

## A Walk with the Reformers: Reformation Reflections from Southeastern Seminary's Reformation 500 Study Tour

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*2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. But while scores of events, conferences, and pilgrimages to Germany are being undertaken to celebrate the Reformation, what exactly is being commemorated? Moreover, how should Luther be remembered? And how does what took place five hundred years ago have any relevance to and impact upon the church today? The following essay is a reflective journal based upon an eleven-day study tour to Germany and Switzerland undertaken during the summer of 2017 through Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. This essay considers the perplexing and at times paradoxical world of the Reformers. It explores not only the Reformers' victories, but also their failings.*

*Key Words: Anabaptist, Buchenwald, Jews, Luther, Marburg, Protestant, Reformation, sola, Wittenberg, Worms, Zwingli*

### Introduction

The story of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation is a compelling one. It includes a tireless search for absolution before God, challenges to the known religious and cultural norms of the day, unwavering commitment to biblical truths in the face of death, and one monk's pursuit to find a gracious God and the assurance of his salvation. It is a drama of celebration, suffering, love, jealousy, bravery, and much more. The narrative is ready made for a Hollywood motion picture, but just as complicated as it is compelling. As celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation continue throughout 2017, certain key questions will shape how this story is told. Which Reformation will be remembered? The life and ministry of Martin Luther will undoubtedly dominate most reflections, but which Luther? How we choose to tell the story will shape not only our interpretation of the Reformation, but what we learn from it as well.

In the summer of 2017 I was privileged to lead a team of students, faculty, pastors, and friends of Southeastern Seminary on an eleven-day journey to Germany and Switzerland that afforded us an opportunity to

consider these questions. We made our way to Europe to engage the story of the Protestant Reformation in the very locales in which this grand narrative once took place five hundred years after Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. We wanted to stand where history had been made, to walk where the Reformers once walked. Given the long shadow cast on both doctrine and church practice in today's church, we also wanted to consider the relevance of the Reformation to our twenty-first-century world. Why do events that took place five hundred years ago matter today? This was not to be an intellectual exercise of the mind alone, but one purposed to challenge our lives and ministries as well.

Given the multivalent nature of the Reformation story and our desire to be personally challenged, an itinerary was set that allowed us to experience the Reformation narrative devoid of hagiography. In other words, we set out to understand both the good and the bad, the intended as well as the unintended consequences, the clarification of the gospel and the splintering of Protestantism. It also required that the Reformers' own stories include their ecclesiastical triumphs framed alongside their egregious failings. As much as the Reformation was the triumph of God's Word in reshaping the ecclesiastical landscape, it also highlighted the deep depravity of humanity. Our journey began in Wittenberg, Germany where it all started on October 31, 1517. We continued by exploring those sites that helped shape the German Reformation and concluded in the Swiss cities of Zürich and Geneva, where a different form of reform was realized.

This essay invites readers along on our adventure and encourages them to take part in our journey without ever stepping foot on German or Swiss soil. While the experiences from our trip were too expansive to cover comprehensively, the major locales that shaped the Reformation story and offered life-challenging reflections for our team will be included. Each of those locales will be described, the historic importance of that place elucidated, and the practical connection to our contemporary world considered. The ultimate hope of this essay is that the reader might be inspired and challenged by the Reformers through these reflections just as our team was for those unforgettable eleven days in June 2017.

### Martin Luther and Lutherstadt Wittenberg

Following a lengthy flight across the Atlantic Ocean and a brief stop at Berlin to take in the usual tourist trappings, our team finally made it to what was sure to be a highlight of our trip—Lutherstadt Wittenberg. The city itself is an amazing confluence of old and new. Narrow cobblestone streets still retain their medieval look, but are now lined with modern

shops, restaurants, and residences. Despite a number of retailers and businesses, Reformation sites dominate the town's skyline. The grandiose *Schlosskirche* (Castle Church), which continues to serve as the focal destination of pilgrimages to Wittenberg, towers above the town and serves as a constant reminder of what once took place here. Its unmistakable neo-gothic green spire, built by the Prussians during a reconstruction effort in the late-nineteenth century, stands bold and defiant. The words *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A mighty fortress is our God) wrap around the church tower and reflect a biblical truth that once served to support and strengthen Luther in his reforming efforts. On the north side of the building's main structure resides the place that started it all and sets the date for the Reformation's anniversary in 2017. There, emblazoned in dark bronze, are the "Theses Doors" that immortalize the words of Luther's 95 *Theses*.

St. Mary's *Stadtkirche*, which served as the parish church for the community, rivals the wondrous architecture of the Castle Church. The unmistakable white façade and dual spires stir a sense of austere reverence for a church building where Luther once offered thundering sermons. Outside of these two visual wonders, the Black cloister where Luther and his wife Katie once lived, the *Rathaus* (Town Hall) that stands watch over the incredible *Marktplatz* at the center of town, and the gorgeous homes of Philip Melancthon and Lucas Cranach all are visually stunning and harken back to a distant era.

However, for all the aesthetic beauty of today's Wittenberg, this was not the place Luther settled in 1511. Just like Luther before the Reformation, Wittenberg may best have been described as insignificant. In fact, prior to Luther's arrival, Wittenberg was an outpost more than a town, dwarfed by the neighboring Saxon cities of Erfurt and Leipzig. Even Luther once had a lowly opinion of the village. After moving there in 1511, Luther called it a town *in termino civilitatis* (on the edge of civilization). Wittenberg was of such little note that eventually some feared recourse if the town served as the hub of the Reformation. Just as the religious leaders of Israel once decried the thought of anything good coming from Nazareth, so too did Roman Catholic apologists lament that a serious challenge to the church might come from Wittenberg of all places. Fast forward some thirty-five years to 1546, the year Luther died, and Wittenberg had been transformed. Similarly, the vision of Wittenberg that we encountered the summer of 2017 hardly bore any resemblance to the dirty, poor village where Luther once reluctantly took up residence.

Outside the engrossing dramas related to Luther's life and his reforming efforts in Wittenberg, two things about the picturesque town that we encountered spoke volumes to our team. The story of Martin Luther and

Wittenberg is a shared tale of how one man transformed a simple village and then the world. Looking at Luther and Wittenberg in light of the Reformation, it is hard to imagine either being considered obscure or inconsequential. However, that was once precisely the case. Our appropriation of history can frequently cause us to focus on the noteworthy occasions, while forgetting formative, but lesser-known events and places. The truth is that much like Wittenberg, Martin Luther was once an irrelevant person; he was a simple monk living a commonplace life. That fact must never be forgotten in the reformer's story. However, Luther's anonymity was soon lost as his ideas set ablaze a Reformation fire that both the Roman Curia and Holy Roman Emperor could not snuff out.

In the early nineteenth century the famous Baptist missionary William Carey once said, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God." This led him to the shores of India and a missionary endeavor that would leave a profound impact both on that country and missions history. The young Luther hardly thought that what he was doing in those earthly years in Wittenberg would elicit any expectation related to his role in reshaping history. Professionally he busied himself with the work of the church and university. Personally, he was trying to find assurance for his salvation and assuage the guilt that consumed him. However, these pursuits eventually led him to attempt reforming one of the oldest, well-established institutions in human history. It also led him to do one of the boldest things imaginable, to stand against the church and the Empire. This was a consequence of Luther pursuing what he believed the Bible taught. In all that he attempted, Luther chose to fear God rather than humanity. He was resigned to listen to the voice of God in the Scriptures, as opposed to the voices of humanity.

Those of us who journeyed to Wittenberg will likely never make a mark on history quite like Luther did. Our stories will not be included in church history books, nor will people travel to see the places we have lived and ministered. Still, Luther's story serves as a vivid reminder that one person can make a difference. One person can turn the world upside down. If we are honest with ourselves, we want to do that very thing, to have a lasting impact for Christ. We long to leave an indelible impression upon the people and world around us. However, there is a danger related to this noble hope. Our culture regularly tempts us to find worth in that which is fleeting. It entices us to measure success according to world standards. While our celebrity-focused culture entices us to find personal worth and value in notoriety, the Bible speaks of a more important measure of worth—God's economy. His value is placed on that which is eternal, life changing, and all efforts that promote his Kingdom, whether public or private.

To that end Luther's story is relatable even if his celebrity is not. In the throes of the Reformation Luther had no idea what was to come. In fact, that is precisely why his theology was so scattered. He wrote about a myriad of matters as issues came up, so his ideas were dictated by the occasion. The Bible always guided his thinking, but Luther's Reformation was constantly in flux from the outset. Amid the shifting seas of controversy, Luther clung to the Word and sought to apply its teaching in both his life and the life of the German Church. Followers of Jesus today would be well served to emulate such an example, to focus on faithfulness to the Word of God in the moment rather than seeking an end goal. This means that we embrace life and ministry as a process, instead of focusing attention on the end product. Such a mentality is freeing and will help Christians in areas like evangelism, discipleship, preaching, counseling, and many others. Here, the faithful evangelist does not bear the burden of winning another person to Christ, but focuses on the task of sharing the truth of the gospel. The pastor is not required to preach a sermon that elicits a radical, life-altering change in his audience every time he steps to the pulpit. Instead, he can focus attention on faithfully expositing the Word week after week, trusting that the Word of God will do its work by the Holy Spirit's power. Faithfulness in the moment is what matters most. In the end, the lives that are transformed through those faithful acts of love will matter to those around us as much or more than anything Luther did for the church. After all, one life changed is a profound thing.

Beyond Luther's impact on Wittenberg and the world, the town tells an equally important story about partnership in the gospel. Although Luther's name and face are nearly ubiquitous in Wittenberg, his story is not the only one told or celebrated by the town. In fact, Luther was not alone in facilitating the change that took place in Wittenberg, nor was he solely responsible for fanning the Reformation flame to other parts of Europe. Co-laborers and co-conspirators surrounded Luther and played critical roles in shaping the unique form of Christianity that radiated from Wittenberg.

For instance, Luther's famous statue at the center of the *Marktplatz* shares prominence in the town square with a depiction of Philip Melanchthon. Although the young prodigy did not arrive in Wittenberg until late-1518, Melanchthon's impression upon Protestantism is undeniable. Melanchthon took Luther's scattered, contextually responsive ideas and helped to organize and structure them into an intelligible corpus. He mediated Luther's doctrine to a culture clamoring for change and desperate to find God-given purpose and value in a world dominated by clerical elites. Melanchthon was also an important sounding board and initiator of ideas for Luther as he worked to build a church detached from Rome.

In truth, modern day Lutheranism owes its identity to Melanchthon as much as its namesake. It is no wonder that Melanchthon is celebrated in Wittenberg and beyond as the *Præceptor Germaniæ* (Teacher of Germany). It should not be forgotten that it was his words that were read before the Emperor at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, not Luther's. And years later it was his *Loci Communes* that inspired the organization of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Similarly, the Wittenberg court painter, Lucas Cranach the elder, played a crucial role in Luther's life and beyond. Cranach was a close friend and confidant to Luther. He and his wife, Barbara, were present at a private ceremony in June 1525 when Luther married the former nun, Katie von Bora. Cranach's portraits of Luther dominate modern perceptions of how the reformer is believed to have looked and are the earliest visions of Luther. But this alone does not speak to the invaluable nature of Cranach to the changes in Wittenberg and beyond. Just as Luther's German Bible helped to develop and normalize the High German language, Cranach's artistic renderings seared the Bible's world into German people's minds. From the earliest of Luther's September Testament of 1522, Cranach's pictorial illustrations brought Luther's Bible to life on paper, just as stained-glass windows had done for centuries. His imagination set the vision for what many people believed and understood about their world and the one beyond. Additionally, through his Renaissance-inspired paintings and woodcuts, Cranach brought an interpretation of Luther to an otherwise illiterate and uneducated society. Without Cranach's visual depictions, the pamphlet literature coming out of Wittenberg would have offered a bark without bite, their polemical reach muted in a culture largely without literary proficiency.

