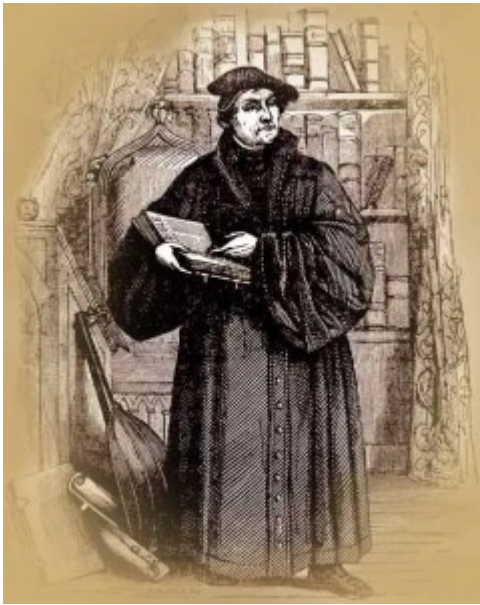


# America's Debt to Martin Luther



Martin Luther

This is from chapter XII of **What The World Owes Luther** by Junius Remensnyder which I found on [The Lutheran Library](#).

Junius Benjamin Remensnyder (1843-1927) was a Lutheran pastor in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and served as the president of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church from 1911 to 1913.

## **America's Debt to Luther**

WHILE all civilized peoples share Luther's heritage, yet especially here in America have we fallen heir to it. The principles of human freedom for which he battled have been embodied in our institutions as in no other country. This is particularly true as to the separation of Church and State. Luther found the State dominated by the Church. He showed that the sphere of the one was spiritual, and that of the other temporal, and that each was supreme in its own sphere alone. And that to preserve each from injury, neither should encroach upon the sphere of the other.

Writes Koestlin,<sup>1</sup> " By Luther's entire conception of the nature of the Church and ecclesiastical authority, every extension of that authority as divinely ordained, to the sphere of temporal, political, or civil life, was excluded." So, conversely, he bluntly told the most powerful and arrogant civil rulers that they should keep their hands off the preparation of confessions and statements of religious doctrines, as being exclusively the business of the Church's theologians.

<sup>1</sup> "Luther," Vol, I, p. 308.

We can have no better illustration of the practical outcome of Luther's principles respecting Church and State than the contrast between the colonists at Plymouth Rock and the Swedes, settled on the Delaware by the great Lutheran king, Gustavus Adolphus.

The former, although flying to escape religious intolerance, were soon persecuting Quakers and differing religionists as severely as they themselves had suffered. Contrariwise, the charter of King Adolphus's American colony, confirmed by all the authorities of the kingdom, specially guaranteed freedom of worship for those of divergent confessions. In this Lutheran king's scheme of colonization, all were invited to enjoy the blessings of a free state. Though a Lutheran colony, supported by a Lutheran government, the other colonists had peace and equal protection in it from the beginning, and when the Quakers came, they were at once and freely welcomed on the same free principles, as also were the representatives of the Church of England.

But chiefly does America owe to Luther her peerless prize of civil liberty.

When Luther made his famous stand at Worms for the rights of the individual, not alone liberty of conscience, but of the human reason, not alone the liberty of organized society, but *personal* liberty, the liberty of the individual, was on trial, and involved in his demand. What Luther there contended for was the right of a man, made in the image of God, to form and hold his own opinions; the divine prerogative of freedom of mind, thought and soul; that churches had their rights and sphere; that governments had their legitimate powers; but that the individual also had his rights, his sphere of independent action, his domain of liberty, and that within this sacred arcanum (hidden place) no scepter of pontiff, and no sword of monarch, dare enter on pain of the fiat (decree) of Almighty God.

America, then, in her separation of Church and State, and in her government by all the people, and for all the people—a true democracy—has profited far more largely by Luther than any modern nation. We are the heirs of his battles and victories and sacrifices, we share in the liberties he achieved, we illustrate in practice the thoughts he originated, as does no other people. America's debt to Luther is one that every man, woman and child of her teeming millions should acknowledge—a debt that it would be as powerless to compute in dollars and cents as it would be to catch and number the drops of Niagara, as its mighty volume of waters plunges over the cataract. But a debt it is at least, that should never be forgotten, and for which we, and the generations that shall come after, and enjoy the blessings of this favored land, should not cease to be grateful.

This obligation has been expressed by Daniel Webster, America's philosopher statesman, thus:

"The Reformation of Luther broke out, kindling up the minds of men afresh, leading to new habits of thought, and awakening in individuals energies before unknown even to themselves. The religious controversies of this period changed society as well as religion, and to a considerable extent, where they did not change the religion of the State, they changed man himself in his modes of thought, his consciousness of his own powers, and his desire of intellectual attainment. The spirit of commercial and foreign adventure on the one hand and, on the other, the assertion and maintenance of religious liberty, having their source in the Reformation, and this love of religious liberty drawing after it or bringing along with it, as it always does, an ardent devotion to the principle of civil liberty also, were the powerful

influences under which character was formed and men trained for the great work of introducing English civilization, English law, and, what is more than all, Anglo-Saxon blood, into the wilderness of North America."