Like a storm wind, the words and images of Martin Luther swept across early sixteenth-century central Europe, decisively altering public life in German, Scandinavian, and Baltic lands, and even among peoples in Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland, where the Counter-Reformation later diminished his influence considerably. Luther’s enemies viewed the currents aroused by his writings and his popularity among common folk and intellectuals as demonically destructive; his supporters experienced them as divine intervention for a beleaguered society and a tyrannized church.

Historical personages always take on a new life in the traditions that convey their personalities and thought to succeeding generations. Twentieth-century scholars sometimes complained that the images of Luther and the summaries of his theology which have helped shape Western culture and Christian thinking do not accurately reflect the “real” reformer, but such is always true. Intensifying this commonplace in Luther’s case is the fact that already during his lifetime his contemporaries experienced him as “larger than life.”

None of his German contemporaries could remain neutral in regard to Luther. Few individuals have aroused so much and such many-faceted and strongly held passion and antagonism so quickly as did the monk-professor from Wittenberg when he penned and posted an invitation to debate the nature and impact of the practice of indulgences in late October 1517. His “Ninety-five Theses” that propelled him rapidly to center stage in German public life slowly came to command the attention of the papal court and launched yet another movement for ecclesiastical reform which, unlike earlier calls for change in the church, created a public persona through the use of the new public medium of the printing press. The cultural, social, political – to say nothing of religious, theological, and ecclesiastical – ripples
from this academic exercise have made him the object of glorification and vilification for nearly a half millennium.

Those who dismiss or diminish Luther’s influence have been rightly criticized for reading sources selectively or uncritically. Indeed, Luther yearned for a different church and society than the one he left in his wake. But his own theological appraisal of the mystery of continuing sin in believers’ lives indicated that no reform could create a utopia. A century after his advent Germans may have behaved in much the same old ways, but the ways in which public leaders and peasants alike thought about God and themselves had changed.

Since about 1980 scholars have used the rubric “confessionalization” to analyze the effects of the disordering and reordering of public life that Luther initiated. Luther’s concept of the Word of God gave “confessionalization” its name, his person and image helped shape the phenomenon, his ideas altered the paradigm for discussion and proclamation of the biblical message at the ideological heart of this “fundamental process in society, which ploughed up the public and private life of Europe in thoroughgoing fashion.” It redefined society not only theologically and ecclesiastically but also in terms of political, social, economic, and cultural attitudes and structures.¹

The definition of the church as an institution governed by its doctrinal pronouncements grew out of Luther’s concept that God’s Word should be proclaimed (confessed) boldly in order to define and govern the church. German society began to define itself in terms of the institution labeled a “confession” – a church defined by doctrinal statements – because Luther’s followers had attained political legality as adherents of the “Augsburg Confession,” a statement of faith composed for presentation to Emperor Charles V by Luther’s colleague Philip Melanchthon at the imperial diet in Augsburg in 1530. As those pledged to the theological and ecclesiastical program summarized in that document, princes and cities of the German empire won an inferior but tolerated position in the empire in 1555. This program was labeled a “confession” because its author, Melanchthon, Luther’s colleague in Wittenberg, shared his belief that God gave his people his Word in order that they might confess it publicly for the salvation of sinners. They believed that God’s Word not only describes God’s actions but actually serves as his instrument for accomplishing his will. One consequence of identifying Luther’s call for reform as a “confession” is the label historians now employ for the broad spectrum of aspects embraced by “the ploughing up of European public life” between 1520 and 1650. Without Luther there would have been no confessionalization; without his concept of God’s Word the phenomenon would have borne a different label.
LUTHER IN THE JUDGMENT OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Luther’s presence haunted the process of confessionalization from its dawning to its passing into the Enlightenment. Robert Scribner has identified three motifs employed by Luther’s earliest publicists in print and portrait as his Reformation commenced: monk, teacher of the church, and man of the Bible or Word of God.

Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) is known as one of the Wittenberg professor’s fiercest critics, but five years before the two fell into conflict over the Lord’s Supper Zwingli had labeled Luther a contemporary Elijah, the eschatological prophet who was to proclaim the Word of the Lord in the last times. In 1520, three years after the Wittenberg monk and professor burst upon the larger stage of the European public discussion of critical ecclesiastical and social issues with his “Ninety-five Theses,” not only Zwingli was lionizing Luther. Artists were depicting him as a saint, with nimbus and dove above his head, and as the humanists’ symbolic exemplar, the ancient Greek demigod Hercules. His students heralded him in hymns and sermons as the angel of Revelation 14:6 who was to bring the eternal gospel to earth. His Roman Catholic opponents vilified and demonized him as an offspring of Satan himself. By accident, through the publication of his Ninety-five Theses, the first modern media event, Luther had helped shape a new world of public discourse in print, for his protest against the abuses of pastoral care in the indulgence trade struck responsive chords among intellectuals and common folk alike.

