

The Protestant Reformation Revolutionized Art

Martin Luther's Reformation ended a period of dominance and unity in Europe under the Roman Catholic Church. This unity lasted for more than 1,000 years. The Protestant reformers influenced artists who became inspired by the new ideas of faith, forgiveness, a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and the powerful stories in the *Holy Bible*.



The Law and the Gospel (Law and Grace), (Lucas Cranach, 1529)

The difference and meaning between the Law (God's rules and moral law) and Grace (God's unconditional love) are answered in a surprising kind of picture called *The Law and the Gospel*. This painting is the single most influential image of the Lutheran Reformation!

The left side of the image is marked by the bare branches on the tree and the naked figures of man and woman. Luther's teaching of original sin, our corrupted nature, death, and the judgment of God is clearly illustrated. In the cloud we see Mary and John the Baptist interceding for sinful man, but it is in vain. One of the Bible verses is Romans 1:18, ***"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of men."***

The right side is illustrated with light, blooming branches, and hope. Luther's theology of the cross is vividly understood with the angel announcing the birth of the Savior to shepherds, the victory of Jesus over the serpent, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the dove. The fourth Bible verse (first one on the Gospel side) is actually from the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:14): ***"The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son."***

A decisive difference between Catholics and followers of Luther was the question of how to get to heaven, and what role, if any, religious art could play. The Catholic Church insisted that believers could take action to earn their salvation by doing good deeds, including making financial donations and paying for elaborate art to decorate

Christian churches. Luther, however, insisted that salvation was in God's hands, and all the believer had to do was to open up (repent) and have faith. Art and music could be a means to communicate this. As people became disillusioned with Catholic teaching, they grew angry about the ways the Catholic Church became rich in money, art, and power.

In consultation with Martin Luther, Lucas Cranach the Elder produced *The Law and the Gospel*. Not only does *The Law and the Gospel* explain the key teachings of Lutheran salvation, but its symbolism and detail mark a difference in the function of art as a means for teaching. Opponents labeled this as propaganda.

The Law and the Gospel explains Luther's Justification by Faith teaching in visual form, most basically the notion that heaven is reached through faith and God's grace. Luther despised and rejected the teaching that "good works" could play any role in salvation. The other Bible verses in the painting are Romans 3:23, 1 Corinthians 15:56, Romans 3:20 and 4:15 and Matthew 11:13. Through Luther and this painting, the 16th century world understood Jesus as their personal Savior who died for their sin and saved them from God's wrath and anger.

<http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/cranachs-the-law-and-gospel.html>