Mathis der Maler: the Isenheim Altarpiece

Very little is known about the life of Matthias Grünewald, a painter (German *Maler*) who worked in the early decades of the 16th Century in Germany. He is renowned for the pictures he created between 1512 and 1516 for the altarpiece of the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim in southern Alsace. The face of Saint Sebastian in one of these paintings (above) is considered to be a self-portrait.

Life of Mathis der Maler

Very few details are available about the life of the painter who came to be known as Matthias Grünewald (Anderson, 2003). His first name has been considered as Matthias, Matthis or Mathis. His surname is disputable: Nithart, Neithardt, Gothart or Gothardt. The name "Grünewald" (green wood) was given to him by his first biographer, Joachim van Sandrart, about a century and a half after his death. The major confusion in his biography is whether Mathis Nithart and Mathis Gothart were one or two people. My intuition is that they were two distinct individuals: one a master painter and the other a water artist (builder of fountains), who also worked as an assistant painter (cf Bruhn, 1998, pp 21-42; Sebald, 1988, 2002).

Given this intuition, the main stages of Grünewald's biography are as follows. He was born in about 1480 in Aschaffenburg. After learning the techniques of painting, he worked for the episcopal court of Mainz, painting altarpieces in several churches in Frankfurt. In 1512, he married Anna, a young woman of Jewish descent who had recently converted to Christianity, and bought a house near the cathedral in Frankfurt. In the same year he was commissioned to paint the altarpiece in the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim. While he worked on the altarpiece, Anna stayed in Frankfurt. Grünewald was assisted

in Isenheim by an older painter, Matthis von Würzburg, and the two men lived together. After finishing the Isenheim altarpiece, they returned to Frankfurt. Grünewald continued to paint under the patronage of Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg, who was the Archbishop of Mainz from 1514-1545 and the Archbishop of Magdeburg from 1513-1545. Albrecht, one of the most powerful prelates in the Holy Roman Empire, was a patron of artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Matthias Grünewald.

These were times of great social upheaval. Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses* (*A Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*) in 1517. These were specifically addressed to Albrecht von Brandenburg, who used indulgences to support his life of luxury and patronage. The theses marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

The German Peasants' War (*Deutscher Bauernkrieg*) began in 1524. Though partly related to the Lutheran rebellion against the Catholic Church, the revolt was mainly directed at the feudal aristocracy. Some of the reformist clergy supported the peasants. However, Luther was terrified of the anarchy that might result, and encouraged the nobility to eliminate the rebellious peasants. Pitchforks were no match for artillery. Over 100,000 peasants were massacred and the revolt came to an end in 1525. It is not known whether Grünewald participated in the rebellion, or how he was affected by it. His friend died in 1528 in Halle where he was working as a hydraulic engineer. Grünewald appears to have moved back to Aschaffenburg where he died in 1532.

A portrait in the Chicago Art Institute, initialed MN, has been considered as a possible self-portrait by Grünewald (Mathis Nithart), though its authenticity and dating is unclear. My intuition is that it is the work of the young Grünewald and that it dates to about 1500. The following is the portrait and its description by Sebald in his poem *After Nature* (1988, translated by Hamburger, 2002)

The small maple panel
shows a scarcely twenty-year-old
at the window of a narrow room.
Behind him, on a shelf not quite
in perspective, pots of paint,
a crayon, a seashell and a precious Venetian
glass filled with a translucent essence.
In one hand the painter holds
a finely carved knife of bone
with which to trim the drawing-pen
before continuing work on a female nude
that lies in front of him next to an inkwell.
Through the window on his left a
landscape with mountain and valley
and the curved line of a path is visible.

The Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony

Saint Anthony the Great (251-356 CE) was a Christian monk from Egypt who lived most of his adult live alone in the desert. At the beginning of his desert life, he was assailed by monstrous demons and tempted by seductive women. Despite a severe asceticism bordering on starvation, he nevertheless lived to

be 105 years old. Although he was buried in the desert, his remains were miraculously discovered about two centuries after his death and transferred to Constantinople. In 980, a French count named Jocelin de Châteauneuf bought the relics from Constantinople to a monastery in what is now known as Isère in the French Alps. The relics were found to alleviate a disease characterized by skin inflammation, gangrene, hallucinations and convulsions that often broke out in devastating epidemics. In 1095 Gaston de Valloire founded the Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony (also known as the Antonines) in gratitude for his son's miraculous cure. The Abbey of Saint Antoine in Isère became the mother church of the order.

The disease came to be known as "Saint Anthony's Fire." The cause was the consumption of bread made from rye contaminated by the fungus *Claviceps purpurea* (Grzybowski et al, 2021). The fungus produces ergotamine and other compounds: these cause peripheral vasoconstriction and excessive stimulation of the central nervous system. The nature of the disease, however, was not known in the Middle Ages: it was first attributed to blighted rye in 1676 by Denis Dodart, but the fungus itself was not identified until the 19th Century.

Grateful patients gave land and money to the Antonines. This support allowed them to establish other hospitals in various locations in France, and later in other European countries. The Isenheim monastery in southern Alsace was founded around 1300. As the years went by, the Antonine hospitals also treated patients who suffered from leprosy, from the Black Death (an epidemic of bubonic plague) in the 14th Century, and from the syphilis epidemics of the 16th Century. The program of treatment involved prayer and the application of vinous extracts from the saint's relics in Isère (*Saint vinage*). Whatever success occurred, however, was likely the result of the concomitant improvement in hygiene and nutrition.