Intellectuals, particularly those involved in the movement for educational reform dubbed “humanism” by nineteenth-century scholars, were longing for a new order in learning, public communication and discourse, and society itself. Luther’s critique of the old order, his focus on the study of the biblical texts in original languages, and his use of the ancient church fathers fired their imaginations. Humanists of his own generation finally distanced themselves from him, but the younger generation provided the shock troops for his Reformation. The common people were yearning with apocalyptic fervor for a prophet who could usher in the Kingdom of God in some form or other; whether they understood more or less of Luther’s insights, their hearts were fired by his bold stance against the old order and selected elements of his call for dependence on God’s grace and responsible service to God and neighbor. The painter Hans Holbein hailed him as Hercules, in battle with theologians of the old faith; Albrecht Dürer placed great hopes in this “man gifted with the Holy Spirit.” Luther’s fellow Augustinian monk Michael Stiefel composed a thirty-two-stanza hymn.
summarizing his teaching and associating him with the eschatological deliverance promised through the prophet Daniel’s visions and John’s angel with the gospel (Rev. 14:6). Other hymn-writers of the 1520s and 1530s associated him with the prophets and evangelists as well, echoing Zwingli’s initial appraisal and enthusiasm.

Practically, these apocalyptic expectations translated themselves not only into popularity with the masses and widespread proclamation of his ideas from thousands of pulpits but also into policy decisions by ecclesiastical and societal leaders. Through a variety of publications Luther’s proposals for reform of theology and of everyday life in church and society won adherence among preachers and political authorities. The printing press enabled this single intellectual to command the attention of peasants, prelates, and princes. Pastors repeated interpretations of texts they had read in his postils, the model sermons that constituted a continuing education program for the clergy of his day. They introduced his liturgy and had their people learning his hymns. They devoured his polemic against the old faith; they learned to preach and pray anew from his biblical comment in homiletical or academic form. They absorbed fundamental elements of his new paradigm for considering the biblical message even as they fit his way of thinking into their own, in their specific parish situations. They advised municipal leaders and counselors of princes to follow Luther’s concepts of reform.

As governments actualized those concepts, Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg – particularly Melanchthon, but also Johannes Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, and others – became a living adjudicatory body, providing a substitute for the authority of bishops and councils in answering questions regarding the proper interpretation of the biblical message or on the best way to solve the problems raised by the implementation of reform. Under the primary authority of Scripture, Luther’s thought and judgment often served as a secondary authority for resolving questions of theology and church life. It was not always decisive to cite Luther, but a tract from his pen, or even better a memorandum or letter fresh from Wittenberg, carried an authority seldom if ever before accorded to a living theologian. Some of his contemporaries truly believed he was the Elijah of their times.

LUTHER IN THE JUDGMENT OF HIS STUDENTS

In subsequent years Lutherans only slowly abandoned the conviction that God had sent Luther for special eschatological tasks in the history of the church. The first longer presentations of his life made crystal clear the unique place in human history that his students believed he had filled. In
both the choice of genre and their content these initial Lutheran “biographies” reflect the religious convictions at the base of their authors’ appraisal of their mentor, their prophet. The earliest Lutheran attempt at an extensive overview of Luther’s life appeared in the martyrology of Ludwig Rabus (1556), a Wittenberg student in the early 1540s. He could define Luther as a martyr because of the consistent and fearless witness from his lips and pen that Rabus chronicled with extensive citations from a large variety of his works. Rabus called Luther not only the chief witness to the gospel of Christ but also “our dear father and the prophet of the German nation.”

A decade later the biographical sermons of another Wittenberg student who had first arrived at the university in 1529, Johannes Mathesius, provided the outline of events of Luther’s life that would inform subsequent biographers for several centuries. Mathesius’ homilies rehearsed the episodes of Luther’s public life with relatively little attention to his thought. Elements of the humanist art of life-writing mark these sermons, complete with citations of earlier sketches by Melanchthon, Johann Sleidan, and others. Yet they also reveal a Lutheran version of medieval hagiographical principles. Focusing on Luther’s pastoral image and concerns, Mathesius depicted the reformer consistently as teacher of the church and “the worthy German prophet.”

These titles and many more were ascribed to their common mentor by Cyriakus Spangenberg, another former Wittenberg student, among the youngest whose personal experience with Luther had fed upon and fostered eschatological perceptions of Luther’s role as God’s special prophet for the end times. His appreciation for his professor had been cultivated in his childhood by his father, Johann, Luther’s devoted disciple and reformer in Nordhausen and Mansfeld. Between 1562 and 1573 the younger Spangenberg preached two sermons each year, on Luther’s birthday and death-day, which examined his mentor in the roles of prophet, apostle, evangelist, pilgrim, priest, martyr – and many more. Published individually over the years and finally gathered into one volume, *Luther, Man of God* (1589), these sermons contained much less biographical description than Mathesius’, but more theological analysis of the reformer’s deeds and writings. Spangenberg had heard from Luther what he found to be the truth of God, the purest consolation of Christ; therefore he could deem Luther’s proclamation of the gospel “David’s slingshot, Paul’s mouth, John’s finger, Peter’s key, and the Holy Spirit’s sword… he so powerfully internalized the dear apostle Paul… that Paul is heard in Luther’s words.”

