

# **THE LIFE OF MARTIN LUTHER**

**(a short biography)**

by

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## The Young Luther

Although a great many factors were involved in the west's journey out of the middle ages, no single individual had a greater influence on the religious aspect of this transition than Martin Luther. His name is forever associated with beginnings of the Reformation, a movement that not only set a new course for religion, but also provided for its coexistence with secularism. Among his many achievements, he is credited with restoring the primitive faith of the church and freeing both it and the state from the shackles of a corrupt Roman Papacy.

All modern men and women in the west have fallen under his influence. Protestants are directly indebted to him for the most basic tenets of their theology, all of which were either formulated or reformulated during the Reformation. Catholics are indirectly indebted to him for provoking the refinements in their theology which were developed during the so-called Counter-Reformation. And even non-religious people have benefitted from his religious teaching, which did much to secure the free exercise of reason, the separation of church and state, and the advancement of democracy.

Martin Luther was not a simple man. His life was made up of great contrasts. Moreover, he was not interested in the task of working these out in a logically coherent system. A man of intense personality—passionate, frank, outspoken, unmindful of consequences—his life was less like a polished work of art and more like a rugged mountain peak, with bracing air, torrential streams, and wild plant life. Accordingly, he was a man whose life embraced great strengths as well as great weaknesses. Among his strengths we can name such qualities of native genius as passion, intelligence, and bravery, but also the religious virtues of humility and reverence, and especially his deep, strong and resilient faith. Among his weaknesses, the most notable by far was his fiery temper, the best of which can be said that providence used it as a tool against evil, but which even his staunchest supporters had difficulty reconciling with the spirit of Christ. Nevertheless, there can be little question about whether this man deserves to be numbered among the great saints of the church, to say nothing of his legacy as a husband, father, humanist, preacher, teacher, hymnist, scholar, theologian, reformer, and founder.

## Martin Luther as a Young Man

Martin Luther's story begins during the transition between medievalism and modernism. For some time now, the western church had been failing to draw any meaningful distinction between its visible institutional life and the kingdom of God. This gave to the church an unwarranted air of authority, which was reinforced by a number of corrupt doctrines. At the same time, the ideal of harmonious cooperation between papacy and empire was easier said than done, and the two found themselves engaged in a constant struggle for power. After the Black Death of 1348, an increasing number of kingdoms began to operate independent of the church.

In an event known as the Renaissance, a new stream of cultural activity began to emerge through the patronage of wealthy aristocrats in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Although the theme of their work remained thoroughly religious, it was not carried out from the perspective of divine revelation, but from the perspective of human experience. This change in perspective brought with it a renewed interest in the classical learning of the Greeks and Romans, the evidence of which can be seen in the philosophy of Ficino, the scholarship of Petrarch, and the sculpture of Donatello. Unfortunately, there were no advances in the natural sciences, the theoretical field remaining very much under the influence of Aristotle, and the practical field continuing to dabble in such things as alchemy, astrology, and magic. In music, the movement known as *ars nova* combined increasingly complex sounds with increasingly secular lyrics, beginning the gradual overthrow of plainchant. The strange board game imported from the east during the crusades rose to new levels of complexity, inspiring the first written chess manuals by Lucena and Damiano.

As the Renaissance spread north, it eventually came to Germany, just a few decades before the birth of Martin Luther. This came about largely through the influence of Johannes Gutenberg, famous for his invention of the printing press, widely regarded as the most significant invention of the modern era. This invention inaugurated an age of mass communication, allowing for the free exchange of ideas among an increasingly literate middle class. The first book to be mass produced was, of course, the Vulgate, but it wouldn't be long before the press would also be used to disseminate the ideas about the Renaissance. In the course of time, it would prove a major factor in the spread of ideas associated with the Reformation, making its appearance at this point in history convenient if not providential.

### *The Birth of Martin Luther*

It was a challenging time in the life of the church. In the east, the church had recently seen one thousand years of continuous rule brought to term with the

fall of Constantinople. In the west, its efforts to enforce orthodoxy among an increasingly mixed population had just given birth to the Spanish Inquisition. Meanwhile, naval exploration was expanding the horizons of the world in ways that the old structures handed down from antiquity would prove ill-equipped to handle.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in Germany. At the time, this region was known as Prussia, and the specific place of his birth was an old Saxon town called Eisleben. Like most places in the middle ages, the region in which he was born was governed locally by a family of nobles, the counts of Mansfield being but one of many who served under the Hapsburg dynasty then ruling the Holy Roman Empire (a loose confederation of kingdoms tracing their origin to the conquests of Charlemagne).

Hans and Margaret Luther were poor peasant farmers, but honest, hard-working, and pious. After their son's birth they had him baptized as a Roman Catholic, and as it was the feast day of St. Martin of Tours, they gave him the name "Martin." Six months later, his father moved the family to the capital city of Mansfield, hoping to improve their financial situation by working in the rich mining district of the Harz Mountains. It was here that Martin grew up, the oldest of seven siblings.

Martin Luther had a hard upbringing. His descriptions of it are devoid of pleasant memories, but he recounts several stories about the severity of discipline. On one occasion, his mother punished him for stealing a nut "til the blood came." On another, his father flogged him so severely that he ran away from home for a brief period: "I hated him until he finally managed to win me back." In retrospect, he would say that his parents were well intentioned, but that they did not know how to adapt their rigorous methods of childrearing to the character of their children. In regards to Christianity, he was taught to pray to God and the saints and to revere the church and the priests, but he was also told harrowing stories about the devil, demons, and witches. As we shall see, the pious severity of his upbringing lent to his words and actions a boldness and lack of refinement which, although not highly prized among the upper classes, would go a long way toward establishing his reputation as a man of the people. As one writer puts it: *He was not a polished diamond, but a rough block cut out from a granite mountain and well fitted for a solid base of a mighty structure.*

### *The Education of Martin Luther*

Martin Luther's father was an ambitious man. After securing a position for himself as one of four representatives in the city council, he took measures to secure for his oldest son a career in law. This required, among other things, that he be admitted into the finest schools available and that he pursue a track of education suited to that purpose.

