

Castle Church Lutherstadt Wittenberg

## Martin Luther's Prefaces for the Books of the New Testament

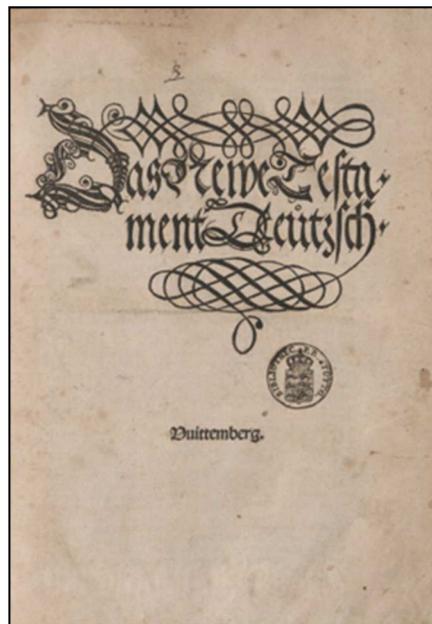
By Pastor Jensen

### Introduction

Last month—September, 2022—was a Reformation anniversary that went largely unnoticed. Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament into the German language was published. The *Septembertestament*, as it was called, was the result of Luther's translating efforts while holed up in the Wartburg Castle in 1521–1522. Although a complete translation of the Holy Scriptures would not be completed until 1534, the German people finally had a decent and reasonably priced translation of the New Testament in their native language. The Reformation theology Luther drew from the Scriptures could now be verified by common Christians from this first installment of the "Luther Bible."

Although Luther's was not the first translation of the Bible into a Germanic language, it certainly was the most influential.<sup>1</sup> The use of the printing press in early modern Germany and the general desire of the people, influenced by humanistic and Reformation ideals, allowed for and

encouraged popular consumption of Luther's writings, most especially his translation of the Bible. Before the printing press, the Bible, let alone any book, could not have been distributed so quickly and in such great numbers. Before a renewed humanistic emphasis on returning to the original sources and before calls to radically reform



the church based on God's Word, the Bible in German translation would not have been so desired by the

Christian populace. Luther's translation of the Bible then became the most influential in German history because of its widespread distribution, which continued in each installment and with every edition in Luther's lifetime and after his death.

Luther had already translated smaller portions of Scripture here and there. In 1517 he translated the Seven Penitential Psalms, in 1518 Psalm 110, in 1521 the Magnificat, Psalm 68 and Psalm 37. He also translated some sermon texts for his *Church Postil*.<sup>2</sup> His real, systematic work of translating Scripture, though, began with his confinement in the Wartburg Castle following the Diet of Worms in April, 1521. At the Wartburg, Luther was safe from any attempts on his life following the Diet. He also had time to relax and write several treatises. Books and other materials were brought to him from Wittenberg.<sup>3</sup> Luther first stated his intentions of translating the entire New Testament into German in December, 1521 and he had completed the task by March, 1522, so only about eleven weeks.

Even before Luther had completed his translation of the New Testament, the work was already being revised. In February, 1522, Luther sent part of the manuscript, probably the four Gospels, to Spalatin and Melancthon and began revising with Melancthon after dealing with the fanatical spirit of Carlstadt and company.<sup>4</sup> By May, 1522 portions of the New Testament began to be

printed. Three presses were used to speed up the process.