Rabus, Mathesius, and Spangenberg found many imitators in Lutheran circles over the following century and a half. These works, undistinguished
as new contributions but sometimes effectively wrought polemical or pedagogical instruments, presented themselves as biography for the poor preacher or as refutations of specific Roman Catholic or Calvinist attacks on the person or thought of the reformer. By the 1590s such biographical efforts also found form in dramas written for schools. These plays conveyed little more than the simplest fundamentals of Luther’s theology in their often rather heavy-handed presentation of certain elements of his career, aimed at fostering faithfulness to the Lutheran church and animosity toward its opponents.

By the time the anniversary of the Ninety-five Theses occasioned grand celebrations in 1617, the expectation that Luther’s appearance would herald Christ’s return had disappeared. Calvinist governments took the lead in planning these celebrations, to arouse opposition to papal-imperial maneuvers against the Protestant estates of the empire. Lutherans joined in, however, also with biographical polemics. Luther’s seventeenth-century biographers emphasized certain standard elements of his life and thought, largely in the service of German freedom and Lutheran truth. By the time Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff turned to archival research to refine the focus on Luther’s life, in reply to the biographical assaults of the Jesuit Louis Maimbourg, History of Lutheranism (1682) and Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches (1688), with his 1150-page Historical and Apologetic Commentary on Lutheranism (1692), a definite domestication of Luther’s biography had set in. He remained the great hero of the struggle against papal tyranny and a theological genius, but earlier efforts to glorify him as God’s special chosen instrument for the last times turned into more sober historical recitation. The panegyric formulas remained, but the excitement was missing.

LUTHER IN THE JUDGMENT OF HIS OPPONENTS

Roman Catholicism

From the beginning Luther’s Roman Catholic foes had been convinced that he embodied demonic attack upon the truth and the church. His first biographer was the Roman Catholic theologian Johannes Cochlaeus, whose Seven-Headed Luther (1529) assessed selected treatises of Luther on eight doctrinal topics and concluded that “not the Holy Spirit, but Satan, an evil spirit, indeed, a whole legion of evil spirits, have spoken and written from this monk the last ten years.” Twenty years later Cochlaeus’ Commentary on the Acts and Writings of Martin Luther (1549) expanded that judgment. This work set the tone and model for a host of Roman Catholic biographical
studies which attacked Luther’s person; to them were joined countless critiques of his theology published to counteract his influence and win intellectuals and common people for the papacy. The Jesuit Ingolstadt professor Sebastian Flasch explained why he converted from Lutheranism to Roman Catholicism in a series of biographical-theological studies (1577–85), in which he cited Luther against himself in his demonstration that the reformer “was no holy prophet of Germany but pure filth.” In 1582 Flasch’s colleague Albert Hunger demonstrated that Luther’s behavior and theology were thoroughly Epicurean, eliciting a storm of protest from Lutheran counter-biographers. The Council of Trent (1545–63) carefully addressed salient points of Luther’s thought (among other reformers) with discriminating scrutiny and sensitive theological analysis, rejecting the fundamental principles of the Wittenberg paradigm. In this way Luther determined the confessionalized shape of Roman Catholicism to a significant extent.

Reformed
Calvinist treatments of Luther were much more ambivalent. John Calvin himself did not share Zwingli’s later reluctance to express a profound debt to the Wittenberg reformer. However, his disciples, particularly in Germany, were forced to define themselves in part in opposition to Luther’s doctrine of the sacraments and predestination. Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, also influenced the German Reformed theologians in their understanding of biblical doctrine and their attitudes toward Luther. Therefore, their treatments of his work were reserved and in part sharply critical; they dedicated no little energy to disputing his authority as a teacher of the church. Heidelberg professor and former Wittenberg student Zacharias Ursinus rejected the special authority accorded Luther by Lutheran contemporaries, noting his errors and weaknesses in teaching and behavior, and warning against “papalist remnants” in his writings, especially on the Lord’s Supper. The Palatine court preacher Daniel Tossanus argued that Luther himself had urged viewing his writings with a critical eye. The Nuremberg attorney Christoph Herdesian, also a former Wittenberg student and propagandist for the Calvinist Palatinate prince Johann Kasimir, tried rather to reinterpret Luther’s positions on the Lord’s Supper by arguing that the reformer’s concerns differed significantly from the later Lutheran interpretation of his sacramental teaching. Luther’s contributions had to be taken further and expanded into a “second Reformation,” argued many in Herdesian’s generation. Thus, in certain ways Luther also played a role in the self-conception of Calvinism.
LUTHER’S THOUGHT IN THE THINKING OF HIS STUDENTS

