

# FREDERICK THE WISE

by Mathew Block

**B**orn January 17, 1463, Frederick III would reign as Elector of Saxony from 1486 until his death on May 5, 1525. His importance to the Reformation is so instrumental that it can scarcely have taken place without him—and yet the motivations behind his actions are not always immediately clear.

Frederick the Wise, as he is often called, grew up a friend of Johann von Staupitz, who would later become an important Augustinian theologian. When he founded the University of Wittenberg in 1502, Frederick would invite Staupitz to become professor of Scripture and theology. Following Staupitz' resignation to become Vicar-General of the Augustinian Order's reformed branch, however, Frederick would appoint—at Staupitz' suggestion—a young Martin Luther to take his place.

It was in this context that Luther began to study and understand Scripture more clearly. As he did so, he became increasingly concerned with the church's teaching on indulgences. He eventually published these concerns in 1517 in the *95 Theses*.

The theses certainly caught the attention of Frederick III, just as they did the rest of Europe. A pious Christian, Frederick had spent years accumulating a vast collection of relics for the Castle Church in Wittenberg. An inventory from 1518 lists an astounding 17,443 items in the collection, making it among the largest in all Europe. Every year on All Saints Day (November 1), the relics would be displayed for the benefit of the faithful. By venerating each of these relics, the church taught that a Christian could gain indulgences reducing his or her stay in purgatory by a full 1,902,202 years.

The relics and their indulgences were a significant source of income for the elector's university. In fact, indulgences had funded the initial building of the university. Luther's theses against indulgences therefore had the potential to reduce the Elector's bottom line. But as the teachings of the Reformation began to grow and spread in the ensuing years, Frederick the Wise nevertheless took constant steps to protect Luther.

Following Luther's excommunication in 1520, Frederick convinced Emperor Charles V to give him a hearing in Worms. And after Luther's departure from the city, Frederick arranged to have him kidnapped for his own safety. The soon to be published Edict of Worms called for Luther's arrest as a heretic. But Frederick had already had him hidden away in Wartburg Castle near Eisenach. There Luther would pursue the translation of Scripture into the common German language, as well as other theological writings.

Throughout all these events, Frederick demurred that he, as a layperson, was not qualified to make judgments on the theological topics under debate. He never openly declared allegiance to Reformation theology. By contrast, he kept his great collection of relics, though he stopped displaying them publicly in 1523. But he was clear that wanted to see justice done for Luther—and that meant a fair trial, not a show court with a predetermined verdict.

Were Frederick III's motivations totally pure in his defense of Luther? Or might he also have been concerned that the fate of his university was inextricably entwined with the fate of its star professor? Perhaps a defense of Saxony's autonomy was also at issue? Or was it in fact that



Frederick the Wise (c. 1540). Painted by the school of Lucas Cranach the Elder.

Frederick III personally sympathized with the teachings of Luther and the Reformation? Or perhaps it was some combination of all of the above?

We cannot know for sure. What we do know is this: right before his death, Frederick the Wise communed for the first time according to the practice of the reformers (taking both bread and wine as opposed to just bread, as was the Roman approach). It was, perhaps, his clearest confession of faith.

Without Frederick III's defense of Luther, the early beginnings of the Reformation seemed doomed to failure. "Such a prince is a blessing from God," Luther wrote after his death. God give us all such good rulers.