

Freed & RENEWED in Christ 500 YEARS OF GOD'S GRACE IN ACTION

Reformation ABCs

L is for Laity

“Laity” refers to those who the baptized people of God who have not been called to religious life as pastor or deacon in modern times; monk, nun or priest in medieval times.

In Luther’s life and times, Christendom could be divided into what was essentially a two-tiered Christianity: monastic life and lay people. In the top tier (after martyrdom), monasticism was the religious ideal. The monastic was distinguished from the ordinary Christian by vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Laity too, when seeking a more religious, devoted life, approached monasticism as the standard; lay piety modeled itself after certain practices found in the monastery. In a 16th century world-view the “common” and “ordinary” were not special.

It was a revolutionary assertion when Martin Luther (a monk himself!) argued that faith in Jesus Christ was holy in all its iterations. Living as a faithful father or mother, an obedient worker, a responsible citizen or temporal ruler was the real religious life, more pleasing to God than monastic vows. The ordinary Christian does not need a priest to stand between the common and the holy; through baptism, we have direct access to God by faith.

Bishop William Gohl
Delaware-Maryland Synod

L is for the Leipzig Debate, 1519

In the summer of 1519, Luther debated the formidably learned Johannes Eck, a theologian from the University of Ingolstadt, in the parlor of Leipzig’s castle. It did not go well for Luther. Eck argued that papal authority was biblical; Luther countered that it was an historical accretion—the “rock” in Matthew 16:18 was not Peter, but Christ, and after all, the eastern church led the way theologically for centuries while not acknowledging Rome’s supremacy. Eck managed to lure Luther into a partial defense of Jan Hus, burned at the stake in 1414, thus leading Luther to question the authority of the Council of Constance that condemned Hus. Leipzig was not the place for denying both papal and conciliary authority – Duke Georg owed his title to his fight against the Hussites while the University of Leipzig had sheltered German professors fleeing from the Hussite conflict in Bohemia.

Eck would become the driving force behind the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine* of 1520, condemning all of Luther’s teaching in *globo* (as a whole), the last papal bull to address an undivided Western Christendom.

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Luther had his own last word, preaching in Wittenberg in December 1520, that the laity should be offered not just bread but the communion cup, as Hus had argued -- a practice that became widely popular and helped to ensure the spread of the Reformation. "We are all Hussites," he wrote to a colleague in 1520, "without realiz-ing it."

Gary Kulik
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L is for Lutheran

It was first a term of insult, hurled by Johannes Eck in his debate with Luther in Leipzig. Eck meant it to define Luther's heresy, his unwillingness to accept papal supremacy, in the same way that the insult Hussite defined Jan Hus, burned at the stake in 1414. Luther had no use for the term Lutheran, preferring to call his efforts to reform the church "evangelical" -- rooted in the gospel. Those who believed in the rediscovered truth of the gospel should, he wrote, "make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone."

Luther had never wanted to found a new church, wanting only to uphold the universal teachings of Christ. It was not to be. The western church would be irrevocably divided. Luther's followers would remain Evangelicals until the Formula of Concord of 1577 proudly proclaimed their church's Lutheran identity.

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