In 1505, the Antonines at Isenheim commissioned a carved

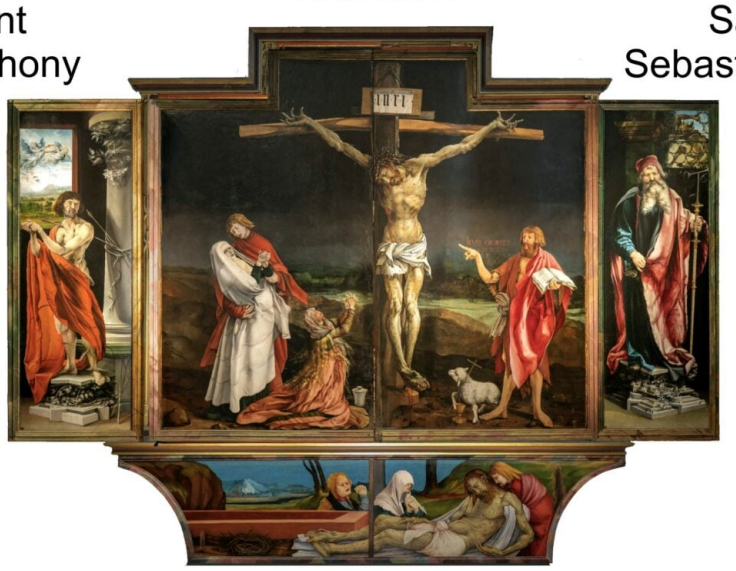
wooden altarpiece from Niklaus Hagenauer (Mayr, 2003). The altarpiece contains a gilded central statue of Saint Anthony, flanked by Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Jerome: asceticism aided by doctrine and by scripture. The predella of the altarpiece contains polychrome statues of Christ and the 12 apostles. In 1512 the Antonines asked Grünewald (Mathis der Maler) to adorn the altar with paintings (Hayum, 1989; Scheja, 1969; Réau, 1920; Sieger, 2025). Over the next 4 years he created two fixed wings, two sets of retractable wings painted on both sides, and a cover for the predella The retractable wings could be opened to provide three distinct views of the altar. An animation of the opening is provided below. This has been adapted from that at the SmartHistory website, and provided with a brief excerpt of music from the first movement of Hindemith's symphony *Mathis der Maler*. Following that is a diagrammatic representation of the three views.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/isenheim-tp-version.mp4

