



Luther and the New Testament

The frontispiece of Luther's 1546 edition of the New Testament (figure 2.1) reveals much about the Protestant Reformation. First, most words are written in German, not Latin, thus reflecting the Protestant view that the Bible should be read by everyone. The place is Wittenberg, where Luther initiated the Reformation by posting his ninety-five theses in 1517. The year, 1546, was that of Luther's death. In the picture Christ on the cross is flanked by the praying Luther on the right and his patron, the elector of Saxony, on the left. This symbolizes the two unified in the central Protestant belief of justification by faith, the actual political-religious alliance of the two that was so important for the spread of Lutheranism in Germany, and the compatibility of Church and state according to Lutheranism. The general simplicity and lack of ornamentation of this work reflect Lutheranism and part of what it rejected about Catholicism. The book itself, produced mechanically, indicates the importance of the recently invented printing press for the Reformation.

CONSIDER: How this frontispiece might explain or symbolize the causes of the Reformation.

Luther and the Catholic Clergy Debate Sebald Beham

Both Catholics and Protestants often used art to propagate their views in the Reformation debate. Nuremberg artist Sebald Beham's 1525 woodcut (figure 2.2) appeared in a broadsheet with a text by Hans Sachs entitled Luther and the Artisans. On the left are the "godless"—members of trades, including a painter holding a stick and brush, a bell caster, and a fisherman with his net—all relying on religious commissions from the Catholic church. They complain that Luther has unjustly attacked the clergy for practices such as the sale of indulgences and rental of church lands. They are led by a nun and a priest, who points an accusing finger at Luther. On the right is a group of humble peasants—representing the "common man"—led by Martin Luther, who uses the Bible to answer charges against him and instruct his accusers to seek the kingdom of God. Christ, above in a circle of clouds and holding orb and scepter as Lord of the world, casts his judgment against the clergy by including his scepter to Luther's side.

CONSIDER: What this painting reveals about the Reformation; how this painting compares to the previous illustration.

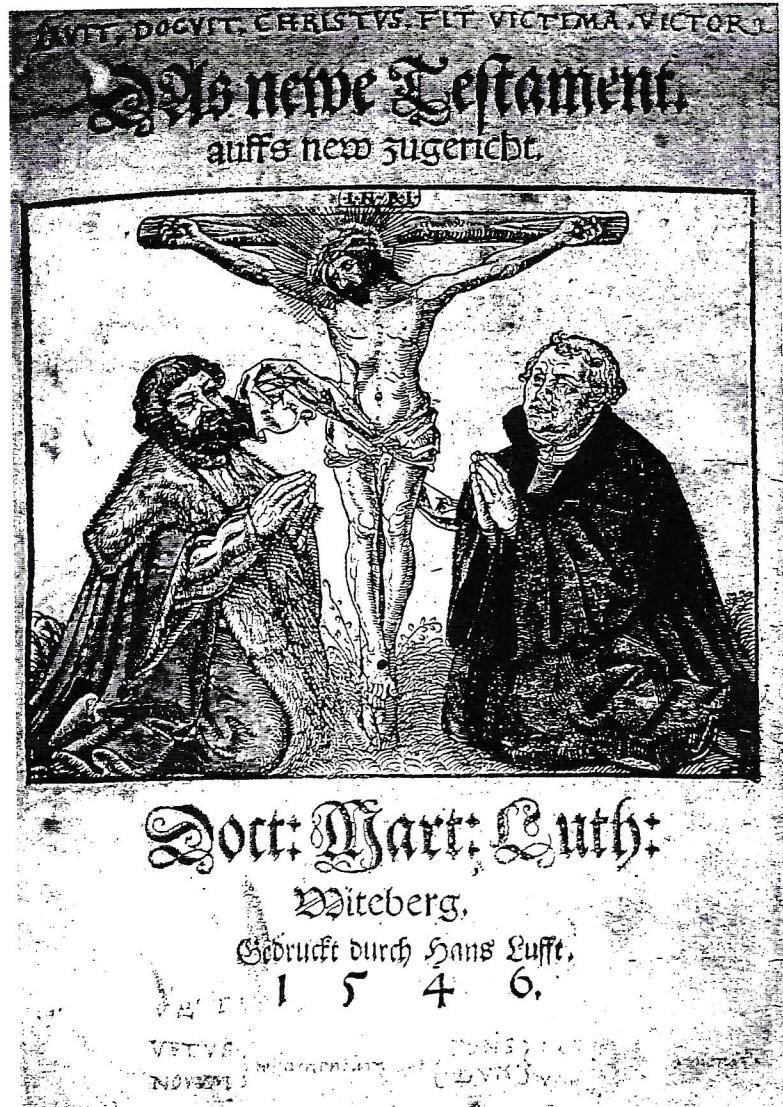


FIGURE 2.1 (Siftung Luthergedenkstätten in Sachsen-Anhalt)



FIGURE 2.2 (© Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY)