

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PART 15: REFORMERS, DOCTRINE, AND THE BIBLE

TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

Luther's Old Testament translation was a much longer and more collaborative project than his New Testament. He led the project, but worked with a team of Wittenberg scholars such as Philip Melanchthon, Johannes Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, Caspar Cruciger, Matthäus Aurogallus, and Georg Rörer. The complete Bible appeared in 1534 and Luther continued amending the text afterward, with a major revision appearing in 1541.

The team cared deeply about making Scripture understandable to common people. Luther did not want a stiff word-for-word German that sounded foreign, but something that was in the language of the ordinary people.

The 1534 German Bible was a large printed book, not a cheap pocket Bible. It was expensive, but printing made it possible to produce and spread far more copies than manuscript copying ever could. That is one major reason Luther's translation spread so powerfully through German-speaking lands.

HYMN WRITER

Martin Luther realized that music has a great influence on people. He was a singer and learned to play the lute.¹ Luther valued music highly and considered it one of the best gifts of God, second only to theology in importance. Prior to the Reformation, church music was in Latin and was often sung by clergy or trained choirs while ordinary people listened. Luther wanted the congregation to participate.

Luther used music as a tool of Reformation teaching. He wanted ordinary Christians to sing doctrine in their own language, so he helped create congregational hymns with clear words, memorable melodies, and theological substance. His best-known hymn is *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, which is still sung today.

Luther wrote *A New Song We Raise* in response to the martyrdom of Johann Esch and Heinrich Voes, two Augustinian monks from the Low Countries who accepted Reformation teaching. They were burned at the stake in Brussels on July 1, 1523, and are often regarded as the first Lutheran martyrs.

This song was probably Luther's first song and it was more like a ballad because it told the story of the martyrs, defended their witness, and spread news of their execution. Luther wrote it in response to papist propaganda which claimed the two men had recanted before death. The song answered that charge by portraying them as faithful witnesses who died confessing Christ and the gospel.

¹ A lute is a plucked string instrument with a pear-shaped body and fretted neck popular in European music from the Middle Ages to the Baroque era.



LIFE AFTER DEATH

John Calvin was a French reformer who belonged to the second generation of the Reformation. Luther was born in 1483; Calvin was born in 1509, so Calvin was still a child when Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517.

Calvin was born in France and originally prepared for a church career. He studied in Paris, then later turned toward law at places such as Orléans and Bourges. Calvin never sat under Luther as a student, but his writings and the wider Lutheran movement helped create the Protestant world Calvin entered. Calvin differed on issues like the Lord's Supper, church discipline, and how worship should be regulated.

John Calvin came to Christ and came to the realization that Roman Catholicism had corrupted the gospel and that salvation rested in God's grace through Christ, not in human merit, ceremonies, or papal authority.

Sympathizers of Martin Luther's Reformation were being threatened and Calvin fled to Basel, Switzerland, where he published the first edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536, establishing himself as a pastor and theologian.

Luther rejected doctrine of purgatory and the idea that departed souls suffer after death in order to be purified. He sometimes described believers after death as resting or sleeping peacefully until Christ raises them.

Luther also made statements that seem to affirm some kind of conscious existence with Christ. In the Smalcald Articles, Luther spoke of the saints as being both "in their graves and in heaven."²

That is why historians often say Luther's view of the intermediate state was guarded, inconsistent, or undeveloped. He was not writing a full doctrine of death the way later theologians did. His emphasis was that death is sleep for the Christian because Christ will awaken the believer at the resurrection.

In contrast, Calvin came to the understanding that souls do not sleep in the graves based upon the Book of Revelation and Paul's letter to the church at Corinth.

"After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10)

"Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

² The Smalcald Articles are a summary of Lutheran doctrine, written by Martin Luther in 1537 for a meeting of the Schmalkaldic League in preparation for an intended ecumenical Council of the Church.

Luther did not address the Judgment Seat of Christ, where Christians are judged for how they lived on earth.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences.” (2 Corinthians 5:10-11)

COMMUNION CONTROVERSY

Philip I, Landgrave of Hesse, called for a meeting in October 1529. It took place at Marburg Castle and came to be known as the Marburg Colloquy. Philip’s reason for the meeting was partly theological, but also political because he wanted the Lutheran and Swiss/South German reformers united so Protestant territories could stand together against Roman Catholic imperial pressure.

On Lutheran side was Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Justus Jonas, Andreas Osiander, and Johannes Brenz. The Swiss/South German side was represented by Ulrich Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, Caspar Hedio, and others associated with the Reformation.

The group worked on fifteen different doctrinal statements to create a common Protestant confession. The result was the Marburg Articles, a set of articles drafted largely under Luther’s influence.

