The Roman Catholic theologian Johann Cochlaeus, an opponent of Luther, who wrote many tracts and books against him, once called Martin Luther, “a seven-headed monster.” His friends saw him as a man of many faces—of many talents and abilities, a man of many gifts—not a monster, but instead [as] the angel of the apocalypse, the angel presented in Revelation 14 as the one who would in the last day bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the earth once again. We cannot really understand Luther’s theology without having something in mind of his life and particularly his literary work. In this first lecture, we will trace his career from his family setting in central Germany at the end of the 15th century (he was born before Columbus sailed the ocean blue), and we will move then through the various stages of his career, particularly as a professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg.

Martin Luther was born to a family of peasant stock, although his father was not a peasant. His father had left the peasant village because in that day there was not enough land to go around, and it was often the older son rather than the younger son who would leave so that the younger son could spend more time at home and so that the parents would be older before the younger son married and took responsibility for the family. So Hans Luther (Martin Luther’s father) moved from the peasantry into an aspiring middle class. He moved into the mining industry of central Germany and became a smelter. Within princely controlled territories (not in a free city, but in a village controlled by a local count), Hans Luther made his way into the middle class and finally actually achieved some political as well as social status by serving as the leader of his village. Luther’s mother came from a middle-class small merchant family in the city of Eisenach; and Luther was raised in the strict and pious environment of the late Middle Ages. He sometimes complained about the strictness of his teachers and his parents, but probably they were not excessively strict. That was simply the temper of the time.

His father was an ambitious man. His father had climbed one rung on the social ladder of medieval Germany, and he wanted his son to do the same. Luther’s education began in the village
of Mansfeld (to which his family had moved from native Eisleben across the valley when he was just a tiny toddler). He began his primary education in Mansfeld and then moved on to the city from which his mother came, the small town of Eisenach. There we hear the famous story of his singing in the streets and begging. Sometimes that has been interpreted as an indication that Luther was poor, but all the young students did the same.

He moved on to Magdeburg to complete what we might roughly compare with a secondary education today. And there he attended a school influenced by the Brethren of the Common Life, the lay monastic movement that had revitalized education in a good bit of northern Europe in the later part of the 15th century.

Luther then went to the University of Erfurt (Universität of Erfurt), perhaps the closest university in a town which was filled with religious orders and with a religious fervor. He began his studies at the University of Erfurt, completed what would be the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree today, and went on the path that his father had planned for him, the study of law. But Martin Luther was a very conscientious young man. He had been influenced by the piety which influenced and permeated the spirit of his age. He had a heavy conscience, and he was worried very much about his relationship with his God. And so when, according to the story at least, lightning struck near him on a trip from his home back to the University of Erfurt, he made a vow to Saint Ann (the patron of miners and smelters) to become a monk if she would save his life. He returned to Erfurt, sold his law books, and found the Augustinian monastery. Some have said that he joined the Augustinian monastery because it was the strictest monastery in town, because it would impose the severest burden upon him so that he might work his way on the monastic path more quickly into God’s favor and thus into heaven. It is also possible that he joined the Augustinian order because it was the closest monastery to the dormitory in which he had lived as a student of the law.

The Augustinian order had two branches in Germany at that time, and Luther did join the stricter of the two. That was the monastic house that was closest to his dormitory. He sought in monasticism the more perfect way to find God’s grace. He submitted himself fully to the rigorous of monastic life, and he very quickly showed his abilities. He wanted to remain a simple monk, but his superiors saw what an able person he was, and so they pushed him. They pushed him first into the priesthood. He studied for the priesthood and was ordained. In his first Mass, he felt the awesome and awful presence of God, and he stopped in the middle. He couldn’t continue because he felt himself totally unworthy to be a priest of God. But his superiors were used to
dealing with tender consciences like his and they furthered his advance in the order. They also commanded him to begin formal theological studies. And slowly but surely, in the late 1500s and the early 1510s, he made his way through the rather rigorous course of studies, which led to the highest title that the academic world of the late Middle Ages could bestow, the Doctor of Bible.

