

# RESCUING THE GOSPEL

*The Story and Significance of the Reformation*

ERWIN W. LUTZER



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Erwin W. Lutzer, *Rescuing the Gospel*  
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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lutzer, Erwin W., author.

Title: Rescuing the Gospel : the story and significance of the Reformation / Erwin W. Lutzer.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015040636 (print) | LCCN 2015042411 (ebook) | ISBN 9780801017131 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493401604 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Reformation.

Classification: LCC BR305.3 .L89 2016 (print) | LCC BR305.3 (ebook) | DDC 270.6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015040636>

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Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Interior design by Brian Brunsting

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To John Ankerberg—  
defender of the faith,  
lover of the gospel,  
faithful friend.

I thank God that He has appointed you to His service  
so that you might “contend for the faith that was once  
for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

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# Acknowledgments

**T**hanks to Brian Vos, who came to Chicago and explained his vision for this book and why he thought I should write it! My thanks also to James Korsmo, along with the entire team at Baker Books.

There have been many dozens of books written about Luther, but I am grateful for the classic *Here I Stand* by Roland Bainton and *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* by Heiko A. Oberman. I have quoted from these writers extensively and am thankful for their scholarship and insights.

Finally, I pay special tribute to my lovely wife, Rebecca, who knows only too well that when her husband has a book to write, he spends an inordinate amount of time at his computer. Without her patience and encouragement this book would never have been written. Thanks, also, Rebecca, for your help and companionship in the many trips we have taken to see the Luther sites in Germany! I look forward to us having the privilege of introducing more people to the Reformation.

# Introduction

## *Join Me on a Journey*

**T**hank you for joining me on this important journey. We'll visit Wittenberg, Worms, Erfurt, Geneva, and Zurich. We'll walk through cathedrals, listen to a sermon in a town square, and meet some people whose intellect and courage shook the world. We'll listen to a story of courage and cowardice, of betrayal and faith. And when we are finished, we'll understand ourselves—and our society—much better. Best of all, new appreciation for the one message that can actually change the world will burn within us.

Someone has said that for many Christians, church history began with the first Billy Graham crusade. They think that as long as we derive our beliefs from the Bible, we can ignore the two-thousand-year history of God's people. Church history, they reason, is really only of benefit to scholars and historians. What possible relevance could the past have for the present?

How easy it is to forget that we are heirs of a rich history that began with the New Testament and continues on to this present day. To study church history is to study the ways of God; it is to appreciate His

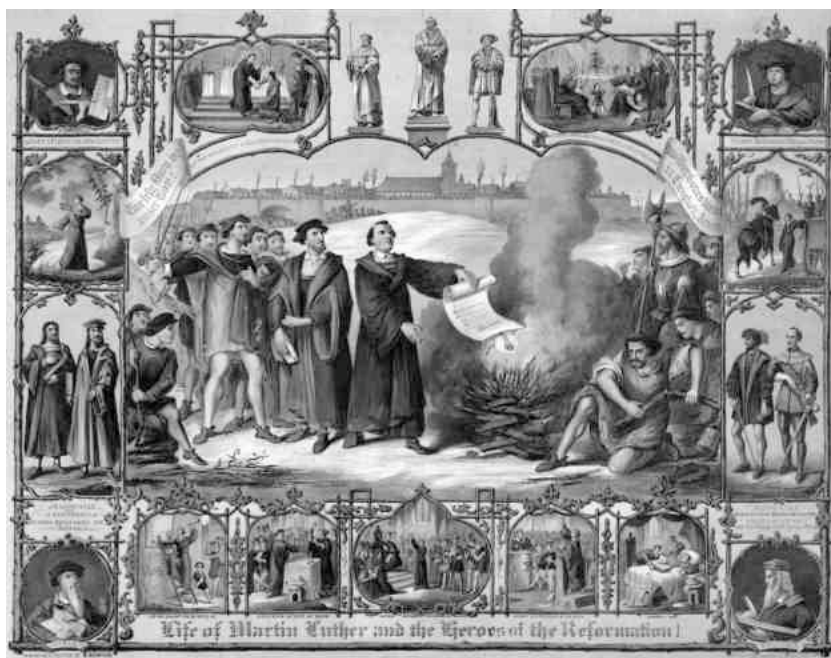
providential guidance of His people. We forget that *the better we understand yesterday, the better we will understand today*.