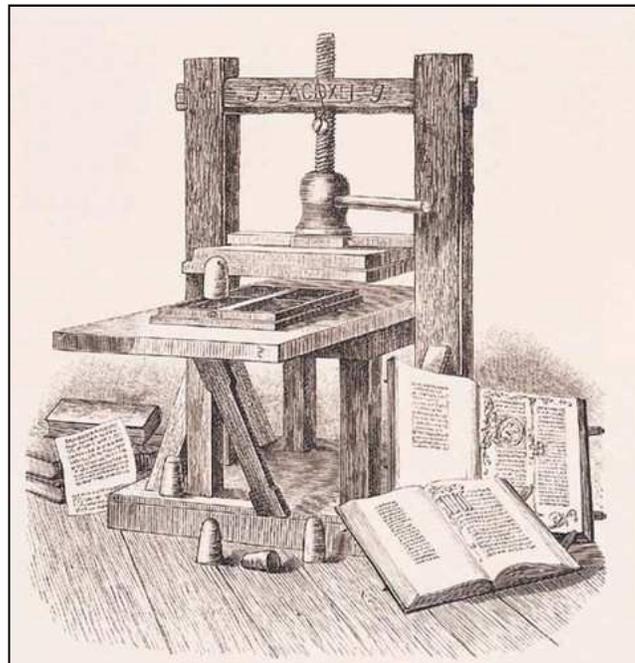
### Luther's Prefaces for the *Septembertestament*

While the New Testament was being printed, Luther wrote prefaces for the entire New Testament and for Romans. Both had to be inserted after printing as indicated by the interruption in pagination.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Luther took longer to write these two prefaces because he considered them to be the most important for understanding the New Testament, and all of Scripture for that matter. All the other prefaces for the September, 1522 publication of the New Testament are considerably shorter. Only the Book of Acts appeared with no preface.

#### *Preface to the New Testament as a Whole*

The Preface to the *Septembertestament* of 1522 begins with a section that was removed from the first complete Luther Bible of 1534 and from editions of the New Testament after 1537.<sup>6</sup> Here, Luther explains that false interpretations of Scripture have led Christians to no longer understand the difference between Gospel or Law, the New

Testament and the Old Testament. The purpose of Luther's preface to the New Testament, then, is all about Law and Gospel: "Necessity demands, therefore, that there should be a notice or preface, by which the ordinary man can be rescued from his former delusions, set on the right track, and taught what he is to look for in this book, so that he may not seek laws and commandments where he ought to be seeking the gospel and



promises of God."<sup>7</sup> Luther argues that the Gospel is to be seen as a single unit, not four separate books written by four different evangelists.

In the portion of the Preface that was contained in all subsequent

editions of the Luther Bible, Luther distinguishes between the Old Testament and the New in terms of Law and Gospel. The Old Testament is a history of God's laws and commandments and those who do or do not keep them. The New Testament is the history of the Gospel, the promises of God, and of those who do or do not believe them. Luther clearly defines what the Gospel is in terms of the life of Christ and the

benefits he gives. The Gospel is about the true David, Jesus Christ, who overcame sin, death, and the devil and rescued all those under their sway. "Without any merit of their own he made them righteous, gave them life, and saved them, so that they were given peace and brought back to God."<sup>8</sup> Luther describes the New Testament in terms of the testament of a dying man, bequeathing property to his heirs. He then goes through different Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ, including the protoevangelium (Genesis

3:15), the promise to Abraham (Genesis 22:18), the promise to David (2 Samuel 7:12-14), the prophecy concerning Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and a prophecy about Christ destroying death and hell (Hosea 13:14). Luther's preface to the *Septembertestament* shows the proper relationship between the Old Testament and the New with the Old prophesying the New.

Luther then gets into the importance of both the person and the work of Christ. Jesus is both the Son of God (divine) and the Son of David (human), who overcame sin, death, and hell by his death and resurrection. With the proper distinction between the Old and New

<sup>1</sup> See P. E. Kretzmann, *The Story of the German Bible: A Contribution to the Quadricentennial of Luther's Translation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934) for an overview of German Bibles from the first contacts between Christianity and various Germanic tribes until Luther's complete translation of the Bible and its revisions within his lifetime.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Reu, *Luther's German Bible: An Historical Presentation Together with a Collection of Sources* (Columbus, OH: The Lutheran Book Concern, 1934), 146.

<sup>3</sup> E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 519-26.