To a far greater extent, the Wittenberg professor remained alive in the consciousness of his Lutheran followers long after his death in 1546. The plaintive cries of loss and grief heard in funeral sermons and orations held by colleagues and in tributes spoken and written across central Europe provide a good measure of the decisive, crucial role those who had experienced him believed he had played in their own lives and in human history. As is true of all historical figures, Luther left a legacy that had to be interpreted, adapted, and integrated into an ever-changing world. That interpretation formed a significant part of Lutheran confessionalization. By the time of his death his own career, with many other factors, had considerably transformed the world in which he had begun to proclaim the biblical message. The course of his heirs’ discussion of how to employ his insights in their generation took place in circumstances of sharp disappointment forged by feelings of betrayal at the hands of comrades and friends.

The forecasts of judgment upon the German nation for not heeding Luther’s call to return to God’s Word more completely – issued often at his death in February 1546 – seemed justified to many of his disciples when, four months later, Emperor Charles V initiated the Smalcald War in order to eradicate the Lutheran faith. Imperial armies defeated the troops of two leading Lutheran princes, Elector John Frederick of Saxony and Landgrave Philip of Hesse, and their allies. Charles seemed triumphant, imprisoning these leaders, driving hundreds of Lutheran pastors into exile, and imposing a new, Romanizing reform program labeled the “Augsburg Interim” by its critics wherever his military power reached. Melanchthon led the Wittenberg faculty – which was placed under the new management of John Frederick’s cousin Moritz, who had sided with Charles against his cousin and Philip (his father-in-law) – into a compromising situation, in which the Wittenberg colleagues attempted to stave off the imperial destruction of Saxon Lutheranism with a policy of concession labeled “the Leipzig Interim” by Lutheran critics. Their charges that Melanchthon and company were betraying Luther by supporting the political turncoat Moritz introduced a quarter-century of strife among Luther’s heirs. Melanchthon reacted against the attacks by former colleagues and students, above all Nikolaus von Amsdorff, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, Nikolaus Gallus, and Joachim Westphal, with increasing bitterness because of their rejection of what he understood as a good-faith effort to save the Lutheran confession of the faith from suppression by imperial soldiers through adjustments in neutral matters of church practice (adiaphora) and minimal reformulating of public teaching.
The disputes that erupted from the crisis of the Smalcald War and the “Interims” had been foreshadowed in tensions within the Wittenberg circle since the 1520s, when Johann Agricola, among the brightest of Luther’s earliest students, failed to capture Luther’s distinction of law and gospel in a way that met his teacher’s expectations. Particularly in dispute with Melanchthon, Agricola argued that the law played no role in the Christian life. First Melanchthon and then Luther fell into sharp controversy with Agricola (1527–28, 1537–40), rejecting his way of thinking because it destroyed effective repentance and used the gospel to perform the functions of the law. Other disagreements between Melanchthon and his and Luther’s close friend Amsdorff also signaled questions that demanded further refinement and remained unresolved when disputes broke out over questions regarding the relationship of God’s grace and believers’ activities in the wake of the Leipzig Interim.

Parallel to those disputes came serious disagreement with the Lutheran reformer of Nuremberg Andreas Osiander, who from imperially imposed exile in Königsberg defended his view of the justification of the sinner by the indwelling of Christ’s divine righteousness. Alongside all these controversies, challenges to the Lutheran understanding of how God’s Word functions in the church, particularly in its sacramental form in the Lord’s Supper, placed sacramental theology on the controversial agenda that required resolution. These challenges emanated both from outside the Lutheran churches – above all, from Calvinist and Bullingerian critiques – and from inside – above all, as some disciples of Melanchthon took his sacramental theology and Christology in a spiritualizing direction.

Among the first topics of controversy over the precise definition of Luther’s theological legacy was the “necessity of good works for salvation,” a proposal defended by Georg Major, formerly Luther’s and Melanchthon’s student and then their colleague in Wittenberg, in his attempts to justify the Leipzig Interim in the early 1550s. As arguments were exchanged in 1552 and 1553, it became clear from Major’s opponents, later dubbed “Gnesio-Lutherans” by scholars, that this “Philippist” position was wrong not only because it undermined the biblical doctrine of justification by faith but also because Luther had condemned it. Seven years after his death Luther was being cited as a secondary authority for public teaching, an adjudicatory source of the truth. Magdeburg pastor Albert Christian used the reformer’s Disputation on the Works of the Law and Grace (1537) as a text that authenticated Christian’s critique of Major’s proposition. In words reminiscent of 2 Peter 1:19–21, he confessed his conviction that “the holy man of God Luther was moved by the Holy Spirit as he spoke, and that his writings set forth the word of the prophets and apostles made more sure, as he laid
waste the empire of the Roman Antichrist.”3 Cyriakus Spangenberg and
other Wittenberg graduates of his generation shared Christian’s opinion of
Luther’s authority and in fact used Luther’s writings as Christian had, to
validate their interpretation of biblical teaching. Johannes Wigand, at the
time professor in Jena, placed Luther’s writings among the confessional
documents which were to govern public doctrine: the ancient Creeds, the
Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles “and the writ-
ings of Luther,” as well as a local confession of faith.4 Official confessions of
faith in several Lutheran lands also accorded the corpus of Luther’s printed
works as a whole this status as a substitute for popes, bishops, and councils,
a standard of secondary authority for ecclesiastical teaching and practice.
Luther’s words could function in this way in part because of the humanist
appreciation for the authority of rhetorically effective discourse and also
because of his own concept of the power of God’s Word to accomplish
what God promises as the “living voice of the gospel” – and because he was
considered a special prophet in God’s plan for the church.

