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8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60631  
(800) 638-3522, Ext. 2540  
[lutheran@thelutheran.org](mailto:lutheran@thelutheran.org)  
[www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org)

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## Study guide:

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# Lutheran mythbusting or ...

*10 things you thought you knew about Martin Luther*

By Robert C. Blezard

It's not surprising that a few misconceptions and larger-than-life legends would persist around the person and work of Martin Luther, who stands tall as one of the most important figures in Christian history. But getting to the truth means more than just fact-checking and "setting the record straight." It means discovering anew the genius of Luther's insights and his lasting influence in the world.

### Exercise 1: 'My myth'

- How many of the myths that author Timothy J. Wengert unravels did you formerly believe?
- Where did you learn the myth?
- How did the truth change your perceptions of the life and times of Luther?
- Why are myths so enduring?

### Exercise 2: Myth and truth

- What is a myth?
- What is the truth?
- What are the differences between myth and truth? The similarities?
- Which comes first, myth or truth?
- What is their common connection to reality?
- What purpose does each serve?
- How are they complementary?
- Do we need both?
- What did you learn?
- What surprised you?
- How will you live differently?



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# Study guide: **Lutheran mythbusting**

*continued*

## Exercise 3: Fact and fiction

How many of the 10 Lutheran “myths” have some basis in fact? For each, explore how bits of truth or fragments of accurate information morphed into misunderstandings that have survived for generations. Discuss:

- Do most myths or legends have some basis in reality?
- What others come to mind?
- What cautions does that raise for church leaders today?

## Exercise 4: Myth-making

- How do facts and stories evolve into myths?
- Why and how are myths and legends important to the identity of a group or culture?
- In what ways are they helpful to a group or culture? How are they harmful?
- What’s the difference between a harmless myth and a destructive one?
- Why is it important to look behind myths and legends to uncover the reality? Why can this be hard?

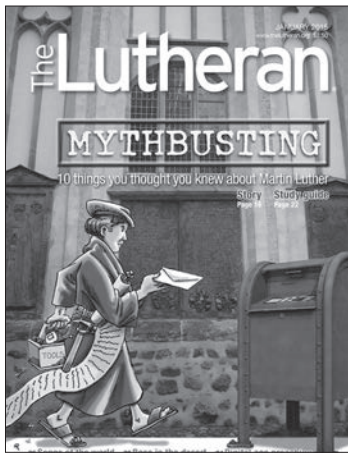
## Exercise 5: Our myths

- What are some of the stories that are told and retold in your congregation concerning events or people of the past?
- Are all of them entirely truthful?
- Which have been fossilized as myths or legends, and why?
- What purpose do they serve?
- What legends or myths need to be “busted” for the good of your faith community?

## Exercise 6: ‘Bar song’ bunk

Wengert busts the myth that the tune of Luther’s best-known hymn is based on a barroom song, but the truth remains that “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” is an artistic and theological *tour de force* whose message has resonated for 500 years. As a study group examine the “bar form” structure of the hymn. Then look at the poetry of the hymn as translated in Evangelical Lutheran Worship, pages 503-505. Discuss:

- What gospel messages of hope can you distill from the poem?
- What theology of Christianity is encapsulated there?
- What are the quintessentially “Lutheran” elements?



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# Study guide: **Lutheran mythbusting**

## *continued*

- As an extra step, ask these same questions of other hymns for which Luther is credited (there are 19 listed on the index in *ELW*, page 1191).

### Exercise 7: The 95 Theses

Putting aside the issue whether Luther posted them on the door of the Castle Church and whether he intended them to spark the Reformation, the 95 Theses still ask the critical questions of faith that have defined Lutheran theology for a half millennia. As a study group, tackle the 95 Theses (see [www.thelutheran.org](http://www.thelutheran.org) and click on “Resources”).

Prepare by asking group members to research the context and meaning of the 95 Theses. Together discuss how they cut to the heart of these issues: God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's mercy, the authority of Scripture, the power of Jesus, the work of the Spirit, the role of human church authorities. Look especially for how three bedrock Lutheran concepts emerge from the 95 Theses: Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone.

