

Luther's Will

1542

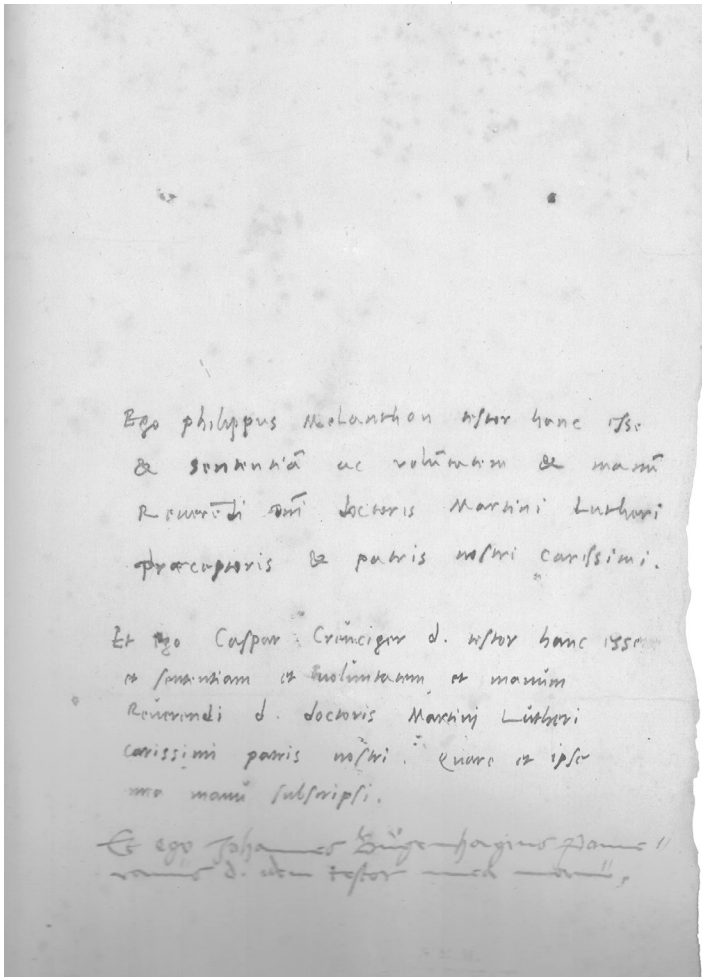
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INTRODUCTION

This document is arguably one of the most personal statements Martin Luther ever made. It displays not the insightful theologian, nor the committed church reformer, nor the implacable foe of the papacy and of all who disagreed with him. It is the simply the personal statement of a husband and father who realized that ill health and advancing years should mean not only a spiritual preparation for the last hour, but also the practical foresight about what then should be done with his property.^a The topic of writing a will and testament had come up for Luther before, but he had not done anything about it. When the year 1542 turned, however, Luther must have suddenly realized that at his age—he was fifty-seven years old at the time—he was delinquent for not having legal provision for his property and thereby for the well-being of his wife, Katie,¹ and their children.

^a For studies on the “late Luther,” see Mark Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Polemics and Politics, 1531–1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), and especially the final volume of Martin Brecht's monumental three-volume biography of Luther: *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

¹ Katherine von Bora (1499–1552).



A portion of Luther's will, written on Epiphany in 1542. The signatures are of Philip Melancthon, Caspar Cruciger, and Johannes Bugenhagen, who served as witnesses.

Clearly growing out of what must have been a sudden impulse, on Epiphany, 6 January 1542, Luther sat down and wrote his will. Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), Kaspar Cruciger (1504–1548), and Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), his three theological colleagues and brethren, were present to co-sign the will. No public official or attorney lawyer was present to point to legal necessities; as a result, the document signed lacked proper legal form, a fact that led to unfortunate legal hassles.