Yet not all of Luther’s followers accepted his “complete works” as an
authoritative interpretation of Scripture and adjudicator of ecclesiastical
questions. It soon proved impossible to maintain the corpus of his writ-
ings as a secondary authority for the church. His œuvre was too extensive,
and his printed opinions had shifted between his earliest tracts and the
publications of his mature years. Luther had always directed his thought to
specific situations, and he could be cited against himself. In the disputes
over adiaphora, original sin, and freedom of the will theologians from oppo-
site sides of the debate assembled Luther citations against their foes – and
their foes’ Luther citations and interpretations. Finally, in the somewhat suc-
cessful effort that produced the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord,
those who had used Luther as a weapon against those who favored cer-
tain elements of Melanchthon’s thought had to give way on the public
use of Luther’s authority in order to win the day on doctrinal issues. It
became politically incorrect to place too much authority in Luther’s hand
when some thought (not altogether correctly) that the Formula diminished
Melanchthon’s theological influence. The Formula recognized Luther’s cate-
chisms and the Smalcald Articles, along with Melanchthon’s Augsburg Con-
fession, accorded highest rank among the Lutherans’ secondary authorities,
and his Apology as the standards for public teaching of the biblical message.
The Formula acknowledged Luther as God’s instrument for bringing God’s
Word to light after the darkness wrought by the papacy, but it granted him
no general authority for the church’s continued exposition of that Word.

In the dogmatic tradition that grew out of the Formula of Concord and
the development of Melanchthon’s genre of organizing biblical material for
preaching and teaching into theological topics by Martin Chemnitz (Loci theologicici, 1591/92), Luther was much honored but not much cited. The great Lutheran teachers, such as Johann Gerhard in his Loci theologicici (1610–22), and Johann Andreas Quenstedt in his Theologia didactico-polemica, sive Systema Theologicum (1685), defended the reformer against Roman Catholic attacks by placing a discussion of his vocation to reform the church within their treatment of the public ministry. They argued that he led the Reformation as a regularly called priest and theological professor but that the Holy Spirit had given him the extraordinary assignment of reforming the church and revealing the antichrist. Gerhard and Quenstedt relied, however, more on Scripture and a score of other, largely more recent, theologians than on Luther for supporting their arguments. The general framework of Luther’s thinking had set the Lutherans’ agenda, but others, such as Chemnitz, provided more quotable arguments for seventeenth-century dogmaticians. Nonetheless, Luther’s writings exercised widespread influence in the preaching and teaching of parish pastors, in the lectures and publications of university theologians, and in the conceptions and conversations of common people who sang Luther’s hymns, learned his catechism, and read or heard read his postils and other works. However his successors may have channeled and packaged his ideas, he continued to inspire and impel theological formulation and expression in churches of the Lutheran confession.

WITTENBERG’S DOCTOR IN BIBLIA AS TEACHER OF THE CHURCH

Luther’s image of himself centered on his call as teacher of Scripture. His doctoral oath to teach the Bible faithfully and keep false teaching from bringing offense to the church was determinative in his own mind for the course of his career. His instruction quickly extended beyond his own lecture hall, for the invention of moveable type enabled him to send his ideas across Germany and beyond. By 1520 his thirty printed tracts or books had sold perhaps as many as 600,000 copies. Nothing like that had happened in the first decades of Gutenberg’s revolution in public discourse. Luther’s use of the printing press established a new cultural matrix for the dissemination of ideas and the persuasion of a populace. His message spread and made its impact largely through the oral proclamation of preachers and laity who read his tracts in public places, but this oral proclamation was made possible and empowered by the diffusion of his message in print.