These are but two examples of many in Luther's close circle of friends that were crucial to the reformer's story. Johannes Bugenhagen spent years shepherding the Luther family as their pastor in the local parish church—a task undoubtedly burdensome given Luther's inner and external turmoil. Georg Spalatin mediated Luther's affairs with the Elector, Frederick the Wise, and helped the reformer navigate the tumultuous political waters stirred during the Reformation. The gifted Hebrew linguist, Matthäus Aurogallus, aided Luther in the painstaking and voluminous task of translating the Old Testament into German, while Justus Jonas not only edited and translated many of Luther's works, but also sat alongside the reformer when he took his dying breath in 1546. Perhaps most important of all was Luther's partner in ministry, Katie von Bora. Her story is a fascinating one that included serving alongside her husband by shouldering a myriad of responsibilities. She handled the family affairs, cared for the children, watched over the Luther garden, supported the

family financially by brewing German beer, oversaw the legion of boarders that came through their home, and much more. The stories of these key figures are inextricably intertwined with Luther's story. His successes and failings became theirs and vice versa.

Such is true today. Students at Southeastern Seminary are regularly reminded that ministry is about people. The focus of that important exhortation is set on the men, women, and children that receive spiritual care as a part of their ministries. However, the importance of people is not simply the focus of one's ministry efforts, but in the participation of the work itself. Ministry is not something done alone or in isolation. It is always accomplished through and sustained by community. At Wittenberg, our team began to reflect on the many people who have helped make us the men and women in Christ that we are today. These are the people that have walked alongside us as we have dealt with death, celebrated births, wrestled with sin habits, shared the gospel with the lost, and encouraged others to love and obey Christ. In a tangible way, our ministry became theirs and theirs became ours. In fact, for those that raised the prayer and financial support necessary to take part in this Reformation tour, the importance of a supporting cast to one's endeavors was immediate. Without the partnership of others, the life-altering trip we enjoyed would not have been possible. Still, being surrounded by friends and supporters in life and ministry does not necessarily mean that those same people are free to offer counsel and advice or that those supporters would be given an ear. This was sadly true in Luther's life as our team came to realize on the most difficult and painful stop on our tour.

### **Buchenwald Concentration Camp and Martin Luther's Anti-Semitic Writings**

Following two days in Wittenberg we were blessed to visit Luther's birth town of Eisleben, reflect on the history of both the German Peasants' War and Germany's *Deutsche Demokratisch Republik* (DDR) at the Castle Allstedt, and visit Leipzig, the site of Luther's famous debate with Johann Eck. Our tour then turned toward the central part of Germany. As morning broke on day five of the trip and our team journeyed toward our first historic site of the day, we anticipated our most gut-wrenching experience. Buchenwald was the site of one of the largest concentration camps in Germany. Constructed in 1934, Buchenwald remained operational until the Allied invasion in 1945. As we entered the outskirts of the memorial site the winding, tranquil German countryside reflected more the beauty of Goethe's *Wanderer's Nightsong* than the horrors of Hitler's Nazi Germany. However, upon arrival, Buchenwald's jail cells and the crematorium furnaces served as a sobering reminder of the suffering and sorrow once

experienced by many in this place. In the end, more than fifty thousand people died at Buchenwald in just over a decade.

To describe our visit to Buchenwald as surreal would be a gross understatement. It is impossible to capture in words the flood of emotions we experienced there. Grief, anger, sorrow, disbelief, and confusion flooded our hearts, leaving our team emotionally and mentally numb. Quotations from survivors of Buchenwald, alongside the preserved stories of those who died at the camp with an undeterred hope, served as a respite from the onslaught of an otherwise grim experience. Sadly, the longer we spent at the memorial site the more commonplace the evil became. Our Southeastern team spent a couple of hours at Buchenwald and that was enough. To remain longer seemed almost unbearable.

Why include a visit to a Nazi concentration camp from the twentieth century when our team traveled to Europe to consider the people and events some four hundred years prior? The answer to that question has two parts, both linked to Germany's complicated history. First, although Germany could have minimized or forgotten their history related to the Holocaust, the people chose a different path. Thus, the iron entry gate at Buchenwald retains the greeting, *Jedem das Seine*, which implies, "to each is given what is deserved," a statement that embodied the Nazi's justification for their actions, even as contemporary Germans have collectively embraced the conviction "never again," a phrase championed at the Dachau camp located two hundred-fifty miles to the south of Buchenwald. And so it should also be with the Reformers and especially Martin Luther. The dark, regrettable sides of their histories must be preserved and told.

Second, our team's visit was initiated by the Nazis' purposeful link to Luther as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda campaign. In fact, *Reichsmark* coins minted by the Germans in 1933 on Luther's 450th birthday depict the reformer's impression on one side and Germany's Hindenburg eagle on the other. Ironically, the German phrase, "a mighty fortress is our God" flanks the coin's edge. The Third Reich believed that they had a forbearer in Martin Luther and it is easy to see why.

It is a well-known fact that at the end of Luther's life the reformer penned and preached some of the most hate-filled words imaginable about the Jews. In a 1543 work, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther proposed some of the cruelest actions imaginable. Those prescriptions included the destruction of Jewish synagogues and homes. Jews were to be stripped of their wealth and livelihoods, while Rabbis were to be deprived of their right to teach and the Talmudic writings destroyed. Luther's animus toward the Jews was not confined to the infamous 1543 treatise alone. The reformer's lauded *Table Talk*, one of the last letters addressed to his wife,

Katie von Bora, and the final sermon of his life all bore anti-Semitic rhetoric as well.