### Exercise 8: Instruction for all

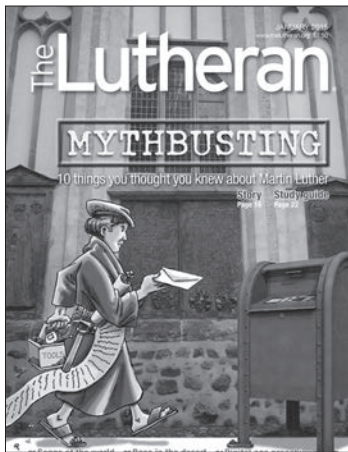
Though it is a myth that he was the first to make the Bible available in an everyday language, Luther advanced the cause of religious literacy not only with his authoritative Scripture translations but more importantly with the Small Catechism. Luther wrote it in 1529 as a basic faith reference for a family in their home. It was simple enough to be understood by anyone who could read and brief—therefore affordable and accessible in a time when printed materials were expensive. Review together the Small Catechism (*ELW*, 1160-1167) and explore:

- How is it organized?
- How is it written?
- How and why did Luther choose the topics?
- In reviewing it, what did you learn? Relearn?
- For those unschooled in the faith, does it provide a basic foundation of knowledge?
- Describe why it is a uniquely Lutheran document.
- Why is it still a classic after nearly 500 years?

### Exercise 9: Plant a tree

The “myth” of Luther's alleged quote about planting a tree nonetheless captures his thought about the end-times and the second coming of Jesus.

- What is the essential message behind the “tree” quote?



### About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Seminary at Gettysburg.

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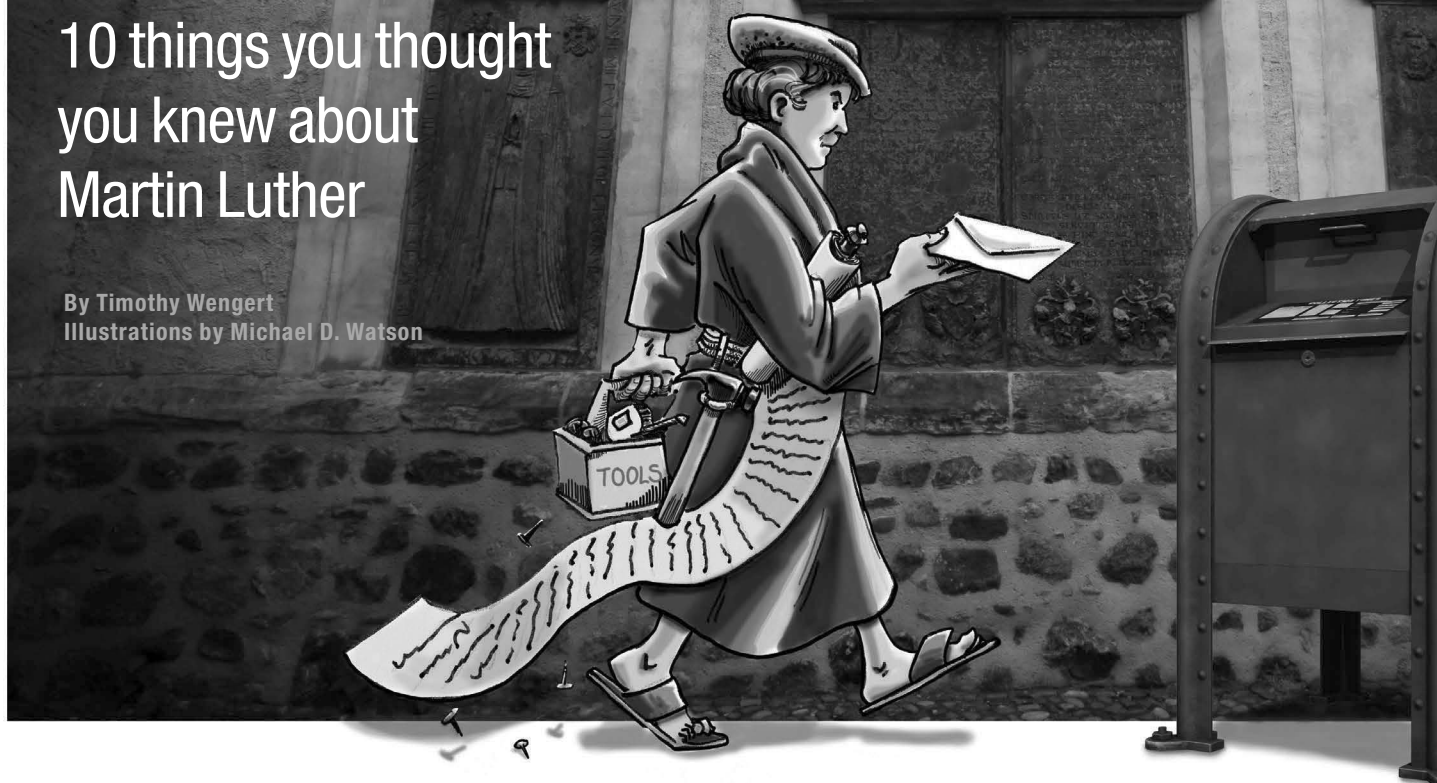
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- What did Luther see as the proper approach to living as we await the return of Christ?
- How is Luther's mythical message important to hear today, as some Christians fan a frenzy over end-times, "the rapture" and being left behind?