Martin was sent to grammar school where he studied Latin (aged 9), a boarding school operated by the Brothers of the Common Life (aged 14), and then a parish school where he studied the Trivium (aged 15). Under the medieval system of education, he was trained in the disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, a process he would later compare to torments of purgatory. Like so many other people of his time, he never had the privilege of reading the Bible. But he did learn a great many hymns, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

At age 18, Martin entered the University of Erfurt, widely regarded as one of the best universities of its time. With the assistance of his father, he was able to free himself of all practical care and devote himself entirely to his studies, even managing to build a small library of books. In the field of scholastic philosophy, he was exposed to the *via moderna* of William of Ockham, an approach which took a skeptical attitude toward metaphysics and which focused heavily on using logic and empirical experience in the pursuit of knowledge. In the field of the humanities, he was exposed to fresh new avenues of classical scholarship that had opened up since the Renaissance, such as the Greek and Latin tongues, as well as the writings of Cicero, Virgil, Plautus, and Livy. There is no evidence that he spent any time engaged in the study of the natural sciences or mathematics. He did, however, cultivate a love of music, and was able to sing and play the lute with some ability.

Martin's conduct at the university was exemplary. He regularly attended mass, observed the daily devotions, and prayed fervently to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the midst of such an atmosphere of pious devotion, it is noteworthy that he claims to have never even saw a copy of the Scriptures until he was given access to the one held at the university library. Like all Bibles, it would have been written in Latin, though this was no obstacle given his facility with the classical languages. The first story he ever read for himself was the account of Hannah and Samuel from the Old Testament. According to his own testimony, he was delighted to find that it contained so much more than was ever read or explained to him in the church services. In 1505, Martin graduated with a Master of Arts, the equivalent of what today we would call a Ph.D.: *What a moment of majesty and splendor was that when one took the degree of Master, and torches were carried before him. I consider that no temporal or worldly joy can equal it.*

## **Martin Luther's Early Religious Career**

Once Martin Luther had completed his degree, it was time for him to begin his career in law. In preparation, he was given a copy of the *Corpus Juris* (for a thousand years, the standard collection of classical works in law theory as

organized by Justinian I). Quite suddenly, however, an unexpected sequence of events set his life on a different path.

A great many legends have arisen concerning what happened in the summer of 1505. Of Luther's testimony, we have only fragmentary statements. We know that he had by this time begun to experience anxiety over the state of his soul. We also know that the fragility of human life had recently been brought home to him by the sudden death of a close friend. Shortly after this event he was overtaken by a violent thunderstorm on his way back from a visit to his parents. Apparently, he so feared for his life that he fell to the earth and prayed that if he should be delivered from the storm he would become a monk (a prayer he directed to Saint Anna, the patron saint of miners). When deliverance came, he honored his word and entered the convent of Erfurt.

Martin's friends implored him to change his mind. His father's anger was beyond consolation. In his own estimation, however, these vows were justified not only in view of his fear of death, but especially in view of his fear of the final judgment. These fears would follow him into the monastery, where they were to play a vital role in his rediscovery of the gospel of grace. In the meantime, however, the restlessness of his conscience had been temporarily assuaged by the fact that he had devoted himself to a life of self-denying piety. He was now thoroughly persuaded of the vanity of the world, and also of the importance of saving his immortal soul, which according to the prevailing notions of the time could best be secured in the quiet retreat of the cloister. The only things he took with him were copies of Plautus and Virgil, both of which he would continue to treasure until the day he died.

### *The Augustinian Monk (1505 – 1507)*

The monastery belonged to the order of the Augustinians. Although this order was not instituted until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it had been inspired by St. Augustine, who after his conversion regularly gathered with a small group of like-minded brothers for prayer, study, and works of public service. The order laid particular stress on the task of preaching, and it was also one of the mendicant orders, meaning that its adherents had to live entirely from the collection of alms.

Martin Luther's entrance into the monastery required him to take the holy orders of poverty, chastity, and obedience. As was customary, he was expected to complete a one-year probation period, after which he would be given one last opportunity to change his mind. Upon completing his first year, he renewed his commitment and was given a cowl along with a cell, a table, a bedstead, and a chair.

Luther was by all accounts an exemplary monk. He had sacrificed a life rich in material prospects and devoted himself wholly to the care of his immortal soul. His most important observance was prayer, and for each of the seven cardinal

hours he said twenty-five Paternosters and their accompanying Ave Marias. He also regularly participated in fasting, night watches, and self-mortification. As he soon discovered, however, life in the convent was not free of temptation, and for him at least the strongest were pride, envy, and anger. In hopes of subduing these temptations, he would volunteer for the most menial offices, such as sweeping floors and begging for bread in the streets. He also spent a good deal of time studying, having received his own Latin Bible, and continuing to devote himself to the thought of William of Ockham and his successor Gabriel Biel. At the time, these thinkers were the vanguard of scholastic theology, and they taught that the free will without the aid of grace was able to do good works and love God. About himself, Luther once said: *If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, I would have gotten there.*

