Martin Luther: The First Forty Years In Remembrance of the 500th Anniversary of His Birth

Hans-Wilhelm Kelling

On 10 November 1983 the Protestant community throughout the world will commemorate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s birth. In honor of this event conferences and symposia will be held throughout Western Europe and the United States. Although Luther’s accomplishments are primarily acclaimed by Protestant scholars and theologians, the Catholic position towards the reformer has softened considerably, and recent Catholic scholarship has viewed Luther’s reforms objectively and often with a considerable sense of appreciation.

Not only the Protestant denominations, and lately the Catholic church, acknowledge Luther as a spiritual leader, but The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well esteems him and the other reformers highly and regards them as prominent forerunners of the Restoration. Statements by Church leaders underline the vital role which the reformers played in preparing the way for Joseph Smith, and it is fitting to review some of Luther’s considerable accomplishments and to recall his major contributions in recognition of his birthday anniversary.

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1Since Luther was born in Saxony, an area which is now located in East Germany, even the German Democratic Republic is holding a Luther symposium to which scholars from all over the world are invited. The places where the main events of the Reformation took place have been restored or renovated, and a flood of tourists is expected. Although 1983 is also the 100th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, it is Luther, ironically, who is receiving top billing since the state expects to earn much more Western currency from visitors who will visit the Luther shrines than it would from Marxists. (See "Mit Luther Ist Alles in Butter" in Der Spiegel, 7 March 1983, pp. 103–13.)

2John M. Todd, Martin Luther (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1965). John M. Todd, Luther (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982). Most Catholic theologians today concede that Luther was a profound spiritual force and that he was driven into open rebellion by the corruption of the church and the intransigent and unenlightened position of the popes and their advisers. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) adopted many of Luther’s demands without, however, officially giving him credit: the use of the vernacular in liturgy, the priority of scripture over church tradition, Christ as the central focus of man’s faith, the serving of the Lord’s Supper (both bread and wine) to the laity, and the church as the people of God who all share in the priesthood of Christ.
Probably the best-known and most frequently paraphrased reference in the Church to Martin Luther is a remark made by the Prophet Joseph Smith during spring conference in Nauvoo on 7 April 1844 concerning the excellence of the German Bible translation. Actually, the Prophet does not mention Luther by name, but it seems certain that he referred to Luther's translation of the Bible when he stated: "I have an old book in Latin Greek Hebrew & German, & I have been readg. the Germ: I find it to be the most correct that I have found & it corresponds the nearest to the revns. that I have given the last 16 yrs." In view of Joseph Smith's long labors of translating scriptures and giving voice to many revelations, his remark is indeed a significant tribute to Germany's most famous Bible translator. In Sunday School and seminary lesson materials and on certain appropriate occasions, the Church has acknowledged the gratitude of the Saints to the German reformer. In their centennial message to the Saints and to the world published in April 1930, the First Presidency stated: "When . . . Martin Luther and others gave the Holy Scriptures to the people of the world, and in the strength of Israel's God declared the truth, the beginning of the end had come." An even more encompassing statement concerning the Reformation was made in 1907 by President Joseph F. Smith in an editorial entitled "Fountain of Truth," published in the Improvement Era:

Calvin, Luther, Melanchthon, and all the reformers, were inspired in thoughts, words, and actions, to accomplish what they did for the amelioration, liberty, and advancement of the human race. They paved the way for the more perfect gospel of truth to come. Their inspiration, as with that of the ancients, came from the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the one true living God. This article validates President Smith's statement and also identifies some of the limitations of Luther's reformatory efforts.

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, reared and educated in Mansfield, Erfurt, and later in Wittenberg, small towns then located

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1Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1980), p. 351. See also pp. 358, 366, and 402. "Joseph then observed that he considered the German translation of the Scriptures more correct than any other and furthermore he believed the German people were more honest than many other nations" (ibid., p. 402).

2James R. Clark, ed., Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 5:279. In a discourse delivered in Rexburg, Idaho, on 17 August 1884, President John Taylor reviewed the accomplishments of Martin Luther and his able co-worker Philipp Melanchthon and acknowledged that they performed their labors under the influence of the Spirit of God: "They were good men. They sought to do good, and did do good: for he that doeth righteousness is righteous. They followed the leadings of that portion of the Spirit of God which is given to all men to profit withal. They operated in the interest of humanity." (Journal of Discourses, 26 vols. [London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-86; reprint ed., 1967], 25:263-64.)

