

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

KNIGHT GEORGE
(A.K.A. MARTIN LUTHER)

LUTHER'S ALIAS WHILE IN EXILE



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The alias Luther used after his prince hid him away to protect his life

LUTHER HAD BEEN CALLED BY THE HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR, Charles V, and the German princes to the diet (meeting) of the German nation, which was to be held at the city of Worms (pronounced "Vorms"). Luther's own prince, Frederick the Wise, was among the nobility in attendance. Luther arrived under the Emperor's guarantee of safe passage April 16, 1521. He was called not to debate, but simply to recant his writings.

"Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen." With these words, Luther risked being named a heretic and thus an outlaw with a price on his head.

Charles V wasted little time in condemning Luther. True to his word, however, Charles granted Luther safe passage to return to Wittenberg. He had 21 days to return home. As he and two of his companions traveled, they were suddenly accosted by several armed horsemen. They pulled Luther from the wagon and whisked him away as his friends watched in horror, certain they would never see Luther alive again.

The elaborate plot, with the blessing of Frederick the Wise, was to "kidnap" Luther and see that he was held safely away from those who might be plotting his death. Frederick knew nothing of the details, only that Luther was taken to safety. This gave him plausible deniability should the Emperor ask Frederick if he knew Luther's whereabouts. Luther was taken to the Wartburg castle in the dark of night. He grew out his hair and beard, traded in his monk's robe for the attire of a knight and lived under the pseudonym Knight George. He saw no one, save the few trusted souls that attended his needs.

He complained of depression, loneliness and boredom. He was not used to the rich food served there, and it did not sit well with him. Work was his deliverance. During his 10-month exile, he produced what to some would be a lifetime of work. He translated the entire New Testament from Greek into German. This work alone helped to codify the German language, and it put the Scriptures directly into the hands of the laymen. He worked at a feverish pace and accomplished this feat in 11 weeks. Among his many books written during this time were a commentary on Psalm 68 in German as a devotional for the laity, and a commentary on the Magnificat.

In Luther's absence, several men — including Andreas Carlstadt, a professor at Wittenberg — threw all order to the wind, and the church was left in relative chaos. Altars were destroyed, and images of saints were smashed. Nothing even hinting at Catholicism was left untouched, including how the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Luther shed his knight's clothing, and on March 9, he returned to the pulpit in Wittenberg. Peace quickly returned to the tumultuous city following a week of sermons on the importance of teaching before any changes could be made, Law and Gospel, and the strengthening of the weaker member of the body of Christ. For all the uproar his 95 Theses caused, no one could deny that his words could be equally calming and healing.

Luther's exile was over. For the rest of his life, the Edict of Worms that declared Luther a heretic hung over him, but Germany was not about to let an outside emperor dictate the fate of the father of the Reformation.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD
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