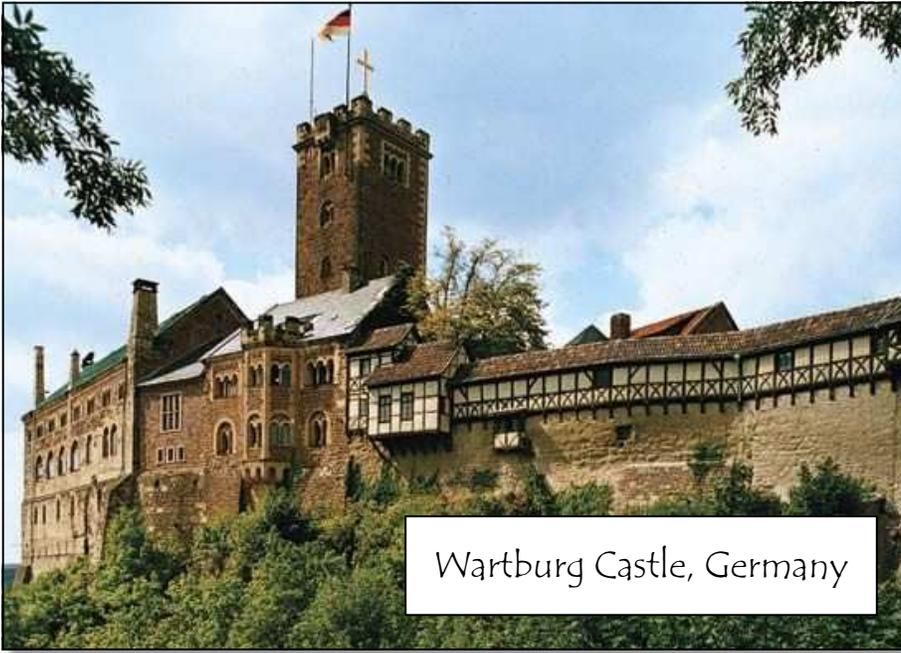
<sup>4</sup> Reu, *Luther's German Bible*, 158-59.

<sup>5</sup> Reu, *Luther's German Bible*, 161-62.

<sup>6</sup> AE 35:357-62, fn. 5. C. F. W. Walther quotes the first line in his own preface to the Weimar Bible: "It would be right and proper for this book to go forth without any prefaces or extraneous names attached and simply have its own say under its own name."

<sup>7</sup> AE 35:357.

<sup>8</sup> AE 35:358.



Wartburg Castle, Germany

Testaments in view, Luther warns about making a Moses (lawgiver) out of Christ. Believers are not made righteous before God by works of the Law, though true faith cannot help but do works of love for the neighbor both spiritually and bodily. Luther's advice is to keep all this in mind when reading Scripture. His Preface is a map for reading the Bible and living the Christian life.

The last part of Luther's Preface to the New Testament contains perhaps the most controversial aspect of Luther's understanding of the Bible. Here he ranks the books of the New Testament in order of importance (the Gospel of John, the Pauline Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and 1 Peter). Luther believes the history of Christ's person and work are well known. The issue is ignorance of the benefits: "you do find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation."<sup>9</sup> This is also where Luther calls James "an epistle of straw" in comparison to the

more useful books of the New Testament just listed.

#### *Preface to Romans*

After Luther's Preface to the entire New Testament came his Preface to Romans (the preface to Acts did not appear until later). The Preface to Romans continues the theological vision Luther described in the Preface to the New Testament. The Gospel is considered more in terms of how it is appropriated by Christians than the historical facts. Luther says: "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel . . . Heretofore it has been badly obscured by glosses and all kinds of idle talk, though in itself it is a bright light, almost sufficient to illuminate the entire holy Scriptures."<sup>10</sup> The Old and New Testaments are interpreted according to interpretive keys provided in Romans, especially in light of the distinction between Law and Gospel.

Luther clarifies the terms Paul uses in Romans, such as "law," "sin," "grace," "faith," "righteousness," "flesh," and "spirit" in an evangelical

way and in opposition to late medieval understandings of these terms that contradict the simple message of the Gospel already outlined by Luther. It is no wonder that Luther spends so much time clarifying key Pauline terms in Romans considering his own awakening that came in understanding the term "righteousness" or "justification" in Romans in a different light.<sup>11</sup> Luther notes that "law" should be seen in terms of God's demands on the entire person, not just outward action. "Sin" involves the entire man, not just outward transgressions. "Faith" is a divine work that changes us, gives us new life and leads to the incessant performance of works.