He had been befriended by the chief of his order in all of Germany, a nobleman from his native Saxony named Johann Von Staupitz. And Von Staupitz recognized in Luther a man of great ability and also, I suspect, a kind of soul mate. They talked much and Staupitz certainly influenced Luther’s theology. As a nobleman in Saxony, Von Staupitz had close connections with the governing family, the Wettin family, which supplied Saxony at this point with two rulers. Western Saxony was called the Electoral Saxony, the elector of Saxony was one of those seven princes in the German empire who chose the emperor and who had other larger responsibilities for the entire empire. In eastern Saxony, his cousin ruled. There the Duke of Saxony (at the time of Luther, Duke George) had a smaller domain, not quite so important as the western part of the duchy, which was led by Elector Frederick “The Wise.” Von Staupitz had helped Elector Frederick the Wise form the University of Wittenberg as his own university in the year AD 1502, and Luther was assigned there by the Augustinian order as a kind of, what we might call today, a teaching assistant, someone who gave lectures to undergraduate students and on the first levels of the study of graduate theology.

So in 1512, Luther received his degree as Doctor in Bible, and he began a series of biblical lectures, which would continue throughout his life. Between 1513 and 1515, his initial lectures treated the Psalms. He worked his way through the entire book of Psalms, and already at this point he showed that he was on the cutting edge of biblical studies in his day. For the newest movement in the entire intellectual world of the late Middle Ages, but particularly in theology, was a movement that is called biblical humanism. The humanism of biblical humanism refers not to what we might call humanism in this modern day but instead refers to the humanities, to the study of the ancient Greek and Latin authors and also ancient Hebrew literature as well. The biblical humanists were interested in a wide range of topics all centered in the ancient (in the classical) writers, both of the church and of pagan Greece and Rome. But they were also very much interested in mastering the languages themselves. So they did a great deal of pioneering work really in studying the grammar and the syntax and the vocabulary of ancient Greek and Latin, also the ancient Hebrew.
So Martin Luther used the work, as he lectured on the Psalms, of some of the best biblical scholars of his day, particularly the French biblical humanist Jacques Lefèvre d’Étапles and the German Hebraist, the man who really pioneered Hebrew studies in northern Europe, Johannes Reuchlin. His students, therefore, benefitted not only from his rich background in the medieval scholastic way of doing theology, but also his growing familiarity with the tide of the times, with the newest developments in biblical studies.

When he finished his lectures on the Psalms, he turned next to the epistle to the Romans. And over the course of a year (1515–1516), he worked his way through the text of Romans. As we read those notes on Romans, we recognize that new things were happening in Luther’s theology, as he dealt with Paul’s text. The next year (1516–1517), he lectured on Galatians and published those lectures in 1519. He then turned to the epistle to the Hebrews in 1517 and 1518. But as you may remember, by the end of 1517 he was involved in controversy in the church because of his Ninety-Five Theses. So he began a second series of lectures on the Psalms in 1518 and 1519, but he did not work his way through the entire book of Psalms this time because the events of the church—the events of his developing reformation—spun out around him in a whirlwind of activity.

At the same time he was lecturing at the University of Wittenberg on a variety of biblical topics, he was also rising in his order as a young administrator, as a pastoral leader, a leader who could show pastoral concerns to other monks, even though he was still very much caught up in the struggle for his own soul, in the struggle to find peace with God. That struggle is focused in a series of disputations for which he wrote theses in 1516 and 1517. The disputation was a medieval way of conducting examinations for university students. A professor, or perhaps the student under the direction of the professor, would write a series of theses of brief thetical statements. And then the student would have to defend them orally in front of the faculty (in the case of theology, in front of the theology faculty), often with fellow students also in attendance.

In 1516 and 1517, Luther then developed (either himself or through his students) three series of disputations that were really quite important. His student Bartholomew Bernhardi prepared theses in September of 1516, lifting ideas really from Luther’s recent lectures on the Romans, and these theses focused on Luther’s rejection of the sinner’s natural ability to keep God’s commands, to do anything good in God’s sight, anything God-pleasing in God’s sight—to earn grace, in other words. And Luther
directed Bernhardi in his development of new ideas on the grace of God. Not totally new ideas, ideas that were dependent already on the ancient church father Augustine, but ideas that shocked some of Luther’s colleagues and his students in the early part of the 16th century. Luther also composed theses in this period attacking Aristotle and the domination of Aristotelian philosophy, particularly Aristotelian metaphysics on theology. Luther did not object to the use of Aristotle’s logic if it took the role of a servant, if it took the role of a minister (a ministerial use of reason, he called it). But if it took the role of the master, of the magister—a magisterial use of reason—Luther rejected it. And he found that much of medieval theology had been jerked out of its biblical context and placed into an Aristotelian context, which damaged the biblical message sometimes beyond recognition.