Given Luther's sentiments, what are we to think? What do we do when a hero of the faith does something blatantly un-Christian? Before trying to understand Luther on this matter two things must be stated. First, this cannot and must not be whitewashed from the history books or redacted from Luther's corpus. Luther's words cannot and must not be forgotten. This is precisely why Buchenwald needed to be included in our itinerary, to tell this part of Luther's story. Second, regardless of intention or historical context there is absolutely no excuse for Luther's hate-filled words that were and remain an affront to Christ and his bride, the Church. These are two truths that must always frame any discussion about Luther's writings on the Jews.

Still, there are a number of things that may help us to better understand Luther and, hopefully, ourselves. Scholars at times have pointed to Luther's sympathetic work penned twenty years earlier, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, as evidence of his movement on the issue. Certainly, Luther's later sentiments may be the consequence of years of frustration over the Jewish peoples' failure to embrace the gospel. It also did not help that in those final years Luther was suffering from a myriad of physical ailments that even forced him at times to dictate works from his bed. But can this be the only real explanation? Diving deeper into Luther's anti-Semitic language reveals more than just a bitter old man expressing frustration over a failure in life.

While his 1543 treatise is typically the focus of any discussion on Luther and the Jews, perhaps more questions need to be raised about his earlier work, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* (1523). Here, Luther expressed great hope and optimism that the Jews might be won to the faith. Tragically, that 1523 writing is not just the outlier in Luther's corpus on the Jews, but for most of Christian history as well. An anti-Semitic bias has sadly been woven into the fabric of Christian history going back as far as the Patristic Period and remains even today. Christians have often blamed the Hebrew people for the death of Jesus, even as they sang hymns declaring their own culpability for Christ's death at Calvary. The historical amnesia and willful bias is staggering.

Similarly, setting Luther's words about the Jews alongside his other writings may also bring clarity. For instance, while the reformer's impassioned words have left many aghast, they were strikingly similar to the vitriolic polemic regularly aimed at Roman Catholicism and the Pope. In truth, the Turks arguably drew the harshest criticism from Luther's pen of any people. For Luther, the Jews willfully stood outside of the gospel, just as the Muslims and Roman Catholics had. Each group was a threat

to the church and had to be combated. Therefore, the reformer's ire was aimed at what he believed to be enemies of the gospel, not at a people for their ethnic heritage.

As hypothetical questions regarding the prevention of the Holocaust are raised, the same query may be asked of Luther. Could this have been avoided? Perhaps so, but this is where Luther was a victim of his own success and his own worst enemy at times. By the 1540s the same stubborn and persistent personality that once helped Luther in his earlier battles against things like papal indulgences, betrayed him when he was on the wrong side of an argument. The more Luther grew to see himself as a prophetic voice to his contemporary world, the more unassailable the reformer became. Even Philip Melancthon, his close friend and partner in the work at Wittenberg, recounted in his correspondence with a young John Calvin times even he could not talk with Luther about crucial matters like the Lord's Supper. Regrettably, insulation and isolation left Luther unapproachable and un-teachable on his view of the Jews and many other issues.

Luther had a blind spot regarding the Jews. One can appeal to context and intention to find a more nuanced understanding for Luther's words. However, in the end those are greatly mitigated by the consequence of his words. What he wrote and said is undeniable and without defense. Sadly, Luther was not alone in his failure to properly understand the damage done to his legacy or the Christian faith as a whole by one simple action or a spoken word. Just as Luther appeared oblivious to the anti-Semitic nature of his words, other examples tell a similar, regrettable story in Christian history. For instance, the Puritans were uncritical of their ownership of slaves even while God moved mightily during the First Great Awakening. Similarly, modern Christians have frequently made the mistake of conflating evangelicalism with the GOP to damaging political and religious ends. Regenerate followers of Jesus can and do err. At times those failings can be egregious and damaging to the faith.

Ironically, this was why Luther argued for the normative authority of Scripture in developing doctrine and church practice. The Word of God must serve as a lens to guide the church as it functions in a fallen culture. The Bible will serve as the rod that will correct the sinful distortions of humanity in a culture bent toward the elevation of self. This is also why contemporary followers of Jesus must nurture their faith in a community that is humble, self-reflective, and diverse. Being open to correction and reproof is critical here. The Bible must serve as the standard in this, but church members must still work diligently and intentionally to facilitate submission to the Word's timeless authority. Moreover, diverse assemblies will help the church to recognize when sinful bias has derailed the

mission of God. Such diversity offers an alternate perspective that is crucial in our context. It also helps us to view the church and its ministry through the unbiased lens of God. Should the church humbly embrace a correctable spirit and pursue a diverse makeup, the future will look decidedly different. A different narrative may be told.

### Marburg Castle and the Protestant Division to Come

A celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is an odd thing. Yes, we should celebrate the clarification of the gospel via justification by grace through faith alone, a stronger affirmation of the Scripture's authority, and expanding the laity's involvement in the church. Nevertheless, the Protestant Reformation brought division. That is part of the Reformation's enduring legacy. In fact, the division that was first sown between Protestants and Roman Catholics during the early years of the Reformation remains today. Sadly, that was only the first fruits of division. As a debate at Marburg in 1529 showed, fracture did not remain confined to the relationship between Luther and Rome.

As various manifestations of reform were realized in different places like Germany and the Swiss Confederation, divisions beyond the one already realized with the Catholic Church soon materialized. A host of differing beliefs and church practices separated the first-generation Reformers. Still, it was the sacrament that most embodied Christian unity, the Lord's Supper, which, ironically, engendered an internal Protestant schism and a deep divide that remains today. As the Reformers would soon realize, the Bible and their notion of *sola Scriptura*, which they championed, became catalysts to an irreparable schism.