"Righteousness" is God's righteousness, because He is the one who gives it. "Flesh" includes the whole man, both body and spirit, mind and senses, focused on earthly things. "Spirit" includes the whole man, both body and spirit, mind and senses, focused on the future life and eternal things.

In clarifying Paul's nomenclature, Luther uses many examples of Scripture. He interprets Scripture in light of Scripture. Psalm 116 calls all men liars because no one can keep God's Law perfectly in his heart. "Sin" is fundamentally unbelief, not simply outward works, as shown in John 16:8-9: "The Spirit will convince the world of sin . . . because they do not believe in me." "Faith" is a rebirth, as seen in John 1:12-13. In John 3:6, we see that the whole man, body and soul, is called "flesh," whereas a spiritual work, such as Jesus's washing of his disciples' feet in John 13:1-14 includes even the body and very physical acts. Luther believes understanding these key Pauline terms is necessary for understanding not only Romans, but all of Holy Scripture.

Luther also warns against anyone who interprets these terms in a

<sup>9</sup>AE 35:362.

<sup>10</sup>AE 35:365-66.

<sup>11</sup>Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 282-89.

different sense, including Fathers of the Church, such as Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome.<sup>12</sup> Luther's understanding of Scripture is drawn from Scripture and then sheds light on Scripture. This crucial interpretive principle for Luther is explained in detail in his Preface to Romans and informs the rest of Luther's prefaces and the subsequent Lutheran interpretation of Scripture throughout history. Scripture is to be explained first by Scripture itself. The Fathers of the Church are not primary authorities. They can only help guide us into the Scriptures.

Luther then goes chapter by chapter through Romans summarizing each section and interpreting the book in terms of Law and Gospel. Luther closes the preface by saying: "Therefore it appears that he [Paul] wanted in this one epistle to sum up briefly the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine, and to prepare an introduction to the entire Old Testament. For, without any doubt, whoever has this epistle well in his heart, has with him the light and power of the Old Testament."<sup>13</sup> The Book of Romans was invaluable for Luther when he came to understand the Gospel and for subsequent generations in interpreting all of Scripture evangelically. Luther's interpretation is both drawn from Scripture and interprets all of Scripture.

#### *Remaining Prefaces for New Testament Books*

Luther then continues with short prefaces for each remaining book or section of the New Testament. The 1522 Preface to 1 Corinthians (revised in 1530 to include more information

on the present danger of sectarian spirits) summarizes chapter by chapter the contents of the book.<sup>14</sup>

1 Corinthians is concerned primarily with rebuking problems in the Corinthian congregation, 2 Corinthians is all about comforting and consoling the terrified consciences of the Corinthians and combatting the false apostles "who were inculcating the law over against the gospel, teaching mere



outward holiness."<sup>15</sup>

The rest of Luther's prefaces for the 1522 *Septembertestament* also include outlines of the respective books and evidence of distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel and combating the traditions of men that were established in place of the clear Word of God. Other themes in Luther's 1522 prefaces to the New Testament include instructions on vocation within the three estates (Titus 2; 1 Peter) and the abuses by the clerical estate (2 Timothy; 2 Peter). The themes Luther brings out in the 1522 prefaces are the same themes of the Reformation movement at that time: Law and Gospel, the proper role of the clergy and laity, clerical abuse of power, and the doctrines of men being set over the Word of God. Luther's prefaces, drawn from God's Word, expound God's Word for both the learned and

unlearned in the face of ongoing controversy in the church.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

The chief blessing of Martin Luther's life and work, as well as the entire Reformation movement, was a return to the Holy Scriptures as the source of our doctrine and life. Luther's translation of the Bible, beginning with the *Septembertestament* of 1522, changed the course of history by making God's Word accessible to the common man. Luther's prefaces for the New Testament then served to introduce the people to the basics of the Bible's teachings. They are a monument to the comforting truths of God's Word. Luther's prefaces continue to guide our reading of the Holy Scriptures. The *Lutheran Study Bible*

quotes portions of Luther's prefaces for each book of the Bible, but for the complete prefaces, you will have to look at volume 5 of *Luther's Works* (American Edition). In the next newsletter, I will provide an overview of Luther's prefaces for the Old Testament.