The most important of these theses that Luther prepared for disputation was a set that he did not intend to actually be defended by a student. There was another usage of the disputation in Luther’s day, and that was the usage which set forth these short thetical statements again (theses) for debate among the professors or among the theologians. So at the end of October of 1517, Luther set forth a series of theses on the subject of indulgences. An indulgence was a means of satisfying God’s demand for the punishment of sin. Theoretically, the medieval understanding of the path to heaven really included two concerns for the sinner. There was the concern about eternal guilt; and eternal guilt could only be taken away as the merit of Christ was applied to the sinner through the absolution which the priests spoke in the sacrament of penance. But there was still temporal punishment left over, and temporal punishment had to be satisfied—it had to be worked off by the sinner—either in this life through good works originally and then through the use of indulgences or in purgatory.

An indulgence was, first of all, in the high Middle Ages some kind of good work that would earn God’s grace by satisfying His demand for temporal punishment. But by the beginning of the 16th century, indulgences could be purchased. And because of the need of the Archbishop of Mainz, Albrecht of Hohenzollern, for funds to cover the costs of his acquiring a third bishopric, the Archbishopric of Mainz, and because of Pope Leo X’s need for money to build the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, an indulgence was sold in Germany in 1517, which led to Luther encountering his own parishioners from Wittenberg, waving a piece of paper in their hand and saying that they did not need to perform the good works that he as priest was prescribing still for them at this point because they had already purchased years out of purgatory for themselves or even for their dead relatives. Luther believed
that was wrong. As a pastor, he was deeply offended—he was deeply hurt—because he had such a tender pastoral concern for his people and for their spiritual welfare.

So he composed Ninety-Five Theses (that’s why we call his theses on indulgence the Ninety-Five Theses), and he posted them at the end of October 1517 so that he might debate a series of issues around the pastoral care of the people of God. There is some debate about whether he actually nailed them to the church door in Wittenberg. Indeed, announcements were nailed to the church door in Wittenberg, but it was questionable whether formal Latin theses would be nailed to that door. Some say that he probably just put them in the mail, shared them with his fellow professors in Wittenberg. We know also that he sent them to a number of other theologian friends in other places. It has been said that whether he nailed them or whether he mailed them, he posted them. So we may speak of the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses in any case.

The content of the Ninety-Five Theses is not particularly important if we are simply going to focus on Luther’s theology. First of all, a professor did not have to express his positions completely or even forthrightly. He could test the waters, he could play devil’s advocate, he could put forth ideas that he wasn’t sure of, maybe that he didn’t believe at all, just as a red flag to attract, to provoke argument in the common search for the truth.

In addition, in 1517, Luther’s mind was definitely still in transit. He had discovered much of what we might talk about as his evangelical breakthrough (the subject of Lecture 4), but he had not come to the full shape of his theology by any means yet. There are some important ideas in the Ninety-Five Theses; that is not to be denied. The first thesis expresses a proposition that Luther would defend his entire life. That first thesis tells us that the whole life of a Christian is a life of penance, not in the sense of going to the sacrament of penance but in the sense of daily repentance, a daily dying to our sin, a daily being raised by the Holy Spirit to new life in Jesus Christ.

Now Luther went on to make a good many points, particularly about papal power to remit temporal punishment, to govern purgatory. He made the unkind crack that if the Pope really had the power to free souls from purgatory, he should in all Christian charity do it (Thesis 82). And he insisted that the gospel, the merits of Christ, the Word of God were more important and certainly more powerful than indulgences ever could be. He centered his pastoral concern on the forgiveness of sin, which in many ways is simply the heart of his message the rest of his life. But Luther’s
theology was not fully formed in the Ninety-Five Theses.

On the other hand, the Ninety-Five Theses is justly famous in Western cultural history because it was the first modern media event, it was the first modern public relations event, we might say. Yes, indeed, the Ninety-Five Theses changed Western history, not just theologically (though they caused a controversy that resulted in what we call the Reformation), but they were also important because in some ways the printing press made its debut as a vehicle of arousing popular feeling and popular thought through the Ninety-Five Theses.