# Lutheran mythbusting or . . .

10 things you thought  
you knew about  
Martin Luther

By Timothy Wengert  
Illustrations by Michael D. Watson



**O**n the popular cable show *Mythbusters*, the hosts unmask assumptions about our world—scenes from movies, familiar sayings or Internet sensations—and rigorously test their plausibility. When it comes to history, however, certain legends and inaccuracies can persist for generations without being challenged or corrected.

In the run-up to commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, here are 10 popular “myths” about Martin Luther that deserve busting.





PLAUSIBLE

**On Oct. 31, 1517, Luther “posted” the 95 Theses in protest against the church.**

Here modern historians have questioned two things. Since the 1960s some scholars have thought it highly unlikely that Luther ever nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. They point to the fact that Luther never mentions it. Also, the posting is first

mentioned in a sketch of Luther’s life written shortly after his death by a colleague, Phillip Melanchthon, who didn’t arrive in Wittenberg until 1518, well *after* the alleged act.

While some scholars (including this author) still argue that such a posting really did take place, all agree that the more important “posting,” which we know occurred that day, was in the mail as an enclosure to a letter addressed to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, head of the German church. The original, dated letter is in an archive in Stockholm, Sweden.

But the notion that the 95 Theses were, from their inception, a protest rests on the mistaken idea about the function of such “theses” in late-medieval university life. In those days, to receive any university degree students had to defend theses, usually composed by their professors and posted on the churches’ doors in advance of the oral defense.

In addition, as a professor of theology, Luther had the right to hold “quodlibital disputations”—debates on any subject whatsoever to clarify church teaching, which usually were presented in the form of theses. In the case of the 95 Theses, Luther was clearly thinking in those terms. His intent wasn’t protest but open debate about an issue over which there was great uncertainty: What were indulgences and how did they relate to a Christian’s sorrow over sin?

It was the reactions to Luther’s theses—the archbishop sent them to Rome because he suspected they contained heresy—that turned a sharp inquiry over church practice and teaching into protest and reform.

### **Katie Luther escaped her convent in (or next to) herring barrels.**

An early chronicler of Katharina (von Bora) Luther’s escape with 11 other nuns noted that they were jammed into the fishmonger’s wagon “like herring barrels.” We might say they were packed in like sardines.

Later, sloppy readers took this to mean that Leonard Koppe, who regularly delivered fish to Katie’s monas-



503-505) is

just such a melody.

Now a great many of Luther's tunes come from medieval modes and chants that he slightly revised to fit the rhymed German hymns he was producing. For example, he reworked an Advent hymn attributed to Ambrose of Milan, "Savior of the Nations, Come" (ELW, 263), setting the German translation to a medieval chant.

But some of Luther's original hymn tunes *were* criticized for being too upbeat. He was one of the first to employ a major key for some of his hymns, including "A Mighty Fortress." One scholar notes that Luther's opponents complained about another such hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" (ELW, 594) for being far too joyous a melody to be sung in church.