Given effective political responses to the Reformation by Roman Catholics, alongside the imminent threat of the Turks to the East, it became clear that an alliance of the various reform movements was required to strengthen Protestantism's viability. The most important Reformers convened in 1529 at the *Marburger Schloss* to enact such an accord. Martin Luther and his brilliant young co-laborer in Wittenberg, Philip Melancthon, set out to meet with the leading Swiss Reformers, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Johannes Oecolampadius, and others. However, theological division threatened the colloquy before it even began. In fact, the hope of a unified coalition was doomed from the start.

By 1525 Luther was aware that Zwingli espoused a view of the Lord's Supper that included a non-corporeal understanding of Jesus' presence in the elements. The following years saw Luther vehemently oppose that interpretation, which he had earlier recognized as a problem in Andreas Karlstadt's theology at Wittenberg. Not only did those prior attempts to snuff out a non-corporeal view of the Supper fail, but the belief began to

spread to the other Swiss Reformers as well. Subsequent discussions had proven so fruitless that Luther did not want to come to Marburg once the invitations were sent. Luther knew that the theological divisions could not be bridged. Yet, he reluctantly traveled to Marburg not knowing the strain this meeting would put on the Reformation.

On day six of the tour, our team took the arduous walk through the winding cobblestone streets of Marburg up to an impressive eleventh-century fortification that sits high atop this university city. Deep in the recesses of the castle was the Great Hall where our team met to hear the story of the Marburg Colloquy that was once held in that same room. The hall, much like the castle itself, is a masterful architectural triumph. Beautiful hand-carved wooden portals offer multiple access points to the room. Sweeping curved flanges frame the low-lying ceiling. A staggered set of Gothic windows flooded the hall with light and offered picturesque views of the town below. Large round pillars separated the room and provided a visual reminder of the division once realized there. What took place in that majestic hall, and why it is pivotal to the Reformation story?

During the early proceedings of the Marburg Colloquy, Luther and Zwingli were kept apart; their coarse personalities as much as their theological positions threatened to undo any agreement from the outset. Over the next few days those Reformers present sought to find agreement on doctrine. While they established an accord on numerous doctrinal positions, unity on the Supper eluded them. As anticipated, the controversial issue related to the nature of Jesus' presence in the elements. That may not appear to be divisive to those unfamiliar with the discussion. However, one's view regarding Jesus' presence in the elements reveals important underlying commitments to Christology, philosophy, and biblical interpretation. The question is not as simple as "is Jesus present in the elements or not?" Many related convictions are informed by one's answer to that seemingly innocuous question. Moreover, a related question about the purpose for the sacraments and who exactly was offering a pledge in the Lord's Supper left the Reformers at a theological stalemate. In the end, driven by the notion of *promissio* (promise), a tenet woven through his theology, Luther held fast to the simple belief that Jesus promised that he would be in the elements. That was enough for Luther. A corporeal presence must be affirmed. Additionally, given Luther's belief that God was the one acting in the sacraments, the reformer asked what greater assurance for one's salvation was there than the actual body and blood of Jesus that had made salvation possible? On the other hand, Zwingli was committed to the notion that Jesus was presently seated physically at the right hand of the Father following the ascension. This was an argument

drawn from Patristic theologian, Augustine of Hippo. Thus, Luther's doctrine of ubiquity was unfounded and flawed in its Christology, according to Zwingli. Moreover, following a humanistic hermeneutic, Zwingli believed that the most natural reading of the text necessitated a memorial understanding of Jesus' presence in the Supper. In fact, a corporeal presence not only reeked of paganism but also veiled the true importance of the Supper in the pledge made by the participant. A corporeal reading loosened the power and purpose of the sacrament for those partaking in the rite.

Despite lengthy and at times volatile discussion, the dialogue at Marburg proved unproductive, for deep theological and hermeneutical divisions lingered beneath the surface of the discourse. To make matters worse, many participating in the debate employed biting polemics to explicate their competing views. Frequently this left the competing camps at Marburg talking past rather than with each other.

The Reformers departed from Marburg without an agreement in place. Perhaps more importantly, the division evidenced at that colloquy foreshadowed what was to come. As the Reformation continued to push forward fragmentation ensued. Conflicting visions for reform, driven by divergent hermeneutics, unveiled church programs that looked vastly different. Soon things like worship practices, theological language, church government, and convictions regarding the pace of reform were added to the division over the Supper. The Protestant church splintered into several confessional heritages. As these groups manifested their particular correctives to Roman Catholicism, the fragmentation was set in stone.

The Roman Catholic Church predicted this division. Once *sola Scriptura* was embraced and applied by the various Protestant factions, schism became inevitable. Marburg exposed an important theological consequence of the Reformers' rejection of papal authority. Once the Bible dethroned the Roman Curia as the final, normative authority for the church, no one human arbiter was left to adjudicate theological confusion. Unknowingly, the Reformers had replaced one pope with an army of Protestant authorities. And each of those Protestant authorities read the Scripture differently. Thus, the Protestant church was left without a unified voice, especially given that there was no consensus regarding how to read the Bible. Such was the logical, theological corollary to *sola Scriptura*.

Our encounter at Marburg was formative and challenged our team on a host of levels. Much of our inner turmoil surfaced as we looked at the Marburg Colloquy through the lens of Jesus' words in John 17. A divided church fragmented into thousands of denominations may be our present reality, but the words of Jesus are a stinging reminder that this is not as it should be for his Bride. So, what are we to make of the legacy of Marburg?

Are we really to celebrate the Reformation that fostered such schism?

As we acknowledge that theological divisions are real and at times inevitable, nevertheless, there are many things that believers from all denominations can readily affirm. These are convictions related to the heart of the gospel and the foundation of the faith. They are bedrock beliefs uniformly affirmed by Roman Catholics, Protestants, and those in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In fact, when we consider those shared convictions against the backdrop of other world religions, there is much that unites us as one body.

