

# Wittenberg: Where the Reformation Came From

J.P. de Klerk

Dr. Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben (Germany) as the second son of a miner, Hans Luder. He attended school from 1488-1496 in Mansfield, in 1497 in Magdeburg, and went then to the Georgen school from 1498-1501 in Eisenach.

From 1501-1506 he did his philosophical studies in the University of Erfurt, which he completed with the award of a Master of Arts degree. He abandoned his subsequent law studies, as he felt obliged to join the Augustinian-Hermit monastery, after his experience during a thunder storm, when he was almost struck by lightning (July 2, 1505).

On April 4, 1507, Martin Luther received his ordination in the Erfurt cathedral and started his study of theology. Johan von Staupitz sent him the following year to Wittenberg to teach moral philosophy to the young monks there. He went for some time back to Erfurt, to teach there dogmatics. In 1510 he paid a visit to Rome, where he was disappointed by what he saw of the monks and priests. In 1511 he received his final summons to the Augustinian-Hermit monastery in Wittenberg, where he resided until his death. (That building is now known as the Luther house, at Nr. 62 in the Collegienstrasse, a gift from King Friedrich "the Wise.")

In 1512 he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Theology and became Bible Professor at the Wittenberg University. On October 31, 1517, he published his 95 theses against the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences, at the oak doors of the Palace Church. In 1524 the reformer put his habit aside and on June 13, 1525, he married the former nun Katharina von Bora, who bore him three sons and three daughters. He was sometimes ill (kidney problems) but forced himself to continue his work. He wrote numerous books. He preached every Lord's Day in the Palace Church as well as in the big City Church.

On February 18, 1546, Dr. Martin Luther died during a visit to Eisleben and was buried on February 22, 1546, in the Palace Church in Wittenberg, at the foot of the staircase of the pulpit there. (The place is marked by a stone with an inscription.)

Luther's house was a centre of activity for the Reformation. A contemporary advised against visiting the reformer, saying, "In the Doctor's house lives a mixed crowd of young people, students, young girls, widows, old ladies and children." Katharina Luther had great difficulty looking after the large family and the lodgers. She used the right to build, tended the garden, gradually acquired several plots of land and bred cattle extensively, as to provide everybody with food. She received also gifts from followers of her husband, who refused to receive money for his work.

The history of Wittenberg is very interesting. It started as a fortress in 1130. In 1293 the Ascanian Duke Albrecht II conferred upon Wittenberg the status of a town.

The Ascanians reigned in Saxony-Wittenberg until 1422. From 1356 they also held the rank of Electors in the German Empire. In 1423 the Wettines became their successors as sovereigns, also taking over the Electorship. Under King Friedrich III, called "the Wise," from the Ernestine branch of the House of Wettin, Wittenberg experienced a unique upsurge as an electoral residential town. After the reconstruction of the residential palace and the Palace Church (from 1492) and the foundation of the University (1502), an extensive building program started in town. Particularly through the work of Dr. Martin Luther the Wittenberg University became one of the most important centres of European intellectual life and the advance of the doctrines of the Reformation.

Especially profitable, in the general economic stimulus in Wittenberg, was business concerned with the production and distribution of books. With the outbreak of the Schmalkaldian War (1546-47), shortly after Luther's death, Wittenberg's medieval heyday came to a close. The new sovereign, Moritz of Saxony, was only interested in Wittenberg as a fortress, which was razed in 1873.

### ***In Wittenberg, October 31, 1517***

The old copperplate (on the front cover) shows the moment that Dr. Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses “against the doctrine of indulgences” etc. (in Latin) on one of the entrance doors of the Palace Church. The nobility and clergy showed much interest. They translated the Theses for the farmers and merchants.

Luther did not have a discussion with the crowd, but sent an elucidation to pope Leo X in Rome, archbishop Albrecht van Brandenburg, professor Johannes Eck and the Dominican Johannes Tetzel.

