



# Rick Steves' LUTHER AND THE REFORMATION

## *A Viewers' Briefing from Rick*

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. In 1517, the German monk Martin Luther collected 95 points to stoke discussion about the corruption of the medieval Church. He then nailed his famous “95 Theses” to the door of his hometown church in Wittenberg. With that small, symbolic act, Luther unleashed a storm of change, kicking off the most important religious event of the last millennium—the Protestant Reformation.

To help those interested understand the whats, hows, and whys of it all, we produced a public television special, called *Rick*

*Steves' Luther and the Reformation*. Before you watch the documentary, here's a little background on its production.

The Reformation—even if you're not a Lutheran—is a very big deal. As 2017 approached, I wanted to contribute to our society's appreciation of this event on its 500th anniversary. My mission: to produce an hour-long documentary that would be useful for Lutheran churches, other Protestant denominations, Roman Catholic churches, and also secular media.

I wanted the film to be a teaching tool for churches and also have wider appeal for broad-

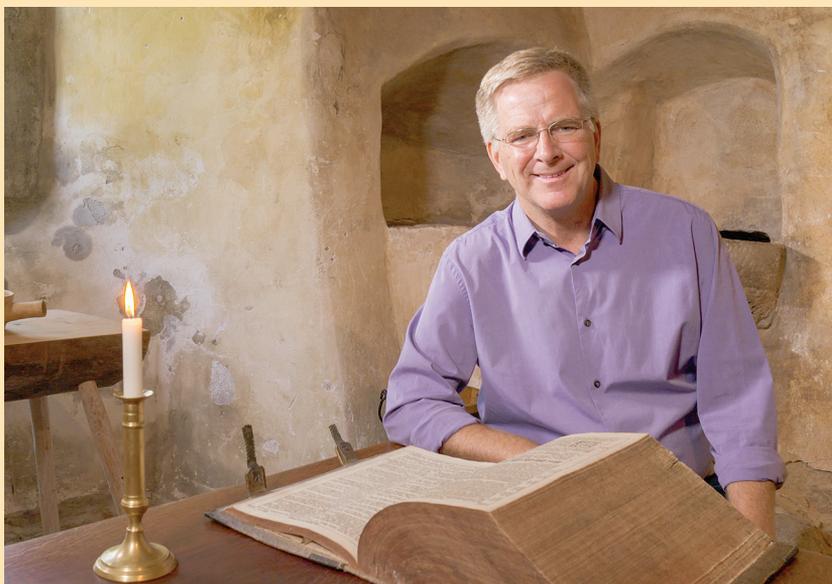
cast on public television—reaching far beyond a Sunday school audience.

There have been good movies about Martin Luther, but I planned a broader coverage—explaining the historic, economic, and social context of the Reformation, and how this tumultuous age helped Europe leave the Middle Ages and enter our Modern Age.

Writing the script was a wonderful challenge. Church scholars helped me by reviewing it. Their concerns were generally that I'd left out (or covered too thinly) topics they felt should have been included. But you can only fit

## **Hosting a *Luther and the Reformation* Screening**

It's easy to make a congregational event out of this documentary. You're welcome to project this DVD or to stream it. At [elca.org/ricksteves](http://elca.org/ricksteves), you'll find a Luther landing page with ELCA-generated discussion points and study questions, a ten-minute video of Rick Steves setting the show up (essentially sharing the same content that's written in this flier), and art and video clips to help promote the event. Both Rick's Christmas and Easter shows, on the same DVD, are also ideal for holiday screenings.





Visiting key Luther sights like Wartburg Castle, Rick Steves and his crew tell the story of the Reformation as never before.

6,000 words into a one-hour TV show, and the script filled up quickly. To add even another phrase would mean dropping something else. You can't just talk faster. In the end, it was a good discipline to limit this program to an hour.