Such melodies that Luther, and quickly other Lutheran Christians, used sometimes had their origins in dance melodies and folk tunes—but probably not bars.

◀ 17

tery, snuck the women out on Holy Saturday 1523 in, or hidden among, fish barrels. Given the size of such wagons and the number of people involved, this is highly unlikely. Also, Luther, who was the first to write an account of this escape, never mentioned it.

But Luther and his fellow believers in Wittenberg knew just how dangerous this was. That same year in a neighboring Saxon duchy controlled by Luther's sworn enemy, Duke George, a man was hanged for aiding another such escape. Koppe's rescue was a capital offense.

### Luther got the melody for "A Mighty Fortress" (or other hymns) from a barroom.

Here, perhaps, truth is stranger than fiction. The association with "bars" comes from a mistaken understanding of a term modern hymnologists use to describe the form of Luther's hymnody: "bar form."

Bar form simply means that the melody would begin with a theme repeated once before introducing a secondary theme and then ending with the last part of the original theme—rather like A-B, A-B, C, B. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship,

### Luther thought himself a reformer of the church.

Here historians answer, "Yes and no!" We can trace changes in theology and practice in the churches of early modern central Europe to Luther. But he didn't often—if ever—call himself a reformer. For one thing, the word "*reformatio*" was used for reconstituting practices and wasn't a particularly radical word in his Latin vocabulary.

For another thing, Luther thought of himself more as a forerunner to the true reformation of the church that Jesus Christ would bring in, rather like the images of

Elijah or John the Baptist at the time of Christ. Indeed, the famous Wittenberg painter Lucas Cranach often depicted Luther the preacher as John the Baptist, pointing to Christ, “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That is what pastors today also are—“finger pointers” to Christ the savior of the world.

### **Luther hated peasants.**

On a flight back from Germany, I was once seated next to a Philadelphia night watchman who was an amateur historian. When he heard what I did for a living, he got excited and said, “I’ve always wanted to ask two questions about Martin Luther. Why did he hate the peasants, and why did he hate the Jews?”

The second question was answered definitively by the ELCA Church Council in a 1994 statement titled “The Declaration of the ELCA to the Jewish Community” (search for this title at [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)). Luther’s statements about the Jews were wrong, and we repudiate them.

When it comes to the peasants, however, the story is more complicated. When the Peasants’ War erupted in 1525, the peasants asked Luther to give his theological opinion of their demands found in “The Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasantry.” He replied with an “Admonition” in which the nobles and peasants came in for almost equal condemnation.

After experiencing a small portion of the revolt firsthand, Luther then assumed (incorrectly) that the “Twelve Articles” was a ruse. So he wrote an appendix to his first tract, which was quickly reprinted separately, titled “Against the Murdering and Marauding Peasants”—that is, against these other lawless peasants who were destroying all good order. Even some of his supporters were shocked, leading him to write another tract in the summer of 1525 defending his harsh language.

When Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx’s early supporter, wrote a history of the Peasants’ War, he blamed Luther for being bourgeois and uncaring toward the lower classes. This was never the case. Luther’s grandfather had been a farmer, and he wrote many of his most important tracts to educate what he called the “simple” folk, that is, the illiterate. There weren’t nearly

the enormous class distinctions in the 16th century that arose in German-speaking lands during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Luther wrote all those tracts during the Peasants’ War not to destroy German peasantry, but to prevent the chaos of revolution and protect those who were getting caught up in the fray against their will.

### **Luther invented the Christmas tree.**

Of course, every age reinvents historical figures to serve their times. In this case, a famous 19th-century etching showing Luther and his family sitting around a Christmas tree rewrote history.

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In Luther's day the home Christmas tree had not yet been invented. Only in the 19th century do we find this practice spreading—first in Lutheran and Roman Catholic lands, and then in the U.S., from German and Scandinavian immigrants to others. Because of his well-known Christmas hymn “From Heaven Above” (ELW, 268), Luther was often associated with Christmas practices he had never heard of—the tree, the Advent wreath and, in this country, even “Away in the Manger” (ELW, 277).