In spite of all this, Luther was not able to find rest for his spirit. The more he advanced in the disciplines of external piety, the more he felt the burden of his own interior sinfulness. In this, he became a living proof of the ancient observation that the law was given so that the trespass might increase. It was John von Staupitz, an older monk who presided over the monastery, who he would later say first caused the light of the gospel to shine into the darkness of his sin. He taught that the moral requirements of the law were able to provide a revelation of mankind's disease, but that they were unable to furnish him with a remedy. In precisely this way, however, he argued that they served to educate us to a life of dependence not on our own merits, but on the merits of an intercessor. For Luther, this idea transformed the spiritual climate of his whole life from one characterized by works, uncertainty, and guilt to one characterized by faith, certainty, and joy. Later on, he would find this experience vindicated in the writings of Paul, and he would also attempt to give it clear expression using language taken from the letters of Paul. His characteristic formulation of the doctrine of salvation was that faith alone was sufficient to set one right with God, thereby allowing the believer to be certain of his justification, and also joyful in the knowledge he was free from punishment of sin. As for the life of meritorious works, these flowed out of the certain knowledge that one was already justified, meaning that they did not come from a desire to alleviate the burden of guilt, but came as a free expression of thankfulness for the joy of salvation.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the experience of having been

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<sup>1</sup> **On Justification:** In general, the sharp distinction between justification and sanctification is what distinguishes the soteriology of Protestantism from Romanism. Protestants share the view that the experience of being justified is arrived at by faith alone and is accompanied by the certainty that one is saved and free from the punishment for sin. In Luther's writings, the manner in which he formulates the doctrine of justification is surprising, since it does not draw from the sacrificial model of atonement we find throughout the gospels. Instead, it proposes a purely forensic model of atonement, which he draws from his analysis of the language of Paul. In this model, the merits of the Savior are imputed to the believer in a purely external way, and he is declared righteous in a purely external way, not because he possesses any native righteousness of his own, but because he has been clothed in the alien righteousness of Christ (see *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, 1510). This very formal way of speaking about justification had the advantage of explaining how a sinner could be justified by faith alone through a sort of legal



saved by grace through faith was by no means a new thing in the long history of Christianity. But it had come to be suppressed by theological subtleties and practical corruptions within the medieval church. Never before had any theologian attempted to breathe new life into it on the basis of so sharp a distinction between justification and sanctification. At the time, this theological formula was presented as a rejection of the scholastic thought of Aquinas and a recovery of the patristic thought of Augustine, though more careful study would reveal both of these thinkers to be frustratingly nuanced when it came to justification. In reality, what he had rejected were the far more recent developments in scholastic theology (such as we find in Ockham), and what he had recovered was the far more ancient debate about faith and works (such as we find in the book of James). As we shall see, he would also resolve it in a far more radical way than the early church ever did, going so far as to pit the theology of Paul against the theology of James. Although most of his successors were unwilling to follow him down this road, they still credit him with recovering the fullest form of the gospel experience, one which is characterized by the primacy of faith, the certainty of salvation, and the production of meritorious works, not through a burdened and guilty conscience, but through a free and thankful heart. This remains the spiritual heartbeat of Protestantism and would eventually do away with the traditional ideas of purgatory and penance<sup>2</sup>. For Luther, it was also the idea upon which the whole church stands or falls, a characteristic exaggeration of his due in large part to the negativity of his experiences within the medieval church. Notwithstanding the importance of this

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fiction, and it steered clear of the idea that he needed to participate in the sacrament of communion through its avoidance of the language of sacrifice. Nevertheless, it had the disadvantage of suggesting that the act of faith did not really need to effect an internal change in the believer in order to effect his justification, a suggestion that was compounded by the fact that it made no reference to the atoning power of the blood of Jesus and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. Luther himself seems to have sensed this, and in his later formulations of the doctrine, we find him proposing a more transformational understanding of justification, so that by faith the outward imputation of righteousness is accompanied by the inner impartation of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit: *These are the two parts of justification. The former is the grace revealed through Christ, that through Christ we have a God appeased, so that sin is no longer able to accuse us, but the confidence of conscience in the mercy of God is reduced to certainty. The latter is the bestowal of the Spirit with his gifts, who illuminates against the pollution of the spirit and the flesh* (see *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1531).

<sup>2</sup> **On Purgatory:** The idea of purgatory is nowhere described in Scripture, but it does provide a rational way of dealing with the fact that people die in a state of spiritual incompleteness, whether as a result of things done or vices not uprooted (equally one might mention things left undone and/or virtues not acquired). Here again, Luther's ideas developed over time. Early in his career, he remained thoroughly convinced of the doctrine: *The existence of a purgatory I have never denied. I still hold that it exists, as I have written and admitted many times, though I have found no way of proving it incontrovertibly from Scripture or reason* (from a letter dated to 1519). Within a year, however, he had let the doctrine go, and in his later writings he attacks it with characteristic vigor: *Purgatory is the greatest falsehood because it is based on ungodliness and unbelief; for they deny that faith saves, and they maintain that satisfaction for sins is the cause of salvation. Therefore he who is in purgatory is in hell itself; for these are his thoughts: 'I am a sinner and must render satisfaction for my sins; therefore I shall make a will and shall bequeath a definite amount of money for building churches and for buying prayers and sacrifices for the dead by the monks and priests.' Such people die in a faith in works and have no knowledge of Christ. Indeed, they hate Him. We die in faith in Christ, who died for our sins and rendered satisfaction for us. He is my Bosom, my Paradise, my Comfort, and my Hope* (*Lectures on Genesis*, 1535).

doctrine, the best definition of our religion remains the same as it always has, namely, that of faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ (inclusive of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and the various branches of Protestantism).

*The Priest, Teacher, and Theologian of Wittenberg (1507 – 1517)*

Staupitz was very impressed with the spiritual potential of his understudy. He encouraged him to enter the priesthood, which he did in 1507. On the occasion of presiding over his first mass, Luther says that he was so overwhelmed by the solemnity of offering the sacrifice for the living and the dead that he nearly fainted. His father came to the ceremony, but he was still disappointed with his son, and the two had not yet been reconciled (this would only come when the fame of his son spread after the Reformation).

