

Sensational Discoveries A Contribution to the 500th Celebration of the Reformation¹

Manfred W. Kohl*

**Dr. Manfred W. Kohl was born in Germany, educated in Europe and the United States, and lives in Nova Scotia, Canada. Dr. Kohl served as Vice-President of International Development for Overseas Council International, an organization that assists theological schools, primarily in the non-western world.*



Abstract:

A little more than two decades ago, while I was visiting the city of Stuttgart in southern Germany, Luther's own Latin Bible was found in that city. A few years later I had the opportunity to view the original last will of Luther in the church archives in Budapest, Hungary. In this will Luther expressed great concern that after his death Kaethe, his wife, and their five surviving children remain strong in their faith and that they be physically cared for. These two discoveries made a deep impression on me, because the notes in Luther's Bible and the references to his wife and family in his will showed without a doubt that Luther held Holy Scriptures, marriage, and family in very high regard – almost as “sacred sacraments”.

A little more than two decades ago, in the autumn of 1995, both Christian and secular media reported a sensational discovery in the city of Stuttgart in southern Germany. While working in the state library in that city, a Spanish theologian came upon a small Latin Bible with copious hand-written notes. This Bible had belonged to the Reformer Martin Luther; it was the Bible he had used when he began to translate the New Testament into the German language in 1521-22 at the Wartburg, near Eisenach. The handwriting was that of Luther himself. Protestant Christians throughout central Europe were

¹ Some of the thoughts expressed in this paper were written for various denominational newsletters/publications prior to the 500th celebration of the Reformation.

excited to hear that Luther's own Latin Bible had been found! This announcement was the first major media coverage of Luther in the twelve years since the 500th celebration of his birth in 1983, apart from reporting on the preparations for the upcoming celebration of the 450th anniversary of his death the following year, in 1996. I was visiting Stuttgart at the time, and I was very excited to be there when this extraordinary discovery was made.

Several years later I traveled to Budapest, Hungary, to visit one of the first theological graduate schools established to serve Eastern Europe and Russia. I had been invited to give some lectures at that institution. In one of our free hours, members of the faculty and I visited the archives of the Lutheran church in the city. I could see immediately that these archives were well cared for. They were housed in very simple rooms in an annex in the cellar, two floors below ground level. I am sure great care had been taken to protect these documents during the Second World War and the ensuing East Bloc/Communist era.

The director of the archives realized quickly that I spoke German, and we began to dialogue. I shared with him that I am a theologian, that I have focused on church history, and that my doctoral work dealt with the "Radical Reformation" as well as "German Pietism." I observed that he was listening very intently. Finally, he said that he would like to do something which would make me very happy: he would like to show me the top treasure of the archives. He went into another room, came back with a small metal box, opened it very carefully and then, with great excitement and anticipation, showed me a five-page handwritten document. I could not believe my eyes; in front of me lay the original last will of Martin Luther.

1. Was this last will genuine?

I saw that the document had been written by Luther in 1542, four years before his death. It is well known that Luther went through long periods of sickness, and many times he was very close to death. He also had periods of depression or, in his words, "dark times." Therefore it is quite understandable that in this his last will he would be very much concerned about the future care of his wife and children. The archivist said that apparently not too many people today know that such a document exists. It was overwhelming for me to hold in my own hands the handwritten pages – with Luther's personal signature – for me another sensational discovery. I was very happy when the director of the archives made an excellent photocopy of this valuable document for me.²

² The Hungarian Lutheran Church lent the handwritten will of Martin Luther to the city of Wittenberg for the 500th anniversary celebration of the Reformation in 2017. It was on display in Wittenberg from August to November. The German government stated that it was essential for one of Luther's most personal writings to be on display at an exhibition of 95 of his personal belongings."

<http://hungarytoday.hu/news/500th-anniversary-hungarian-lutheran-church-lend-luthers-will-wittenberg-29735>

In studying the document further, I discovered on the last page the signatures of his three best friends ‘...Philippus Melanthon, Caspar Creuciger, Johannes Bugenhagenius Pomeranus...’ With their signatures, they signified to the authenticity of this will. The director of the archives also gave me a photocopy of the transcription of the will from the original handwritten German script into today’s German script by Pastor Doleschall, a Protestant pastor in Budapest. (This document was undated.)