It would be interesting to know how the printers in Wittenberg recognized that they had a saleable product in these little Latin theses. They translated them into German, and they printed them and they sold them. In a way that had never been seen before in Western Christendom, one man’s ideas spread. They spread rapidly. It was said that within a month, all of Germany was talking about Luther’s protest against the Pope; and it was said that within only a few weeks, more theologians all over Europe had read his Latin theses and were clucking in their corners about the daring defiance of this monk against the medieval system of salvation.

So slightly more than 50 years after the invention of the printing press, Martin Luther, by accident, through no intention or fault of his own, actually made a tremendous impact on Western history by falling into a demonstration of how the printing press might be used to influence ideas.

It is true that not all that many people were literate in this day and age. We have varying estimates of literacy at the beginning of the 16th century in Germany, but they are all quite low. However, there were people in most villages who could read. There were people certainly in every small town who could read, and something like Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, a hot news item because it affected the very heart and soul of people’s lives—their religious faith—something like that was read in the taverns, in the street corners, in the markets. And those who were not able to read heard from others the content.

Luther had, as a matter of fact, attacked one of the most important elements of late medieval piety, so he could not go unanswered. The church had to defend itself, and almost immediately. In Rome, but also in German theological faculties, attacks on Luther began. Here was a problem that had to be solved. It is indeed true that Pope Leo X did not take what he called a monk’s quarrel in Germany very seriously. But in the Augustinian order, and particularly in
the Dominican order, which had been charged since its founding in the 13th century with the defense of the church against heresy, particularly in the Dominican order, theologians were aroused and they attacked Luther.

E. Gordon Rupp, the 20th-century English Reformation scholar, has commented that Luther has never gotten enough credit for the tracts and the books that he did not write, for he did not respond to all these attacks—attacks on him as a low and dirty dog, attacks in the worst kind of language with the worst kinds of insinuations. Luther, of course, as an earthy boy of peasant background, was able to respond too often in kind, and he does not always do himself credit with the attacks that he did write. But Rupp’s point is well taken. Luther was severely attacked, and it is no wonder that the church, as the Reformation movement was forming, fell into this highly hostile adversarial relationship between reformers and the established church because of the vigor with which the reformers called for reform and because of the viciousness with which the establishment responded.

There had to be a solution. Luther had raised issues that could not be ignored. And because he was an Augustinian monk, the Augustinian order was really supposed to be responsible for taking care of one of its own. That was the normal channel in which such a problem should be dealt with. So in April of 1518, Luther was summoned to Heidelberg to the annual meeting of the Augustinian Order of Hermits, the branch of the Augustinians to which he belonged. There he presented his ideas in the so-called Heidelberg Theses. There he presented his theology as “a theology of the cross”—the subject of our fifth lecture, in which we will go into this initial public expression of his view of theology, the presuppositions from which he was going to study the Word of God. The Augustinians came to no conclusion in Heidelberg. They liked their brother Martin, and they were not about to condemn him. They were certainly not about to send him off to Rome and thus to certain death. The church from Rome had to press itself.

So later in 1518, it sent one of its best diplomats and one of its best biblical scholars, an Italian cardinal named Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio was his baptized name), and Cajetan came to the imperial diet, the imperial legislative assembly, which was held that year at the city of Augsburg. Luther came there wanting to discuss theology with Cajetan. Cajetan said, “No, we don’t want to discuss theology, there is no theology to discuss. There is only your submission to the Holy Father in Rome.” And Luther could not recant, and Cajetan would not discuss theology, and so Luther (mindful that John Huss had been burned in just such a situation 103 years earlier) slipped away in the night because he recognized
that there was no negotiating with the papal party. It was either submit or be excommunicated.

Again, the opposition to Luther came not only from Rome. It came from some of the brightest and the best who remained faithful to the Holy Father in Rome, among the German theologians themselves. In 1519, a debate was arranged between Luther's colleagues, headed by the senior theologian at Wittenberg, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, and Luther and others from Wittenberg. They went to Leipzig in 1519 to defend their ideas, above all against the Roman Catholic theologian from [the University of] Ingolstadt, perhaps the brightest and the best of contemporary Roman Catholics in Germany, a man named Johann Eck. The debate was hard fought. Karlstadt was not able to defend the Wittenberg position very effectively as the leader of the delegation from the University of Wittenberg, and so Luther himself went to the podium. And Eck very cleverly pointed out to Luther that he was traveling the same doctrinal road, dogmatic road, that John Huss had traveled one hundred years earlier when the Bohemian contended that the church was not the clergy headed by the Pope, but the church was the people of God. Luther came to the conclusion, against his will almost, we could say, that, as he said, “We are Hussites all.” He was being moved into more and more of a position of open opposition, not just to the administration of the papacy but to the very idea that the church should be controlled by the Bishop of Rome.