In 1508, Staupitz called Luther to teach theology at the newly founded University of Wittenberg. At the time, the impoverished town had only about three thousand inhabitants and lay on the boundary of barbarity and civilization. Its citizens were largely uncultured, and the school seemed to have few prospects, save money from the prince who founded it and a ready supply of teachers in a nearby convent of Augustinians. Even to this day, its fame is due chiefly to the influence of Luther, who now began to teach, preach, and study for his Doctor of Divinity.

Luther thereafter passed quickly through the degrees of bachelor, licentiate, and doctor of divinity (all by 1512). After this, he devoted himself exclusively to the study and teaching of theology. His earliest writings from this period consist of sermons, a series of lectures on the Psalms, and a series of lectures on Galatians and Romans. He was not well equipped for this work by the standards of today. Modern textual criticism did not exist, so he had to rely almost exclusively on the text of the Latin Vulgate. When it came to mastering the original languages, he only managed to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of Greek and a still more rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew. As for his hermeneutical approach, he began by following the fourfold method of interpretation handed down from the medieval period, according to which every passage of Scripture was said to have a literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical meaning. As a result, he fell to the practice of using the Scripture for doctrinal and devotional purposes, without giving much attention to questions about its preservation, language, or historical context. Among his studies during this period, he was favorably impressed with the sermons of the mystic Johannes Tauler, but he showed an early distaste for the scholarship of Nicolaus Lyra, the humanism of Erasmus and the philosophy of Aristotle.

In the midst of these studies, he made a very important visit to Rome. The whole trip was taken on foot by moving from convent to convent. It had been arranged in the hopes of making certain reforms within the discipline of the

Augustinian order. Upon his arrival, he spent four weeks in the holy city, and he specifically mentions that it was his personal desire to secure a fuller confession and absolution for his sins. Unfortunately, the state of religion in Rome was very different from what he had expected. Pope Julius II was far more interested in political than religious affairs. Much of his papacy was spent trying to enlarge his secular dominion through diplomacy and war (in fact, he had just returned from the siege of a town). As for the pope's domestic concerns, these were almost entirely absorbed in enthusiasm for the Renaissance. He founded the Vatican Museum and encouraged the arts: Raphael had just completed his famous *Madonna with Child*, Michelangelo was working on the Sistine Chapel and huge amounts of labor were being spent in the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica (a project largely funded through the sale of papal indulgences). Upon his arrival, Luther fell to the earth and declared: *Salve, sancta Roma! Thrice for the blood of the martyrs shed here.* He explored the city's churches, shrines, and catacombs with unquestioning faith in the legendary traditions that had accrued there. He ascended on his knees the 28 steps of the Scala Sancta, securing the indulgence attached to this ascetic performance. Nevertheless, for all his awe of the city, he was struck by its wealth, luxury, and business-like atmosphere. But he was even more distressed by the unbelief, levity, and immorality of the clergy. He received the impression that the holiest city had now become the worst, and was reminded of the city of Jerusalem as described by the prophets. In spite of all this, however, he didn't cease to have faith that the Church of Christ was the church of Rome—not yet.

## The Beginning of the Reformation

Martin Luther was born, baptized, confirmed, educated, and ordained within the Roman church. Furthermore, he had taken a solemn oath of obedience to the pope. He never intended to end his days as a reformer or schismatic.

Nevertheless, the problems in the western church were such that he would soon find himself forced to choose between loyalty to the institution in which he grew up and fidelity to his conscience before God. It wasn't just that the church was bogged down in a large number of corrupt doctrines and practices. The way she wielded her authority, coupled with the political and economic interests she had acquired in the world, made it impossible for her to respond to the call for legitimate reform.

These problems were widely acknowledged by a great many independent thinkers. In fact, in the centuries leading up to it, we find antecedents for nearly every doctrine of the Reformation. At the lay level, movements which betrayed a dissatisfaction with the status quo included those of the Waldensians, the Rhineland mystics, and the Brothers of the Common Life. At the ecclesiastical level, a number of councils were convened in order to place limits on papal power, such as the councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basel. And we also have the appearance of individual reformers, such as Jan Hus in Bohemia, John Wycliffe in England, and John von Goch, John of Wesel, and Wessel of Gansfort in Germany. Perhaps the most influential voice for change was that of the Dutch scholar Erasmus, widely regarded as the greatest humanist scholar of his day, and famed for providing the west with the Greek text of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> The whole of Europe was witnessing widespread efforts toward change, but none of them had been able to awaken the spirit of reform within the Roman church. Indeed, a great many of them were officially condemned and forcibly suppressed.

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<sup>3</sup> **The Greek New Testament:** For over a thousand years, the Scriptures of the western church had been taken from Jerome's Latin Vulgate. While in its day this work was unquestionably one of the finest scholarly achievements the world had yet seen, its habitual usage had led to an uncritical faith in its accuracy and the entrenchment of views arising from its inaccuracies. The publication of the Greek text marked the renewal of western man's search for increasingly better forms of the original. The Erasmian version quickly established itself as the authoritative text, and although his intention in producing it was to provide a more accurate translation into Latin, it subsequently became the basis for the vernacular translations that came out of the Protestant Reformation, most notably those of Luther, Tyndale, and of course King James. Today, the *Textus Receptus* of the sixteenth century has been surpassed by the work of text critical scholars like Tischendorf, Wescott, Hort, Nestle, and Aland.

## The Indulgence Controversy

The rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica was both the glory and the shame of Rome. Although built over the bones of the humble fisherman, it has the reputation of being the grandest and most expensive church in the world. It required tremendous resources to build, and this furnished an occasion for the papacy to exercise its power of granting indulgences in exchange for money (a relatively minor practice that grew up around the doctrine of penance, one of seven sacraments of the medieval church).

