

# Introduction

Martin Luther changed the face of Western Christianity more than anyone either before or after him. The reaction to his work led to a split in the West between the “traditional” believers and the adherents of the Reformation. Yet it would be a distortion of the facts to charge Luther with the greatest ecclesial schism of all time, for the exclusion of those favoring Reformation was instigated from the Roman side. Additionally, the framework of Western Christianity had already for some time been experiencing tremors. Since the work of John Wyclif (ca. 1320–1384) in England and John Huss (ca. 1368–1415) in Bohemia (present-day Czech Republic) frequent criticism had been voiced against the centralizing efforts of Rome. In the century of the Reformation the struggle for a regionalization of the church reached new heights. Yet a regional church had always been presupposed in Eastern Christendom. To this day there exists in the East only the titular primacy of the patriarch of Constantinople who exercises no binding authority over the other Orthodox patriarchs. One could nevertheless accuse Luther of destroying the doctrinal unity of the church. But even this unity between East and West had been irreparably destroyed through the edict of the Roman Pope Leo IX (1002–1054, pope: 1049–1054) against the Eastern church on July 16, 1054, which formalized the separate doctrinal development of the

Western church. One could even credit Luther with instigating a return to the doctrinal tradition of the early church and for rejecting the separate dogmatic and theological development of the West, at least to the extent that, according to his understanding, this development contradicted fundamental biblical teaching.

Much more important than this apologetic consideration, however, is the positive influence that Luther exerted. On the one side, he noticed the similarity of his teaching with that of John Huss, while on the other side he exchanged positional statements with King Henry VIII of England (1491–1547, king: 1509–1547), who aspired to create in England a church independent from Rome. Also not to be overlooked is Luther's considerable influence upon the Reformed wing of the Reformation in Switzerland led by Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) and John Calvin (1509–1564). Both of these Reformers made much effort to come as close as possible to his teaching, as can be seen, for instance, in their debates with Luther over the Lord's Supper. Even the left wing of the Reformation, from Caspar Schwenckfeld (1489–1561) to Balthasar Hubmaier (ca. 1485–1528), was not untouched by Lutheran ideas. Decisive for the Reformation in the West was also the fact that those loyal to the Roman Church, as was demonstrated at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), eliminated unnecessary ballast and returned to the center of the Christian faith even while rejecting that which they held to be ideas of the Reformation. It was no accident, therefore, that the Council of Trent devoted ample time to the doctrine of justification. Without the influence of the ideas of Luther such an emphasis would have been impossible.

Luther is of such central importance for Western Christianity that it is always profitable to recall the crucial data of his biography and the core of his thought. Of course, five hundred years separate us from Martin Luther, during which time the world and intellectual

history have decisively changed. It is sometimes claimed that Luther stood at the beginning of the modern period. In this regard, however, one cannot overlook the fact that Luther lived before the Enlightenment and would have viewed our modern industrial society with wonder, if not indeed as something entirely incomprehensible. “How do I find a gracious God?”—the central question of Luther’s life, which led him first into the monastery and pressed him next toward reformation—sounds strangely outdated for us. In Luther’s day, however, it was an urgent question, since on account of the shorter life expectancy it was questionable whether one would even live to maturity. Luther had experienced this painfully in his own family. Two of his six children, born out of his marriage with Katharina von Bora, died before they reached adulthood. Luther himself was favored with more luck. Nevertheless, he was an old and frail man by the time he died at sixty-two years of age. His body was worn out and had been scarred from various ailments. It is no wonder then that for people of that period this earth offered little and they hoped at least for a better life eternal. Yet for this they needed first of all a gracious God who would not reject them, but would rather receive them into a better afterlife once their brief sojourn in this earthly valley of tears had ended.

When Luther inquired about a gracious God, he expressed a yearning common to nearly all of his contemporaries. For us in the privileged West, however, life presents almost limitless opportunities. Infant mortality has been reduced to a minute percentage. Thanks to modern medicine we can hope for a life free from prolonged pain and disease, and for senior citizens the possibility of an active and interesting life looms ahead. These prospects, however, touch only upon the surface data of our society. Not taken into account is the so-called two-thirds world, whose members stand closer to the conditions of Luther’s time than does our affluent society.

Additionally, one must not forget what our own life is really like behind its glittering facade.

In a medieval family of seven children, one or two of them were expected to reach adulthood and have descendants of their own. In our small modern families, however, if even one child is severed from this life through an auto accident no one remains to carry on the tradition to the next generation. But yet what does “our tradition” mean when our communality is so meager that many cannot even find the courage to marry, or soon abandon their already consummated marriage? Stability and continuity are not characteristics of our modern society. Although we control much and believe ourselves to be able to do almost anything and to have most things well under control, we are haunted by naked fear: the fear of meaninglessness, the fear of losing our job, the fear of winding up life empty-handed. The effort to satisfy immediately every desire, to celebrate today rather than tomorrow, and to still gain some satisfaction out of life points to the fact that we are driven by angst.

Luther’s Reformation discovery of a gracious God can still have a liberating effect upon us today. We need not be anxious, for we are not limited to our own selves and our own accomplishments. God himself is in command, the God who has always shown to be gracious and concerned for us.

Luther detested theological speculations since he was convinced that they led to doubt and uncertainty. But he also strongly rejected looking first to humans and their potential and then to God as a metaphysical scapegoat. In Luther’s thought God occupied first place. Only when God is on our side, the God from whom and to whom we have our being and without whom we cannot accomplish anything, can we meet the future with confidence. The endeavor to accord the divinity of God first place runs through Luther’s entire thought. Already in the battle hymn of the Reformation Luther

stresses, “No strength of ours can match his might! We would be lost, rejected.” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, hymn #503, stanza 2). Luther was more than a seeker after God. He discovered in an existentially decisive manner that the God who created the whole universe is not an indifferent cosmic snob, nor a fatalistically threatening judge, but a God who desires only the best for us and opens for us a new and certain future. Luther arrived at this knowledge because he discovered in Jesus Christ the human face of God. In Jesus he recognized the gracious God. Through the living Christ Luther became aware that faith did not mean to assent to ecclesiastically stipulated propositions, but rather to trust and to rely upon the God who leads us to new shores.