The opening sentences of the document make clear that Luther was fully aware that he was drafting a document that would not conform to proper legal norms and practices of the time. As far as he was concerned this was done for a good reason, thus providing us with an uncannily honest and profound characterization of Luther the human being and husband. Luther was concerned about Katie's financial well-being in her widowhood, and he expressed this concern in touchingly loving words. And while he emphasized that his sons would exercise filial responsibility toward their mother, nonetheless Luther's language does not avoid a tone of slight concern. In due time the Saxon elector John Frederick (1503–1554) was willing to honor Luther's wishes and officially declared the will to be

valid and acceptable, even after he had expressly noted that it lacked proper legal form. Upon Luther's death, the elector must have had some second thoughts, however, for guardians were appointed for the children, precisely what Luther had hoped to

avoid, and which Katie resisted. For Katie the years of her widowhood were clearly a time of hardship, financially and legally, and her correspondence shows her as an energetic and determined individual.

Luther's will also provides us with insight into Luther's financial circumstances. He was the highest-paid professor in the university, and while he did not address this fact in his will, he did specify both his assets and his debts (amounting to just about half of his assets). He also noted prominently the two real-estate properties he had acquired, one at Zulusdorf and, in cryptic wording, "a dwelling, the house of Bruno which I have bought under the name of my man Wolf."²

2. The reference is to Luther's servant Wolf Seberger. It is not clear what happened: Did Luther wish for Seberger to have a dwelling or accommodations? Did he simply act as Luther's representative?



Portrait of John Frederick,
elector of Saxony, by Titian (1550).

3. In 1552, an outbreak of the Black Plague caused Katie to flee to Torgau from Wittenberg for the last time. The cart in which she was riding was involved in a bad accident near Torgau, and the injuries she sustained led to her death three months later.

No inventory of Luther's assets was compiled when he died in February 1546. We know a little bit about Katie's financial circumstances as widow (she died in 1552),³ and they were not that good. The will is found in the archives of the Hungarian Lutheran Church in Budapest, Hungary.



The gravestone and **epitaph** of Katharina von Bora in Marienkirche in Torgau.

[ED: Consider including the text of the epitaph.]



LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF MARTIN LUTHER^b

Wittenberg, 6 January 1542

I, MARTIN LUTHER, Doctor of Sacred Scripture, etc., acknowledge with this my own handwriting that I have given to my beloved and faithful wife Katherine as an endowment (or whatever one can call it) for as long as she will live, which she will be at liberty to manage according to her desire and best interest, and give it to her by means of this document on this present day;

To wit, the small holding at Zülzdorf,⁴ which I purchased and made productive until the present day;

Second, Bruno's house, which I bought under the name of my footman Wolf;⁵

Third, goblets and valuables, such as rings, necklaces, gratuities, gold and silver, which should be worth about a thousand gulden.

I do this because, above all, as a pious and faithful spouse she has at all times held me dear, worthy, and well and with God's rich blessings gave birth to and reared for me five living children (who are still living, God may grant them a long life).

Second, that she should herself assume and pay off the debt, insofar as I am still indebted (what I do not pay off during my lifetime), which may be about four hundred fifty florin as far as I am able to ascertain. There could perhaps also be more.⁶

^b This translation is based on the German text in WA, Br 9, (571) 572-4, and LW 34:295-7.

⁴. Luther had purchased a little farm from Claus Bildenhauer in Zülzdorf, about two miles south of Leipzig. The Elector granted him six hundred florins and a quantity of wood to improve his property. Katie was fond of the estate and Luther referred to her as "Lady Zülzdorf."

⁵. Luther had also purchased the house of Pastor Bruno Bauer in Dobien on 29 June, 1541. Luther's servant Wolf Seberger acted as his agent for the sale.

⁶. It is not clear whether Luther meant to say that the debt might be larger or that his assets might be greater. In either case, this sentence indicates that the worldly possessions of Luther were modest. One needs to keep in mind that Luther was a monk for some twenty years and what compensation he received for his preaching in the town church in Wittenberg was a pittance. Luther's financial situation changed in September 1525, when Georg Spalatin (1484-1545), the elector's right-hand administrator, reorganized the Wittenberg University and provided an annual stipend of two hundred gulden for Luther, the highest in the university. However, most of it came in kind, which was greatly helpful for the ever-present renovations and maintenance work in the Augustinian monastery.