Crucifixion

Saint Anthony

Saint Sebastian



Annunciation

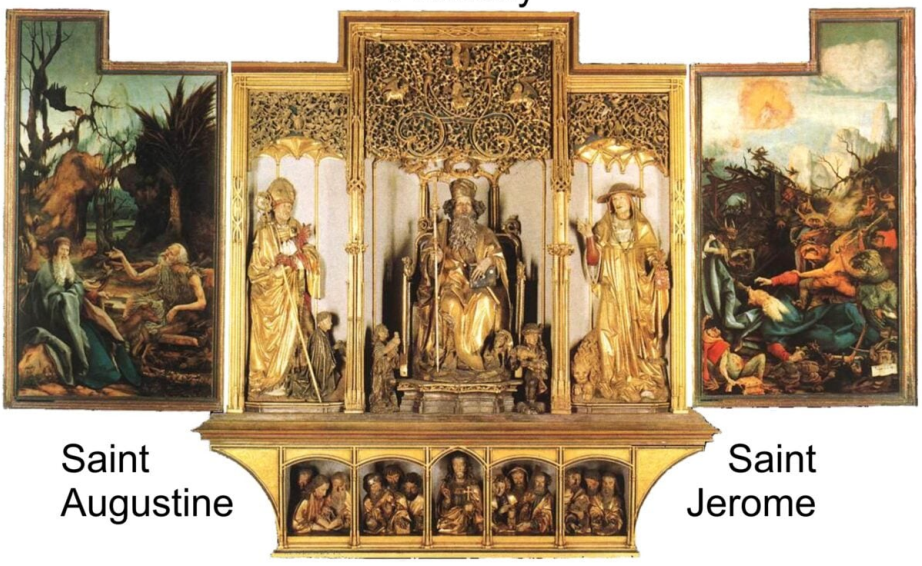
Nativity

Resurrection

Saints Anthony and Paul

Saint Anthony

Temptation of Saint Anthony



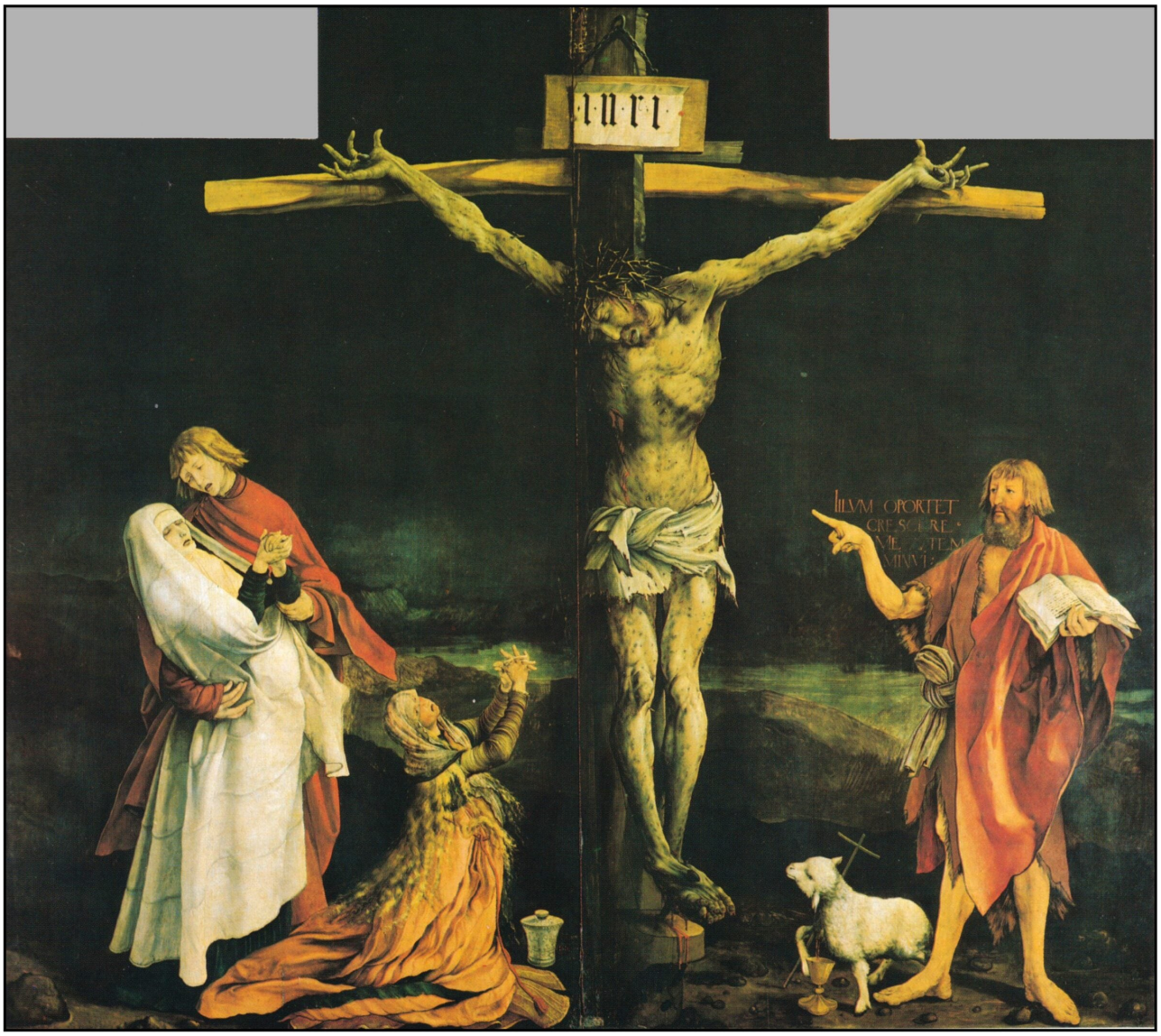
Saint Augustine

Saint Jerome

First View of the Altarpiece

Other than on holy days, the altarpiece was kept closed and the viewer was presented with the terrifying representation of the crucified Christ. The scene is set in the darkness that fell “over all the land” (*Matthew* 27: 45) as Christ died.

> The gigantic body of the dead Christ is rendered with brutal naturalism and seems to leap out at one with redoubled violence, as if to take the viewer in an ambuscade: flesh in the greenish color of death with the scars of the frightful ordeal, an atrocious benumbed pain written across the face, the mouth extinguished in death, the body pulled up high by the tensile arch of the crossbeam and, at the same time, twisted with the torsion of the tree of the Cross, all limbs ripped out of joint, the loincloth in tatters, while a thorn of the crown pins the head fast in an excruciatingly painful position digging low and deep into the chest (Scheja, 1969, p 15).



The cross is contorted as though it shares in the agony. The crossbar is bowed under the weight of the dead body. The vertical post is twisted: it faces to Christ's right above his head and to his left at his feet. The resin of the wood mixes with the blood of the dead Christ (Bryda, 2018)

The vision of Christ on the Cross as a dead body rather than as a suffering savior perhaps comes from the visions of the 14th Century mystic Saint Bridget:

> The color of death spread through his flesh, and after he breathed his last human breath, his mouth gaped open so that one could see his tongue, his teeth, and the blood in his mouth. Th e dead body sagged. His knees then contracted

> bending to the side. His feet were cramped and twisted about the nails of the cross as if they were on hinges (quoted in Bryda, 2018, p 13)

On Christ's right side his mother Mary swoons, and is supported by the disciple John. Near them, Mary Magdalene laments the death of her teacher. The figures vary in their size as in their importance to the story.

On the left side of the crucified Christ is a representation of John the Baptist. This is in no way realistic: John was from another time – he was beheaded before Christ was crucified. Yet he was the last of the prophets to announce the significance of Jesus as the son of God. His words are written in red:

> *Illum oportet crescere me autem minui*
> [He must increase, but I must decrease]. (*John* 3:30)

At the feet of the Baptist is a lamb from whose chest blood drops into a communion chalice. When John had baptised Jesus, he had proclaimed "Behold the Lamb of God!" (*John* 1:36) The Baptist's right arm points dramatically to the crucified Christ. The eye may move to the attendant figures but Grünewald insists that it return to the dead Christ.

In *The Emigrants,* W. G. Sebald describes the experience of Max Ferber on viewing the Isenheim crucifixion

> The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain,

> though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next. (Sebald, 1993/1996)

Perhaps the sight of the dead Christ served to numb the pain and suffering of the patients who came to Isenheim for treatment.

The fixed wings of the altarpiece provide a stark contrast to its horrifying centerpiece. On the left Saint Sebastion tranquilly suffers through his wounds. On the right Saint Anthony remains unperturbed by the demon threatening him through the window at his shoulder. Both Saints are invoked for protection against disease. Saint Sebastian actually survived the onslaught of arrows that pierced his body. Saint Anthony endured his temptations and lived to die of old age.

Radiographic examination of the Saint Sebastian has revealed that the head was painted over an earlier version. In *After Nature*, Sebald interprets this in terms of the existence of two painters: Grünewald and Mathis Nithart:

> And indeed the person of Mathis Nithart
> in documents of the time so flows into
> the person of Grünewald that one
> seems to have been the life,
> then the death, too, of the other.
> An X-ray photograph of the Sebastian
> panel reveals beneath the elegiac
> portrait of the saint
> that same face again, the half-
> profile only turned a tiny bit further
> in the definitive overpainting.
> Here two painters in one body
> whose hurt flesh belonged to both
> to the end pursued the study
> of their own nature. At first
> Nithart fashioned his self-portrait
> from a mirror image, and Grünewald
> with great love, precision and patience
> and an interest in the skin
> and hair of his companion extending
> to the blue shadow of the beard
> then overpainted it.
> The martyrdom depicted is
> the representation, to be sensed
> even in the rims of the wounds,
> of a male friendship wavering
> between horror and loyalty.

Second View of the Altarpiece

On holy days the altarpiece was opened to show a sequence of

paintings depicting episodes from the life of Christ. On the left is the Annunciation. The center, where once was presented the horror of the death of Jesus now shows the wonder of his birth. Heavenly angels provide a marvelous music while the baby Jesus plays with a golden rosary on the lap of his mother Mary.