For many years, mainly in the 19th century, a long discussion about this will took place. Again and again scholars expressed great doubts that this document in Budapest could really be Luther’s last will. Apparently many copies (or excerpts) of a will had been found in other places. A commission was appointed to check every aspect, and in the end the authenticity of this particular document was verified. This is recorded in the notes of Pastor Doleschall.

2. Why is this will in Budapest?

How was it possible for Luther’s last will to be in the archives of another country? Why is it not in one of the great Luther collections in Germany?

From historical research we know that after the death of Duke Johann Frederick this original last will of Luther was in the keeping of Samuel Benedict Carpzovius, the rector and superintendent of the churches in Dresden. The will remained in his family, passed down from generation to generation. Finally, in 1804, it was included in a large auction of books and handwritten documents. Niklaus von Jankovich, a Hungarian collector of rare books and documents, bought the entire collection, including Luther’s will, for 40 ducats. Then in 1815 he gave the five-page document to the Protestant Church of Hungary as a special gift.

For some time the will was kept in the Hungarian National Museum until finally it wound up in its present location in the archives of the Protestant Lutheran Church of Hungary. It is unquestionably one of the most valuable treasures in the custody of the Hungarian Church, and the Church is very proud of this treasure. All this information I received from the curator of the archives in Budapest.

3. What a life testimony!

Luther begins his last will by writing about his wife Kaethe ‘... she was always a very pious, faithful marriage partner, she was filled with love, she was faithful, she helped me, and through God’s rich blessing she has borne me five children, still living, whom she also educated...’

Kaethe (Katharina Luther, nee von Bora, 1499-1552) was a remarkable woman, and much has been written about her.³ She was one of twelve nuns

³ A good bibliography is found in Hartmut Ellrich, *Die Frauen der Reformation* (“The Women of the Reformation”) (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2012). See also

taken by a fishmonger on Easter weekend (April 6 and 7) 1523 from the Zisterzienserinnen Convent Marienthron (Nimbschen), near Grimma, to Wittenberg. Among these twelve were also Kaethe's sister Margarethe and Kaethe's closest friend, Ave von Schönfeld. This was a very dangerous undertaking. For anyone caught "kidnapping" nuns from a convent received the penalty was death. Luther wrote a special pamphlet justifying this action.⁴

Three of the twelve nuns returned immediately to their families. Eight were married soon after their escape, some in Wittenberg by Luther himself. Kaethe, however, did not get married. She worked for more than two years for several well-known families and friends of Luther. There she learned how to properly run a household. During her time in the convent, she had already learned reading, writing and singing. She became an efficient household manager, which was of great value for her later on, during her entire married life.

On June 13, 1525, Luther married Kaethe, with only his closest friends attending the wedding. A few weeks later, there was a big wedding celebration. According to several statements made by Luther, and from some of Kaethe's own statements, their early married life could hardly be described as a close relationship. It became obvious, however, that both learned not only to support each other on a daily basis but that they also developed a very close love relationship. One clearly sees in Luther's last will that his relationship with his wife and family was very precious. We know this from other writings as well, writings in which Luther wrote of sharing incredible joy in his marriage as well as the deep sadness they experienced as a family.

When Luther wrote his last will on January 6th, 1542, five of his children were still living. His first daughter, Elizabeth, died before her first birthday. Shortly after he wrote his will, on March 20th, 1542, his favorite daughter, Magdalena, age twelve, also died. Only four children survived their father; namely, Johannes (b. 1526), Martin (b. 1531), Paul (b. 1533), and Margarethe (b. 1584). In his last will, Luther requests from the Elector of the state that he appoint the proper guardian for his children: '... Herewith I ask most humbly my gracious lord the Duke Johann Frederich, the Elector of the state, that he would kindly protect and administer all things, including my wealth, accordingly...' Later, one of the guardians appointed was Philipp Melanchthon.

