

To understand the Protestant Reformation,
forget the myths and look to the motifs

What the Reformers Thought They Were Doing

Timothy George

Five hundred years ago, on October 31, 1517, a thirty-three-year-old German professor named Martin Luther called for a public discussion of the sale of indulgences, and all hell broke loose. The tumult that ignited the Protestant Reformation began in a backwater university town of some two thousand inhabitants: “Little Wittenberg,” Luther called it. Wittenberg may have seemed an outpost at “the edge of civilization,” but it did boast a university, one founded in 1502 by princely and imperial rather than papal authority. That one of its professors would call for academic debate on the commercial trade in papal indulgences, long recognized by reform-minded critics as a major abuse in the church, was not surprising and may even have been predictable. After all, as early as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), traffic in “indiscriminate and excessive indulgences”—the kind Luther’s parishioners were running to buy—had been condemned by the church. The Reformation was born in a crisis of pastoral care. But Luther’s act was a spark that ignited a conflagration. One confrontation

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led to another, and soon Europe was ablaze with edicts, bans, bulls, anathemas, and condemnations. The Ninety-Five Theses were translated, published, and soon were circulating from the Atlantic to the Baltic, from Lisbon to Lithuania.

In this anniversary year, the Reformation is once again being remembered, renounced, regretted, celebrated, commemorated, and analyzed from many perspectives. A new emphasis on “reforming from below” aims to give voice to groups that have been marginalized in much of Reformation historiography until now—women, peasants, dissenters, Jews, and others. There is much to learn from political, social, economic, intellectual, and cultural tellings of the Reformation story. In pursuing such lines of inquiry, however, it is possible to lose sight of what the Reformers themselves actually thought they were about. What made them tick? How did they understand the movement of which they were a part? The time is long past when one could speak confidently of presenting any slice of the past—much less such a controverted epoch as the Reformation—“just as it really happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), to cite Leopold von Ranke’s summary of the historian’s craft.

In recent years, it has become fashionable for historians of the Reformation to use the word in the plural, *Reformations*. The point is clear: there were many diverse streams of renewal and spiritual innovation in the sixteenth century, and these resulted in various and competing patterns of reformation, including Lutheran, Zwinglian, Calvinist, Anglican, Radical, and, not least, Catholic. There was also the reformation of “the common man” (Thomas Müntzer and the revolt of the peasants), the reformation of the princes (religious change led by territorial rulers), the reformation of the cities (reform as part of communal urban advance), the reformation of the refugees (asylum seekers as agents of religious change), and so on.

Paul S. Peterson, author of *Reformation in the Western World*, has written of “the short Reformation,” a series of events that took place over the course of some fifteen years around the Indulgence Controversy, in contrast to “the long Reformation,” a period stretching back into the later Middle Ages and forward into the age of confessionalization and beyond. Euan Cameron, however, author of *The European Reformation*, gives a good reason for continuing to speak of *the* Reformation: “The Reformation, the movement that divided European Christianity into Catholic and Protestant traditions, is unique. No other movement of religious protest or reform since antiquity has been so widespread or lasting in its effects, so deep and searching in its criticism of received wisdom, so destructive in what it abolished, or so fertile in what it created.” In his book *The Reformation: A History*, Patrick Collinson gives another reason for retaining the singular use of Reformation: without *the* Reformation, discourse about other putative reformations would make no sense.

If F. M. Powicke’s dictum “A vision or an idea is not to be judged by its value for us, but by its value to the man who had it” is not the whole truth, it at least reminds us that we cannot begin to evaluate the significance of earlier thinkers, especially the Reformers, until we have asked ourselves their questions and listened well to their answers. This essay will examine four motifs, each of which is central to the self-understanding of the Reformation as glimpsed primarily from Luther’s perspective, but with attention to other Reformers as well: the Reformation as *divine initiative*, as *spiritual struggle*, as *ecclesial event*, and as a movement imbued with a *long view of history*. First, however, a look at three oft-repeated “myths” about the Reformation is in order.