In 1938, Paul Hindemith completed an opera about *Mathis de Maler*. The prelude to the opera is a musical version of the concert of the angels in the Isenheim altarpiece. This was also used as the first movement of his 1935 *Symphony Mathis der Maler*. Hindemith introduces three themes: a setting of an old German hymn *Es sungen drei Engeln* (There sang three angels) mainly in the brass, a lively melody on the strings and a more peaceful tune on the flute. He then plays these themes against each other. The following is an illustration of the painting together with the initial introduction of the themes in the Symphony Matthis der Maler with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra led by Marin Alsop:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Symphony_Md-M_-I-beginning.mp3

The beautiful angel in the foreground of Grünwald’s *Concert of*

the Angels is playing a viola da gamba, the forerunner of the modern violoncello. Grünewald was clearly familiar with the instrument, which has been closely studied and reproduced. However, the direction of the bowing is strangely reversed from normal. It is difficult to understand what his means (Rasmussen 2001). Perhaps the angel is producing heavenly rather than earthly music. Even more disconcerting is the angel directly behind and above the foreground cellist. This angel is covered in iridescent green feathers and looks upset rather than entranced by the birth of Jesus. Mellinkoff (1988) proposed that this is the angel Lucifer who rebelled against God, brought about the fall of man, and is now aghast that man will be redeemed by the birth of Christ.

Between the concert of the angels and the representation of Mary and the infant Jesus is a vision of a woman, with a crown of flames, surrounded by a bright yellow and red aureole (see below). No one is sure who she represents. Malinkoff (1988) suggests that she is *Ecclesia* (Church), who with the birth of Christ takes over from *Synagoga* as the intermediary between man and God. Others (e.g., Réau, 1920, p 187-94; Scheja, 1969, p 48) consider her to be the Eternal Mary, Queen of Heaven, the woman “clothed with the sun” of *Revelation 12*. She is there to witness herself in her temporal form together with her infant son.

The most striking painting in the second view of the altarpiece is the Resurrection on the right side. Christ arises from the tomb in glory, scattering and tumbling the guards:

Joris-Karl Huysmans, the first modern critics to consider the importance of Matthias Grünewald in *Trois Primitifs* (1905, reprinted in part in Huysmans & Ruhmer, 1958), described *The Resurrection*:

> As the sepulchre opens, some drunks in helmet and armour are knocked head over heels to lie sprawling in the foreground, sword in hand; one of them turns a somersault further off, behind the tomb, and lands on his head, while Christ surges upwards, stretching out his arms and displaying the bloody commas on his hands.
>
> This is a strong and handsome Christ, fair-haired and brown-eyed, with nothing in common with the Goliath whom we watched decomposing a moment ago, fastened by nails to the still green wood of a gibbet. All round this soaring body are rays emanating from it which have begun to blur its outline; already the contours of the face are fluctuating, the features hazing over, the hair dissolving into a halo of melting gold. The light spreads out in immense curves ranging from bright yellow to purple, and finally shading off little by little into a pale blue which in turn merges with the dark blue of the night.
>
> We witness here the revival of a Godhead ablaze with life: the formation of a glorified body gradually escaping from the carnal shell, which is disappearing in an apotheosis of flames of which it is itself the source and seat.
>
> … Having dared to attempt this tour de force, Grünewald has carried it out with wonderful skill. In clothing the Saviour he has tried to render the changing colours of the fabrics as they are volatilized with Christ. Thus the scarlet robe turns a bright yellow, the closer it gets to the light-source of the head and neck, while the material grows lighter, becoming almost diaphanous in this river of gold. As for the white shroud which Jesus is carrying off with him, it reminds one of those Japanese fabrics which by subtle gradations change from one colour to another, for as it rises it takes on a lilac tint first of all, then becomes

pure violet, and finally, like the last blue circle of the nimbus, merges into the indigo-black of the night.

This is no ordinary representation of the Resurrection. Christ has not just risen from the tomb: he has also been transfigured into a vision of the Godhead. Scheja, 1988, p 40) notes how Grünewald has accurately depicted Dante's vision of the Trinitarian Godhead at the end of *The Divine Comedy* published two centuries before his painting (*Paradiso* XXXIII 115-120):

> *Nella profonda e chiara sussistenza*
> *de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri*
> *di tre colori e d'una contenenza;*
>
> *e l'un dall'altro come iri da iri*
> *parea reflesso, e il terzo parea foco*
> *che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.*
>
> [There appeared to me in the profound and bright
> reality of that exalted light
> three circles of three colors and one size.
>
> As rainbow by rainbow, one seemed reflected
> by the second, and the third seemed a fire
> that breathed as much from one as from the other.]
> (translation by Louis Biancolli)

Third View of the Altarpiece

As well as the statues created by Niklaus Hagenauer the third view has two lateral paintings that are the obverse of the *Madonna and Child* and the *Concert of Angels*. These represent *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony* and *The Meeting between Saint Anthony and Saint Paul*.

Although often called the “temptations” of Saint Anthony, the subject of Grünewald’s painting on the right is more accurately considered his “tribulations.” Scheja (1969, p 28) tells the story from original biography of Saint Anthony written by Athanasius a few years after his death. When Anthony first went to the desert he was attacked by demons. Despite the pain, he refused to give up his devotion to Christ. Finally, the heavens opened, light streamed down from Christ in majesty, and the demons vanished. Anthony had passed his test and was worthy of his God. Anthony cried out the words written at the lower left of the painting (Hayum, 1989, p 79):

Ubi eras ihesu boni, ubi eras? Quare not affuisti ut sanares

vulnera mea?
[Where were you good Jesus, where were you? Why were you not there to heal my wounds?]