3Joseph F. Smith, "Editor's Table: Fountain of Truth," Improvement Era 10 (June 1907): 629.
Portrait of Martin Luther by his friend Lucas Cranach the Elder
in the Electorate of Saxony but now in the southwest section of the German Democratic Republic. Luther's father, an ambitious man who had advanced from miner to part-owner and manager of several mines, planned for his son to become a legal counselor or diplomat at the court of one of the numerous German rulers. Consequently, Martin attended good secondary schools and then studied law at Erfurt, receiving his B.A. and M.A. degrees in 1502 and 1505. His legal training provided him with the basis for clear and logical argumentation which distinguishes him in his many debates and publications. The passing of a friend and a close encounter with death during a violent thunderstorm in July 1505 caused him to change his career and enter the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt to devote his life to the Lord. Although his decision to become a monk is sometimes depicted as unfounded and rash, it must be pointed out that Luther was reared as a devout Catholic by pious parents and that devotion to God and the church had been a natural and daily part of his life since childhood. The study of theology and service to God had been considered as an alternative to the legal profession for some time. In 1507 he was ordained a priest and in 1512 was awarded the Doctor of Theology degree from the newly founded University of Wittenberg. In addition to his duties as a member of the Augustinian order and as a priest, he was entrusted with an ever-increasing amount of administrative duties and with the chair of Bible Studies at the university.

During the years in the monastery, as a student of theology, as a minister of the gospel, and as a professor, Luther was plagued by a fundamental question: What can sinful man expect from God's justice? Luther longed for God's grace but feared His condemnation. He endured agonizing mental and painful physical torture. How could he please a God who was angry with him, and how could he escape His vengeance? The church had prescribed the way of meticulous confession and of the performance of good works. In order to gain God's forgiveness and favor, man has to confess his sins and become pure. Luther went to confession daily, often several times a day. At least once he confessed for six hours, and when he was finally finished he had still forgotten to confess a minor detail. He panicked. Man cannot be forgiven if he does not confess, yet how can he confess if he cannot remember every single detail of his wrongdoings? When his confessors in exasperation and his superiors in

6Germany did not become a unified nation until 1871. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Germany was divided into more than three hundred principalities which more or less solemnly pledged allegiance to an emperor.
loving sympathy assured him that his minor transgressions were inconsequential and that there was nothing to fear, he became convinced that they did not understand the sacrament of confession and that all his confessions thus had been to no avail. Luther was desperate. He was certain that his immortal soul would be summoned to eternal damnation by the dreaded adversary. He chose twenty-one saints, three for each day of the week to intercede for him at the Father's throne, but still God remained angry. Luther began to hate God, which is the most terrible of all sins. He later recalled:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.⁹

Finally, after years of agonizing struggle, he received insights and light from the study of the Bible. To us it seems strange that Luther did not turn to the scriptures earlier for answers, but it must be remembered that the study of the Bible was not part of a theological education in his day. The many commentaries on the Bible written by church authorities, as well as the laws and rules of the church originating from pronouncements of popes and church councils, were the primary sources for the study of theology. In reading the Old Testament, Luther came across the first verse in the 22d Psalm: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Instantly able to sympathize with David, and with what became the agonizing cry of the Savior on the cross, for the first time he felt understood. God's own son had also experienced the total alienation from the Father. Because of His identification with man and His participation in man's alienation, Christ, the judge, will understand Luther, the man; and the Father, who raised up Christ triumphantly after having totally abandoned Him, will also raise up man. This miracle, Luther explained, remains mysterious and cannot be explained or fathomed by human reason, but must be accepted with simple, childlike faith.

⁹In the Catholic tradition a saint is a person who has accumulated during his lifetime more merits than are necessary for his own salvation. Because saints are considered to be especially favored by God, their intercession with the Father is believed to soften His heart.