Luther’s use of Gutenberg’s invention not only changed the ways intellectuals exchanged ideas and attracted followers. It also transformed the way common people worshiped and learned the Christian faith. Mark U.
Edwards Jr. has shown that in any given area, decisions of local printers highlighted different sides of Luther. But the general re-formation of pious practice and perception developed under the Wittenberg model no matter what initial accents had been prominent in local readings of his works. The publication of Luther’s handbook (*enchiridion*) for Christian instruction converted the word for that instruction – catechism – into a word for the book itself, and the memorization of Luther’s *Small Catechism* began its 500-year-long history of shaping basic Christian knowledge for countless boys and girls. Luther’s hymns edged their way into the pious practice and consciousness of parishioners; worship in Western Christendom was altered forever by his combination of music and lyrics. Devotional material for the families of literate artisans and peasants, postils and commentaries for their pastors, treatments of social questions for city councilmen and princely counselors reconstructed significant parts of popular piety and public policy, because Luther’s ideas penetrated parsonages and princes’ courts alike through his publications.

Luther’s writings continued to play such a role, even if in a more limited way, after his death. The reprinting of his works found ready markets deep into the seventeenth century, and even thereafter. Without the printing press there would have been no confessionalization, and without Luther’s continued presence on the booksellers’ lists its shape would have been quite different. Those who could afford it could obtain Luther’s “complete” works and have ready reference to the reformer’s thought always at hand. No living personality had made it worthwhile for a printer to produce an *opera omnia* before 1518, the year in which the Basel printer Johannes Froben commissioned the local cathedral preacher Wolfgang Capito to edit the first *Luther’s Latin Works*, in one volume of five hundred pages. Erasmus protested, and he was the exceptional author whose voice publishers heed. In addition, papal excommunication and imperial outlawry made it dangerous for printers in Basel and Strasbourg to continue to issue subsequent editions.

Twenty years later, however, Luther’s own colleagues – against his protest – began a massive project of producing his “Works.” When completed twenty years later (1539–59), the Wittenberg Edition embraced twelve German and seven Latin – massive folio – volumes. It had also provoked a rival undertaking, the Jena Edition, because the latter’s Gnesio-Lutheran creators suspected that the Philippist editors of the former had altered certain passages too freely (an exaggerated verdict). Its volumes appeared rapidly: eight German between 1555 and 1558 and four Latin between 1556 and 1558. Individual volumes of both editions were reprinted into the seventeenth century.
One of those who planned the Jena Edition, Luther’s former amanuensis Johannes Aurifaber, sought to fill in the very few gaps that remained in these two “complete” works. He obtained some support from the ducal Saxon government to publish two supplementary volumes (1564/65) plus two of Luther’s correspondence (1556, 1565), but lack of commercial success ended his projects. Much more successful was Aurifaber’s publication of student reports from Luther’s dinner table, his Table Talk, organized by topics. At least twenty-three editions, some modified by other editors, appeared in print between 1566 and 1621.

By the later seventeenth century the government of Saxony-Altenburg deemed it necessary to issue a ten-volume revision of the German Jena edition, the Altenburg Edition (1661–64); in 1729–40 the Leipzig publisher Johann Heinrich Zedler (1706–1763) brought out twenty-two volumes in German, the Leipzig Edition. The Jena professor Johann Georg Walch was already at work on a twenty-four-volume “Luther’s Works” in modernized German (1740–53); it was extensively revised and republished by A. H. Hoppe and others in St. Louis for German-American pastors (1880–1910). By that time critical editorial standards were being developed, and these standards guided the production of the Erlangen Edition (67 German volumes, 1826–57; 26 Latin, 1829–86) and the Weimar Edition (101 volumes, 1883–1993).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries editors and publishers recognized that many pastors could not afford the whole of Luther’s works, so they prepared single works or florilegias of Luther citations on specific subjects, ranging over many topics Luther had addressed. His postils remained popular; his Church Postil appeared at least a dozen times during the fifty years after his death; his House Postil, designed for family use, in at least thirty-five editions. Other pieces or collections of his prayers and biblical comments for such devotional use were frequently printed well into the seventeenth century; at least four editors assembled selected prayers from his pen to aid pious meditation. Luther’s hymns remained on people’s lips and in their hymnbooks. Even when a hymnal contained few of his hymn texts, his name frequently appeared on the title page. Luther’s heirs associated his name inseparably with song and praise.

Although the course of polemic with Roman Catholics and Calvinists developed in ways that demanded new expressions of Lutheran theology, Luther was occasionally republished in order to defend his teaching against those who were attacking it. For those who wanted to study his thought within the framework of systematic theology as Melanchthon had organized it, into topics from “God” to “the resurrection of the dead,” a new genre, the loci communes Lutheri, was conceived in the 1560s. By 1600 five such
collections had appeared to provide readers with a pre-digested synopsis of his thought. For the most part they actually offered sufficiently extensive citations to furnish users with substantial material for thought and for preaching and teaching. In 1584 the first of many collections of short citations – aphorisms and maxims suitable for embellishing sermons – came from Michael Neander’s pen. This genre still finds users in the twenty-first century among Lutheran preachers.