The poor wretch at the lower left of the painting represents a patient suffering from ergotism. The distal parts of his fingers have been lost to gangrene and his skin is covered with sores (Grzybowski et al, 2021). The image serves as an intermediary between the patients in the hospital and Saint Anthony. Even the fingers of Saint Anthony's left hand are turning grey with incipient gangrene (Kluger& Brandozzi, 2023). The patients can see in the painting that their disease is the same as that of Saint Anthony. They can therefore hope that God may relieve their pain, just like he drove away the demons that tormented Saint Anthony. The following is Hindemith's musical version of Saint Anthony and the Demons: from the beginning of the 3rd movement of his Mathis der Maler symphony:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Symphony_M-d-M_III-beginning.mp3

The painting on the left is as tranquil as that on the right is turbulent. After his tribulations, Saint Anthony sought out Saint Paul, an older ascetic who had retired to the desert. Paul convinced him that the monastic life was worth pursuing. Although the meeting was reported to have taken place in a cave, Grünewald locates it in a peaceful wooded landscape with a gently doe acting as an intermediary between the two saints. In the background a stag waits patiently. On a high branch, a raven, accustomed to providing Paul with his daily slice of bread, gets ready to deliver two slices. The head of Saint Paul is another self-portrait of Grünewald (Scheja, 1969, pp 30-33; von Mücke, 2011)

Afterlife of the Altarpiece

The altarpiece remained in the abbey church at Isenheim until the French Revolution (1789-1799) led to the suppression of the monasteries. In 1852, the altarpiece was moved to the new Unterlinden Museum located in Colmar, about 25 km north of Isenheim. The museum is housed in what was once a convent for the Dominican sisters, originally built in 13th Century.

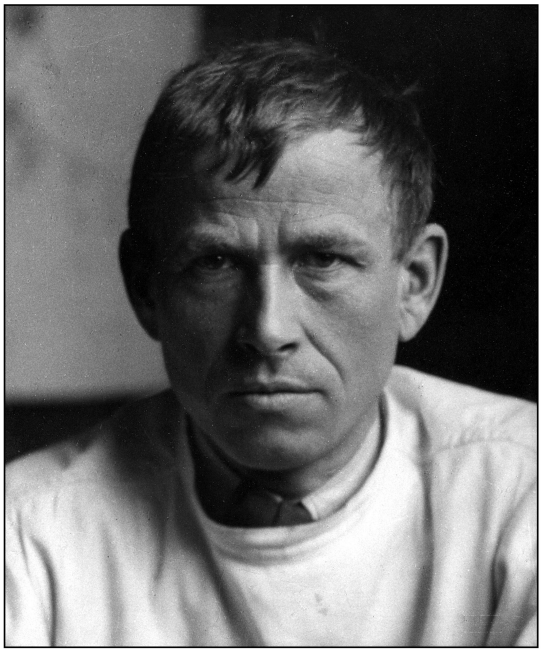
After the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), Alsace became part of Germany. The unification of Germany bought with it a desire for a distinct national culture. Philosophers conceived a Northern or Gothic tradition in art, as distinguished from Mediterranean Classical art (Rosenblum, 1975; Stieglitz, 1989). Its characteristics were a sense of the sublime, an emotional intensity, a mystical predisposition, and a deep subjectivity (or inwardness, *Innerlichkeit*). Grünewald's paintings fitted easily into these ideas.

During World War I, for safety's sake, the altarpiece was taken away from Colmar to Munich, where it was exhibited to great acclaim. The peace arrangements after the war included a requirement that the altarpiece to be returned to Colmar. Since 1919, the altarpiece has lived there in the Unterlinden Museum. The following illustration shows how it is exhibited.

The visitor can go behind first section to see the paintings on the obverse side of *The Crucifixion – The Annunciation* and *The Resurrection*. And then behind the *The Nativity* (*Angel Concert* and *Madonna with the Infant Jesus*) to see *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and *The Meeting between Saint Paul and Saint Anthony*.

Otto Dix

Otto Dix (1891-1969) studied art at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. When war was declared in 1914, he volunteered for the army and served for the duration of the war. He took part in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, was transferred for a while to the Eastern Front, and then back to Flanders for the end of the war. He was profoundly affected by the horrors he experienced. After the war he painted images representing both his ghastly memories of trench warfare and his anger at the hypocrisy and depravity of post-war German society. He was one of the painters of *Der neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) Exhibition of 1925.



Dix became a professor at the Dresden Academy in 1927. A 1929 photograph by Hugo Erfurth is shown on the right. Between 1929 and 1932 he worked on a large triptych entitled *Der Krieg* (The War) based on old German triptychs especially that of Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece (Bayer, 1920).

The left wing of the triptych, entitled *Aufmarsch* (Deployment), depicts the soldiers leaving for the frontline early in the morning before the mists have cleared.

The right wing, entitled *Nachtlicher Ruckzug* (Nightly Retreat) shows a soldier (a self-portrait of the artist) trying to bring a wounded colleague back to safety behind the frontlines.

The central section, *Der Krieg*, takes the place of the Crucifixion in a medieval altar. Instead of Christ on the cross

> a rotting corpse has been hurled onto iron girders in similar fashion. His eye sockets have already become black holes, the teeth are bared, with what remains of his uniform hanging in tatters. (Bayer 1920)

The corpse points to another dead body on the right. This is clearly an illusion to Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece wherein John the Baptist points dramatically to the crucified Christ. The body to which the finger points is upside down and riddled with bullet holes in much the same way as Grünewald's Christ was covered in sores. The background to these horrors is a landscape completely destroyed by artillery.

The predella of Dix's triptych shows several soldiers lying down under what might be a camouflage screen. It is unclear whether they are dead or sleeping. If the latter there is a

clockwise circular logic to the triptych: the exhausted soldiers will wake up, advance to the front again, engage in the murderous work of war, and then retreat, wounded and exhausted to sleep another night.

Dix's description of the war was loathed by the Nazi government, who wished to portray war as an occasion for heroism rather than a field of horror. In 1933 Dix was dismissed from his position at the Dresden Academy. Many of his paintings were removed from galleries and destroyed. Some were included in the Exhibition of Degenerate Art in 1937. Dix saved the triptych, took it apart, and stored it in a friend's farmhouse until after the war. The *Galerie der Neue Meister* (Gallery of Modern Masters) in Dresden purchased the painting in 1968.