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There was more that united the Reformers than divided them

Three Reformation myths

1. *“The Reformation divided the church.”*

The idea that the Reformation divided the church is as old as the sixteenth century. It was the centerpiece in the classic exchange between Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto and John Calvin in 1539. Calvin and his fellow Reformers, Sadoletto charged, were attempting to tear into pieces the seamless robe of Christ, which not even the pagan soldiers at the foot of the cross had been willing to divide. Calvin’s reply was an appeal to antiquity. “All we have attempted has been to renew that ancient form of the church,” he claimed. The “church” Calvin had in mind was the one revealed preeminently in Scripture but also evident in the age of Chrysostom and Basil the Great, of Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine—the church of the ancient Christian teachers. That the Reformation entailed the rupture of Western Christendom is not in question. But who had left whom, and why, would be debated between Catholics and Protestants for centuries to come.

The fracturing of Christianity, however, did not begin in the sixteenth century. Not to rehearse the many divisions among Christians of the first millennium, but the

split between Eastern and Western churches in 1054 left a gaping hole in the unity of the church, one that perdured despite continuing efforts at reconciliation. In the West, the pontificate of Boniface VIII ended with “the Babylonian Captivity,” a period of almost seventy years (1309–77) when the papacy was based at Avignon rather than Rome. This was followed by the Western Schism (1378–1417), with its spectacle of two and eventually three popes excommunicating one another, each presiding as the sole vicar of Christ over separate jurisdictions. The crisis of the multipapacy was resolved at the Council of Constance by the election of Pope Martin V in 1417. But the Hussite wars in Bohemia, the suppression of Lollard dissent in England, not to say the persecution of the Waldensians in France and Italy and of the Alumbrados in Spain, continued to mar the image of the church as the seamless garment of Christ.

One way to understand the Reformation is to see it as an effort to overcome the brokenness of the late medieval church. In this view, the Reformation was a movement for Christian unity based on the recovery of a besieged catholicity. Initially, this effort involved leading Catholics (Contarini and Seripando) and Protestants (Melancthon

and Bucer) alike. That this movement to mend ecclesial rifts did not succeed in the sixteenth century, that in fact what Erasmus once called the “worst century since Jesus Christ” ended up more divided at its close than when it began, does not count against the unitive impulses that were present in the Reformation from 1517 on. In an essay published in 1933, Friedrich Heiler declared:

It was not Luther’s idea to set over against the ancient Catholic church a new Protestant creation: he desired nothing more than that the old church should experience an evangelical awakening and renewal, and that the gospel of the sovereign Grace of God should take its place at the centre of Christian preaching and piety. Luther and his friends wished, as they were never tired of emphasizing, to be and to remain Catholic.

2. “*Luther was the first modern man.*” In 1971, the 450th anniversary of Luther’s famous “Here I Stand” speech at the Diet of Worms, Reformation scholars from around the world gathered in St. Louis at the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research. The theme of the Congress was “Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era,” and the keynote speaker was Gerhard Ebeling, a leading Luther scholar and former student of Rudolf Bultmann. He reminded his listeners of Hegel’s depiction of the Reformation as “the all-illuminating sun, which follows that day-break at the end of the Middle Ages.” Hegel attempted to integrate Luther into the history of thought by portraying him as the first great exponent of individual conscience and human freedom. In other words, Luther was a precursor of the Enlightenment. He stood against the authoritarian darkness and superstition of the Middle Ages and so helped his fellow Europeans break through to civilizational maturity. This view of the Reformation was intrinsic to what Herbert

Butterfield would later dub the “Whig interpretation of history.”

The same theme was taken up by the Scottish savant Thomas Carlyle, who accorded Luther an honored place in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841), touting his refusal to recant at Worms as “the greatest moment in the Modern History of Men.” “Had Luther at that moment done other, it had all been otherwise!” Carlyle surmised. English Puritanism, the French Revolution, European civilization, parliamentary democracy—all this would have been forestalled had Luther faltered. In that moment of crisis, however, “Luther did not desert us.” Not surprisingly, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carlyle’s best American friend, also gave Luther honorable mention in his famous essay on “Self-Reliance.” There he stands in the company of other great achievers in history, all of whom were misunderstood in their own day: Pythagoras, Socrates, Jesus, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton.