It is very significant to me that in his last will Luther laid on the hearts of his children that they continue to hold their mother in the highest honor - as

the very popular *Luther Magazin Eine Entdeckungsreise: 500 Jahre Reformation* ("Luther magazine A Journey of Discovery: 500 Years of Reformation") (Witten: SCM Bundesverlag, 2016). This magazine gives important information on Reformation events as well as a list of contemporary publications on Luther, Kaethe, and the Reformation in general.

⁴ The pamphlet was entitled „Ursach und Antwort, dass Jungfrauen Klöster göttlich verlassen mögen“ ("Reason and Justification for young women to leave convents in a godly manner").

God has commanded: ‘... I would like not that she helps the children, but that the children should help her, watching her hands and holding her in honor, and being obedient as God has commanded...’ Further, he writes that mothers are the best guardians for their children: ‘... I think that the mother is indeed the best guardian for her own children...’ Only in case of emergency should the Elector of the state appoint someone else as a guardian for the children.

It was also important to him that his wife receive all the protection and help she needed. ‘... I also ask that all my good friends help my dear Kaethe, strengthen her, and defend her if some of the mean people, with their negative talk, accuse her or speak negatively about her...’

4. What a personal testimony!

Luther’s last will expresses his deep love and great respect for his wife, and one can easily see that they had developed a very healthy marriage and close family relationship.

Luther not only translated the Old and New Testaments (using some of the already translated parts) into the common German language. He also wrote 350 pamphlets, brochures, and books, as well as more than 2,500 letters. He was a genius with languages, and he was able to formulate his writings in good German expressions. He also translated the Koran from Arabic into German and wrote several books on how one should deal with Muslims. Islam was making great advances in Eastern Europe during Luther’s time.

Luther also wrote more than 40 hymns. For some he composed both the text and the music; others were his translations into German of already existing Latin hymns. Most of the hymns he practiced with his family, since he believed that the family should gather to sing, make music, read, and pray. All of his children had to learn to play at least one instrument. There are numerous reports of Luther, Kaethe, and the children spending evenings together singing, playing instruments, and reading Scripture.

Probably the most familiar of Luther’s hymns throughout the world is “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”. In writing this hymn, he was probably remembering or reflecting on the mighty castle in the town of Mansfeld, where he spent his childhood. He would have viewed daily this fortress towering over the small town. The text of this hymn has some heart-searching statements.⁵

Luther believed in a proper education for all children, not only for those given to convents and monasteries. Already in 1524 he recommended to all city authorities that all children receive free schooling so that they could read

⁵ At the recent 500th year Reformation celebration in the church of the small village of Simmersfeld in the Black Forest in Germany I heard the pastor, A. Schweizer, recommending that we not sing the last verse of this hymn without first examining our own commitment to Christ.

the Bible.⁶ One should also note that Luther believed that we should emphasize and celebrate Christmas, the birth of Christ, more than giving recognition to and remembering St. Nicklaus Day on December 6th. Luther and his family celebrated Christmas as one of the most important events of the entire church year.

In these final statements Luther also says that he would like all his debts to be paid: ‘...that she [Kaethe] pay all the debts which have been incurred (if I have not been able to pay them as long as I am alive). There are approximately 450 fl., maybe even more, which have to be paid...’ For the paying of his debts, he gave instructions that all the silver and gold in his possession should be used, including cups, special coins, or medals. We know from later documents that the proceeds from selling all these possessions came to approximately 7,000 guilders. Luther was quite determined that the entire amount remaining after the payment of debts should be given to his wife and the children.

Luther knew that his last will did not follow strict legal requirements. According to these requirements, a will should be written by a notary public and signed and sealed before at least seven witnesses. Luther mentions this fact and writes that he as a person was always faithful to the truth, and that he was well known in heaven and on earth, and even in hell: ‘... Just let me be the person that I am, known to be in truth, namely everywhere - in heaven, as on earth, even in hell - known by everyone and given enough authority that one can surely believe even more than just a simple notary public...’ Luther knew about Satan and all the temptations that he experienced in his own life.