**Luther once said, “Even if I knew the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.”**

This is one of those cases where even though he didn't say it, the saying itself matches his theology—in two ways.

First, Luther very much assumed that the end of the world was near. Although he rejected speculation about the “day and hour” of Christ's return, he was convinced that the time was near.

Second, rather than *not* caring for this world because it was ending, Luther thought the opposite and treated creation as a gift entrusted to us to care for—not to exploit or escape from.

In 1525, when he faced the Peasants' War and attacks from many foes over human captivity to sin (against Erasmus of Rotterdam), over the efficacy of infant baptism (with so-called Anabaptists) and over the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper (with the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli)—and therefore thought the world *was* ending—Luther didn't plant a tree. But he did get married. One can hardly imagine a more positive statement about the goodness of creation and about how faith in Christ's coming as savior frees us to serve our neighbor. Knowing the world was ending, Luther formed a family.

There are other statements attributed to Luther that he never uttered or wrote—and the Internet has increased their number. One favorite of mine: Luther said that every day when you wash your face you should remember your baptism. Despite it sounding “like Luther,” it doesn't really match 16th-century hygiene, where the notion of washing your face wasn't necessarily a daily chore.

Moreover, Luther made clear that the water of baptism wasn't merely a “Bath-keeper's baptism,” something those who rejected infant baptism often said. That is, the difference between baptismal water and regular water is the word and promise of God. Thus, washing your face is good for your face, but returning to your baptism daily is always a matter of trusting God's promise of

forgiveness, life and salvation offered there.

Luther, in fact, placed baptism at the center of the Christian life. We never lose God's baptismal promises to us but may always return to them.

Perhaps what he says in the Large Catechism on baptism is even better than what we attribute to him:

“Baptism is not a work that we do but ... a treasure that God gives us and faith grasps. ... In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. ... Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: ‘But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body ...’” (*Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; Fortress, 2000).

Therefore baptism remains forever. Even though someone falls from it and sins, we always have access to our baptism so we may again subdue the old creature.

But we need not have the water poured over us again. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless not be more than one baptism, and its effect and significance would continue and remain.

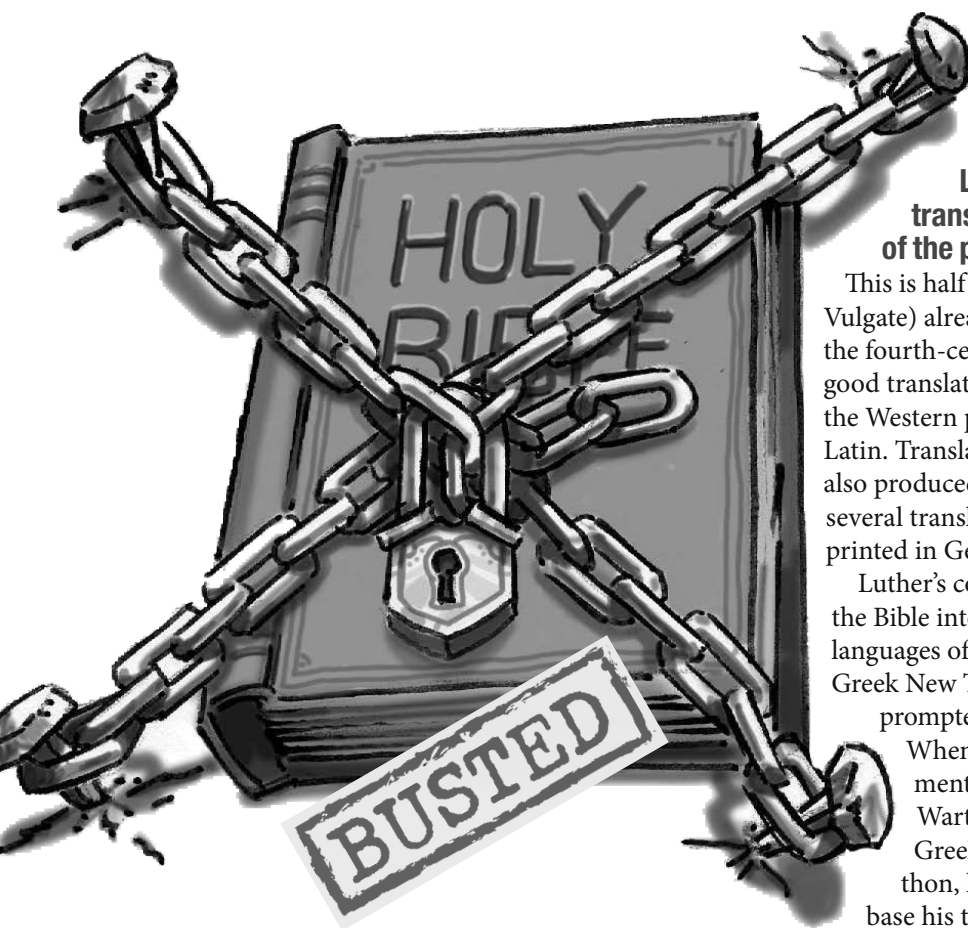
**Luther had problems with constipation throughout his life.**