During a meeting of theologians in Heidelberg, in April 1518, he defended his viewpoints, and several important people became convinced (like Johannes Brenz and Martin Bucer). He urged the people to listen to Paulus instead of Aristoteles. King Friedrich (“the Wise”) and emperor Maximilian of Germany agree with Luther and protect him when he has to defend himself in Augsburg, where Cardinal Cajetan questions him in the name of the pope.

### ***In Wittenberg Today***

Here is the famous entrance of the Palace Church of Wittenberg as it looks like today, behind a fence of cast iron.

Two statues of knights on both sides of the windows above, partly broken and boarded up. Everything is dirty because of dirt in the air from the factories around the city.

Wittenberg is situated 70 kilometers north of the big city of Leipzig, in the province Saksen, formerly part of East Germany (D.D.R.).

Luther as well as King Friedrich III, his protector, are buried under the floor of the church. The Communist government of the past fifty years did not dare to touch this building; they didn’t have friends in Wittenberg.

### ***In the Reformation City***

The remnant of the old Castle of Friedrich III, which has been part of a fortification against many enemy armies during the past four centuries. Behind it the Palace Church, with a big and a small tower, carefully restored. They were built by the king of Saksen at the same time (1489- 1525). It is visited by thousands of people every year. Wittenberg is the Luther-City, the birthplace of the Reformation.

### ***Wittenberg***

View at the city, from the river, the Elbe.

In the middle the famous Palace Church with a round tower, which has a roof made of copper. Around it in gold lettering the first words of Luther’s well-known “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Left of it you see a restored remnant of the castle of King Friedrich III, who supported Dr. Martin Luther every step of the way and gave him also as much protection as he could against his enemies.

Through the Congress of Vienna (1815), Wittenberg became Prussian territory and remained a fortress through the wish of the new ruling house, until 1873. The University was amalgamated with Halle University. A fast economic and municipal development followed in the ensuing time and through the establishment of many industries (which still pollute the air and make the houses dirty) a rapid increase in population occurred. Wittenberg survived the Second World War without major damage to its historic building.

After the unification of Eastern Germany with the “Bundesrepublik” restoration and reconstruction measures were undertaken in the old center to restore the glory of “Luther’s city” (in German: Lutherstadt).

### ***The Churches of Wittenberg***

The beautiful silhouettes of the two important churches of the history of the Reformation in the center of Wittenberg, while the sun begins to color the sky. To the left the tower of the Palace Church, in front the two towers of the Lutheran City Church.

On the western edge of Wittenberg lies the once magnificent Palace of the Elector of Saxony. It was built from 1489 to 1525 under King Friedrich III together with the Palace Church ("Schlosskirche"). In 1503 it also became University Church. In 1524 the evangelical (Lutheran) service was officially introduced. Before reaching the entrance of the Church next to the 88 meters high tower, coming from the direction of the market, one sees the Theses doors, inscribed with Luther's 95 Theses in Latin. The original doors of 1517 went up in flames with the whole church during a bombardment in 1760 (only the external wall and the gravestones in the floor survived), but everything was rebuilt. Again destroyed in 1815 during the battles with Napoleon. From 1885 to 1892 the Palace Church and the tower on its western side were comprehensively renovated. Since then the tower has been graced with a striking dome. Below the dome on the brick work the first words of Luther's hymn in big golden lettering; "A safe stronghold our God is still, a trusty shield and weapon," surrounded by colored mosaics. Inside the Church octagonal columns were used together with a new vaulting in late Gothic style. Many figures, coat of arms and medallions form a fitting memorial hall to the Reformation.

Below the pulpit a simple bronze plaque on a stone base indicates the place where Martin Luther was buried.

The City Church is 300 years older than the Palace Church and has survived several wars and restorations. But the pulpit from which Luther held his sermons there remained undamaged. The front is a treasure cast in bronze in 1457. There are paintings of Cranach (father and son), witnesses to Luther's Reformation. There is also a Reformation alter (1547) that found its place in the choir room. Luther and all his friends and relatives can be seen on the paintings (including Luther dressed as "Junker Jorg," when he had to live in hiding, protected against his enemies).

Originally Published in:

Vol 55 No 11 November 1996