



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

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 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. 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

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 to help guide a conversation in your community.

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



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