The practice of granting indulgences did not originate in the church, but in pagan nations which sometimes provided conditions under which an individual might be exempted from civic punishment (e.g., imprisonment, exile, or death). In the early medieval period, this idea was incorporated into the western church and applied to some of the more severe religious penances that had been carried over from the attempts of the previous age to deal with those who had apostatized under the threat of persecution (e.g., public confession, temporary exclusion from the assembly and temporary withholding of access to communion). This practice, however, did not become truly widespread until the Crusades of the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when plenary indulgence were granted to all who fought as soldiers, and partial indulgences were granted to all who donated money. Since at that time no clear distinction was drawn between the requirements of the institutional church and those of God, the popular perception was that these grants released one from earthly religious obligations and ensured acceptance into heaven. As a result, the soldiery was sometimes emboldened to engage in murder, rape, and robbery, and church leaders were tempted to sell indulgences in order to raise money and labor.

The problems arising from this practice did not go unnoticed. Peter Abelard challenged the idea that the payment of money could ever substitute for interior acts of contrition, and the problems he raised challenged later scholastic theologians to provide a better refinement and justification for the dogma. In its clearest formulations, the doctrine of indulgences required that payment of money be combined with inner contrition, and they further specified that these did not secure the forgiveness of sins but only remitted the punishment of sins already forgiven. In order to justify the doctrine, a theory was developed according to which the institutional church held in its possession a treasury containing the merits of both Christ and the apostles, and that by dispensing merits from out of this treasury it was able to provide satisfaction for the punishments that would have otherwise been due. As scholastic theologians sought to formulate the doctrine in a way that would be acceptable from the point of view of theory, a very different climate of spirituality was forming outside the walls of the academy among those who were directly involved in its practice. In popular thinking, while indulgences might not be able to get one out of hell, they were very handy for ensuring a

speedy transition through purgatory for themselves or their loved ones. This gave rise to the famous saying: *As soon as the gold in the casket rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs*. Luther would later produce a saying of his own: *One thing at least is certain, that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice are increased*.

### *The Ninety-Five Theses (October 1517)*

Martin Luther became embroiled in the problems of this doctrine and its practice when a famous preacher of indulgences began to exert his influence in the lands near Wittenberg in 1516. Johann Tetzel was not only a preacher of indulgences, but a doctor of philosophy, a papal inquisitor, and a member of the Dominican order. It is probably impossible to make a fair assessment of his character as the accounts vary so widely between Protestant and Catholic literature. What is certain is that he was charged among other things with the promotion of indulgences, and that the effect of his methods on the general public was that they confessed, paid money, and received a letter of indulgence which was then wielded as a kind of passport to heaven.

Luther preached a sermon that very year warning against the dangers of indulgences. After a while, however, the gravity of concern he felt over this matter seemed to demand a fuller response. Without consulting anyone else, but solely in response to the voice of his conscience, he decided to call for a public discussion of the doctrine of indulgences. As a guide to this discussion, he posted his 95 Theses, entitled *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral on October 31, 1517. He also sent a copy to the archbishop, who forwarded them to his counsellors at Mainz, and they in turn to the pope in Rome. Unfortunately, no one seemed interested in accepting the invitation to public discussion, but the theses were copied, translated, and mass produced without his consent and with the aid of the newly invented printing press. Within a few weeks, the challenges raised by this document had spread throughout all of Europe.

Although this event is justly regarded as the beginning of Protestantism, a careful reading of the theses reveals its author to be a staunch Catholic. For example, he nowhere lodges a protest against the papacy or such doctrines as purgatory, transubstantiation, and so forth. In fact, he does not even condemn the doctrine of indulgences, but surprisingly condemns those who have the effrontery to speak against them. The purpose of the document was simply to issue a stern warning against the abuse of this doctrine in the church. About the theses, Luther himself says: *I will allow them to stand, that by them it may appear how weak I was, and in what a fluctuating state of mind, when I began this business. I was*

*then a monk, and a papista insanissimus, and so submersed in the dogmas of the Pope that I would have readily murdered any person who denied obedience to the Pope.*

Nevertheless, the attentive reader is also able to see boiling beneath the surface of these theses the aforementioned doctrine of justification by faith, as well as a number of other ideas which, if taken to their logical conclusion, would have the ability to unravel the whole fabric of the papacy. Some of the most important of them are the following: (1) *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of the believer to be one of repentance* (in this statement, he opens up an investigation into the true nature of repentance and forgiveness); (2) *This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy* (in this statement, he draws an important distinction between inner repentance and participation in the outward sacrament of penance); (36) *Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters* (in this statement, he does not condemn letters of indulgence, but he does say they are unnecessary); (41) *Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love* (in this statement, he asserts that indulgences are inferior to works of love); *Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep* (in this statement, he provides both a defense as well as a challenge to the motives of the papacy); (62) *The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God* (in this statement, he supplants the idea of a treasury of merit with the idea that the treasury of the church consists in the gospel); (90) *To repress these very sharp arguments of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving reasons, is to expose the church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies and to make Christians unhappy* (in this statement, he asserts the desirability of reason over the assertion of authority).

### *The Initial Controversy up to the Heidelberg Disputation (April 1518)*

For a great many people, the publication of the theses was so fitting as to seem providential, and even gave birth to a popular legend according to which the night before they were posted the local governor had a dream in which a monk was sent down from heaven and wrote something on a castle door that eventually pierced the head of a lion (presumably Pope Leo X). The theses found a ready audience among patriots, progressive scholars, and the mass of ordinary believers.