With more nuance than Carlyle or Emerson, but along the same trajectory, elite thinkers in the early twentieth century continued to advance the idea of the Reformation as the harbinger of modernity, including Max Weber (disenchantment/secularization), Wilhelm Dilthey (individualism/freedom), and Karl Holl (conscience). In 1923, Adolf von Harnack, a scion of German liberal Protestantism, summed up the progressive optimistic model of understanding the Reformation, “The modern age began along with Luther’s Reformation on 31 October 1517; it was inaugurated by the blows of the hammer on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg.” These words were written the year of Hitler’s failed Beer Hall Putsch.

Countervoices there were, including Ernst Troeltsch, who saw the Reformation as more medieval than modern, more authoritarian than liberating, and more transcendental than immanent. Troeltsch had no more personal sympathy than Harnack for

the traditional theological construals of the Reformation. For him its “catholicity” was something to be embarrassed about and also something to be transcended and eliminated by the forward march of progressive Protestantism. Nonetheless, Troeltsch rightly saw that the major break in the Christian culture of the West had taken place in the eighteenth century rather than in the sixteenth, with the Enlightenment rather than at the Reformation. In his eyes, the worldview of medieval Catholicism came to be associated with the “Dark Ages,” as Petrarch had named the epoch between Augustine and Dante.

Another naysayer was Friedrich Nietzsche. Rather than discovering the beginnings of modernity in the Reformation, he saw it as a challenge and sign of contradiction. If “Luther would have been burned like Hus,” he said, “the Enlightenment would perhaps have dawned somewhat earlier and with a more beautiful luster than we can now conceive.”

3. *“The Reformation was a German event.”* Like most myths, this one has within it an element of truth. Erasmus was the prototypical European, but Luther was a German through and through. His intuitive genius and brilliance with the German language, especially in his translation of the Bible, has had a shaping influence on German culture to this day. In the nineteenth century, the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine commended Luther’s mastery of his mother tongue by saying that he had the unique ability to scold like a fishwife and whisper like a maiden at the same time.

The Reformation era was an age of transition in many respects. It witnessed, for example, the hastening decline, if not yet the breakup, of the Holy Roman Empire, which was accompanied by the rise of the modern nation-state. While Germany itself would not become a united country until 1871, Luther boldly appealed to the patriotic sentiment of his German people. One of his early polemi-

cal tracts, and one of his most influential, was titled “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” (1520). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Germany’s greatest poet, declared that Luther was the one through whom “the Germans first became one *Volk*.” Throughout history, the figure of Luther and his words have been co-opted for ideologies of both left and right—including publicists for National Socialism, who during the 1930s republished and disseminated Luther’s deplorable and inexcusable writings against the Jews. The fact that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of Luther’s most fervent disciples in the twentieth century, was arrested for helping Jews escape Hitler’s grasp, and later put to death for trying to bring down the Nazi state, shows how complicated the legacy of Martin Luther has been.

For all this, there are good reasons to challenge the myth of the Reformation as an event that happened largely between the Elbe and the Rhine. There was, after all, a French Reformation, a Swiss Reformation, a Dutch Reformation, even a Polish Reformation, and so on. But even if we expand our vision to include all Europe, the gauge is too narrow. From the outset, the Reformation was a global event. In the same month that Luther stood before the emperor at Worms (April 1521), Ferdinand Magellan completed his circumnavigation of the globe in the faraway Philippine Islands. Magellan was a forerunner of the Catholic Reformation, which inspired a new wave of Jesuit-led missionary activity into Latin America, Africa, China, and Japan. The Protestants were soon to follow, with a Calvinist mission to Brazil in the 1550s, more than sixty years before the Pilgrims came to Plymouth. Baptist missionary William Carey went to India in the eighteenth century (following in the steps of Moravian and German Pietist pioneers), aiming to extend the work the Protestant Reformers had begun in the sixteenth. Thus he and his helpers translated the Bible into

the many languages of India and the East. He established schools (including for girls), taught the doctrine of justification by faith, and worked to reform the many ills of society. Today, as Philip Jenkins has pointed out, the theology and mission of the sixteenth-century Reformers are finding new life in vibrant forms of spiritual revival in Africa, Latin America, and other places in the Global South.