The Bishop of Rome had to defend himself, of course, and in 1520 he issued a warning that Luther and a number of others would be excommunicated if they did not quickly submit to the papal obedience. And at the beginning of 1521, Luther was excommunicated. In May of 1521, Emperor Charles V, who was king in Spain as well as German emperor, called him to another legislative assembly, the Diet at the city of Worms. There Luther was summoned to appear before the emperor and all the assembled princes and representatives of the free municipalities of Germany, and it was there where we say, according to legend, he said, “Here I stand, I cannot do other.” Whether he actually said that is disputed by Reformation scholars today because it first occurs in reports much later, but we do know that Luther stood before the emperor, that he refused to recant ideas which he had expressed on the basis of his conviction as the Word of God, and he stood by his confession of the faith.

Luther left Worms then and was returning to Wittenberg. But his prince, Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, whom Luther never met personally, liked Luther (we don’t really know what Frederick the Wise thought of Luther’s ideas, but we know that he
liked Martin Luther) and wanted to defend him, wanted to defend German liberty. And so he arranged for Luther to be kidnapped and hid away at a castle which belonged to the elector, the castle at the Wartburg. There Luther had the better part of a year in which he could study and meditate and work. And, “he worked,” we might say, “like mad.”

He had already begun his campaign for the reformation of the church in print. A year earlier in 1520 he had published four very important works that in some senses laid out his program for the reform of the church. In chronological order they were: first, his Treatise on Good Works. He met the charges that his understanding of the justification of the sinner in the sight of God by grace alone through faith alone would eliminate good works from the Christian life. In his Treatise on Good Works, he established that faith in Christ will inevitably and naturally produce good works. And in this tract he then instructed believers in how to carry out God’s commands in daily life.

Chronologically, the second of these great programmatic tracts of 1520 was his Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate. In this tract, he sharply criticized the papacy’s claim to control all spiritual and all temporal power on earth, and he used memoranda that the German estates in their Diets had earlier brought together as protests against what was wrong with the church. And he wove all this together into a program for practical reform—practical adjustment of the church’s life to the biblical commands and to the biblical demands.

Thirdly, in the summer of 1520, he wrote perhaps the most important of these four works from a theological standpoint, his far-reaching Babylonian Captivity of the Church. It attacked the role of the priest, the sacerdotal role of the priest in controlling the church and oppressing the laity, and it critiqued the sacramental system of the late medieval church. In the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther rejected four of the seven medieval sacraments: (1) extreme unction at the deathbed, (2) ordination of priests, (3) marriage as a sacrament (not as an institution of God, of course), and (4) confirmation. He suggested that the sacrament of (5) penance—if understood as the confession of sins and absolution by a fellow Christian—if properly understood and properly practiced, confession and absolution, could be a sacrament. But indeed it was also simply a continuation of God's gracious action in baptism, putting the sinner to death and raising us up again as the people of God. So he waffled on whether there are three sacraments or only two, (6) the Lord’s Supper and (7) baptism, with confession and absolution being a continuation
of baptism. The other sacrament that Luther retained was, of course, the Lord's Supper. And in the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, he gave an extensive treatment to a number of questions surrounding the doctrine and the practice of the Lord’s Supper.

The final of these four major works of 1520 came in a Treatise Addressed to Pope Leo X, a kind of conciliatory attempt to make peace with the Pope, although Luther was probably moved by political considerations, and he may not really have believed at all that the Pope would understand his proclamation of the gospel or respond to it. He was, of course, not successful. The topic of “The Freedom of the Christian” is indeed Christian Liberty, but in a sense it is Luther’s whole doctrine of justification. And when we come to discuss this centerpiece of Luther’s theology, we will return to his tract in which he called for sinners to flee to the arms of Jesus Christ, to the forgiveness of sin in Jesus Christ so that they might be freed by Christ from everything that threatens them—from every enemy, from Satan and sin and the condemnation of the law and death and hell—so that they might live a life which was bound to all, that is, bound to serve every neighbor in every need.