Weaving the story of Martin Luther into the big historic sweep, we dealt candidly with Luther's human foibles and weaknesses. His authenticity is endearing. We followed the tortured path of a troubled young monk, as he fought depression, walked from Germany to Rome to sort out his feelings, and climbed the Holy Stairs on his knees...struggling to make sense of it all and eventually becoming "the Great Reformer." As a tour guide and travel teacher, writing the script provided an opportunity to explain concepts people may have heard of but didn't really understand—concepts like relics, purgatory, indulgences, iconoclasm—and to delve into the Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, and Lutheran notions like "the priesthood of all believers."

I'm a proud Lutheran, and my friends in public television were

wary of an overtly religious program. Several times, early drafts of the script came back to me with notes along the lines of, "be careful that you're not proselytizing." I took this advice seriously. We dealt with complex issues (both historical and religious) in simple and concise terms—which, if you're not careful, can be inaccurate or misleading. Theological concepts like Luther's "three pillars" (by scripture alone, by faith alone, and by grace alone) would have been interesting for some, but a complete turn-off for many. The only fundamental bit of theology I felt we really needed to include was Luther's epiphany of the "Good News." That's when he discovered in the Bible the idea that people can't earn salvation but are saved by faith alone.

We were careful to write the script so that Roman Catholics would also find the program useful and constructive. For example, when criticizing the Church, we were careful to call it "the medieval Church" rather than "the Catholic Church." And we made a strong point to acknowledge the work of other reformers, like Erasmus

## A message from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

*The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is not only a time for reflection on the rich history of this church, but also a chance to look forward to what lies ahead for all of us. It's an exciting time to be Lutheran as we come together with the Roman Catholic Church on the foundation of our common heritage.*

*Rick Steves' Luther and the Reformation is a wonderful resource for all of us—pastors and lay people alike—to better understand our Lutheran roots and help us in our continued journey of understanding the gospel. I invite you to share this video with your congregation and use the discussion questions on [elca.org/ricksteves](http://elca.org/ricksteves) to help guide a conversation in your community.*

**The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton**  
Presiding Bishop  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



and Francis Xavier, who worked for change but stayed loyal to the Roman Catholic Church.

To ensure that we'd strike the right balance, we carefully vetted the script with Lutheran scholars, Catholic scholars, and secular scholars. And, as scholars like to point out, many beloved bits of the Luther lore are most likely romanticized or even just legends. Did Luther literally hammer those 95 Theses onto that church door? We'll never know for sure. But if these tales are part of the popular consciousness—and not incorrect in spirit—I generally kept them in the story.

In preparing the show, a common question I got was, "Are you going to talk about Luther's poor treatment of the Jews?" And the answer, of course, was yes. Luther was angry with Jews for not accepting his theology, and wrote hateful pamphlets lambasting Jews in harsh and crude ways. And we included that, unapologetically, in the program.

I'll admit: The show is dense. And, for many, viewing it will be demanding. I'm thankful that in public television, we can assume a one-hour attention span. These days, this show would not see the light of day anywhere else on the dial.

Most of my TV programs on European travel are easy to make entertaining: fun-loving people, great art, decadent dining, and vivid travel experiences from the beaches of the Riviera to the scalps of the Alps. But this Luther special was tougher. While it's mostly static with few ways to inject liveliness, the original art, intimate artifacts, gorgeous German townscapes, and fascinating story all combined to help make it both entertaining and interesting.

We try our best to minimize



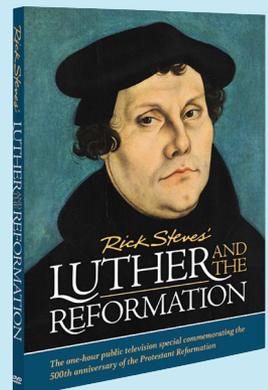
Rick and his Luther crew in Wartburg Castle. From left to right: Martin Luther, Rick, producer Simon Griffith, Tim Frakes, and cameraman Peter Rummel.

the time spent with me "on camera." I generally open and close each show with an "on camera," and then only talk to the camera for topics that are challenging to "cover" with beautiful images. As you can imagine, our Luther program included lots of substantial "on cameras" explaining historic and theological bits that just couldn't be illustrated with filmed images. As you watch, I hope you'll notice how we worked really hard to make each "on camera" setting gorgeous, and to craft fun and tight ways to explain those complex historic points.