In 1958 a famous psychiatrist, Erik Erikson, wrote a psychological biography of Luther in which constipation and toilet training played a large role, in line with the author's Freudian convictions. In reality, despite all of the other physical ailments that fill Luther's letters (kidney stones, ringing in the ears, palpitations, etc.) only for one brief time did he suffer from severe constipation.

In 1521, after being condemned as an outlaw at the Imperial Diet (parliament) meeting in Worms, Luther was whisked away into protective custody at the Wartburg Castle, an impregnable fortress belonging to the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise. His diet changed dramatically from the rather rough fare of an Augustinian friar to the relatively rich food he encountered at the table of the castle's warden, where he ate meals fit for a prince. In letters to his best friend, Georg Spalatin, he revealed his miseries, but never before or after.

**Bibles were chained up in Luther's day so no one could read them.**

In Sélestat, an old town in Alsace, France, the 16th century library of a famous scholar, Beatus Rhenanus, has



When all one hears in church are rules and moral guidance for us to follow, then the Bible is chained up in a far worse way.

**Luther was the first person to translate the Bible into the language of the people.**

This is half true. The Latin translation (the Vulgate) already prepared in large measure by the fourth-century scholar Jerome was a perfectly good translation for its time because people in the Western parts of the Roman Empire spoke Latin. Translations into other languages were also produced in those days. In the 15th century several translations of Jerome's Latin version were printed in German, among other languages.

Luther's contribution was that he translated the Bible into German based upon the *original* languages of Greek and Hebrew. The first printed Greek New Testament appeared in 1516 and prompted Luther to begin learning Greek.

When he began translating the New Testament while in protective custody at the Wartburg Castle in 1522, he already knew Greek well enough (helped by Melancthon, his colleague and Greek professor) to base his translation upon the Greek text.

In the following years, the Hebrew text (helped by early translations of the Old Testament into Greek and Latin) served as the basis of Luther's and his colleagues' work.

We have examined 10 "legends" about Luther. There are doubtless many more, and our age will invent new ones. Once we peel away the myths and misunderstandings, however, what remains is a remarkable figure in the history of the church.

Luther rediscovered for the whole church that God gives salvation by grace alone—without any reciprocal gift on our part—received by faith in Christ alone, where that faith comes into being not by human decisions but by hearing God's gracious word of forgiveness and reconciliation alone. □

survived almost intact. There many large tomes—not just Bibles—have chains, *not* so they won't be read but just the opposite: so someone couldn't steal these costly books for private use. Chains were the 16th century's equivalent of the modern "targets" that librarians put in books to prevent theft.

Before the Reformation, the Bible was everywhere—whole Bibles (even German translations made before Luther's), excerpts in prayer books, stained-glass windows, statues and paintings inside and outside church buildings. The problem in Luther's day was not so much the lack of biblical stories and passages. The problem was how people interpreted the Bible.

The same is true today. Many people think the Bible is something *we* must try to figure out, like an answer book or rulebook or even a star chart for predicting the future.

Luther discovered something quite different: God's word is a word that works on us—putting to death the old, sinful creature through the law and raising up a new creature of faith through the gospel promises.



**Author bio:**

*Wengert is a retired ELCA pastor and former professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.*