Luther continued his search into the Bible, and as he compared the Latin vulgate—the standard translation accepted officially by the Church—with the more original Greek manuscripts, he gained additional insights. Thus he came to understand, for example, that the Greek word for justice has the double meaning of ‘justice’ and ‘justification,’” and he was comforted by the thought that the judge can justify the sinner and express confidence and personal interest in him and thus reclaim him from the clutches of Satan. Particularly the epistles of Paul shaped Luther’s understanding, and he accepted Paul’s terminology of justification by faith. “The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17) became a basic tenet of his philosophy and the source for his reading and interpretation of all scripture.9

In order to appreciate Luther’s attack on indulgences, one needs to understand his emphasis on salvation through faith. The sale of indulgences had become a major scandal decried by honest and concerned men throughout Europe. An indulgence in Catholic theology is a remission of temporal punishment which is due here on earth or in purgatory by divine justice for sins “whose eternal punishment has been remitted and whose guilt has been pardoned by the reception of the sacrament of penance.”10 The practice of transferring merits had become a lucrative proposition for the church and was being shamelessly exploited by insensitive church officials for their own private gain. It had become standard procedure to sell indulgences to raise money for “holy” wars against unbelievers, for the building of churches, and for the payment of church offices and privileges.11

Although Frederick the Wise, the Elector and ruler in Saxon, to which Wittenberg belonged, did not permit the sale of indulgences...

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9Ibid., 34:337.

10Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, s.v. “indulgence.” The pope’s right to grant indulgences was based on the view that although sins must be accounted for individually one by one, goodness can be pooled. The pope assumed stewardship of the huge pool of good deeds which, over centuries, were thought to have been accumulated by Jesus, Mary, and the hundreds of saints who had done more good deeds than were necessary for their own salvation. This treasury of merits could be dispensed to sinners by the pope, who claimed the keys to bind and to loosen on earth. Such a credit transfer was referred to as an indulgence. In Luther’s time the papacy had decreed that indulgences could be granted not only to living persons but would be efficacious even for the souls of dead ancestors or family members who were believed to be suffering in purgatory. (See Luther’s Ninety-five Theses as quoted in Luther’s Works, 31:25–33.)

11Ostensibly the indulgence of 1517 was offered to raise money for the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, but in reality huge sums were diverted to kings and bankers for their personal coffers. King Henry VIII of England, for example, was permitted to keep a fourth of the proceeds collected and King Charles I of Spain was advanced a loan of 175,000 ducats (approximately $10,000,000). In Germany the Augsburg banking house of the Fuggers was allowed to take 20,000 florins which they had loaned to Albrecht of Brandenburg, who had to pay huge sums to the pope for his confirmation as Archbishop of Mainz. (Will Durant, The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300–1564, vol. 6 of The Story of Civilization [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957], p. 338. According to Durant’s estimate, 20,000 florins would be equivalent to approximately $500,000 in 1957 dollars, but if we accept the price of gold at $500 an ounce, it would now be $1,000,000. See ibid., p. 295.)
in his territory, his subjects had no difficulty availing themselves of the documents by simply crossing the river to the neighboring territory. They joyfully returned to Wittenberg with the letters of indulgence and believed that their sins had been forgiven them. This greatly troubled Luther, who knew that contrition and deep sorrow were necessary prerequisites for divine forgiveness and that his parishioners were in danger of losing their salvation by believing the claims of unscrupulous salesmen. He decided to act and call on his learned colleagues to debate the issue of indulgences. He proposed that the basis for the academic disputation should be ninety-five short, crisply worded propositions or discussion points called theses. Following established custom, he posted the ninety-five theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on the eve of a major holiday, All Saints’ Day, 31 October 1517.

The issues which Luther raised were of considerable public interest, and Luther’s arguments were very quickly circulated throughout Europe. This was made possible through the medium of the printing press which had only recently been perfected by Johannes Gutenberg. Although the original propositions had been penned in Latin, within weeks German translations were made available to the lay people.

At the outset (theses 1–5), Luther asserted that the entire life of a believer must be one of repentance and that the sacrament of penance does not meet the Savior’s requirement as stated in Matt. 4:17: “Repent: for the kingdom is at hand.” The Latin version of the word repent, poenitentiam agite, was interpreted by the church to mean “do penance.” Referring to the Greek text, however, Luther contended that the actual meaning was “be penitent,” “change your heart,” or “turn away from your sins.” Luther denied the power of the pope to release sinners from purgatory and to absolve sins. No storehouse of credits exists, he stated, from which the pope could dispense indulgences:

5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons. . . .

12Frederick did not forbid the sale for theological reasons but rather because he wanted to protect his own profit-making business. Special shrines with sacred relics had been established throughout the Catholic world—but especially in Rome—which devout pilgrims believed had the power to remit sins. Frederick was an ardent collector of relics and accumulated so many that Wittenberg was often referred to as the German Rome. His collection contained thousands of bones, teeth, hairs, and pieces of clothing of various saints; one piece of bread eaten at the last supper, one piece of stone on which Jesus stood to ascend into heaven. The viewing of these relics, accompanied by stipulated contributions, made possible the reduction of a stay in purgatory for oneself or others “to the extent of 1,902,202 years and 270 days.” Frederick did not intend to lose considerable income for his own coffers and for this reason forbade the indulgence salesmen to enter his territory. (Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950], pp. 69–71.)


