

Why did Luther change his mind and come home? We have no account from him, but there are four likely reasons. First, Luther had been promised that things would be better in Wittenberg. There was an agreement by the leaders of the town, the university, and the elector to do something about the worse offenses to public morality—from the prostitutes that preyed on the students to the moneylenders who charged interest of up to 30 percent. At the end of 1545, a new ordinance tried to curb excesses, extravagance, even the amount of noise in the streets.

Second, Luther's friends were probably persuasive. The one who was railing against his longtime opponents at the wedding sermon in early August had not become indifferent to the outcome of the Reformation. Luther deeply trusted people such as Melancthon and Bugenhagen, and he no doubt took to heart their warnings of the practical consequences that would result from his self-imposed exile.

Third, Luther took John Frederick seriously and was probably impressed by his arguments about the political blow that Luther's action would be to the Lutheran cause. Luther had always had good relationships with his princes and especially close ties with John Frederick and his father John before him. It would be hard for one who counseled obedience in all but the gravest circumstances to say no to a kindly and faithful prince.

Fourth and finally, on his travels Luther may well have remembered one crucial feature of his theology that was always slipping away. Among the greatest of Luther's formulations is his theology of the cross—his sense of hidden and surprising ways that God works in the world. You cannot jump to conclusions, Luther had been saying all his life, if you follow the God of the Bible. God's ways are hidden, and divine judgments not read from surface success or failure, strength or weakness.

When Luther went home on August 18, he wrote a poem in honor of Wittenberg and published it later that year with a wonderful woodcut of the town. It compared Wittenberg to Jerusalem—small among the cities of the ancient world and yet a place from which great things came forth. God had chosen a little, out-of-the-way place once again. A great renewal of Christianity had flowed from Wittenberg, from their work together. Luther hoped the Wittenbergers would not take for granted the astonishing things that had happened there, nor become complacently accustomed to a gospel that had radical implications when first preached to them. Perhaps the poem also implied that Luther would try not to jump to negative conclusions about the impact of the gospel. After all, such things can never be seen perfectly even by the best observer or the wisest pastor.

So the summer crisis came to an end, although tensions remained between Luther and the town until he was buried in the castle church on February 22 of the next year.

But several questions emerge from this incident that provide an opening to Luther, a way into understanding him after five hundred years.

There is a special challenge in approaching Luther because of his great communicative powers. He has many “sound bites” that cut through the centuries that separate us from him. These catch our attention and may make him seem more completely our contemporary than he is. For Luther is vast and complex enough that he can be read in many ways. Over the past centuries, people have raided the Luther story to make him all sorts of things, from the founder of the bourgeois family to the super-German patriot, from the ultimate advocate of prejudice and oppression to the father of public education and the Enlightenment.

Every Luther book ends up being partly a volume about its author, and everyone who reads Luther imposes a personal history on the Luther story. Getting to know Luther in a balanced way requires taking his whole story into account, not just the thrilling early years of defying authority successfully, but also the middle years of constructing a new form of church life and the later years of living out the consequences of his good and bad decisions. Concentrating on Luther’s most exciting and enduring ideas is strategic, but his foibles, missteps, and ugly or ghastly mistakes also need recounting.¹

¹ Lull, T. F., & Nelson, D. R. (2015). [*Resilient Reformer: The Life and Thought of Martin Luther*](#) (pp. xxvi – xxix). Fortress Press.