Against the background of this setting forth of his program in print, Luther then began to extend his campaign for the hearts and the minds of Christian people. He translated the New Testament. In remarkably short time, he created the first German translation based on the original Greek. It was not the first German translation of the Scriptures, as is sometimes said. But it was the first that took Erasmus’ text of the Greek New Testament and put the Word of God before the people in their own language in a spritely fashion. Luther was a literary genius and he in some ways shaped, we could almost say created, modern German with his translation of the Bible. And in this translation of the New Testament, done in 1521 and 1522, he captured the rhythm of Paul and of John and of the other New Testament writers in a marvelous way and paved the way for his own Reformation and for the reconstitution of the piety of his people through his translation.

He also prepared the first of several postils. A postil is a collection of sermons that were used in the Middle Ages by priests who could read, when they didn’t want to write their own sermons. Luther recognized that he had to conduct what we might call a continuing education program for priests who wanted to join his movement and preach the Gospel as he understood it. So he put model sermons in their hands, in their mouths, in their pulpits though his postils.

Luther went on then in the 1520s and 1530s, up to his death in
1546, to use the printing press in a number of ways. One of the important ways was in the reconstitution of the Western Catholic Liturgy. In 1523, he wrote a new setting for the divine service in Latin that was also translated later into German and became the kind of standard liturgical service for Lutheran churches. In 1526, he wrote an outline based on the traditional medieval order, an outline of the Mass, but it was in German and it was done with hymns, not with chanting. And his German Mass of 1526 provides a more popular kind of liturgy for Christian people.

He continued then to use the printing press in a number of ways, with polemical literature aimed against foes on every side and with instructional literature of various kinds, above all his catechisms (which we will discuss in the last lecture of this series). Luther returned in 1522 to Wittenberg to become head of his Reformation. And in the following years he nursed his Reformation along by teaching and by writing and by preaching.

1525 was a particularly important year, for there were a series of what we might call creative crises for Luther. The Peasants’ Revolt gave him occasion to discuss the whole relationship between the church, the gospel, and society (we will discuss that in Lecture 22). He married and he enjoyed his marriage to Katherine von Bora; and she provided him with spiritual insight and spiritual support, which was very important for him.

In 1525, he also broke with the older generation of biblical humanists, particularly with Erasmus, over the issue of the Freedom of the Will, and we will discuss their debate on the Bondage of the Will in Lecture 9.

In 1525, Frederick the Wise died and was succeeded by his brother, Elector John. John was not afraid to express his full and fulsome support for his good friend Martin Luther. And with John's coming to power, the princes of Germany began to introduce the Reformation on the level of their own territories.

Luther’s life was filled with a good deal of conflict in the 1520s and 1530s with other Protestants, particularly over the issues of the sacraments, which we will discuss in Lecture 16 and 17; and we will discuss his confrontations there with Karlstadt, with [Ulrich] Zwingli, with [Johannes] Oecolampadius, and also with the Anabaptists of his day.

Luther spent the last years of his life, particularly from 1550 on, in the classroom, although he was engaged in a number of other activities as well. In the early 1550s, he lectured on the book of Galatians. And his Galatians Commentary is a classic, perhaps
the best expression of his whole world of thought. He began a series of lectures in 1535 on the book of Genesis, and that series of lectures took him 10 years. He interrupted it with some smaller, shorter lectures on other Old Testament books, but from 1535 to the end of 1545, shortly before his death, he lectured on the book of Genesis.

He wrote a number of other important tracts and treatises during this last 15 years of his life, among the most important is his work that we call the Smalcald Articles, a collection of articles of the faith, a kind of summary, almost a last will and testament of his theology. It was prepared for his fellow Lutherans to take to the papal council should it assemble, which it finally did in Trent 10 years later. These articles from 1536 and early 1537 are an excellent brief summary of Luther’s theology.

We will return to the Smalcald Articles and to his many other writings as we pursue then the course of the proclamation of this man whom contemporaries viewed as an angel of apocalypse, as well as the very expression of the devil’s word itself. For in Luther, we have an exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ that has profoundly influenced the church for 400 years plus and profoundly influences our proclamation of the gospel still today.