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20. Therefore the pope, when he uses the words "plenary remission of all penalties," does not actually mean "all penalties," but only those imposed by himself.

21. Thus those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences.

22. As a matter of fact, the pope remits to souls in purgatory no penalty which, according to canon law, they should have paid in this life.

23. If remission of all penalties whatsoever could be granted to anyone at all, certainly it would be granted to the most perfect, that is, to very few.

24. For this reason most people are necessarily deceived by that indescribable and high-sounding promise of release from penalty. . . .

25. They who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges preach unchristian doctrine. . . .

27. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letter. 14

The two most appealing arguments are stated in theses 82 and 88. If the pope were a loving Christian, concerned with the salvation of Christians, and if he has the power to release souls from suffering, why does he not freely do so for everyone?

82. "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church? The former reason would be most just; the latter is most trivial."

Why are indulgences only issued during certain specified time periods? Luther objected to the idea that one had better hurry and buy before the sale ends.

88. "What greater blessing could come to the church than if the pope were to bestow these remissions and blessings on every believer a hundred times a day, as he now does but once?" 15

In other theses Luther contended that indulgences are actually harmful to the recipient since they impede his salvation. Christians must be taught to love one another and freely give to the poor, not to the rich princes of the church. The pope, cardinals, and bishops must not amass huge fortunes but should distribute their wealth among the needy and serve for the love of God and man.

14Luther's Works, 31:27-29.
15Ibid., 31:32-33.
The great appeal of Luther's arguments is readily appreciated. It must be remembered that Luther's intent at this point was not to attack or abolish the papacy or the church, but to correct gross errors and practices which were committed by unworthy men who Luther thought were possibly acting without the pope's full knowledge. It was the Dominican order which had been commissioned to spearhead the sale, and the ensuing debate matched the Dominicans against the Augustinians, who generally sided with Luther. Thus Luther quickly made several powerful and influential enemies, who misrepresented his position in Rome, and he consequently incurred the wrath and anger of the papacy and the church hierarchy. Several attempts by well-meaning men at reconciliation failed, mostly because of the intransigence of the church hierarchy and because of the veritable flood of acrimonious writings against Luther to which he felt compelled to reply, often in language equally as sharp, insulting, and crude as his opponents.

Three monumental events brought about Luther's final break with the church and led to his establishing a new denomination: (1) the debate with Professor Johann Eck in Leipzig in July 1519, (2) the issuance of the papal bull of excommunication in late 1520, and (3) the stripping of Luther's civil rights by the imperial Diet of Worms in May 1521.

The ninety-five theses were the subject of discussion between Eck and Luther. Johann Eck, a formidable debater, skillfully maneuvered Luther onto dangerous ground. He pressed his opponent to declare that the only head of the church is Christ, that popes had often erred in matters of doctrine, and, most serious of all, that church councils had been fallible in the past and issued contradictory decrees. For Luther, Holy Scripture was the final and true authority, not the canon law of the church, the pronouncements of popes and councils, or the statements by honored church fathers and theologians. Eck succeeded in associating Luther with John Huss, who had been burned at the stake as a heretic and whose teachings had been condemned as abominable. Luther was tricked into accepting some of Huss's articles as Christian and evangelical. By getting Luther to express such sentiments, Eck inflicted heavy damage on Luther's reputation and standing in the church, associated him with the despised Hussites, and succeeded in labelling him a heretic. Not only Luther's repeated

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16John Huss (1369–1415) opposed the growing secularization of the church and called for reforms and closer adherence to the gospel principles as they are taught in the Bible. Huss was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance. His followers, who were located mostly in Bohemia, rose in arms against the Catholic forces and desired privileges.
outbursts against the papal office and the person occupying the Chair of the Bishop of Rome and also his various publications directed against church doctrines, led to his excommunication on 2 January 1521. He had been warned repeatedly that he would be excommunicated if he did not accept the church’s ultimatum to recant completely and submit himself to church authority in Rome. Luther’s answer was to burn the papal decree and a set of church laws in a bonfire in Wittenberg attended by his students and fellow faculty. A few months later he was summoned before the imperial Diet of Worms.