Paul Hindemith

Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) studied music at Dr. Hoch's Konservatorium in Frankfurt and joined the Frankfurt Symphony

Orchestra after graduation. He served in the German army on the frontlines in Alsace during the last year of the war.

After the war, he founded the Amar Quartet, playing the viola, and began to compose. During the 1930s he worked on his Opera *Mathis der Maler*, based on the life of Matthias Grünewald. As he was writing this music, he used some of the orchestral interludes in the opera to make his *Symphony Mathis der Maler* which was published in 1935. The opera was not completed until 1938. Because the Nazis considered his music degenerate, Hindemith was unable to get the opera performed in Germany. He emigrated to Switzerland in 1938 and then to the United States in 1940.

As well as the modernity of the music, the subject matter of the opera was anathema to the Nazi powers (Bruhm, 1998, 2002; Paret, 2008; Watkins, 2002; Fuller, 1997). It revealed the horrors of war: the summary executions, the raping and pillaging. One of the scenes concerned the burning of Lutheran books as ordered by the Catholic Church. This made obvious reference to the Nazi book burnings which had begun in the early 1930s.

The opera has been performed only rarely. A 1977 production starred Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Mathis. A striking recent production in Vienna that was captured on DVD by Naxos in 2012.

The opera is concerned with the life of Matthias Grünewald after he completes the Isenheim altarpiece. Hindemith imagines that Mathis leaves the service of Albrecht von Brandenburg and joins the rebellion of the peasants. Throughout these terrible times, images from the altarpiece (and Hindemith's musical versions thereof) return to comfort or to haunt the painter. During the rebellion, he takes care of Regina, a young woman whose father, one of the leaders of the rebellion, was cruelly executed before her eyes. The beginning of the 6th scene of the opera finds them fleeing from the mercenaries through the

forest of the Odenwald southeast of Frankfurt, Mathis tries to comfort the grieving Regina with the story of the *Concert of Angels* who played music at the nativity of Jesus. The following is part of the aria, as sung by Wolfgang Koch as Mathis and Katherina Tretyakova as Regina:

Alte Märchen woben
Uns fromme Bilder, die ein Widerscheinen
Des Höheren sind. Ihr Sinn ist dir
Fern, du kannst ihn nur erahnen.
Und frommer noch reden
Zu uns die Töne, wenn Musik, in Einfalt hier
Geboren, die Spur himmlischer Herkunft trägt.
Sieh, wie eine Schar von Engeln ewige Bahnen
In irdischen Wegen abwandelt. Wie spürt man jeden
Versenkt in sein mildes Amt. Der eine geigt
Mit wundersam gesperrtem Arm, den Bogen wägt
Er zart, damit nicht eines wenigen Schattens Rauheit
Den linden Lauf trübe. Ein andrer streicht
Gehobnen Blicks aus Saiten seine Freude.
Verhaftet scheint der dritte dem fernen Geläute
Seiner Seele und achtet leicht des Spiels.

Wie bereit
Er ist, zugleich zu hören und zu dienen.

REGINA
Es sungen drei Engel ein süssen Gesang,
Der weit in den hohen Himmel erklang.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Mathis-der-Maler-Scene-6-Alte-Marchen.mp3

The following is a translation

Old fairy tales wove
Pious images for us that are a reflection
Of something higher. Their meaning is so
Far from you, that you can only guess.

And music speaks even more piously
When, born here in simplicity,
It brings a breath of heaven.
See how a host of angels eternally follow
Our earthly paths. How one feels each one
Is immersed in their gentle office. One plays the violin
With a wondrously bared arm, lightly bowing
Lest any roughness darken
Cloud the gentle melody. Another,
With an uplifted gaze, strokes joy from the strings.
The third seems captivated by the distant chiming
of his soul and hardly attends to the music.

How ready
he is to listen and serve at the same time.

REGINA
Three angels sang a sweet song
That resounded far into the heavens.

The Comfort of Images

Hindemith's Mathis comforts the grieving Regina by describing to her his painting of the *Concert of Angels*. The world is difficult to understand. The suffering that occurs is often unjustified. So we tell ourselves stories – we weave together fairy tales – to make sense of the world. We can represent these stories in paintings and in music.

The story that Grünewald unfolds in the Isenheim altarpiece is the myth of a Son of God who suffered and died so that we may be redeemed and live forever. And the life of Saint Anthony who lived in holiness so that our illness can be cured.

And even if these are only stories, the comfort they provide is real.

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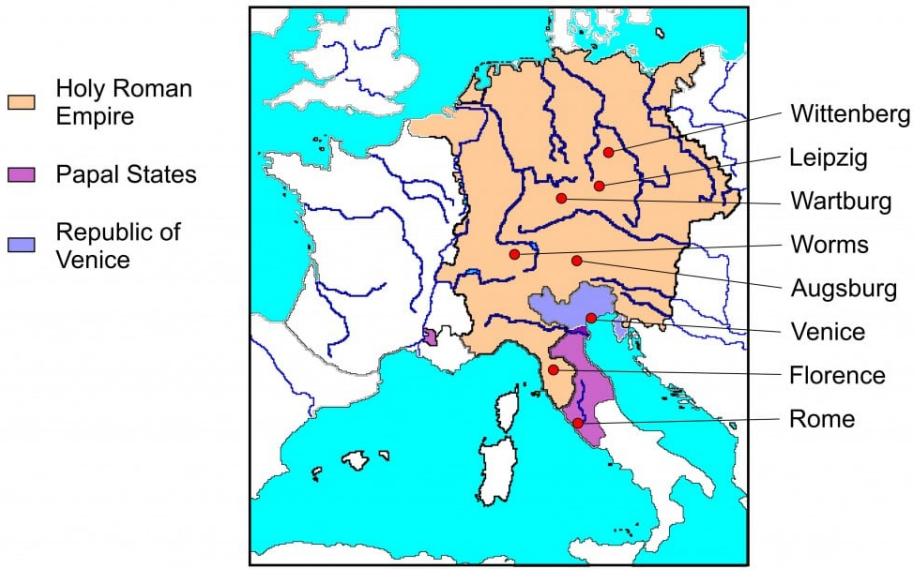
Here I stand

The Diet of Worms was an assembly of the lords of the Holy Roman Empire called together by Emperor Charles V in 1521. One of the duties of the Diet was to consider whether the writings of Martin Luther were heretical. The Diet marked the point-of-no-return for the Protestant Reformation. Luther's ringing statement "Here I stand" reclaimed the spiritual freedom of the individual. Henceforth each person could choose to interpret scripture and to commune with God without the necessary intervention of the church. However, Luther's actual concept of freedom was far more complicated than this.