“The Reformation” refers to a spiritual rebirth that took place in Europe back in the sixteenth century. Many of us believe that it is, by all accounts, the most important recovery of the gospel since the days of the New Testament. When the Reformers were forced to define their faith in the crucible of controversy and hot debate, their conclusions had ramifications that shook their world—and we can still feel their influence. Look around the evangelical world today and you’ll agree that we have to rediscover these same truths if we want our own churches to be all they can be for the glory of God.

Many people ignore the fundamental beliefs of the Reformation, thinking that there might be a better way to rescue our nation from the assault of secularism, pagan spirituality, and the proliferation of false religions. Others are unaware of what the fundamental issues of the Reformation really were, much less appreciate their relevance for today’s world. The doctrinal apathy among many Christians in our nation is deserving of tears.

Church growth experts tell us that most people seeking a new church care little about its doctrine. They’re mostly interested in the facilities of the church, its nursery, and opportunities for friendship. In fact, we are told that doctrinal teaching in new members’ classes will actually turn people away rather than encourage them to join the church. The experts tell us that today’s church members will switch churches at a moment’s notice if they think that their personal and relational needs will be better met elsewhere—even if the doctrine taught is, at best, suspect. Thus some will opt for better facilities and architecture even at the expense of jeopardizing their own soul.

As long as indulgences are no longer for sale in a town square, and as long as the pope is no longer squandering the coffers of the church to finance unrestrained sensuality, then, as many believe, the issues of



The main image depicts Martin Luther burning the papal bull of excommunication. Episodes from the life of Luther and portraits of other Reformers make up the border.

the Reformation are no longer relevant. How wrong! Nearly all of the conflicts of the Reformation are still ongoing today, albeit with different players and in a different context. Woody Allen was right: “History repeats itself. It has to—nobody listens the first time around.”<sup>1</sup>

I’m glad you think differently. The fact that you’ve read this far tells me that you are interested in the past because you know that it will shed light on the present. You’re willing to join our journey and learn more about the truths that made the church great. You will be rewarded; I promise.

On our journey we’re going to work through several topics.

We’ll begin by examining Martin Luther’s own spiritual journey and pinpoint the most important questions we need to ask ourselves about theology: How can a sinner stand in the presence of God? How perfect



do we have to be in order to get to heaven? We'll sketch just enough of the background so that you'll see the conflict between Protestant and Catholic doctrine in context. And in the process, you might discover that the gospel you've heard falls short of its full, robust biblical implications.

Along the way, we'll ask (and answer) the following questions:

Do only good people go to heaven? If so, how good do we have to be?  
Do priests and pastors have special privileges in the sight of God that are not accessible to ordinary believers?

What is the nature of the church? Should we have a regional church that encompasses all who live in a geographical area, or should it be limited to those who have personally trusted in Christ?

To what extent should we accept tradition into our church life and belief system? Is all tradition bad? If not, what should we keep, and what should we discard?

What does it mean to say that Christ is "the head of the church"?  
And how does your answer impact whatever church you happen to attend?

When you participate in the Lord's Supper, are you literally or symbolically eating and drinking Christ's body and blood? And is infant baptism the means of entry into the Christian life?

And perhaps most important, we will answer the question, "Is the Reformation over?"

At the root of these matters is the issue of *sola Scriptura*, that is, whether the Bible is sufficient and complete as a revelation from God. We will discover that in Luther's time, as in ours, there were many who denied that the Bible is the sole basis for faith and practice. Today, we are awash with self-styled prophets and preachers who claim to receive additional revelations directly from God. Luther was outraged at the

claims made by such prophets in his day, and many of our televangelists would do well to listen to what he had to say.

We'll also consider the matter of freedom of religion. We who live in the West take freedom of religion for granted without realizing that throughout most of the church's two-thousand-year history there were no such freedoms. Heretics—often sincere Christians—were burned at the stake. When Luther gave his famous pronouncement at the Diet of Worms, “My conscience is taken captive by the Word of God. . . . To go against conscience is neither right nor safe,” he was opposing more than a thousand years of church tradition. Indeed, he was the one who planted the seeds of freedom of conscience that were realized in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. We dare not take this precious gift for granted.