Until the spring of 1521 the Emperor Charles V, a staunch defender of the church, had been too occupied with political and military matters in territories outside of the German principalities to pay much attention to the situation within. When he finally managed to call the Reichstag, the assembly of German princes and rulers, into session, Luther had won the sympathies of many of the dignitaries and was much more popular with the people than the emperor. On 18 April, before the emperor and the august gathering of princes, bishops, and potentates, Luther defended his writings and when pressed hard to recant his views, he uttered these famous and dramatic words:

Un[]e 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 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 will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.17

The assembly did not agree on what action to take. Some wanted to move very cautiously so as not to arouse the knights and the people to violent action. Others found it politically expedient to side with Luther. Finally, on 26 May 1521 after much debate and after most of Luther’s supporters had left Worms, the emperor signed the edict, which had been prepared by papal emissaries. Luther was stripped of all civil rights. It also placed anyone who would shelter, feed, or aid him in danger of similar censure. All of his writings were condemned

17The scene has lent itself readily to dramatic embellishment in writing and painting, and indeed it was one of those rare moments when an outstanding individual is about to change the course of history forever. Tradition has it that Luther actually spoke the words “I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.” It is generally assumed, however, that the words “here I stand, may God help me” were inserted later by an admiring scribe to the officially printed text of the proceedings. The German words inserted into the official Latin text read: “Ich kann nicht anders, ich stehe ich. Gott helf mir. Amen.” (See D. Martin Luther’s Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 92 vols. [Weimar: Hermann Boelhau Nachfolger, 1883–1970], 7:838; Luther’s Works, 32:113; and Deutsche Reichstagekunden unter Karl V, ed. Adolf Wrede [Goettingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1962], 2:555–56, especially n. 1.)
and forbidden to be printed or distributed. Luther himself had already left the city in April and on his way home had been taken into protective custody by his sovereign, Frederick the Wise. For ten months he stayed in hiding in the Wartburg Castle near Wittenberg, where he occupied his time with the translation of the New Testament from Greek manuscripts into German.  

While Luther was in retreat, his followers in Wittenberg, many of whom were much more radical than he, took matters into their own hands and started to reshape the church. They encouraged monks and nuns to leave their monasteries and marry; they changed the celebration of the mass and served the Lord’s Supper, both bread and wine, to the laity even without requiring previous confession. They removed images and pictures from the churches, stripped the priest of his vestments, instituted adult baptism by immersion, established societies which held all things in common, encouraged a paradisiacal Garden of Eden atmosphere in which people would walk around naked, and advocated the death penalty for those who did not accept these reforms. The more moderate elements were losing control and appealed to Luther for intervention. Luther returned to Wittenberg, took firm control, and condemned most of the radical changes. In consultation with such eminent scholars as Philipp Melanchthon, Luther in the ensuing years instituted the following reforms: permitting monks and nuns to leave the monasteries and marry if they so desired; dismissing priests whose only responsibility had been to read masses for the dead; changing the mass—giving the sermon a more central importance—and reading the mass and the scriptures in German; and serving the Lord’s Supper in both kinds to everyone who wished to partake. Luther himself married a former nun, Katharina von Bora, in 1525 and became a devoted father to his six children.

18The Old Testament translation was completed about ten years later. The Bible translation became a best-seller because it was written in language and style which the common man could easily understand. It also became the basis for the development of the German literary language and made possible the great flowering of German literature in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

19The church had strictly required confession before participation in the Lord’s Supper and only the bread was served to the laity. The cup was served to the priest, who drank the wine vicariously for the congregation.

20Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) became Luther’s closest associate and worked diligently but unsuccessfully to avoid a complete break with the Catholic church. He was a brilliant scholar and humanist who possessed extensive knowledge of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and the liberal arts. He aided Luther in his debates and in composing his pamphlets, and he clearly enunciated the principle of scriptural authority against the primacy of the pope. His writings are systematic and authoritative statements of theology in Protestantism. Melanchthon composed the Augsburg Confession (1530), the basic statement of Protestantism which constituted the irreparable break with the Catholics, and the famous Apology (1531), which is regarded as one of the most intelligent theological writings of the Reformation and a fundamental statement of Lutheranism. Melanchthon is also called the “Preceptor of Germany” for his ground-breaking work in founding preparatory schools and reorganizing the university system. He, not Luther, is the actual founder of the Protestant public school system.
Among Luther's voluminous writings, the three reformatory treatises, except for the Bible translation, are his most famous and popular works. They were all composed and published in 1520 before Luther was summoned before the Diet of Worms. The best known of the three, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, was addressed to the German political leaders, written in German, and printed on 18 August. The second, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, was published on 6 October, originally in Latin because it was not intended for the average Christian, but for theologians and scholars. The third pamphlet, *The Freedom of a Christian*, was completed in early November and was also in Latin. It, along with a letter, was addressed to Pope Leo X and is more conciliatory in tone than the first two publications.

When writing *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther benefited from the advice and cooperation of officials of the Saxon Court who were anxious to make him their eloquent spokesman. In it he placed the responsibility for reform firmly on the nobility and denounced the three basic claims of the church: (1) that the power of the church is superior to power of the state, (2) that only the pope may interpret scripture, and (3) that only the pope may convene church councils. In denying the Catholic claim of the fundamental distinction between the priestly class and the laity, Luther asserted that all Christians are equal, that through baptism all men are priests (obviously it was much too early even to consider the equality of women), and that every soul—including the pope's—is subject to secular authority. This latter point is important in that it reverses the centuries-old period of church domination in secular affairs. By placing the church under the protection and guidance of civil authority, Luther laid the foundation for the national church, the *Landeskirche*, the concept that church and state are involved with each other to the extent that the state collects and distributes church taxes, pays the clergy, and, in a way, supervises church affairs. This concept originated early during the Reformation since the various Lutheran church communities, breaking off from the mother church, obviously needed supervision and guidance which was best provided under the auspices of the lords and city councils. The legal basis for this arrangement was initially formed after the religious wars in the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and

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22The German title is *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung*. The second part of the title, *von des christlichen Standes Besserung* ("Concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate"), is usually left out in English translations. (See Luthers Werke, 7:381, 404–69.)
23*De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae* in Luthers Werke, 6:489, 497–573.
24*Tractatus de liberate christiana* in Luthers Werke, 7:12–38, 49–73.
the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and buttressed through the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*, which asserts that the government determines the religious affiliation of its subjects.

In the main body of the treatise addressed to the Christian nobility, Luther strongly indicted specific abuses practiced by the church and made numerous proposals for reform. Again and again Rome was taken to task for having dominated both the German emperor and his feudal lords in Germany and for having extorted heavy taxes from the people:

Some have estimated that more than three hundred thousand gulden a year [\$15,000,000] find their way from Germany to Rome. This money serves no use or purpose. We get nothing for it except scorn and contempt. And we still go on wondering why princes and nobles, cities and endowments, land and people, grow poor.\(^{25}\)

Luther then challenged the noblemen to oppose the pope and to stop the flow of gold to Rome, advice which was all too eagerly accepted since it provided them the opportunity to confiscate rich church properties and keep the church taxes for themselves.

*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* reinterpreted the church sacraments. Since the church controlled her members from birth to death through a well-buttressed sacramental system, Luther struck at the heart of the church and set the stage for his arguments in *The Freedom of a Christian*. Babylon, of course, was Rome, and as the Jewish people were carried into captivity by the Babylonians, so Christians had become enslaved by the Romanists and the papacy through the misuse and misinterpretation of the sacraments.

According to Luther, there is no scriptural basis for five of the traditional seven sacraments: Penance, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination, and Extreme Unction. He retained Baptism and the Lord’s Supper and devoted half of the treatise to these two, deploiring the withholding of the cup from the laity, the doctrine of transubstantiation,\(^{26}\) and the sacrifice of the mass.

In view of Luther’s frequent and urgent appeals to scripture and his insistence that he was guided by the Holy Spirit, his views on baptism, to a Latter-day Saint, are disconcerting. To be sure, he perceived baptism as an essential ordinance for salvation, but while stressing the spiritual implications and blessings, he completely

\(^{25}\) *Luther’s Works*, 44:143.