<sup>12</sup>AE 35:372.

<sup>13</sup>AE 35:380.

<sup>14</sup>See Wilhelm Scherer's edition of *Das Neue Testament Deutsch 1522*, p. 268 for Luther's original preface to 1 Corinthians, available online at: <https://archive.org/details/DasNeueTestamentDeutsch1522/mode/2up>

<sup>15</sup>AE 35:384.

<sup>16</sup>Reu, *Luther's German Bible*, 159.

Melanchthon is quoted as writing on 25 February, 1522: "Of what profit this translation will be, not only to the people but to us as well, when in ambiguous passages we can counsel with Luther's spirit!" Counseling with Luther's spirit occurs in Luther's interpretations in the prefaces as much as in his actual translation.



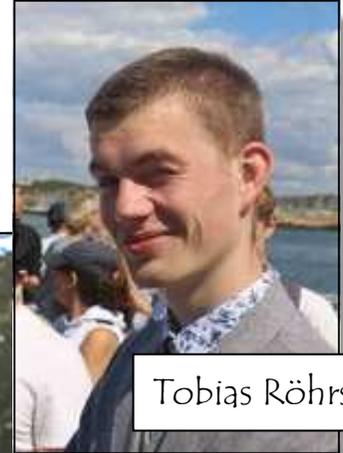
## Introducing the Seminarians of Oberursel

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Kaiserslautern!

You may have noticed that for quite some time a group of German students from Oberursel has been visiting your Sunday Divine Services more or less regularly. Well, so that you won't have to wonder any longer who we are and what the reason of our regular attendance at your church is, we thought it might be right to introduce ourselves.

We are Tobias Röhrs, Max Krüger, Samuel Abliganz and Markus Busenius. Coming from the SELK, your sister church in Germany, and wanting to become pastors, we are living and studying in Oberursel, which is close to Frankfurt (Main). Tobias has been studying for two, Max for four, Samuel and Markus for seven years. The latter two got to know Pastor Nathaniel Jensen during his exchange-year in Oberursel, and later attended Concordia Theological Seminary Fort-Wayne, Indiana (USA) for one exchange-year where they also studied together with him. We come from different parts of Germany:

Max comes from Braunschweig, where he was born, re-born in Holy Baptism, and confirmed. Tobias comes from the north, a city between Hamburg and Bremen, was raised in a big family with ten children. Both have been part of the SELK since their baptism. Whereas Markus and Samuel were raised in a Russian-German brethren-congregation. Markus was born and grew up with his five older siblings in Paderborn. His family returned home from Kazakhstan 32 years ago, shortly before the Berlin wall came down. Samuel was born in Kazakhstan and grew up with his seven siblings near Bremen.



Tobias Röhrs



Max Krüger

To become a pastor in the SELK you normally start your studies right after finishing school. You begin with learning the ancient languages (i.e. Hebrew, Greek,

and Latin) and it takes at least 12 semesters to get your exam. After the examination you begin your two and a half year vicarage, followed by a second exam, which qualifies you to get ordained and become a pastor. So for each of us there are still a few years ahead before becoming a Lutheran pastor.



Markus Busenius

Since the first time we visited your church you have welcomed us very warmly and we are grateful that in a time of spiritual hunger and frustration about the congregation in Oberursel and the administration of the sacraments and the conduct of the divine services in time of covid, we found a new spiritual home in your congregation. We are thankful that here we can not only hear the pure Lutheran teaching from the pulpit and receive the Sacrament according to Christ's institution, but also that we are spiritually nourished and built up in your bible class and catechesis every Sunday. This precious good is worth it to take such a long way each Sunday and to have fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ in a foreign language.

May God bless you and continue to make your church a spiritual home for people who thirst after the word of God.