Martin Luther thought the theses would unite believers; instead, they caused division. They were condemned by all members of the church hierarchy: clerics,

scholastics, and monastics (even those within his own order). The first public attack came on January of 1518 in Frankfurt, where a set of counter-theses were composed by a scholastic theologian named Wimpina and delivered by the indulgence preacher Tetzel. When printed copies of these were brought to Wittenberg, a crowd of enthusiasts burned them, an ominous indication of the hostilities now being expressed against the institutional church. Although Luther did not participate in the display, he did begin composing an academic defense of his theses entitled *Resolutiones* (in Latin) as well as a sermon for the laity entitled *Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* (in German). In this way, he initiated an ongoing dialogue with the upper and lower classes throughout Europe.

The second public attack was more painful as it came from a now former friend named Johann Eck. This man was one of the most formidable theologians of his day and also served as vice chancellor of the University of Ingoldstadt. At the request of the local bishop, he undertook a review of the theses, after which he singled out eight of them as “Hussite.” It was largely through his observations that the connection was drawn between the thought of Jan Hus and the thought of Martin Luther.<sup>4</sup> Although these observations given to the bishop privately under the title *Obelisci*, copies were leaked into the hands of his opponent who promptly wrote a response entitled *Asterisci*. After the emergence of this unintended literary skirmish, the notion was conceived of a verbal debate in which the public might observe the cut and thrust of their ideas at closer quarters. The projected debate, in fact, would materialize one year later at Leipzig in 1519 and prove a decisive turning point in the Reformation.

In the meantime, however, Martin Luther was more urgent to defend his ideas, not to the general public, but to the members of his own order. Having been invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Augustinians at Heidelberg in April of 1518, he drew up a list of forty propositions which are currently recognized as containing the earliest expression of his whole theology. The Heidelberg Disputation reveals his interest in dislodging the philosophical underpinnings that lay at the basis of scholastic theology. After the Crusades, the influx of foreign learning in philosophy, science, and mathematics had given rise to a new brand of theology conducted at the university which overshadowed the old brand of theology conducted in the cloister. The best exponent of this new brand of theology was undoubtedly Thomas Aquinas, who in his *Summa Theologica* sought

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<sup>4</sup> **Jan Hus** (Prague 1369 - 1415): A theologian, philosopher, scholar whose ideas serve as an important prelude to the Reformation. His followers were called Hussites, and they managed to form a number of churches in Bohemia, which are the ancestor of the modern day Moravian Church. Although he enjoyed protection for a while under the supervision of good king Wenceslaus, he was eventually burned as a heretic for his reformist views on ecclesiology. In the treatise *De Ecclesia* (a copy of which was received by Luther in 1519), he revived the old distinction between true church and mixed church (first made by Augustine), but with an anti-papal spin (following John Wycliffe). The true church was conceived as the totality of the saints, and therefore, belonging to it did not depend not on earthly membership, but rather on the eternal election of God. This was an early version of what would later come to be known as the distinction between the visible and invisible church within Protestantism.



to strike a delicate balance between the faith that had been handed down and the now rapidly advancing life of reason. Although justly regarded as one of the greatest theological works of all time, a great many professional theologians had since become absorbed in a multiplicity of questions only remotely connected with the gospel, all the while the common man was left struggling under the tangible corruptions of the institutional church. Moreover, the truths of theology for Luther came not so much like the unfolding of a flower under the gentle light of the sun, but like a bolt of lightning out of a stormy cloud. He preferred the motions of the heart over the deliverances of the senses, theological paradoxes over rational insights, Platonic spiritualism over Aristotelian materialism, the warm piety of Augustine over the cool rationalism of Aquinas, the jolting leap of the supernatural over the steady incline of the natural. Whether or not we think it desirable to imitate this kind of polarized thinking, there can be little doubt that the imbalances in his personality ideally fitted him for the tasks which lay ahead. And so it was, in the presence of the members of his order, he outlined the fundamental dichotomies around which he would develop the rest of his theology, most notably, the freedom of the will versus the bondage of the will, the law versus the gospel, and the *theologia crucis* versus the *theologia gloriae*.

## Rome Intervenes

The pope's first reaction to the young monk had been one of condescending kindness: *Brother Martin is a man of fine genius, and this outbreak is a mere squabble of envious monks*. From there it turned to tolerant insult: *It is a drunken German who wrote the Theses; when sober he will change his mind*. When it became apparent that the troubles being stirred up were not going to go away, it became necessary to take action.

At first, the pope simply instructed the head of the monastic order to tell their monk to be quiet. When that failed, a special commission was appointed to make an investigation, after which his teachings were officially declared heretical. Finally, he was summoned to appear in Rome within sixty days in order to recant his beliefs. Prince Frederick was also informed of the pope's decision and was instructed to hand the man over, but he refused. Frederick, also known as "the wise," was no revolutionary, but neither did he wish to deprive his university of its best asset. Instead, he decided to meet the pope's demands halfway by arranging a meeting between the legate and Luther at Augsburg.

Martin Luther arrived at Augsburg on October 7, 1518. The prince received him warmly and introduced him to the legate, Cardinal Tommasio de Vio of Gaeta, also known as Cajetan. He was unquestionably the greatest theologian of his day, having authored the first commentary on Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, and was

still to establish himself as the most formidable opponent of both Humanism and the Reformation. For three days, Cajetan met with Luther, gently appealing to him to recant his views and submit to the pope. The latter refused, citing his conscience, the Scriptures and the example of Paul's criticism of Peter (Gal. 2:11). The negotiations went nowhere: Luther was threatened with excommunication, and Cajetan expressed unwillingness to talk any further with what he called that deep-eyed German beast filled with strange speculations. Lest the reformer be taken into custody by force, his friends arranged for him to make an escape during the night-time through a small gate in the city-wall, an event which no doubt fed into speculations that divine providence had found in Luther a second Paul.