As a verification of his last will he writes: ‘... This is Doctor Martin Luther (God’s notary public and witness to his gospel) who very earnestly and after thinking it through carefully has given signature to it...’ His last will was written in absolute honesty and he asks that the Elector of the state accept it as such.⁷

Luther wrote his last will, like all his writings, with total honesty, following his early expression “Here I stand. I can do no other.” He was convinced that he was right. However, one should also mention that Luther was very wrong in his understanding and treatment of the Jews. He hated the Jews, holding, among other convictions, that they killed the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He wrote more than one document requesting that all authorities get rid of all Jews

⁶ Luther’s pamphlet was entitled “An die Ratsherren aller Städte deutsches Lands, dass sie christliche Schulen aufrichten and halten sollen” (“To the authorities of all cities in Germany that they should establish and maintain Christian schools”).

⁷ After Luther’s death on February 18/ 1546, his last will was not accepted in court. The children were taken away from their mother, and Kaethe herself did not receive what Luther had allocated to her. Kaethe died six years after her husband, in 1552, a sick and poor woman.

in the land and burn their synagogues. These terrible treatises had bitter consequences over later centuries in Europe, and especially in Germany.⁸

Furthermore, Luther states that he is a poor sinner and that only through God's mercy and through the gospel of his dear Son did he become an honest servant, serving and testifying before emperors and kings: '...The dear God and Father of all mercy has granted me, the condemned poor and unworthy sinner, the gospel of his dear Son and has made me faithful and trustworthy that I can continue to serve in honesty...' In this last will Luther makes clear that this document, the summation of his life, is based on the same truth and honesty as the gospel itself. He always, throughout his life, demonstrated this openly in spite of all opposition.

I believe that in these few sentences quoted from Luther's last will the character of the great Reformer is revealed through his own testimony. Also significant are the signatures of the three friends who verified his last will: Magister Philipp Melancthon, a close friend, student and co-worker, who later became guardian of Luther's children; Caspar Creuciger, who supported him faithfully; and, finally, the very gifted organizer, Johann Bugenhagenius Pomeranus, who followed Luther as a close friend in joy and in sorrow. All three were closely connected not only with Luther, but also with the German Reformation as a whole.

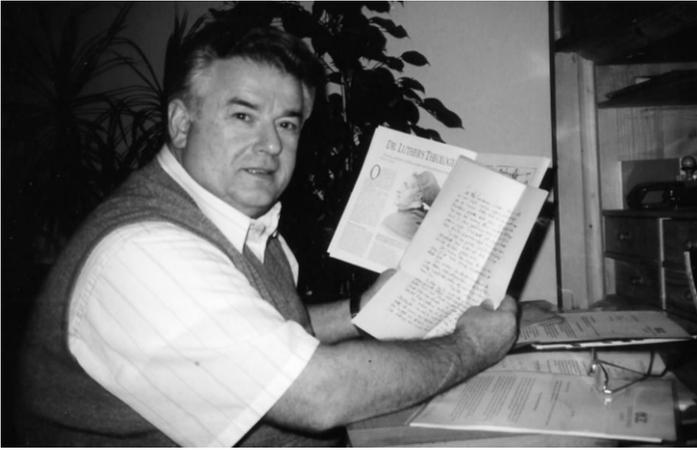
I personally wish, especially in this year in which we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, that everyone could read Luther's last will and that, in reading it, would reflect on his own life and beyond his own death. I wish also that everyone would recognize how important a healthy marriage and family relationships are, and why God has given us these basic institutions. Luther and his family are a convincing example. Luther's last will also makes clear with what love, loyalty, and determination Luther followed his Lord Jesus Christ.

The Reformation was a great turning point in the history of the church. This simple document – the “last will” of the Reformer Martin Luther – gives much insight into the man who was used by God to bring about these changes.

For me, the discovery of Luther's Latin Bible and the discovery of his last will are indeed sensational discoveries.

I attach photocopies of pages 1 and 4 of Luther's handwritten last will and an English translation of the entire will (5 pages).

⁸ The best recent publication on the subject is Richard Harvey, *Luther and the Jews: Putting Right the Lies* (London: Cascade Books, 2017).