Four defining motifs

Since the nineteenth century, Protestant historians have spoken of the formal principle and the material principle of the Reformation. The formal principle refers to the normative authority of Holy Scripture as the determinative rule for Christian faith and life. The material principle defines the central message of grace and forgiveness as taught in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. These two principles do indeed encompass much that the mainstream Protestant Reformers wanted to say against a resurgent Roman Catholicism on the one hand and a proliferating sectarianism on the other. But these two principles must be set in the context of other defining motifs.

1. *The Reformation as divine initiative.* The religious situation in the early sixteenth century was dynamic and evolving, and one should not overstate either the unity of the Catholic Church prior to the Council of Trent or the internal schisms among the magisterial Protestant Reformers in the same period. Luther, Bucer, Calvin, Cranmer, and even Zwingli (despite his 1529 clash with Luther over the Eucharist) shared many things in common across the geographical and confessional boundaries that set them apart. This common front has often been downplayed for two reasons. On the one hand, there is what we might call today confessional identity politics, a kind of Ref-

ormational tribalism and triumphalism; and on the other, secular, political, and nationalist concerns. For example, in 1917 Harnack traced the carnage of the Great War to the sixteenth-century confessional divide between Calvinism and Lutheranism. “This war,” he wrote, “shows us that the Reformed territories of Western Europe and America stand over against us with a lack of understanding which makes them susceptible to every defamation. We German Protestants are still just as isolated as 300 years ago.”

Luther’s radical doctrine of justification by faith alone, shared by all the mainstream Reformers, challenged the entire theology of merit that was so central to the sacramental-penitential structure of the medieval church. Yet this teaching presupposed an equally radical Augustinian understanding of divine grace. Augustine’s doctrine of election, though controversial at times, had never been condemned by the church nor gone completely out of vogue since his death in 430. Nonetheless, it had been modified, qualified, and attenuated, especially in the various salvific schemes of late medieval nominalism. The Reformation can be understood in part as a recovery of Augustine’s original emphasis, an acute Augustinianization of Christianity. Augustine’s doctrine of grace, with its high predestination theology, was not entirely unfamiliar in the sixteenth century, for similar views can be found in the teachings of medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (in his later writings), Gregory of Rimini, and Thomas Bradwardine. The Reformers picked up on this theme and gave it a new airing, however. Augustine’s emphasis on divine sovereignty in salvation was the backdrop for the Reformers’ more precise soteriological formulation: God’s grace, unmerited and unmeritable, justifies sinners through the imputation of the external, “alien” righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is mediated through faith understood as trust, reliance, dependence.

It is tempting for modern interpreters of the Reformation to portray the Reformers as the great activists of their time—sixteenth-century Lenins or Robespierres out to shake the world and overturn kingdoms. But this is not how they themselves saw their work, and we miss something crucial if we do not take with full force the Reformers' own view of the providential direction of their movement. Perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, Luther put it like this:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip [Melanchthon] and my [Nicolaus von] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.

"God has seized me and is driving me, and even leading me on," Luther wrote to Staupitz in 1519. "I am not the one in control. I want to be at peace but I am snatched up and placed in the middle of an uprising."

Calvin was always more reticent than Luther to speak about himself, but he too referred to his embrace of the evangelical faith as "a sudden conversion" by which God subdued his mind and "made it teachable." When, just a few years later, he was set upon by the fiery Guillaume Farel, who threatened the young scholar with a divine curse should he refuse to join the reforming cause in Geneva, Calvin summed up this fateful encounter by declaring, "Thus God thrust me into the game." Calvin was not interested in making Calvinists, nor Luther Lutherans, though some of their followers did promote a kind of hero worship that would have made even Carlyle blush. But closer to the spirit of the Reformation are these words Calvin wrote to the emperor Charles V in 1543:

The restoration of the Church is the work of God, and no more depends on the hopes and intentions of men, than the resurrection of the dead, or any other miracle of the description. It is the will of our Master that his gospel be preached. Let us obey his command, and follow whithersoever he calls. What the success will be it is not ours to inquire.

