

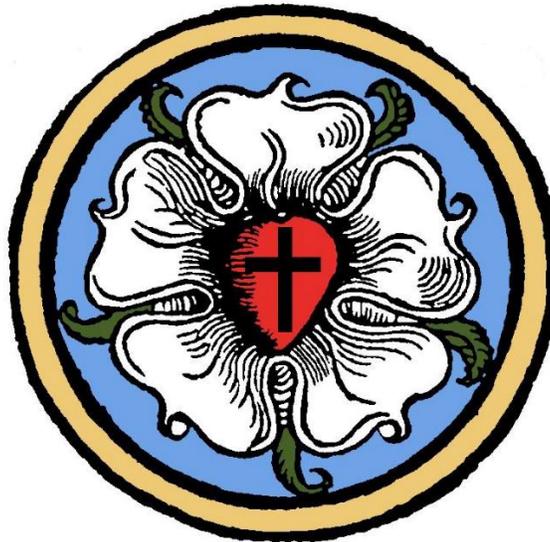
**Reformation Festival Service
An Examination of Luther's Seal
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By the early 1520s, a few years after Martin Luther's 95 theses had sparked the beginning of the Reformation, a symbol began appearing on the young reformer's letters and works. It was a rose which Martin Luther had designed to be his personal seal to mark the authenticity of his writings. (The seal pictured below is the earliest version on record.)

In 1530, on his return trip from presentation of the Augsburg confession, Elector John Frederick who was a close friend of Luther's presented him with a signet ring bearing the rose which Luther had designed. A man named Lazarus Spengler, who had assisted Prince John in crafting the ring, wrote to Luther asking him to explain the symbolism of the seal.

The letter which Luther sent back to him explained that the seal was a summary of the reformers doctrinal convictions. Because of this, the seal is not only remembered as the personal seal of Dr. Luther and his household, but has also been adopted as a symbol of the Lutheran church, which holds to those same biblical truths. An examination of the seal, therefore, along with the explanation given by Martin Luther and the Scriptures upon which his beliefs were founded, will provide us with a fitting review of those key truths of Scripture as we celebrate the Reformation.



Luther's Seal c. 1520

- 1. First, there is a black cross in a heart that remains its natural color.... It is a black cross because it mortifies and is designed to inflict pain.*

At the very center of Luther's seal is a cross. Right from the beginning we recognize that as far as symbols for the Church go, this is a good start. Any explanation of who you are or who I am or of what

it is that we believe in, must center on the cross. That's because message of Christ crucified is the cornerstone of our faith. For that reason, the cross, more than any other image, has been used over the centuries to symbolize the Christian faith. We want to be careful, then, lest we forget what the cross means. Luther tells us that the cross in the center of his seal was black for precisely that purpose. The blackness reminded him and reminds you and I of the darkness of our sin. The cross was a tool of execution. It represents the punishment that you and I deserve because of our sin. As we reflect on the cross we confess:

I believe that I am a sinner.

A lesson from Romans 3:

¹⁰As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

2. *The cross leaves the heart its natural color, red. This is to remind me that it is faith in the Crucified One that saves us. Anyone who believes from the heart will be justified. [The cross] doesn't destroy nature, that is to say, it does not kill us but keeps us alive, for the just shall live by faith in the Crucified One.*

Martin Luther struggled for years with the blackness of his sin and the punishment he knew he deserved because of his sins. He tried everything he could think of to make himself more appealing in God's eyes. He became a monk; he dedicated his life to fasting and to prayer; he beat himself bloody to try to atone for his shortcomings before God.

In 1519, a few years after Luther posted his 95 Theses, God led him to an incredible discovery. As he studied a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther finally came to understand the saving message of the Gospel. It is not through our own works that we become righteous before God—because as the law shows us our works can only condemn us—rather, it is through faith in works of Jesus and His death on the cross that God credits righteousness to us.

That is why Luther placed the black cross in the middle a red heart. Even though the cross is black to symbolize sin and death and the punishment we deserve which Jesus endured, the heart is not black. It is red because it is a living heart. Our hearts are because that is what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. He took our sins on Himself and paid the price for them so that we could be reconciled to God and justified before Him.

The red heart reminds us both of the love of God who sent His Son to rescue us from our sins through His death on the cross and of the new, living heart which God has created in each of us through faith one which seeks to love God with all our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. As we reflect on the heart we confess: **I believe in the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, my Savior.**

A lesson from Romans 5:

⁸ God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

¹⁸ Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

3. *The heart should stand in the middle of a white rose. This is to show that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace—it lays the believer upon a white, joyous rose. Faith does not give peace and joy like the world gives. This is why the rose must be white, not red. White is the color of the spirits and angels.*

Jesus once said to His disciples, **Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me** (Matthew 16:24). What He meant by that was that life as a Christian is not always going to be easy. The “cross” which you and I will bear as we follow Jesus and live our lives as His disciples may come in different forms for each of us. But every single one of us can count on the fact that Satan and the world are going to attack us because of our faith in Christ.

If those attacks are the thorns, then the rose which makes them all worthwhile, the rose which gives us the strength to persevere and to bear up under them is the joy and comfort and peace that Jesus gives us through the gospel. Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, is your Lord. He has won salvation for you and given you an inheritance in heaven at His side and nothing in this world not even the devil himself for all his power can take that peace-bringing forgiveness away from you. As we reflect on the rose we confess: **I believe that God has given me peace.**

A lesson from John 14:

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

³³ “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

4. *This rose should stand in a sky-blue field, symbolizing that a joyful spirit and faith is a beginning of heavenly, future joy, which begins now, but is grasped in hope, not yet fully revealed.*

The sky-blue background of Luther’s seal points us beyond the peace of forgiveness which we have already in this life, to the promise of eternal life that we have through Jesus. Just as He rose from death and has ascended to the right hand of the Father, so He promises that we too will one day share in the

unending bliss of heaven. When our life on this earth comes to its conclusion, it is not the end. We pass not into a void of emptiness and oblivion, but into the joy of eternal life. As we reflect on the sky-blue field we confess: **I believe in better things to come.**

A lesson from Revelation 2:

⁸ These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! ¹⁰ Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

¹¹ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

5. *Around the field of blue is a golden ring to symbolize that blessedness in heaven lasts forever and has no end. Heavenly blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and better than any possessions, just as gold is the most valuable and precious metal.*

The final piece of Luther’s seal, the golden ring, reminds us that the forgiveness of sins Christ has one for us, the peace and joy that forgiveness brings us, and this glorious new life which He has brought us into through faith in Him will have no end. The ring is made of gold, that most precious of metals, to remind us that Jesus and the gifts of His saving grace is what is truly most precious to us for there is nothing no one else that can bring the joys of forgiveness, life, and salvation. The Apostle Peter summed it up well when He said, **Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life** (John 6:68). As we reflect on the golden ring we confess: **I believe in Christ alone and in life eternal at His side.**

A lesson from Revelation 21:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

⁶ He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.