**Luther’s Influence on Lutheran Theology in the Age of Confessionalization**

Luther presumed that the entire life of the church proceeded from the Word of God, and he spent his life interpreting and proclaiming it. Convinced of his understanding of the biblical message, he wanted to pass on to his followers what he had learned. Yet every generation reformulates its own expression of its theology, even when paradigm shifts of the magnitude introduced by Luther and Melanchthon cannot be part of each age’s task. Students of these two Wittenberg professors are often “accused” of not being their equals in originality – an impossible demand – or of changing and shading their message – a necessary historical development. Indeed, it did not fall to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran “epigones” to be Luther and Melanchthon. But they did take seriously what these two had bequeathed them as they addressed the changing world of early modern Europe. Their times, other elements in their framework of thinking from medieval and humanistic as well as patristic sources, and their epistemological equipment did affect the way they used what Luther had left them.

Luther was a “conservative” reformer, as all reformers are, in certain ways. He preserved much of the medieval heritage, and his followers hauled more or other aspects of their medieval inheritance back into church. But at the heart of theological enterprise – and at the heart of piety – Luther proposed profound shifts in the way Christian people thought of God and his way of working in a fallen world, of themselves, and their relationship to their neighbors. The most important elements in this paradigm shift proceeded from his reprocessing his nominalistic heritage as he wrestled with what might be called the paradox of two sets of responsibility. His professors had helped Luther recognize that the biblical concept of the sovereign Creator posited a God who holds all things under his control; from this presupposition he fashioned his doctrine of providence and his concept of grace and of free forgiveness of sin and life in Christ. This teaching he labeled “gospel.” At the same time he assumed that God had so designed human creatures that they are also totally responsible for that which God
has given them to do. Divine expectations for human creatures are what Luther called “law.”

Out of this paradox of divine and human responsibilities (a term Luther did not himself employ) arose his hermeneutical principle of the proper distinction of law and gospel. The gospel is God’s means of re-creating his elect children out of sinners as he gives them this new identity through Christ’s death and resurrection; the law unfolds God’s expectations for the performance or behavior of God’s human creatures. The law crushes and accuses sinners; the gospel gives them the forgiveness of sins, restoring them to people whose lives center in trust in God as he has revealed himself in Christ. The anthropological corollary of this paradox is Luther’s distinction of two kinds of righteousness. He taught that human creatures are righteous in God’s sight “passively,” as children, only because God looks on them with favor, mercy, and love. They are right or righteous in relationship to God’s creation by carrying out his commands in deeds of love. The societal and ethical implications of the paradox are expressed in Luther’s distinction of two realms in which God operates. The vertical or “heavenly” realm of faith embraces the gospel’s forgiveness and the believer’s responding trust in Christ. The horizontal or “earthly” realm of love embraces the good works of care for the neighbor and all of God’s creation. Alongside this paradox of divine and human responsibility Luther took seriously the mystery of the continuation of evil in believers’ lives. Therefore, he emphasized the necessity of lifelong daily repentance.

Luther’s second fundamental presupposition that guided several elements of his theological system lay in his understanding of God’s Word. God reveals himself in such a way that human creatures are totally dependent on his Word, which Luther contended can be found alone in Scripture (and human conveying of its message). Therefore, in what he called the “theology of the cross,” he not only affirmed the atonement wrought through Christ’s death and resurrection but also the distinction between the Hidden God, inaccessible to human reason, and the Revealed God, whom faith grasps as it is created by God’s revelation of himself in Christ and in Scripture.

God’s Word not only reveals information about God. It is performative speech, God’s instrument of creative and re-creative power. It does what God says: law condemns sinners, gospel forgives and bestows new life upon the elect whom the Holy Spirit brings to faith through its proclamation. Luther believed that reality proceeds from God’s speaking; he held an ontology of the Word, and the reality of human life in God’s sight is determined by the faith God’s promise of life creates.

According to Luther, God’s Word, in the form of human language — in oral, written, and sacramental forms — is not bound by presuppositions
imposed by spiritualizing philosophies, such as the then ever more popular forms of Platonic thought which asserted that spiritual blessings could not be conveyed by material elements. Luther maintained that God has chosen certain material elements, including the human language of the gospel and sacramental elements, including water, bread and Christ’s body, wine and Christ’s blood, to deliver forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

These larger conceptual frameworks for interpreting and applying biblical thought did not fit neatly into the epistemological structures of the time. Luther clearly formulated the distinctions between law and gospel and between two kinds of righteousness as well as his “theology of the cross.” But without a clear epistemological framework he did not unambiguously pass his method of thinking on to his students. They indeed struggled with the application of his method, but did so with the tools given them by Melanchthon, chiefly the method of organizing material by specific topics (loci communes). These discrete units of ideas, packaged for effective delivery to listeners or readers, permitted no larger view of a framework for thinking. Thus, Luther’s disciples reduced the dynamic of his insights into forms manageable as loci communes.