The Reformation also speaks to our own day about the relationship between the church and the state. Although “separation of church and state” is an idea largely attributed to the United States, the Reformers tackled the topic and often differed as to how Christians should relate to civil authorities. Luther believed that the state (civil authorities) should correct the abuses of a corrupt church. Yet he strongly opposed Protestants fighting a religious war with Catholics, believing that the Christian fights on his knees in prayer. Huldrych Zwingli disagreed and was killed outside Zurich as a chaplain for the Protestant army that fought against the Catholics. Church/state issues are complex, but history helps us define the issues.



Ulrich Zwingli pastored the Grossmünster (Great Cathedral) in Zurich.

By the end of our journey, we'll be encouraged to learn that God uses imperfect people in His work. We'll marvel at Luther's courage and be bewildered by his anger and personal vendettas. We'll be impressed with John Calvin's mind and yet question his wisdom in agreeing with the decision of the Geneva city council to have the heretic Michael Servetus burned at the stake. We'll be deeply disappointed in Zwingli for agreeing with the Zurich city council that those who rejected the doctrine of infant baptism (and therefore baptize one another as believers) should be put to death.

And yes, we'll learn that faith has a price tag. Whether it is John Hus burned for his beliefs at the Council of Constance or Felix Manz forcibly drowned in the Limmat river, we'll be surprised at the many thousands who were martyred for their faith. We'll be astonished at just how dark God allowed the world to become before the flickers were fanned into a flame in Germany that would eventually shine around the world.

On at least a half dozen occasions it's been my privilege to lead a tour to the sites of the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland. Each time the tours end, I leave more deeply committed to defend "the faith . . . once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3 KJV). As you join me on this journey, I hope you'll be instructed, inspired, and determined to stand for the clarity of the gospel at any cost. Together we'll be intellectually stretched and spiritually enriched. We have to rescue the gospel from distortions, cheap substitutes, and neglect.

We will rediscover those truths that made the church great.

## Power, Scandals, and Corruption

**C**hristianity can survive without the gospel. Let me clarify. There is a form of Christianity that developed in medieval times that has survived to this day without the gospel. It is, of course, a powerless Christianity that cannot give people the assurance of salvation, nor does it lead to lives of holiness—but it is still called *Christianity*. Yes, whether Catholic or Protestant, every generation, including ours, has to fight for the purity of the gospel. It's our nature to reject the gospel's verdict on us and resist the profound simplicity of its transforming message of grace. The gospel must always be defended, and sometimes it must be *rescued*.

By any estimation, at the close of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, the Catholic Church was in desperate need of reformation. Many of the church leaders were living in shameless

decadence that bred cynicism among the common worshipers. Queen Isabella of Castile (1451–1504) wrote that the “majority of the clergy are living in open concubinage, and if our justice intervenes in order to punish them, they revolt and create a scandal, and that they despise our justice to the point that they arm themselves against it.”<sup>1</sup>

Or consider this assessment of medieval Christianity by Andrea di Strumi. “At that time, however, the ecclesiastical order was corrupted by so many errors that hardly anyone could be found who was truly in his proper place. Some served the pleasures of the hunt, wandering about with hounds and hawks, others were tavern-keepers and wicked overseers . . . almost all led shameful lives either with wives who had been acknowledged publicly or with concubines.”<sup>2</sup>

By this time, the gospel had been buried under centuries of traditions and superstitions. As one writer put it, “We had too many churches, too many relics (true and fake), too many untruthful miracles. Instead of worshiping the only living Lord, we worshiped dead bones; in the place of immortal Christ, we worshiped mortal bread [the consecrated bread of the mass].”<sup>3</sup>

As the power of the Catholic Church grew, so did the exaggerated claims of spiritual authority. Priests, who were taught that they had the power to turn ordinary bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ, believed that they could also withhold or grant salvation to whomever they wished. And certainly the pope could open heaven for his friends or send his enemies to hell. Clearly, the gospel needed to be rescued from the misleading traditions of medieval Christianity.

Even ardent Catholics will admit that the church needed reform—and needed it badly. They might wish that the reforms hadn’t gone as far as they did under Luther, but they have to acknowledge that the church had been sliding into corruption for centuries and that the abuses needed to be halted.

## The Babylonian Captivity of the Church

Let's review a bit of history. Consider this scandal. Beginning in 1305 and lasting until 1377 (a total of seventy-two years), there were six successive popes, all of French origin, ruling from Avignon in southern France. Can you imagine the reaction of the citizens of Rome to the humiliation that their city—believed for centuries to be the burial site of St. Peter's remains—no longer housed the papacy? This usurpation of authority was deeply resented not only in Italy but also in Germany. Since Rome refused to support the “rebel” papacy, the French popes raised money in any way they could, whether through taxes, wars, or bribery.