\(^{26}\) The official Catholic doctrine teaches that in the sacrament the substances of bread and wine are miraculously transformed into the body and blood of Christ while retaining their appearance and taste. Luther rejected this doctrine in favor of the position that Christians, while partaking of the bread and wine, are mystically united with Christ and the body of believers. The body and blood of Christ join with the bread and wine (consubstitution).
deemphasized the significance of the baptismal prayer, the external form (immersion and adult baptism), and priesthood authority. He rejoiced that God

has preserved in his church this sacrament [baptism] at least, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men, and has made it free to all nations and classes of mankind, and has not permitted it to be oppressed by the filthy and godless monsters of greed and superstition. For he desired that by it little children, who are incapable of greed and superstition, might be initiated and sanctified in the simple faith of his Word; even today baptism has its chief blessing for them. But if the intention had been to give this sacrament to adults and older people, I do not believe that it could possibly have retained its power and its glory against the tyranny of greed and superstition which has overthrown all things divine among us. Here too the wisdom of the flesh would doubtless have devised its preparations and dignities, its reservations, restrictions, and other like snares for catching money, until water brought as high a price as parchment [letters of indulgences] does now. 27

Luther never questioned the practice of baptizing infants; in fact, he defended it by maintaining that God has obviously accepted this mode of baptism because He has poured out His Holy Spirit on so many:

Since God has confirmed Baptism through the gift of his Holy Spirit, as we have perceived in some of the fathers, ... and others who were baptized in infancy, and since the Holy Christian church will abide until the end of the world, our adversaries must acknowledge that infant Baptism is pleasing to God. 28

He anticipated and refuted the argument that children do not yet have faith by stating that faith is conferred by baptism and develops in the person after the sacrament has been performed. Besides, the vicarious faith of those who bring the infant to the font is quite sufficient.

Luther was well aware that the word baptism means "immersion" and much preferred this mode of baptism to any other. "I would have those who are to be baptized completely immersed in the water. ... And this is doubtless the way it was instituted by Christ." 29

There were three modes of administering baptism in use at this period [Luther’s time]: immersto, i.e., total immersion of the child in the

27Luther’s Works, 36:57.
29Luther’s Works, 36:68.
font; *superfusio*, i.e., holding the naked child over the font and pouring water over him profusely; and *infusio*, i.e., dipping only the head of the child in the font. Luther strongly favored immersion.30

Nevertheless, Luther accepted other forms of baptism as well.

Baptism truly saves in whatever way it is administered, if only it is administered not in the name of man, but in the name of the Lord. Indeed, I have no doubt that if anyone receives Baptism in the name of the Lord, even if the wicked minister should not give it in the name of the Lord, he would yet be truly baptized in the name of the Lord. For the power of baptism depends not so much on the faith or use of the one who confers it as on the faith or use of the one who receives it.31

This kind of argument seems strange since in other matters Luther was so adamant and insistent on correctness and truth.

He was equally as unconcerned about the question of authority in baptism, or, for that matter, in other priesthood functions. The man who performs the baptism is "simply the vicarious instrument of God," and it is really God who "thrusts you under the water with his own hands, and promises you forgiveness of your sins, speaking to you upon the earth with a human voice by the mouth of his minister."32

Luther's position on baptism and some other gospel ordinances validates John Taylor's assessment of him as a "good" and "righteous" man who "operated in the interests of humanity" and who was guided by the "Spirit of God" and not by the Holy Ghost,33 a vital distinction which accounts for Luther's limitations and for the fact that he was a reformer and not a restorer and prophet. This does not diminish his accomplishments in his calling as a reformer whose basic conservatism did not allow him to revolt against orthodox doctrine and theories but rather against practices. Thus he objected strenuously to the indulgence traffic and to the domination of the church hierarchy in the daily life of its members through the sacramental system; however, to the end he accepted and defended the traditional doctrines: infant baptism, the trinity, the spiritual nature of God's person, the actual presence of Christ in the Last Supper, a personal devil, hell, and a noncorporeal resurrection.

In the struggle to retain control of his movement and to save it from dissipating or falling into radical hands, he transferred the power held by the church to the state and advocated the divine right of kings, thus opposing political upheaval and revolution directed

30Ibid., 53:100, n. 2. See also 35:29.
31Ibid., 36:63-64.
33*Journal of Discourses*, 25:263.
toward governmental change. While freeing his followers from the tyranny of an infallible pope, he subjected them to the tyranny of an infallible book—just as restrictive when a narrow and incorrect interpretation leaves little or no room for additional insight and revelation. Nevertheless, his emphasis on regular scripture reading, on Jesus Christ as the Lord and the only source of man's salvation, on rejection of false traditions, and on the quest for truth must be viewed positively, since such an approach, if honestly and sincerely pursued, prepares man to accept the fulness of the gospel and the restoration of all things. For that, most of all, we honor Martin Luther.