Samuel Abliganz &  
Elisa Hiestermann

A Letter from the Mission Field  
Pastor Christian Tiewws

Ten days ago, a young woman, Mahsa Amini, was arrested in Tehran for not wearing her hijab (head covering) in accordance with Islamic law. Tragically, she died in prison that same night—under very mysterious circumstances. News of her death soon got out, sparking Iran-wide protests. Only God knows how these demonstrations might impact the current political situation, but they seem to be gaining traction day by day. In the meantime, the government has shut down the Internet to stymie the coordination of anti

-regime protests and to try to prevent news of unrest from spreading.

As I write this, over forty demonstrators have been killed in clashes with government forces. Last week many of our Iranian church members here in Hamburg asked whether we might organize a special prayer service to pray for the explosive situation in their homeland—and also for their relatives who cannot leave the country. We had more people attend that service than we typically get on a Sunday morning. Some of

the women even set up a little memorial in honor of Mahsa outside the walls of the church (see picture) and gathered in front of it, weeping.

In my homily I sought to provide comfort by pointing out that, while the death of one person may impact the



history of Iran, we know for a fact that the death—and resurrection—of another person, also God Himself, impacted the history of the entire planet. As Caiaphas himself said—ironically, not aware of the depth of his words: "...it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." John the Evangelist explains: "...he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:50-52).

Please join us as we pray for the people and country of Iran, that the death of Mahsa Amini would not be in vain and that the Lord would work great miracles out of this extremely volatile situation.





# Elder's Corner

Insights, thoughts, and inspirational messages

Many of us were blessed with the chance to travel to Wittenberg over Labor Day weekend for a prayer retreat. For me, the most spectacular part of this retreat was spending unopposed time in real community with the Church – not just our local church, but the Church Universal. We acknowledged the Church Universal every Sunday during the liturgy, but it is rare that we experience it in a tangible way.

While reflecting on our retreat, it reminded me of a book I read recently titled *“True Community,”* by Jerry Bridges. Bridges talks about how Christians should seek to live in fellowship with each other on a day-to-day basis, both within their local churches as well as in the Church Universal. Several parts of his discussion are particularly poignant for me in the light of our retreat:

1. The purpose of fellowship: Bridges asserts that despite the common understanding of the term, ‘Christian fellowship’ actually has very little to do with ‘social fellowship’ (in fact social fellowship is the very last and least point he discusses in the book!). Instead, he claims that true fellowship should be viewed in a much broader sense: it is anything we do together which fulfills the Hebrews 3:13 command to “encourage each other daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13). In other words, all aspects of our fellowship, from our routine weekly Sunday services to the special retreats where we spend entire days together should be approached from the attitude of trying to mutually encourage each other to fight against sin.

2. The fellowship of serving: Paul teaches us that Jesus took on the “very nature of a

servant” (Phil 2:7), and Jesus himself stated that he “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt 20:28). Bridges argues that one of the greatest experiences of true Christian community we can have is through serving. Some of the small but powerful acts of service we witnessed during this retreat were the quiet but loving care the Colleg Wittenberg staff provided for our group, and the delight and enthusiasm with which the Wittenberg English Ministry at St. Mary’s Church received our group. In their service, they participated in the fellowship of our church, and we were able to participate with them!

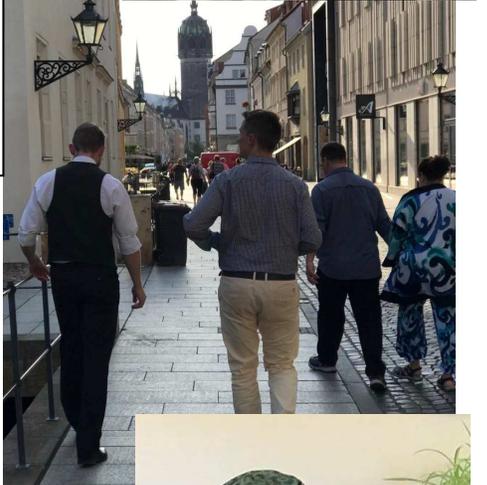
3. The fellowship of suffering: Finally, my favorite memory from the retreat! After our English service on Sunday morning, several of us stayed to worship with a group of Ukrainian Lutherans, experiencing the liturgy in a completely foreign language but witnessing the true joy of families who had left everything behind. The woman who sat next to us leaned over at one point and cheerfully whispered “You feel now how I felt when I first arrived in Germany – none of the words made any sense! Now I can help you like I was helped when I first came!” As we worshiped together, we experienced what it means to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Rom 12:15).