This period in church history is known as “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” because the papacy was absent from Rome or held captive in France for seventy years (actually, seventy-two years), just as Israel was held captive in Babylon for seventy years.

The Italians were ecstatic when at last, in 1377, an Italian pope was elected and the papacy moved back to Rome. But now an even more embarrassing scandal erupted. The pope who had been ruling in Avignon refused to resign. Now there were *two* popes ruling simultaneously. And when both of them were deposed by the cardinals and a new pope elected, they both refused to accept the decision and step down. This resulted in *three* popes ruling at the same time. All three claimed to be the legitimate successor to Peter, calling the others “antichrist” and selling indulgences to make enough money to fight against the other two.

It wasn't until the Council of Constance in 1414 that all three popes stepped down and made room for one successor. The thirty-six-year period in which there were multiple rival popes (who weren't exactly role models of credibility and humility) is known as “The Papal Schism.”

These scandals, of course, made the common people doubt that the papacy represented Christ, the head of the church. What's more, various

countries in Europe sided with one pope or another, thus the confusion and corruption of the church was clear for all to see. Loyalty to the papacy was at the very least questioned if not altogether abandoned.

Yes, obviously, some people did understand and believe the gospel during these centuries of spiritual darkness and confusion. Monks who had access to the Scriptures often experienced personal devotion to Christ. The gospel, though buried under centuries of conflicting traditions, could be found by those who sought it out. God did not leave Himself without a witness.

## Abuses Tolerated

Other abuses of power also haunted the church. Clergy who were brought to trial for one reason or another were tried by a tribunal of the church, not in civil courts. Today in the United States, priests are subject to our constitutional and civil laws, but in those days, they were tried by canon law as interpreted by their own peers. We can imagine the abuses that were tolerated by appointed churchmen who were more interested in protecting their colleagues and grasping for power than in acting for what was best for the people, or more important, what was honoring to God. The attempts by the church to cover its sins were obvious.

Simony (the selling of spiritual positions for money) was rampant. “Bishop bricks” were sold to the highest bidder. The legal recognition of Christianity under Constantine in the fourth century and the church’s rise to wealth and power increased the temptation of church leaders to accept “gifts” in exchange for spiritual or sacred positions. Thus the church became wealthy



A twelfth-century painting showing an abbot selling a church position. The term “simony” derives from Simon Magus, who offered to buy the Holy Spirit from the apostles in Acts 8.

by acquiring lands and money, and as we might expect, the spiritual rulers who paid for their own promotions were often immoral and corrupt.

Parishioners were grateful that centuries earlier the church had decreed that the lifestyle of the priest did not affect the validity of the sacraments. Indeed, none other than the great theologian Augustine said that the sacraments had value *ex opere operato* (“out of the working of the works,” or “in and of themselves”), even if the rituals were performed by “thieves and robbers.” Therefore people need not fear that the sacraments they received were invalid. But for reasons that will be made clear later in this book, the common people were denied the privilege of hearing a gospel that would give them the assurance of eternal life. Doubt—often fearful doubt—about one’s personal salvation was common and actually encouraged by the church. To be certain of one’s personal salvation was considered to be the sin of presumption.

Long before Martin Luther arrived on the scene, ripples of reform weakened the monopoly the church had on people’s souls. Thousands of people, both in England and continental Europe, knew that reform was long overdue and were ready to support it when it came. As we shall see, Luther stood on the shoulders of others who had affirmed the same doctrinal convictions that he would come to believe. Although the official church was able to squelch previous reform movements, it wasn’t able to stem the



This illustration from a Czech manuscript depicts the devil selling indulgences nearly thirty years before Martin Luther published the *Ninety-Five Theses*.



tide started by Luther. The eventual break from Rome ignited under Luther was both final and irreversible.

In the next chapter, we'll look at two voices of reform that began a stream that eventually flowed into a larger river of reform under the leadership of Martin Luther. It's not too much to say that we cannot understand Luther unless we first grasp the impact of these two forerunners of the Reformation movement. Even Luther himself acknowledged that he stood on the shoulders of these giants of the faith.