To produce the show, we shot for ten days in Germany and two days in Rome. Our regular crew (producer Simon Griffith and cameraman Peter Rummel) was joined by Tim Frakes. (Tim was the producer and videographer for our *Opening the Door to Luther* show, which he and I produced for the Lutheran Church 15 years ago.) And my co-writers back at the office, Gene Openshaw and Cameron Hewitt, contributed mightily to the script. I'm thankful to these collaborators—and many more—for the way our program turned out.

## The Luther DVD comes with Easter and Christmas, too

The Rick Steves' *Luther and the Reformation* DVD has three extra features: Rick's *European Easter* and *European Christmas* shows and an excerpt from his TV episode covering the Luther Cities (Erfurt, Wittenberg, and the Wartburg Castle). Rick's Easter and Christmas specials (each one hour long)—which celebrate these sacred holidays in homes, villages, and churches across Europe ranging from Greece to England, Andalusia to Norway, and the Swiss Alps to the Vatican—have become evergreen holiday specials on public television.





Rick works with Rothenburg's Thirty Years' War reenactors, who marched into battle for the show.

I must also thank my team for their strength in reining in my geeky fandom of all things Luther. For example, I insisted on being filmed as I played Luther's beloved hymn, "A Mighty Fortress" on a pipe organ... but in the end, my producer Simon (wisely) nixed the idea of including that in the program.

It was fun to include a little travelogue material, filmed on location in Germany: the Luther sights in Erfurt, Wittenberg, and the Wartburg Castle are great to visit. The amazing Luther House in Wittenberg is a treasure trove of artifacts, and we spent hours there filming paintings, woodcuts, and historic items that helped us illustrate details throughout the script. And you'll see Germany's most beautiful little walled town, Rothenburg, throughout the program. It's perfect for portraying Germany in the days of

Luther and the Thirty Years' War, and that's where we filmed most of those generic "on cameras." Just like we have Civil War reenactors in the United States, Rothenburg has Thirty Years' War reenactors. And, in exchange for giant mugs of good beer, the entire fun-loving army suited up and marched into battle for our camera.

As a tour guide and teacher, I've honed the art of seeing an historic event not only from my own 21st-century perspective, but also by imagining myself in the context of where and when the event took place. From our modern point of view, a monk translating the Bible into German may seem like no big deal. But to imagine it from the perspective of Jan Hus—the Czech reformer who tried to accomplish some of what Luther did a century earlier, but failed and was burned at the stake—that's our challenge. To

explain the courage (and public relations brilliance) of Luther, 500 years ago, standing up to power—a simple monk defying the emperor and the pope—gives the story extra punch.

Wrapping up the documentary—and bringing it all the way to the 500th anniversary year of 2017—was a challenge. For a dramatic finale, I imagined Pope Francis and the Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran Church (Elizabeth Eaton) doing a happy theological high five...but that wasn't to be. Even so, Catholics and Lutherans alike can look back over five centuries and be thankful for the bold work Luther and the great reformers did to help modernize the medieval Church. In fact, that's exactly what Pope Francis and Bishop Eaton recently did together in Sweden. In our age, Lutherans, Catholics, and everyone else can come together to celebrate the tolerance and mutual respect the various Christian denominations now share.

With this documentary, I'm honored and thankful to make a small contribution to the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Thanks for your interest in this fascinating and important chapter in both the history of the Christian Church and the story of our Western Civilization. I hope you enjoy the show.

– Rick Steves

## Streaming and more at [ricksteves.com](http://ricksteves.com)

You can stream any of Rick Steves' TV programs—including *Luther and the Reformation*, *European Christmas*, and *European Easter*—any time for free at [ricksteves.com](http://ricksteves.com). On Rick's website, you can also learn about his guidebooks, travel gear, and tour program. Each year Rick and his guides organize and lead about 900 bus tours on more than 40 exciting itineraries ranging from seven days to three weeks. At [ricksteves.com](http://ricksteves.com), you can turn your travel dreams into smooth and affordable reality. That's our mission at Rick Steves' Europe.