2. *The Reformation as spiritual struggle.*

At the heart of Reformation spirituality is the experience of Christian life as conflict, contention, trial, testing, assault. This is very different from popular models of spirituality today, which present religion as an "opiate" to soothe the pain of life, an aid to self-enhancement and personal fulfillment. The concept of the spiritual life as struggle was certainly present in medieval Christianity, especially in the monastic-mystical tradition by which Luther was so decisively shaped. Luther had inherited the monastic devotional triad of *lectio, oratio, and contemplatio*, but he intensified and altered it in a distinctive way. He did so by changing the last step from *contemplatio* to *tentatio*, which he rendered in German as *Anfechtung*. This word is often weakly translated as "temptation" in English, but that rendering misses the intensity inherent in the German original. The word *Anfechtung* derives from the world of fencing: a *Fechter* is a fencer or gladiator. A *Fechtboden* is a fencing room. Thus *Anfechtungen* connotes spiritual attacks, bouts of dread, despair, anxiety, conflicts that overwhelm. Such a churning rages both within the soul of every believer and in the great apocalyptic struggle between God and Satan.

The reality of an active devouring Devil (see 1 Peter 5:8) belonged to the mental world Luther inherited. Some of his Catholic adversaries later concocted a story that he was Satan's own progeny, the product of an illicit sexual union between the Devil

and his mother, who was portrayed as a promiscuous bath maid. His father, Hans Luther, once suggested that his son's call to the monastic life in the thunderstorm might actually have been an intervention of the Fiend rather than a summons from God. At every turn, Luther was confronted with the insinuations of Satan, with whom he often carried on a lively dialogue. On one occasion, when the Devil had accused Luther of being such a great sinner, he replied: "I knew that long ago. Tell me something new. Christ has taken my sins upon himself and forgiven them long ago. Now go grind your teeth."

Luther's struggles, both with himself and with the Evil One, were not a mere phase through which he passed en route to his Reformation breakthrough. No, just as repentance was a lifelong process of turning to God again and again, so too conflict and temptation continued until the end of life. Such struggles were essential to becoming a theologian. "For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the Devil will plague you and make a real doctor of you, and by his attacks will teach you to seek and love God's Word." As early as his first exegetical lectures on the Psalms (1513), Luther confessed that "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, where my *Anfechtungen* took me. . . . Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but living, nay, rather dying and being damned makes a theologian."

In his famous 1525 debate with Erasmus on the freedom of the will, Luther depicts the human person as a horse that is ridden either by God or by the Devil. Thus the ultimate question of life is not "Who are you?" but rather "Whose are you?" To whom do you belong? Who is your Lord? Luther, along with Zwingli and Calvin, was accused of teaching fatalism because of their emphasis on the will's bondage to sin and Satan. But human responsibility is a part of the

equation, and the focus is on the triumph of Christ over Satan through his death and resurrection.

3. *The Reformation as ecclesial event.* Why did the Reformation happen when it did? A number of factors came together to create a perfect storm in the years leading up to and immediately following Luther's posting of his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517. The Fifth Lateran Council, which concluded in that very year, failed to recognize the urgent need for reform in the church. Meanwhile, the New Learning provided scholars with hitherto unavailable textual and philological resources, such as those used by Lorenzo Valla to challenge the authenticity of the so-called Donation of Constantine, a major bulwark of papal authority. In 1516, Erasmus published the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament, which Luther used in drafting his Theses. The invention of the printing press brought about an explosion of knowledge and the expansion of literacy. It resulted in Luther's becoming the world's first bestselling author and Protestantism the first religious mass movement. In addition, the advance of Islam, signaled by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, changed the geopolitical equation for everyone on the other side of the Ottoman armies. In other circumstances, Luther's protest against the abuse of indulgences, his focus on justification by faith alone, and even his appeal to Scripture as the normative authority for faith and practice (which was not an unknown idea) might have been accommodated within recognized ecclesial structures. Luther's doctrine of the church was rooted in his early study of the Scriptures, and to this he returned in the years following his excommunication.