Dr. Manfred Kohl working on translating Luther's will

Dr. Martin Luther**Last Will and Testament****Wittenberg, Epiphany 1542****Page 1**

I, Martin Luther, doctor, etc. acknowledge with this my own handwriting that I have given to my beloved and faithful housewife Katherine as an endowment (or whatever one can call it) for her lifetime, which she will be at liberty to manage according to her pleasure and to her best interest, and give it to her by the authority of this document on this very present day, To wit, the little holding at Zulsdorf, the same which I have purchased and made useful, absolutely as I have had it up to now;

Secondly, as a dwelling the house of Bruno which I have bought under the name of my man Wolf,

Thirdly, beakers and valuables, such as rings, necklaces, gratuities, gold and silver, which should be worth about a thousand gulden.

I do this because, in the first place, as a pious and faithful spouse she has at all times held me dear, worthy, and fine and through God's rich blessings gave birth to and reared for me five living children (who are still alive, God grant for a long time).

Secondly, that she should herself assume and pay the debt, insofar as I am still indebted (what I do not pay off during my lifetime), which may be about four hundred fifty fl., as far as I know. There could perhaps also be more.

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Thirdly, and most of all, for this reason, that I do not want her to have to look to the children for a handout, but rather the children should be obligated to her, honor her, and be subject to her as God has commanded. For I have certainly seen and experienced how the devil agitates and provokes the children, be they ever so pious, contrary to this commandment through evil and jealous gossips. This is especially true when the mothers are widows and the sons take wives and the daughters, husbands and, in turn, mother-in-law daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law mother-in-law!

For I maintain that a mother will be the best guardian for her own children and will use such a holding and endowment not for the harm or to the disadvantage of her children, but to their use and betterment, since they are her flesh and blood whom she carried under her heart.

And even if after my death out of necessity or for some other reason (for I can set no limit for God in his works and will) she would remarry, I have confidence, and wish herewith to have such confidence expressed, that she will act motherly toward our children and faithfully share everything with them, be it the endowment or something else, as is only right.

And I hereby also humbly beg my most gracious lord, Duke John Frederick, Elector, etc., that his electoral grace will graciously protect and administer such a gift or endowment.

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I also ask all my good friends to be witnesses for my dear Kaethe and to help defend her, when some idle gossips want to trouble or defame her, as though she perhaps had a sum of ready cash on the side, which she would purloin or embezzle from the poor children. I bear witness that there is no ready cash except for the beakers and valuables listed above in the endowment. Indeed, such a reckoning can be manifest to everyone, since people know how much income I have had from my most gracious lord and beyond that I have not received as income one heller or kernel from anyone, except what was a gift, which is to be found cited above under the valuables and which in part is still tied up with the debt. And yet, with this income and with donations I have built and bought so much, and I ran such a big and burdensome household, that among other things I must acknowledge it as an extraordinary, remarkable blessing that I have been able to manage. The miracle is not that there is no ready money but that there is not a greater debt. I ask this for this reason that the devil, since he can come no closer to me, shall no doubt persecute my Kaethe in all sorts of ways for this reason alone that she was, and (God be praised) still is, the espoused housewife of the man Dr. Martin.

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Finally, I also ask of every man, since in this gift or endowment I am not using legal forms and terminology (for which I have good reasons), that he would allow me to be the person which I in truth am, namely, a public figure, known both in heaven and on earth, as well as in hell, having respect or authority enough that one can trust or believe more than any notary. For as God, the Father of all mercies, entrusted to me, a condemned, poor, unworthy, miserable sinner, the gospel of his dear Son and made me faithful and truthful, and has up to now preserved and grounded me in it, so that many in this world have accepted it through me and hold me to be a teacher of the truth, without regard for the pope's ban, and the anger of the emperor,

kings, princes, clerics, yes, of all the devils, one should surely believe me much more in these trifling matters; and especially since this is my very well-known handwriting, the hope is that it should suffice, when one can say and prove that it is Dr. Martin Luther's (who is God's notary and witness in his gospel) earnest and well considered opinion to confirm this with his own hand and seal.

Executed and delivered on Epiphany Day, 1542

M. Luther

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I, Phillip Melanchthon, attest that this is the opinion and will and hand of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, our most beloved teacher and father.

And I, Kaspar Cruciger, attest that this is the design and will and hand of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, our most beloved father, wherefore I myself have signed with my own hand.

And I, Johann Bugenhagen Pomeranus, likewise attest with my own hand.