*The Leipzig Disputation (June 27 – July 15, 1519)*

When Luther arrived once more at Wittenberg, he wrote about the meeting to the public, the prince, and the pope. In writing to the latter, he anticipated the judgment of excommunication, but appealed for to him to call a general council. In private study he sought to educate himself about the papacy, and he became increasingly persuaded not only that it fell short of its claims to apostolicity, but had in the course of its history become a power opposed to Christ: *I know not whether the pope is Antichrist himself or his apostle, so wretchedly is Christ, that is the truth, corrupted and crucified by him in the Decretals.*

At this point, the pope made one final attempt at negotiations, sending to him a local nobleman named Karl von Miltitz. The terms named by this messenger were very different from those of his predecessor: he repealed the summons to Rome and agreed to adjudicate their differences via the local clergy in Germany; furthermore, he urged the path of reconciliation not in order to avoid the threat of excommunication but in order to preserve the spirit of unity within the church. Luther was so taken by the offer that he agreed to give a public address against divisions in the church, to write a letter requesting pardon from the pope, and to keep silence until the matter was peaceably resolved.

For the moment, it looked as if a breach had been avoided. Unfortunately, before the plan of peaceful resolution could get underway, the wounds that had only recently been closed over were torn wide open again at the Leipzig Disputation. As mentioned, a public debate against the new teaching had been urged by the theologian Johann Eck, and this had been scheduled to take place at the Castle of Pleissenburg from June to July of 1519. The topics under discussion were papal authority, free will, meritorious works, the doctrine of purgatory, and the practice of indulgences. Although Luther had agreed to keep silence, he broke his pledge by participating in the debate, and the very public pronouncements he made therein made it impossible for him to back down afterwards.

The first phase of the disputation was conducted between Johann Eck and Andreas Karlstadt (the chancellor of the university at Wittenberg). Karlstadt was

not up to the challenge, as he relied heavily upon notes and was easily thrown into confusion by arguments that he hadn't specifically prepared for. Luther, however, showed himself more than a match, not only because of his facility in debating, but especially because of his deep knowledge of the Bible. Nevertheless, Eck was an insightful debater, and the force of his arguments pressed him to make public admissions that he would not be able to retract without conceding the victory. In a way, he was not only challenging his opponent's thoughts, but also his resolve: did he believe in his position enough to accept the consequences that would inevitably follow should he openly declare the full range of its implications? For example, when charged with promoting the heresy of Jan Hus, Luther flatly denied it. A little later, however, he was forced to argue that some of Hus' teaching was scriptural, and still later that he believed Hus had been unjustly condemned. This led naturally into a discussion about ecclesiastical authority, and before long the young monk found himself asserting that the right of the fathers, the councils and the pope to influence doctrine could extend no further than the rule of Scripture, and that all of them were fallible. In his concluding remarks, he articulates what would later be referred to as the doctrine of *sola scriptura*: *I prefer, with all deference to the fathers, the authority of the Scripture, which I herewith recommend to the arbiters of our cause*<sup>5</sup>.

### *Luther's Mighty Men*

As usual, various authorities hastened to claim the victory for one side or the other. The professionals claimed victory for Eck, while the laity were emboldened in their following of Luther. In either case, Luther's public affirmation that the Scriptures were the highest rule of authority and his denial of the inerrancy of the papacy had forever cancelled his chances of reconciliation with Rome. From this point forward, he would be involved in a project of re-forming the doctrine and practice of the existing church from the ground up, his sole guide being his conscience and an informed interpretation of Scripture.

Luther was not without friends however. Mention has already been made of Frederick the III, the Elector of Saxony. Although himself a faithful Roman Catholic, he was also the founder of the University of Wittenberg, and through his interest in that university, he became the protector of Martin Luther. He was famed for his care in deliberating and his reticence in speaking, cautious about trusting

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<sup>5</sup> **The Supreme Authority of Scripture** remains a principle held in common by all the reformers. In its earliest formulations, it is encapsulated in the phrase *sola scriptura*, a phrase which sets scripture up as the sole voice of authority within the church. In later formulations, a number of theologians expressed preference for the phrase *prima scriptura*, an indication of their view that scripture was the primary but not the only voice of authority within the church: e.g., the triad of Richard Hooker (scripture, tradition, and reason), and the quadrilateral of John Wesley (scripture, tradition, reason, and experience). In all of its formulations, however, the scripture is held to be inerrant in all that it intends to affirm, not so that it may be used as a tribunal in other fields of knowledge, but so that it may be used as a final court of appeal for the resolution of in-house debates among Christians.

others, but equally cautious about offending them. His refusal to hand Luther over to Rome was his first act in this capacity, but it would not be his last. He is quoted as saying: *If one wants to judge something, then one should know the reason of the matter from the beginning*; and concerning his protection of Luther: *Time, perhaps, will show if I have been a good diviner.*

Luther also found a friend in a remarkable individual named Ulrich von Hutten. A monk, scholar, poet, knight, and courtier of the archbishop, he was dismissed from his post for publishing tracts exposing the corruptions of the church. Among these were numerous pamphlets, a satire on the life of the average monk entitled *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*, and a preface attacking the *Donatio Constantini* (a forged document giving the pope authority over the western half of the Roman Empire). After the disputation at Leipzig, Hutten offered Luther the aid of his pen and sword. Luther accepted the former but declined the latter: *I would not have the gospel defended by violence and murder. By the Word the world was conquered; by the Word the Church was preserved; by the Word she will be restored. Antichrist, as he began without violence, will be crushed without violence—by the Word.*