Still, as the Reformation demonstrated there are many things that Christians do not agree on. While believers should decry the division of Jesus' church presently, that schism should be tempered by our understanding of the fallen nature of humanity and of the appropriation of divine revelation. We may hate the division, but it is inescapable. Different readings of the Bible and views of church authority are not easily bridged. Moreover, the differing theological and practical convictions that grow out of those readings of Scripture confine believers to such a tendentious reality. Given such limitations, perhaps it is best that the various confessional heritages join arms together and embrace those areas where believers from different denominations may work together, while at the same time recognizing that worshiping together may not be realized in its fullest form until the return of Messiah. This would allow various churches to work collectively on issues related to the sanctity of human life and freedom of religion. However, things like missions and church planting, where major areas of division will inevitably surface, could be pursued in partnership with like-minded churches. Such an approach would allow shared cooperation across denominational lines, while also acknowledging those important theological differences that will remain until Christ returns.

One thing that is crucial to the viability of this model of shared cooperation is the way in which believers dialogue with and speak about those with differing views. Sadly, just as the Reformers often allowed volatile, pejorative language to dominate their discourse, the same may be said of discussions today. Careful language covered in grace and love may not bridge the theological divide. However, it may help to find understanding and appreciation, which will pay dividends in finding common ground to work together on shared matters of concern.

### Reformation Monument in Worms and Personal Conviction

Following a memorable visit at Marburg we continued the day by heading south to the German city of Worms, the site of Luther's most

famous stand for the authority of God's Word during the most dangerous time of his life. We traveled to Worms to visit the world's largest Reformation monument. Here, a *Lutherdenkmal* designed and constructed by the German sculptor Ernst Rietschel in the mid-nineteenth century commemorates Luther's bold stance at Worms and acknowledges the roles other key figures played in helping to reshape the church during the late-medieval and early modern periods. The monument is a raised stone platform that offers a place for rest and reflection in a quaint downtown park. Martin Luther dominates the memorial as its focal point and stands high atop a single center pedestal. His likeness, cast in a green patina bronze, stands confident and resolved. Luther is cloaked in his typical monastic robe and clings confidently to a large Bible, emblematic of the same Scriptures that served to undergird the reformer at his most tenuous moments of the Reformation. Luther's gaze is set to the southwest of the location of the now lost Bishop's Palace, the site of his famous encounter with Charles V in 1521. This is how Luther is often remembered in relation to Worms, though the true nature of this encounter in the reformer's life was more agonizing for him in the moment.

The flames of controversy surrounding Luther's public burning of the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, in December 1520 had no sooner died down than political wrangling over the rogue monk ensued. The Emperor, Charles V, was ready to act swiftly against Luther, but the German Estates refused him until Luther was given a proper hearing. With the ink on Pope Leo X's papal bull of excommunication barely dry, Luther stood before the Emperor at an Imperial Diet in Worms and gave an account of his seditious actions.

By the time Luther made the journey to Worms, this once obscure Augustinian monk was now a popular, national figure. His doctrines had tapped into the underlying unrest of culture and brought a renewed sense of value and purpose to the laity. This garnered him a groundswell of support from the German populace, a support that was crucial to the long-term viability of his reforming efforts. In fact, a papal legate named Aleander recounted to Pope Leo X that ninety percent of the crowd in Worms greeted Luther with shouts of support and admiration, while the other ten percent shouted antagonistically against the Roman Curia. Luther was a celebrity of sorts, riding a wave of Reformation optimism as the landscape of the German Church was being recast according to his innovative ideas. Nevertheless, that did not mitigate the possibility that he could still be drowned under a squall of Roman or Imperial force. Thus, potential for disaster loomed at the Imperial Diet of Worms.

Luther came to Worms only after Frederick the Wise had first secured for his star professor a passage of safe conduct. Still, Luther's journey to

Worms was fraught with danger. Memories of the Council of Constance reneging on the same promise once afforded to Jan Hus in 1415 must have flooded Luther's mind with anxiety and concern. That Johann Eck made a theological link between Luther and Hus at the Leipzig Debate just one year earlier in 1519 made Luther's death seem all too plausible. Still, Luther went to Worms. The day after his arrival Luther stood before the Imperial assembly for what he thought would be a parlance about his beliefs. Such was not the case. Instead, Luther's writings were set before him and he was asked if he would recant his heretical teachings. It appeared that there would be no debate or dialogue at Worms. This was a moment of decision and the weight of that decision must have been excruciating. Still, his definitive pronouncement on the matter was deferred until the following day, as Luther was given the night to ponder the gravity of his reply. The next morning, having spent the evening measuring conviction against consequence, Luther offered arguably the boldest words of his entire career:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.<sup>1</sup>

He once stood up against Pope Leo X and he now defiantly refused to submit before the Emperor, Charles V. In both cases Luther did so on the authority of God's Word.

Why was Luther willing to make such daring stands? By 1521 Luther had come to reject sacramental theology, a cornerstone of late-medieval Roman Catholic soteriology. Accordingly, humanity was no longer relegated to endlessly pursuing a right standing before God by participating in the prescriptions of Roman Catholicism. For Luther, such a position was rooted in a false gospel and without assurance. This had been precisely what plagued the monk in his monastic pursuits for over a decade. Instead, the gospel was solely a work of God whereby he declared sinners righteous on the basis of his grace. In what Luther would later characterize as a "sweet exchange," Jesus' righteousness was transferred to sinners. Simultaneously, their sin was cast on Jesus who shouldered its burden at the cross. This was the true evangelical gospel. Even the human response of faith that appropriated this salvific moment was a work of God, not of

<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 32, ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 112.



humanity. According to Luther, this simple yet profound truth led to his rebirth.

Justification by grace through faith alone became the foundational theological tenet upon which Luther's developing theology was built and a theme that drove his reforming efforts. Luther was passionate about this doctrine given that he believed it was clearly taught in the Scriptures. Now loosed from both the papacy's authority and a scholastic reading of Scripture, Luther found the Bible to contain the very words of life. This is why *sola Scriptura* became a watchword for both Luther and the other Protestant Reformers. The Bible was clear on how a sinner gained a right standing before God. Luther contended that the Roman Church had distorted that pathway. Such was the regrettable consequence of the papacy's willingness to embrace a second fount of revelation—church tradition. In the end Luther was beholden to the sacred Scriptures—the Bible alone. The words of popes, councils, and canon law must be subservient to the normative source of divine revelation, the Bible. Thus, to jettison his newfound beliefs at the hour of greatest trial at Worms would have been akin to disregarding the very voice of God.

