIDEO) He was a master at 16<sup>th</sup> century marketing and came up with the phrase, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul out of purgatory springs." If you read Luther's 95 theses, you will see that they mostly center on the selling of indulgences.<sup>10</sup> Only later would Luther write this. "It [faith] does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises; it is already done them, and is always doing them."<sup>11</sup>





At this point, Luther had not yet discovered the gospel for himself. He most likely was not even saved until a few years later. But now that Now Scripture was on top and as result, faith alone in Christ was about to be discovered by Luther. Here is his personal testimony.

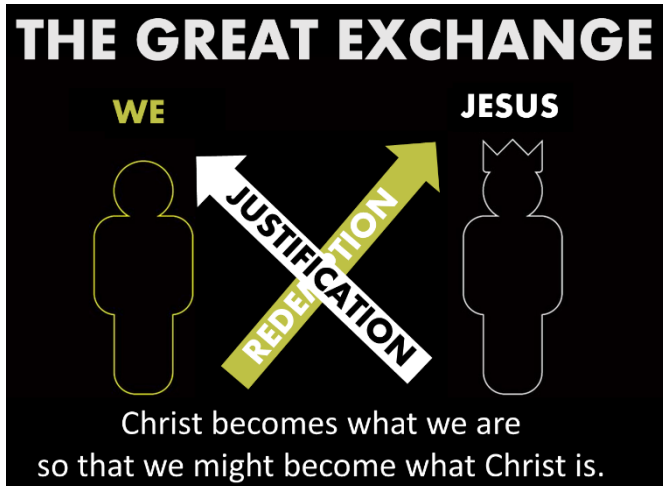
At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous 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>12</sup>

John Piper has an excellent observation about Luther's conversion.

One of the reasons Martin Luther came to his great discovery in the Bible of justification by faith alone was that in his early years in the Augustinian monastery he was influenced to love Scripture by Johann Staupitz. Luther devoured the Bible in a day when people earned doctorates in theology without even reading the Bible. Luther said that his fellow professor, Andreas Karlstadt, did not even own a Bible when he earned his doctor of theology degree, nor did he until many years later (Richard Bucher, *Martin Luther's Love for the Bible*). Luther knew so much of the Bible from memory that when the Lord opened his eyes to see the truth of justification in Romans 1:17, he said, "Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory," in order to confirm what he had found.<sup>13</sup>

You can see how the gospel began to change everything he did and said. This is evident in a letter to his brother.

I should be very glad to know what is the state of your soul. Have you learned to despise your own righteousness and put your trust in the righteousness of Christ? Many do not know the righteousness of God which is given us abundantly and freely in Christ., but they endeavor to do good works and depend on their own effort, their own virtues, their own merits. You were full of this great error when you were here, and I was full of it. Even now I must fight against it, and I have not finished. Therefore, my beloved brother, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to despair of thyself and say to Him, Thou Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am thy sin. Thou has assumed what was mine, and given me what was thine.<sup>14</sup>



Let me graphically represent what Luther was saying. Our sin is atoned for by Christ. The Bible calls this redemption and as Luther wrote to his brother, “Thou has assumed what was mine.” At the same time, Jesus imputes his perfect righteousness to our account. The Bible calls this justification by faith. This is the second half of Luther’s sentence—” and given me what was thine.” We could say that Christ became what we are so that we might become what Christ is. This entire process is called the great exchange—we exchange our sin for Jesus’ righteousness.

All of it is by grace through faith—(not of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:9).<sup>15</sup>

By this time, Luther’s German Bible, his pamphlets and his books were spreading all over Germany and beyond. He was becoming a tremendous threat to the church—to its power and immeasurable wealth. But the church was not about to let this trouble maker ruin one-thousand years of hard work, so they went after Luther with all of their power. They required four unequivocal responses.

1. Repent of all teachings.
2. Stop all teaching
3. All teachings must be burned
4. All who side with Luther deemed heretics and excommunicated<sup>16</sup>

He was summoned to appear before Emperor Charles V along with about 200 other bishops and church officials. After a day of contemplating the charges, Luther appeared before the emperor and gave his reply.

Since your most serene majesty and your high mightinesses require of me a simple, clear and direct answer, I will give one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is as clear as noonday that they have fallen into error and even into glaring inconsistency with themselves. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God’s word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me! Amen.<sup>17</sup>



This is the bold witness for Christ that Luther is most known for. As far as we can tell, when he started his desire to reform the church with his 95 theses he probably was not yet saved, but I don't think there is any question he was when he risked his life. He expected to be killed as a heretic, which is why he initially did not want to get married. "I am not now inclined to take a wife," he wrote to a friend. "Not that I lack the feelings of a man (for I am neither wood nor stone), but my mind is averse to marriage because I daily expect the death decreed to the heretic."<sup>18</sup>