	Subject	Basic meaning
1	The Trinity	There is one true God, maker of all creatures, and this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
2	The Person of Christ	Jesus Christ is true God and true man, born of the virgin Mary.
3	Christ’s Death and Resurrection	Christ suffered, died, was buried, rose again, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God.
4	Original Sin	All people inherit sin from Adam and are naturally unable to fear, love, or trust God rightly without grace.
5	Faith in Christ	People are saved from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ.
6	Faith as God’s Gift	Faith is not produced by human strength but is given by the Holy Ghost.
7	Justification by Faith	Faith is our righteousness before God; God counts believers righteous apart from works and merit.

8	The External Word	The Holy Ghost ordinarily gives faith through the preached gospel, not apart from the Word.
9	Baptism	Baptism is not an empty sign; it is a sacrament instituted by God, connected to His promise.
10	Good Works	True faith produces good works through the Holy Ghost: love, prayer, and patient suffering.
11	Confession	Confession should be free, not forced, but it is useful for troubled consciences because of gospel absolution.
12	Civil Government	Secular authority, laws, courts, and offices are good and may be held by Christians.
13	Human Traditions	Church traditions may be kept or abolished, provided they do not contradict God's Word.
14	Infant Baptism	Infant baptism is right, and through it children are received into God's grace and Christendom.
15	The Lord's Supper	They agreed the Supper should be given in both bread and cup, the Mass is not a work that earns grace for the living or dead, and spiritual participation in Christ is necessary. But they did not fully agree on whether Christ's true body and blood are bodily present in the bread and wine.

A controversy arose over the Lord's Supper, especially Christ's words:

"...This is my body." (Matthew 26:26d)

Luther insisted that the body and blood of Jesus are actually present in the Lord's Supper. He rejected the Romanist doctrine of transubstantiation, but nevertheless held firm to the belief that it was the real body and blood with the bread and wine.

In contrast, Ulrich Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper as a symbolic ordinance. He believed that Jesus is omnipresent according to His divine nature, because He is truly God, but did not believe that Christ's human body is omnipresent. His reasoning was Christ's human body was a real human body and it ascended to heaven and now resides at the right hand of the Father; therefore, it is not bodily present on thousands of communion tables at once. Nevertheless, Zwingli was willing to accept spiritual presence language.

Luther also believed Jesus was fully God and fully man, but he argued that because Christ's divine and human natures were personally united in the physical person of Christ, the humanity of Christ can also share in divine majesty. This is connected to the Lutheran idea of Christ's body being present everywhere.

The meeting succeeded in showing that the reformers agreed on many major doctrines, but it failed to unite the Lutheran and Reformed branches. The central unresolved issue was whether Christ's true body and blood are present in the Lord's Supper.

The Diet of Augsburg was an imperial diet of the Holy Roman Empire. Emperor Charles V summoned the imperial princes and free cities to explain their religious position. The Lutheran princes and theologians presented the Augsburg Confession to explain what the Lutheran churches taught.

The Swiss cities of Zurich, Bern, and Basel, were not in the same position as Saxony, Hesse, or the imperial free cities. Switzerland was largely outside direct imperial control by this point, so the Swiss reformers were not central invited parties in the same formal way.

The Swiss were not the main intended signers of the Augsburg Confession. The confession was prepared for the Lutheran imperial estates attending the Diet. Luther and Zwingli could not agree on the Lord's Supper, as a result, the Swiss could not in good conscience sign a confession that taught Luther's real presence doctrine.

SUMMARY

Martin Luther helped break the spiritual stranglehold of the Roman Catholic Church by translating the Bible into the language of ordinary people and proclaiming that salvation is received by faith rather than earned through religious works. Yet Luther himself did not understand every doctrine correctly.

This is an important point to take note. We must never replace one human authority with another. The purpose of the Reformation was not to exchange the pope for Luther, Calvin, or some other theologian. The final authority must always be the Bible.

The Bereans were commended because they did not blindly accept what they were told by the apostle Paul's preaching.

"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:11)

Every preacher, theology, and tradition must be examined by the same standard. If something contradicts the Bible, it must be rejected regardless of how old the teaching is, how respected the teacher may be, or how many people believe it.

Jesus also made it clear that His departure from the earth was necessary so the Holy Spirit could come. In John 16, He told the disciples:

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you...

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth...

He shall glorify me..." (John 16:7a, 13a, 14a)

Jesus did not tell His followers that a pope, reformer, denomination, or theologian would guide the church into all truth. He pointed them to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, whose work is to glorify Christ and lead God's people into truth.

The Reformation therefore did not end with Martin Luther. Each generation of Christians must turn to the Bible, examine what it says, and be willing to correct anything that contradicts it.

“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

Our loyalty is not to Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, a denomination, or a religious tradition. Our loyalty belongs to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit guides us into truth, and the Word of God has the final say.