A mere three months after Luther's defiant stand at Worms, the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam said of the Wittenberg reformer, "Even had all [Luther] wrote been religious, mine was never the spirit to risk my life for the truth. Everyone has not the strength needed for martyrdom." What Luther had done was not lost on Erasmus, nor was the unique nature of the reformer's resilient conviction even when faced with death. Erasmus concluded that Luther had an internal resolve and fortitude that he did not, nor ever would have. Luther's unwavering belief in the authority of God's Word was not mere intellectual conviction along. It was a deep and abiding belief that directed his actions at Worms. The Word of God for Luther truly was a lamp unto his feet and a light unto his path. Worms was a formative moment for Luther in relation to the Scriptures. The Bible would direct the reformer in his attempt to reform the church; it also accompanied him through the darkest of life's trials.

Most of our team lives and ministers in an American context, so we have not, nor will likely ever face a trial like the one Luther did at Worms. Certainly, it is possible that missionaries in antagonistic contexts might be forced to stand before a governing authority with a similar decision hanging in the balance. But such instances are rare even for our students from Southeastern that serve around the globe in places hostile to the gospel. Still, the importance of the Bible's authority is relevant to each and every one of us that ventured to Worms that day. In fact, if we are not careful, biblical authority may be supplanted and superseded by other authorities. This is a change that happens all too often. Luther's stand before Charles

V has much relevance to us even today in the twenty-first century.

Our lives are constantly being driven and directed by authorities we take for granted. While followers of Jesus may be quick to affirm the ascendancy of Scripture, other influences creep in and direct our thoughts and affections. When this takes place, extra-biblical authorities begin to contend for our minds and hearts, to reshape what we think and love. Such a reorientation then directs the actions of our lives. The consequences of having the Bible's authority usurped are devastating, for the individual becomes repurposed away from the will and mission of God. What do these extra-biblical authorities look like? Context often dictates the forms they take. For evangelical Christians in America these may be things like science, reason, and culture.

Consider how often believers shy away from gospel encounters based on faulty assumptions that relate to our culture's commitment to reason. We may fail to share with that family member not simply to avoid relational conflict, but because previous instances did not secure a decision for Christ. Perceived failings become an expectation of future attempts. So why bother at all? We become convinced that people do not change. The law of cause and effect direct us more than any Scriptural exhortation. Others may fail to witness based on an assumed lack of apologetic knowledge. Our commitment to reason may leave us paralyzed and insecure in our own knowledge of the simple truths of the gospel. Somehow we become convinced that people are only intellectually won to the Kingdom. Isn't that how one appropriates truth after all? We forget that the Bible speaks of sin being a problem of the heart and salvation a work of the Lord. All the Bible asks of us is to carry the message to those who have not heard or do not embrace the gospel. Yet, too often the assumption that we cannot carry the intellectual burden of proof in a gospel conversation keeps us silent around those that need to hear the truth.

The same dangerous commitment to reason and science may be found in our understanding of repentance. All too often Christians remain in dangerous patterns of sin because they believe what other authorities have asserted, even if those claims subvert the truths of Scripture. Culture may also play a subversive role alongside reason in these cases. The vision of the good life intentionally normalized by media may slowly begin to give credence to the propaganda of those committed to authorities outside of the Bible. Here, the ideas of personal responsibility and victory over sin may be lost amid the indoctrination of our rationalistic culture. The Bible and its authority may be squelched by these other voices of influence.

If we were honest and introspective we would cede that culture dictates much of what we think and believe. While it may be easy to see when

secular progressive forms of culture skew from the biblical pattern, Christian forms of culture may be just as dangerous as substitutes for the Scriptures. Things like our understanding of acceptable forms of worship may be driven more by cultural norms within the faith than what the Bible actually prescribes. Here, if we are not careful we may take what we have experienced and been mistakenly told are the standard, correct patterns of worship and erroneously require others to follow them. Likewise, we may embrace a biblical view of gender relations, but argue for and apply views derived from an oppressive, non-biblical perspective. What one has been told to believe on such matters may displace what the Bible says and teaches.

In the aforementioned cases, the power of God to save and transform lives seem so irrelevant and obsolete in a world that operates according to the norms of rationalism and is driven by culture. If we are not careful, the truths of Christianity divinely given in the Bible may become lost under the weight of the known laws of this world. Here, our actions become a natural corollary that reveals our true convictions. When this happens, then the Bible ceases to be enough and one enters into a dangerous world that is subject to the whimsical and often erroneous perceptions of temporal authorities. However, if everything that we think and believe is filtered through the lens of Scripture, then we will see things as God sees them. This is what Luther did at Worms and it not only helped him stand against the currents of culture at his greatest hour of need, but it also directed all future reforming efforts.

### **Täuferhöhle and a Gathered Regenerate Church**

As day number eight began, our team embarked on a four-hour journey from the picturesque medieval city of Heidelberg, where we had spent the past two nights, to the rustic countryside east of Zürich. This drive transitioned our tour from Luther's Reformation in Germany to the Swiss Reformation under figures like Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin. The day's excursion was not to include visits to visually stimulating gothic cathedrals or imposing medieval castles. Instead, we eschewed Zürich city center to tell the inspiring, yet sorrowful story of the Swiss Anabaptists. Accordingly, a more obscure and rural venue was in order.

When Zwingli began to reform Zürich in the early 1520s, a wave of gospel optimism swept across the Confederate territory. Much of the success in those early years was rooted in Zwingli's investment in a group of young humanists who partnered with the Swiss reformer in his work. However, despite their early cooperation, differing views on things like the pace and shape of reform initiated a rift between Zwingli and his un-

derstudies like Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz. Sadly, schism was inevitable once again.