Finally, "in 1523, Katherine von Bora and eleven other nuns wanted to escape their cloister, and they wrote to Luther, whose radical new ideas had filtered into their convent. Though liberating nuns was a capital offense, Luther devised an ingenious plan with Leonhard Koppe, who regularly delivered herring to the cloister. On Koppe's next delivery, twelve nuns were smuggled out—inside empty herring barrels. As a man in Wittenberg put it, 'A

wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all more eager for marriage than for life.'<sup>19</sup> He married her more for practical purposes but came to truly love her. "I would not change my Katie for France and Venice, because God has given her to me...Katie, you have a husband who loves you; many an empress is not so well off. I am rich..."<sup>20</sup>

Luther and Katie lived in the same building that served as the monastery in which Luther had lived when he was a monk. Their house was often filled with guests who talked for long hours

about theology and the growing movement of reformers. Some of these conversations were written down into volumes called Table Talk. Does that name sound familiar? Each week you receive an email with a Table Talk devotional in it with the same topic as the upcoming sermon. Many parents struggle to have devotions with their family but even if you used this for 10 minutes per week, you would be starting a great discipleship habit.

They were married for 20 years and had six children. She obviously loved him as well. She wrote the following after her husband died.

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. Therefore, I am truly so deeply grieved that I cannot ... eat or drink, nor can I sleep. And if I had a principality or an empire and lost it, it would not have been as painful as it is now that the dear Lord God has taken from me this precious and beloved man, and not from me alone, but from the whole world.”<sup>21</sup>



Luther's grave inside the Wittenberg Church

Katie's words were more true than she could have known. Luther gave the world an incalculable gift which can be summarized in the 5 Solas.

Sola Scriptura ("Scripture alone"): The Bible alone is our highest authority.

Sola Fide ("faith alone"): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Sola Gratia ("grace alone"): We are saved by the grace of God alone.

Solus Christus ("Christ alone"): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and King.

Soli Deo Gloria ("to the glory of God alone"): We live for the glory of God alone.

But hopefully as you have seen from this bio on Luther, unless you recover the first one, you will never recover the other four. They stand or fall together. And this would have happened with or without Luther, but God used this imperfect priest to start the barrel of reform rolling down the hill. Once it gained a little momentum, there was no stopping it. And now 500 years later, you and I are benefactors of this rediscovery of the Scriptures and of the gospel.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was converted by reading Luther's introduction to his commentary on the book of Romans.<sup>22</sup>

That evening he reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate. Someone read from Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans. About 8:45 p.m. 'while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'<sup>23</sup> (1738)



We should thank God for Luther and others who followed after him like Wesley. However, we should not gloss over his grave sins. While it was not true 20 years prior, at the end of his life, Luther developed a wicked antisemitism. Two years before his death, he published the book, *The Jews and their Lies* where he wrote things like this.

Moreover, they are nothing but thieves and robbers who daily eat no morsel and wear no thread of clothing which they have not stolen and pilfered from us by means of their accursed usury. Thus they live from day to day, together with wife and child, by theft and robbery, as arch-thieves and robbers, in the most impenitent security.

However, they have not acquired a perfect mastery of the art of lying; they lie so clumsily and ineptly that anyone who is just a little observant can easily detect it. But for us Christians they stand as a terrifying example of God's wrath.<sup>24</sup>

He also went on to recommend that

1. Their synagogues and school be burned.
2. Their houses be burned
3. All their writings be taken from them.
4. Rabbis forbidden to teach<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, and very sadly, his pronouncements against them<sup>26</sup> are eerily similar to what the Catholic Church pronounced against him.

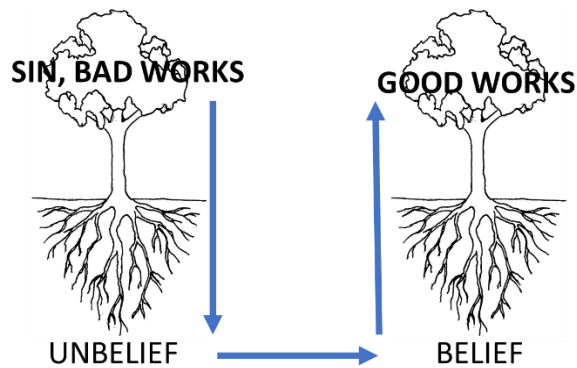
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These writings were used during the Holocaust as justification for Jewish genocide. One Jewish believer, whose own great-grandmother was murdered in the Holocaust,<sup>27</sup> offers a helpful summary.

With that in mind, it seems to me Luther is a man we should honor but not celebrate. Let's honor him for confronting the hollow deceptiveness of the Roman Catholicism of his time. Let's honor him for translating the Bible into the language of ordinary people, so they could read for themselves the words of eternal life. Let's honor him for releasing countless monks and nuns across Europe from lives of cloistered ritual and mandated celibacy. Luther was a mighty instrument of awakening, deserving honor in this anniversary year. But this honor shouldn't rise to the level of celebration. Our memory of Luther must be tempered with sadness because of his sin and its consequences.<sup>28</sup>

This sad footnote on Luther's life reminds us that the universal church and the local church is always in need of continual reformation. For example, the EFCA exists because it broke free from the state controlled Lutheran church in Scandinavian nations. No one does church perfectly, but we can always do it better.