I pray that you were equally encouraged and strengthened through the fellowship of the retreat, and that you will each continue to pursue the True Community of our fellow believers!

–Steve Young



Labor Day  
Weekend 2022





Lutherstadt  
Wittenberg, Germany





Once again, we are partnering with Rhema Café to spread God's love through Operation Christmas Child. Boxes are available for pickup in the narthex now. The boxes need to be filled and returned by Nov. 14th. They can be dropped off at Rhema Café or KELC. Monetary donations are also accepted to help cover shipping costs.

## Sundays at KELC

### Divine Service

Sunday Mornings  
8:30-9:30 AM

—

### Fellowship Time

Sunday Mornings  
9:30-10:15 AM

—

### Sunday School & Bible Study

at Kirche Mittendrïn  
10:15-11:15 AM

—

### Catechesis

St. Michael's Basement  
11:30 AM-12:30 PM

## Reformation Day Party!

Please join us on

Sunday, October 30th

at 4:30pm

at the Hesters' house

for our family's Reformation Day tradition of food, fellowship, fire (weather permitting), and film (*Luther*). We'll have a fire bowl going, plus chili, hot dogs, cornbread, spiced apple cider, and gluhwein to enjoy. Feel free to bring something to share if you would like.

We will start the movie *Luther* at about 6pm so that those with kids can get them to bed at a somewhat reasonable time.

Contact Paul or Karly Hester if you have questions.



## Reformation Day

**LOOK FOR US ON  
FACEBOOK &  
MESSENGER**

Kaiserslautern  
Evangelical Lutheran  
Church (KELC)

For news, worship sign-ups  
and fellowship events.



**CONFESSIONS STUDY**

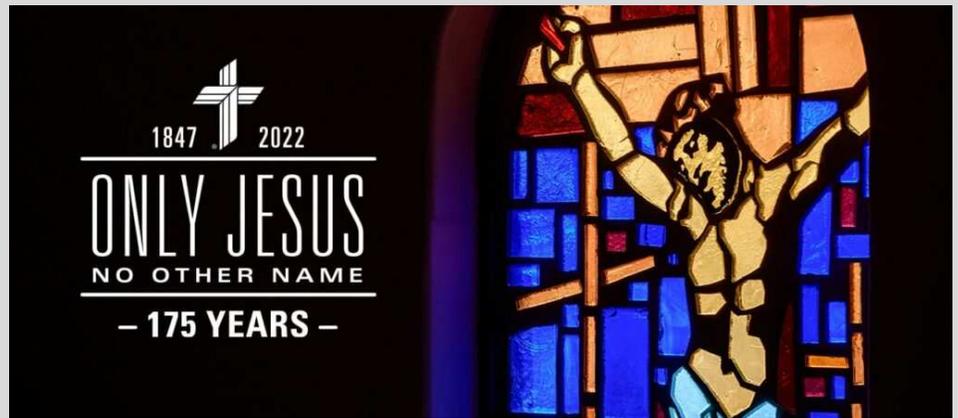


Thursday Nights  
at 7:00 PM  
Location TBD

Fellowship  
Lunch

**SAVE THE  
DATE**

Sunday, Oct. 23rd



**Reformation  
Sunday**

October 30th  
2022



Welcome to the  
Paulsen Family  
April, Gabe, Tucker,  
& Grace

Please join us in  
praying for the  
important work of  
the Kaiserslautern  
Military Resiliency  
Center in Landstuhl,  
Germany.



**October  
Birthdays**



15 Grace Paulsen  
17 Heidi Worley  
20 Alida Worley