Once Grebel, Manz, and others realized that their more expanded ideas for reform could not be realized through traditional channels, they took the decisive action to form their own church outside the auspices of the Swiss Church. Believers' baptism was embraced as the gateway into this visible church, which was to be characterized by discipleship, a strong emphasis on discipline, and a separation from the world that was increasingly perceived as evil. Most important, this new conception of the church was grounded in a believers' church ecclesiology. Those that gathered did so on the basis of a confession of faith and repentance. Thus, both infant baptism and the territorial form of the church were jettisoned.

Such a church may not seem all that unique in a twenty-first-century, western context. However, this was a radical departure from the norm in the early modern period. Accordingly, those in power pejoratively dubbed anyone that embraced this type of church as Anabaptists, which means "rebaptism." The Anabaptists' beliefs were religiously and socially scandalous. Accordingly, proponents of the movement paid dearly for their convictions, as participants in this new church faced persecution, imprisonment, and even martyrdom.

As the Swiss Church's response to Anabaptism intensified, many Anabaptists retreated to the hills in the rural communes outside Zürich. Here, amid the rolling Swiss hillsides, lush forests provided the necessary cover that offered sanctuary for the dissenting group and a place to freely worship. One such place was a famous *Täuferhöhle*, or "Anabaptist cave," that once provided a hidden locale for Anabaptists to worship. This was our destination for the day, a seeming detour not found on most Reformation 500 tour itineraries.

As one might expect, a cave once used to hide religious dissenters could only be found at the end of an arduous path. This most physically taxing day of the trip demanded that we walk through fields alongside grazing livestock and eventually deep into a dense forest. A steep incline challenged us for nearly the entire walk. Still, the effort was worth it, for deep in the Swiss forest a dirt path eventually led to the most astonishing of caves. High atop a winding ravine a thirty-foot wide cave lay nestled in the face of a stone mountain. A steady stream of water gently cascaded over the face of the cave and generated the unmistakable sound of a waterfall.

Once we caught our breath and snapped a few photos our team heard the story of the Anabaptists, about their beliefs and great sacrifices. We also sang hymns like "Amazing Grace" and prayed for those presently serving around the globe amid harsh persecution. It was a sweet time of

worship filled with emotion and inspiration. It also left us with much to consider about the nature of both worship and personal conviction.

As a father of four I can attest to the fact that gathering with my local church can at times be challenging. Yet, those obstacles pale in comparison to the ones faced by the Swiss Anabaptists. Wrangling restless children on a Sunday morning is my regular challenge. Avoiding persecution at the hands of civil authorities was the Anabaptists' challenge. And in the twenty-first century all around the globe countless followers of Jesus do the very same thing those dissenters were forced to do in the early waves of the Reformation. From house churches in China, to church plants in closed Muslim countries in the Middle East, every week Christians gather to worship the Lord of Creation. Honestly, there is something both simplistic and beautiful in that. Pipe organs, altars, pulpits, and pews were unmistakably absent for the Anabaptists, just as they often are in harsh modern contexts. Yet, believers remain free to worship King Jesus. No contextual circumstance may thwart the praises of His people. Our visit to the *Täuferhöhle* was a stirring reminder of that deeply profound theological truth.

Reflecting on the depths of the Anabaptists' convictions that had once led them to this isolated place also left our team with much to consider. Unwavering belief in things like a regenerate church, the separation of church and state, and believers' baptism had set the Swiss Anabaptists apart from the state church. They were steadfast in those convictions and so worshiping in a place like the *Täuferhöhle* was a small price to pay. Sadly, a new venue for worship was not the only thing surrendered to maintain their beliefs. The first few decades of the movement saw some of the most horrific executions imaginable. Suffering, sorrow, and death became both the lot and legacy of all too many who were simply unwilling to recant their beliefs.

Seminary is a formative time for students to consider not only what but also why they believe. They are challenged to move away from blind assumptions toward clear and certain convictions. Such is demanded of the next generation of gospel torchbearers. Yet, we had made our way to the *Täuferhöhle* to ask a different, more probing and personal question. How tightly should we hold to our beliefs? What are we willing to surrender for our convictions? This is a question rarely considered in a western context. But it is a question that is relevant to missionaries and church planters serving Christ in antagonistic contexts today. It was certainly germane to the Anabaptists. Hearing the stories of their martyrs and considering the Anabaptists' sacrifices pushed our team to do just that. Given the shifting currents of culture even in a place like America we need to be pushed to consider the depths of our belief. To that end, this exercise, much like the

visit to this amazing cave, would be something not soon forgotten by our team.

### Conclusion

Our trip this past summer was an unforgettable journey to the past. We saw and experienced many amazing things during our eleven-day excursion through Europe. Every day brought something new to see and a different challenge from history to consider. Throughout the journey we were given much to reflect on regarding the Reformers' work during the Reformation and our present labors back home in the twenty-first century.

The Reformers lived in a place and a time that was undoubtedly different than ours. However, being able to walk the streets of their world and consider the complicated legacy they left for the church roused in us an unforeseen thought. The Reformers may be more like us today than we first considered before our journey to Europe. Much like Luther we too are imperfect people searching for reconciliation with God. Nothing has changed in that regard. In that pursuit we may do great things for Christ and his Kingdom, especially as our ministries are tethered closely to and driven by the Word of God. Still, just like those men and women who labored for change during the Reformation, we too are flawed people. Our lives and ministries may be flawed and marred by sin and error. In the end, our stories, much like those of Luther and the other Reformers, are complicated. Thankfully, the story of Christ's work in redemptive history, which was championed and made clear during the Reformation, is not so complex. His is a beautiful story of redemption, of taking the flawed, broken things of this world and making them whole again. This is a truth experienced by Luther and others during the Reformation that rings equally true today.