Most of their controversies arose from their different perceptions of the paradox of two responsibilities and of the nature of God’s Word as his active instrument for effecting salvation. In contending over the role of good works in the Christian life, Philippist followers of Luther and Melanchthon paid special attention to the human responsibility of obedience to God’s commands, an accent the two Wittenberg professors had stressed since their encounter with dissolute peasant life in the visitation of 1527/28. Thus, under Major’s leadership they argued that good works are necessary for salvation. Gnesio-Lutheran opponents emphasized God’s grace. Few went so far as Amsdorff, who revived Luther’s statement regarding the use of good works as meritorious, for self-justification, “good works are detrimental for salvation.” But all affirmed that good works play no role in salvation even though many used the expression, “good works are necessary in the Christian life.” Others in this group opposed any association of “necessity” with the performance of God’s Word, fearing that such language would lead the pious to believe that they could win God’s favor through their own behavior. These Gnesio-Lutherans urged that Christians do good works “spontaneously,” “from a free, merry spirit,” in their effort to preserve Luther’s distinction between two kinds of righteousness.

The Wittenbergers’ students also disagreed on the bondage or freedom of the will. Gnesio-Lutherans tended to accent the will’s bondage in sin until freed by the Holy Spirit through the use of God’s Word. They preserved Luther’s “broken” doctrine of predestination, teaching within the
framework of distinguishing law and gospel that God’s unconditioned choice of believers is the sole cause of their salvation while denying that God is responsible for the damnation of unbelievers, who under the law must take responsibility for their rejection of God. Philippists, on the other hand, focused on human responsibility. They confessed God’s total responsibility for the salvation of his people, but they also took seriously the concerns that caused Melanchthon to explore what the will does in coming to faith and continuing repentance. As they defended themselves against Roman Catholic charges of “stoic determinism,” probed ways to communicate the gospel with effective rhetoric, and investigated the psychological dynamics of cultivating repentance and public discipline, they focused on the actions of the will. The Gnesio-Lutherans affirmed that the will acts, but turns to Christ, they asserted, only under the power of the Holy Spirit. Although the *Formula of Concord* confessed the latter position, seventeenth-century theologians continued to search for ways to clarify the will’s role that sometimes abandoned the paradox of divine and human responsibility and gave more credit to the will’s actions than Luther had done.

Andreas Osiander challenged Luther’s concept of the Word of God in the doctrine of justification. Influenced by the Platonic principles of his training in cabalistic thinking, he taught that sinners are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ. But he did not capture Luther’s concept of the re-creative power of God’s Word of forgiveness. He could not understand Luther’s ontology of the Word, that God’s speaking creates reality. Osiander therefore concluded that justification takes place because the righteousness of Christ’s divine nature comes to dwell in believers through faith. With one accord Luther’s and Melanchthon’s students, Gnesio-Lutherans and Philippists alike, recognized that Osiander failed to understand Luther’s fundamental approach to salvation through Christ’s obedience to the Father in his death and resurrection. Osiander’s thought remained a symbol for error but exercised no effective role in Lutheran thinking.

A much deeper influence on the confessional sense of Lutherans was the controversy over spiritualizing views of the Lord’s Supper and Christology that some Melanchthon students introduced at the University of Wittenberg in the 1560s. Accused of “crypto-Calvinism,” this new generation of Wittenberg theologians – Casper Peucer, Christoph Pezel, and others – actually were working out insights of Melanchthon in directions opposed to the way in which other Melanchthon students (Martin Chemnitz, Nikolaus Selnecker, David Chytraeus, and others) were taking his ideas. Chemnitz, for example, repeated Luther’s insistence upon reading Christ’s words, “This is my body,” literally since God’s almighty power was able to design means of conveying salvation in any way he pleased. Chemnitz also used Luther’s
explanation that Christ’s body and blood could truly be present in the Supper because of the ancient doctrine of the communication of attributes (Lat. *communicatio idiomata*) between Christ’s divine and human natures. Others, such as Johann Brenz and Jakob Andreae, emphasized the christological argument even more strongly. The *Formula of Concord* confirmed Chemnitz’s approach, which seventeenth-century Lutheran theologians followed, even though its christological aspects were the subject of dispute between theologians at Tübingen and Giessen in 1616–27.

In the year 2000 North American and European lists of the most significant personalities of the second Christian millennium consistently placed Luther near the top, probably for different reasons than central Europeans regarded him as important in 1650. They would have recognized his political and cultural significance but emphasized his theological influence on public thinking. Strained as it was through alien forms of communication, in the Aristotelian-Melanchthonian dialectic of dogmatic theology, Luther’s proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ remained alive in his literary legacy and in forms of thinking which his paradigm shift in theology had effected.

Notes
2. *Warhaftiger Bericht von den wolthaten/die Gott durch Martin Luther…erzeigt…* (Jena: Rhebart, 1561), A4a-b1b.
3. *Disputatio Reverendi patris D. Martini Luther de operibus legis & gratiae…* (Magdeburg: Lotther, 1553), A3b.
4. *De confessione in doctrine divina…* (Jena: Rödinger, 1569), c5b–c6a.