The image of Luther as a rebellious monk pulling down the pillars of Mother Church and replacing her with his own subjective interpretation of the Bible stems from a misreading of his famous "conscience" speech at the Diet of Worms. Luther did appeal to

his conscience but in a distinctive way: he declared that his conscience had been captured by the enduring Word of God. When asked to defend his right to challenge the received teaching of the church in which he had been ordained, Luther appealed to the vow he had made when he first became a doctor of theology in 1512. On that occasion he had sworn to preach faithfully and purely and teach “my most beloved Holy Scriptures.”

Luther and the Reformers who followed him, including those in the Reformed and Anglican traditions along with a number of the Anabaptists, were not lonely, isolated seekers of truth asserting “the right of private judgment.” They were rather pastors committed to proclaiming God’s Word in the company of God’s people. As Luther wrote in his 1535 commentary on Galatians:

This is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.

The priesthood of all believers, a distinctive Reformation idea, was set forth in 1520 in Luther’s address to the German nobility and its implications spelled out in his popular tract *On the Freedom of the Christian*. This teaching asserted that all Christians, by virtue of their baptism, had direct access to God and enjoyed the same spiritual status as priests, bishops, or popes. There is sanctity in the secular; no calling is intrinsically higher or more spiritual than another. The Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers did not, however, produce modern rugged individualism, the ideology of “every tub sitting on its own bottom.” Paul Althaus, in *The Theology of Martin Luther*, rightly

places the original meaning of the Reformation in the context of Luther’s churchly commitment:

Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the sense of the Christian’s freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian’s evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community.

4. *The Reformation as a movement with a long view of history.* Luther lived in an apocalyptic age, and he shared with many of his contemporaries the belief that the world was running out of time. Sebastian Brant’s *The Ship of Fools*, published at Basel in 1494, portrayed society, from the mighty down to the lowly, as a company of fools on board a ship sailing to “Narragonia,” the country of fools, and headed for disaster. Four years later, the Nuremberg artist Albrecht Dürer gave an artistic depiction of a similar situation in his *Apocalypse* series. “It is a dramatic sequence—oppressive, alarming in its reality, heralding disaster,” wrote the art historian Karl-Adolf Knappe in *Dürer: The Complete Engravings, Etchings, and Woodcuts*. Dürer “ventured to depict never seen, unimaginable things, events outside space and time, thunder and lightning, conflagrations and voices—the alleluias of the blessed and the despairing groans of the damned.”

Luther shared the anxieties of his time and understood himself as living at the very edge of history. Nevertheless, there was an eschatological reserve in his thought. Neither he nor Calvin wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation. They both followed Augustine in interpreting the thousand-year

reign of Christ in Revelation 20 as already fulfilled in the history of the church rather than pending in the future. Luther thought the thousand years in the vision of John had culminated in the pontificate of Gregory VII (1073–85), with his extravagant claims for papal supremacy. Subsequent events, such as the threat of Islam and the Hussite revolt, simply brought the world closer to the finish line.

Although Luther had a keen interest in history and did some sanctified number crunching to determine where he was in the scheme of things, he resisted making too much of such calculations and refused to set a date for the Second Advent. He was neither a meliorist nor a utopian. One could not force God's hand, as both the imperial knights led by Franz von Sickingen and the rebellious peasants led by "the hammer" Thomas Müntzer attempted to do during the tumults of the 1520s. Living at the edge of history did not give license for apocalyptic speculation. Thus when the numerologist Michael Stifel predicted that Christ would return on October 19, 1533, at 8 o'clock in the morning, Luther demurred.

Still, Luther did believe that the last day was at hand. "For almost all the signs which Christ and the apostles Peter and Paul announced have now appeared, the trees sprout, the Scripture greens and blooms, whether or not we can know the day in just this way does not matter; let another do it better. It is certain that everything is coming to an end." As he grew older, crankier, and more and more ridden with sickness and pain, he came to see the world as the mirror image of himself—an old, gray-haired man. The Reformation had not turned out to be the success he had once hoped for as a young reformer still in his thirties. But he continued to believe that, to cite one of his favorite Old Testament texts, the Word "shall not return void" (Isaiah 55:11).

"If the world should come to an end tomorrow, I will still plant a little apple tree today!" These words have been attributed to Martin Luther, though recent scholarship has shown that they come from a proverb instead. Nonetheless, they capture something of the hopefulness with which he lived and the confidence of the faith in which he died. †