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who studied, taught and preached at the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, one of the states of the Holy Roman Empire. The engraving on the right by Lucas Cranach the Elder shows Luther in his monk's attire. Cranach was the court painter for the Elector of Saxony. He knew Luther well and made several portraits of him. This engraving was used as a frontispiece for several of Luther's early books. The Latin beneath the portrait states that Luther's depiction of his thinking was eternal but Cranach's portrait of his features only transient. At the bottom is a device used by Cranach as his signature – a winged serpent with a crown upon his head and a ruby ring in his mouth.

Luther had published his *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* in 1517. Indulgences were sold by the Roman Catholic Church as a means for the sinful to decrease their time in purgatory. Though they might have begun as a means to relieve the sinner, they had rapidly become simply a way for the church to raise money. Whether or not the theses had actually been nailed to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenburg is unknown, but they were quickly printed and made available throughout the Holy Roman Empire:



In 1518, Luther was arraigned in Augsburg before Cardinal Cajetan, the papal ambassador to the Holy Roman Empire. Cajetan insisted that Luther's views were heretical in that they questioned the authority of the pope. He asked Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, to arrest Luther and send him to Rome. Frederick refused to do so since Luther had not been formally tried and convicted of heresy.

In 1519 Luther debated on the 95 theses with Johann Maier von Eck in Leipzig. Luther insisted on the freedom of the individual to decide what was right on the basis of the scriptures and conscience, whereas von Eck insisted on the need for obedience to God's church. Their debate had no resolution.

Over the next year, Luther published several books highly critical of the Roman Catholic Church (Mullett, 1985, Chapter 5). His *Address to the German Nobility* proposed that the German states should become independent of Roman control and not send Rome its annual payments. The *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was a vituperative attack on the papacy, likening it to the power of Babylon and the Antichrist described in Revelations.

A third book *The Freedom of a Christian w*as addressed to Pope

Leo and was more conciliatory. The essence of its message was that

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Christians were granted freedom from sin through the grace of Christ. Nevertheless, they must then act not for themselves but for the benefit of others. Freedom comes with duty.

However, the book was also adamantly opposed to many tenets of Roman Catholicism. Luther proclaimed that salvation comes through faith rather than by works, and that each Christian can be his or her own priest: “Christ has made it possible for us, provided we believe in him, to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow-kings, but also his fellow-priests.”

In the summer of 1520, Pope Leo X issued the bull *Exsurge Domine* (Arise Lord), which listed the heretical ideas proposed in Luther’s writings. The pope requested that Luther come to Rome and recant; failure to do so would result in his excommunication. The pope arranged for the burning of Luther’s books in Rome. In Wittenberg, a defiant Luther publicly burned his copy of the papal bull.

The pope assigned Cardinal Girolamo Aleander the task of bringing Luther to trial. His task was facilitated by the coronation of the new Emperor Charles V in November, 1520. Anxious to display his faith, Charles agreed to bring Luther before the Diet of Worms in the spring of 1521. Frederick the Wise of Saxony insisted that Luther be guaranteed safe conduct to and from Worms.

Luther appeared before the Diet on April 17. Since Cardinal Aleander did not allow himself to be in the same room as a confirmed heretic, the examination of Luther was conducted by von Eck, who had previously debated Luther in Leipzig. The

following woodcut by an anonymous artist (from a Freiburg History webpage) was used to illustrate one of the early reports of the Diet. In the background is Charles V surrounded by six electors (Frederick of Saxony, Joachim of Brandenburg, Ludwig of Rhine, and the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier and Cologne). The seventh elector (from Bohemia) was not present. In the foreground Luther stands on the right and von Eck on the left. In the center are Luther's books.

Luther was not allowed to present any of the ideas in his books. Rather he was simply asked to acknowledge and recant his authorship. Luther acknowledged that some of his writings had perhaps been too polemical ("more severe than befits my religion or my profession"), but claimed that the criticisms they voiced were nevertheless correct. He asked to have time to consider his response, and this was granted. The next afternoon, he appeared again before the Diet. Von Eck requested that he not make inappropriate comments, but simply state whether or not he would "revoke and retract your books and the errors contained in them" (Atkinson, 1971)

The final words of Martin Luther were variously reported (*Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, pp. 555-559; Atkinson, 1971;

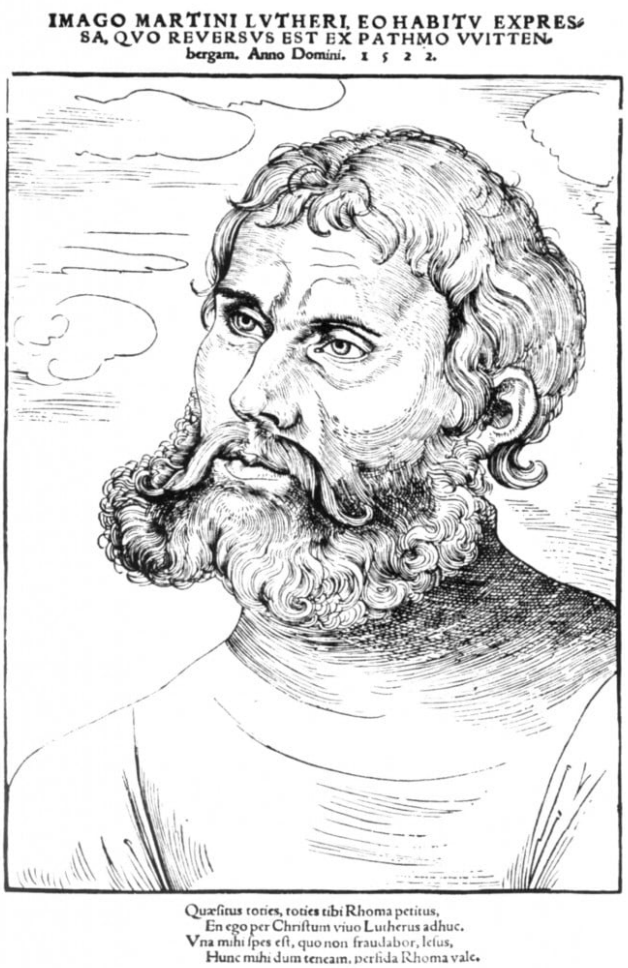
Whitford, 2011; Linder 2010, webpage *The Trial of Martin Luther*). Luther spoke in both Latin and German. He refused to recant the opinions expressed in his books since no scriptural evidence had been produced to prove them wrong:

> Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen. (Brecht, 1985).

> Nisi con victus fuero testimoniis scripturarum aut ratione evidenti, nam neque papae neque concilio solis credo cum constet eos errasse saepius et sibi ipsis contradixisse, vinctus sum scripturis a me adductis, et capta conscientia in verbis Dei, revocare neque possum neque volo, cum contra conscientiam agere neque tutum neque integrum. Gott helfe mir. Amen. (*Reichtagsakten*, p. 555)

Some reports include the statements “Here I stand. I can do no other.” (*Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders*) before “May God help me.” These words were certainly in the mind of Luther. Whether or not they were actually spoken is unknown. Most experts think not.

A few days later, Luther left Worms to journey back to Wittenberg. Afraid that the safe conduct granted by Charles V might be revoked, Frederick the Wise arranged a sham kidnapping of Luther, who was spirited away to the castle at Wartburg. There Luther remained incognito. He grew a beard, and was known as Junker Jörg (Squire George). The woodcut on the right (again by Lucas Cranach) shows Luther with this new identity. The verse below the portrait states that “though so often sought and persecuted by Rome, I, Luther, still live by Jesus Christ in undeniable hope. As long as I have this, farewell perfidious Rome!”



The results of Luther’s examination before the Reichstag was published as the Edict of Worms in May 1821. Luther was denounced as an “obstinate, schismatic heretic.” He was to be apprehended and punished. Those favoring or supporting him would be guilty of treason against the empire and would forfeit all their goods. All of Luther’s books were to be burned.

Luther found the seclusion in Wartburg a relief from the disputations and polemics of the preceding years. He considered it his Patmos – the island where legend has it that St. John wrote Revelations. During his retreat in Wartburg, Luther translated the New Testament into German. In March 1822 he returned to Wittenberg. Frederick the Wise had negotiated

with Charles V that the Edict of Worms did not apply to him. The young emperor did not wish to alienate one of the most powerful princes of his empire. Luther resumed his teaching and his writing.

One of his works on his return was a reply to the book *On Free Will (De Libero Arbitrio),* published in 1524 by Desiderius Erasmus, the humanist scholar. Erasmus was actually reacting to Luther's earlier scriptural interpretations that man had no free will. The papal bull *Exsurge Domine* had listed this claim as one of Luther's heresies. Luther had replied in an *Assertion of all Articles*: "free will is really a fiction and a label without reality because it is in no man's power to plan any evil or good … everything takes place by absolute necessity" (Winter, pp. 44-45). All that mattered to Luther was salvation through the grace of God. Erasmus recognized the grace of God but insisted that we could accept or reject this salvation. Furthermore we could choose to do either good or evil. Why would the scriptures exhort us to follow God's commandments, if there were no choice between obedience and disobedience?

In 1525 Luther denounced the ideas of Erasmus in his book *On the Bondage of the Will* (*De Servo Arbitrio*). Since God is omniscient and omnipotent,

> all things which we do, although they may appear to us to be done mutably and contingently, and even may be done thus contingently by us, are yet, in reality, done necessarily and immutably, with respect to the will of God. (p. 27)

Luther proposed that the purpose of the commandments is simply to demonstrate that man cannot obey them without the grace of God.

> man, by the words of the law, is admonished and taught what he ought to do, not what he can do … he is brought to know his sin, but not to believe that he has any strength in

> himself. Wherefore, friend Erasmus, as often as you throw in my teeth the Words of the law, so often I throw in yours that of Paul, “By the law is the knowledge of sin,”(Romans 3:20) – not of the power of the will. (pp. 111-112)

Luther interpreted the words of Paul as irrefutable truth. He had replaced the authority of the Church with the authority of the scriptures. There is no reason to accept either. Both represent incomplete attempts to understand how we should act.

These ideas bring into question Luther’s statements at the Diet of Worms. According to our understanding, we exercise free will when we choose to act in one way when we could have acted otherwise (van Inwagen, 1983). Typically this requires “deliberation” – we imagine the outcomes of our possible acts, and evaluate these against our principles of what is good or right.

One of the great paradoxes of Judeo-Christian thought is how free will is possible when God knows everything that will happen. In our modern and more agnostic times, this paradox has been transformed. Now we wonder whether free will is possible when science proposes that everything is determined. Most consider that free will and determinism are compatible but it remains unclear how this can be so.

Much of what we do occurs without thinking. We often respond instinctually or reflexively. Sometimes we do things for reasons of which we are unaware. After the act we invent rationalizations for our behavior. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that some of our actions are truly deliberate. We choose to do them because we have thought carefully about the consequences. Various options are freely available to us. We select what we think is best. We try to do the right thing.

Luther had deliberated overnight whether to recant. In the end he decided not to. Yet he believed that this decision was not his. He was merely acting out God’s preordained will. He could

do no other.

Luther had constructed his personal system of values from his interpretation of the scriptures. This set of values had determined his decision. He attributed his ideas about what he should do to God. He did not say so for fear he might be wrong. For he had conceived these ideals, and he chose to follow them. He could have done otherwise.

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