Our personal faith is also in need of continual reformation. This sad story reminds us that we all need the gospel every day. Luther has a simple solution to personal transformation. “For this reason, too, before good or bad works are done, which are the fruits, there must first be in the heart faith or unbelief, which is the root, the sap, the chief power of all sin.”<sup>29</sup> Luther was saying that the fruit of unbelief in your life will result in sin and bad works but conversely, the fruit of belief—and that must be right belief, gospel belief, justification by faith—will result in good works.



But in order for this idea to help us, we need to do what the gospel fluency model teaches us to do. You start with the fruit in your life and if you see things that do not accord with Scripture, you trace them to the root of unbelief. You have to identify the false beliefs you hold which give rise to the fruits you don't want. You identify the lies you believe. You identify the idols of your heart. You repent of that unbelief and then you begin to root yourself deeper into gospel truths.

By the way, this is exactly what we are doing in LEAD that started this month and will go for the next 4 months. We are using the model of gospel fluency, which does exactly what Luther was describing. We are studying this model so we can understand it and use it in our own lives but also so that we can do ‘gospel fluency’ on others—to help them take steps forward in their faith.

I think it would be appropriate to close this biography on Luther by signing a verse of A Mighty Fortress that we all know and love.

A mighty Fortress is our God,  
A Bulwark never failing;  
Our Helper He amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing:  
For still our ancient foe  
Doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and power are great,  
And, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side,  
The Man of God's own choosing:  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord Sabaoth His Name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

**Rich Maurer**  
**October 28, 2018**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-mighty-fortress-is-our-god>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/march/martin-luther-musician.html>

<sup>3</sup> John A. Morrison, *Martin Luther: The Great Reformer*, Christian Liberty Press, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Morrison, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Larry D. Mansch, Curtis H. Peters, *Martin Luther: Life and Lessons*, McFarland 2016, p. 17

<sup>6</sup> <http://thecripplegate.com/the-monk-who-wasnt-good-enough/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/MartinLutherConversion.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Morrison, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/history-of-the-bible-timeline-700157>

<sup>10</sup> "In reading the whole of the Ninety-Five Theses, it is clear that Luther still held on to a number of formative Roman Catholic doctrines. At that point, he was not in favor of jettisoning the whole of it; he sought instead to correct and purify it from the corruptions that he saw as creeping in during the 1200s through the early 1500s." (<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/story-martin-luthers-conversion/>)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.messiahskingdom.com/resources/The-Gospel/luther-romans.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/MartinLutherConversion.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-memorize-scripture>

<sup>14</sup> Morrison, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Luther also coined the phrase, *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous and a sinner).

<sup>16</sup> From the Papal Bull, June 1520

<sup>17</sup> Before he was called to Worms, he wrote: "Fear not that I shall retract a single syllable...if the Emperor summons me that I may be put to death as an enemy of the empire, I am ready to comply with his call, for with the help of Christ, I will never desert the word on the battlefield. I am well aware that these blood-thirsty men will never rest until they have taken away my life." (Jean Henri Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, Volume 2, 1853, p. 206.)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/martin-luthers-gallery-family-album>

<sup>20</sup> Morrison, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/martin-luthers-gallery-family-album>

<sup>22</sup> Here's another favorite quote of mine from the preface to Romans. "Sin in the Scriptures means not only external works of the body but also those movements within us which bestir themselves and move us to do the external works, namely, the depth of the heart with all its powers."

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/martin-luther-quot-the-jews-and-their-lies-quot>

<sup>25</sup> First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom...

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies.

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.

<sup>26</sup> His hatred for the Jews is all the more surprising when you read his attempts at peaceful tactics such as these examples.

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"I have written some books against private individuals, who had undertaken to defend the tyranny of Rome by destroying the faith. I freely confess that I may have attacked such persons with more violence than was consistent with my profession as an ecclesiastic: I do not think of myself as a saint; but neither can I retract these books. Because I should, by so doing, sanction the impieties of my opponents, and they would thence take occasion to crush God's people with still more cruelty."

(<http://www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Hum1B/s3/Luther-Speech-Worms-1521.pdf>)

"Compel or force anyone with power I will not, for faith must be gentle and unforced. Take an example by me. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but not with force; I only wrote, preached, and used God's Word and nothing else. That Word, while I slept...has broken the papacy more than any king or emperor ever broke it. Had I wished it, I might have brought Germany to civil war. So I did nothing, but only let the Word act." (Morrison, p. 81.)

<sup>27</sup> Through Sasse and others, Luther's name and work were used to prepare the ground for the Holocaust, in which my own great-grandmother was murdered and my great-uncle and great-aunt were brutally incarcerated. The Holocaust was fully underway by 1943—exactly 400 years after Luther shut his ears to the Bible and unleashed his anti-Semitic furies. As we commemorate Reformation 500, we do well to remember that other anniversary."

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/luthers-jewish-problem/>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.messiahskingdom.com/resources/The-Gospel/luther-romans.pdf>