By far, however, Luther found his greatest ally in a young man named Philip Melanchthon. A voracious polymath, he spent his early years in the study of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, and from there turned to the rapidly advancing field of the humanities. He became a master of the Greek and Latin languages, and was thoroughly acquainted with the classical writings of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Livy, Cicero, and Plutarch. He then directed his remarkable energies toward the study of ecclesiology and the Bible, and was greatly influenced by the forward thinking scholarship of Reuchlin and Erasmus. While still plastic in his views, he was hired as a teacher of Greek at Wittenberg in 1518, and he was also present at the Leipzig Disputation in 1519. From that point forward, however, he became the first real scholar, philosopher, and theologian of the Reformation. Although he continued to teach classes on philology, he drew the greatest number of students to the university for his lectures on theology. But while a supporter of Luther, he was a man of very different temperament—quiet, studious, careful, measured, and peace-loving. Although unfitted for the violence of the religious-political struggles in which his movement was embroiled, he was admirably suited to those needs which would express themselves over the long term, especially that of a reasonable, consistent, and broad-minded theology. Of himself and Melanchthon, Luther would later say: *I am rough, boisterous, stormy, and altogether warlike. I am born to fight against innumerable monsters and devils. I must remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns, and clear the wild forests. But Master Philippus comes along softly and gently, sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts which God has abundantly bestowed upon him.*

## **The Battle against Church and Empire**

After the disputation at Leipzig in 1519, a period began during which the reformer became increasingly involved with his allies at the university, the members of the humanist movement, and the disaffected nobility. This created a broad base of support for the Reformation, but it also transformed it into a movement under whose banner a wide variety of different causes came to march. As a result, this movement would become the fountain head of several other important developments in western history, the most notable of which were the trends toward rationalism and the trend toward democracy.

For Martin Luther, the most notable feature of this new period is found in his attitude to the papacy, to which he became openly hostile. In part this was due to the fact that its defenders had been pressured into making increasingly extravagant claims which were easily shattered by his research into the history of the institution. More importantly, however, he became persuaded that the errors of this institution were opposed to the gospel itself, and therefore, an expression of the spirit of antichrist. Accordingly, his writings from this period attack the papacy beyond all bounds of moderation as the very stronghold of Satan.

Nevertheless, Luther's criticisms were not limited to the papacy. Indeed, he began to subject the whole tradition of the church to re-evaluation, especially the writings of the church fathers and the decisions of the church councils. He found examples of what he regarded as errors in the councils and in the writings of Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. The point, of course, in making these observations was not to reject them out of hand, but rather to re-evaluate them in the light of Scripture. In his writings from this period therefore, we find him advancing new ideas on such hitherto settled subjects as the relation between the church and the state, the sacraments, and ethics. In turn, these critical re-evaluations would establish the theoretical and practical basis for Protestant Christianity.

### **The Battle against the Church**

After the debate at Leipzig, Luther's opponents had everything they needed to secure his condemnation from Rome. A bull of excommunication was duly drawn up, but its publication was delayed out of concerns surrounding the recent death of the Holy Roman Emperor. For the first time, it became apparent that political changes might play a role in the success or failure of the new religious movement.

The death of Maximilian had come at a bad time. The empire was threatened internally by religious division and externally by the advance of the Muslim Turks. The seven electors of the empire had settled on giving the crown to Frederick the Wise, a decision that could easily have offset the balance between the church and state given his positive attitude toward the Reformation. He declined, however, and proposed instead that they give the crown to Charles V, the heir by natural succession and a staunch Roman Catholic. Charles won the election in June and was crowned emperor at Aachen, having taken the traditional oath to protect the Catholic faith, the Roman Church, and its leader the Pope.

After the election of Charles V, the church published the bull *Exsurge Domine*, thereby issuing a formal attack against “the wild boar from the forest.” It called for him to recant forty-one of his sentences, in return for which it promised to receive him back as a prodigal son. Should he fail to repent, however, he and his followers were to be cut off (i.e., excommunicated) and punished as heretics (i.e., burned at the stake). Furthermore, the punishment of interdict was laid on all who would harbor him or his followers, while the promise of reward was extended to those who would hand him over to Rome (the punishment of interdict involved the withholding of certain official rites, usually the sacraments). All Christians were commanded to burn his books and were forbidden to read, print, or publish any of them. Although the terms of the bull were carried out in most parts of the empire, they were shortly to be rejected in the territories throughout Germany. Martin Luther is later quoted as saying: *The die is cast: I despise alike the favor and fury of Rome; I do not wish to be reconciled with her, or ever to hold any communion with her. Let her condemn and burn my books; I, in turn, unless I can find no fire, will condemn and publicly burn the whole pontifical law, that swamp of heresies.*

### *The Three Great Treatises of 1520*

Martin Luther’s resolve was admirable, but that alone would not win the battle. His personal situation had become precarious and there was no institutional machinery at hand to implement the principles that up to now he had only been preaching about. It was out of the increasing desperateness of his situation that he penned three great treatises in July, August, and September of 1520: the *Address to the German Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

Martin Luther’s *Address to the German Nobility* has the flavor of a revolutionary political tract. It is addressed to those men of influence who were sympathetic with the cause of reforming the church, and it urges them to take matters into their own hands by activating the legislative powers of the state. For many, this would have seemed like an intrusion of the secular into the sphere of sacred, but he argued that the priesthood of all believers vests them with the right

to exercise ecclesiastical authority, that the current administration has by its greed and dishonesty forfeited all claim to such authority, and in a breathtaking move proposes twenty-seven articles of legislative action to be taken by the various states. He proposed by rule of law to abolish papal homage, the granting of political power to the church, clerical celibacy, masses for the dead, processions for the saints, mandatory fasts and punishments, professional begging, and of course indulgences. And he proposed by rule of law to promote temperance in matters of dress, drink, and sexuality, the increase of schools and the study of language, mathematics, and history, the right of free thought, the employment of reason over force in combating falsehood, and the retraction of the charge of heresy against the Hussites. Like a match to a powder keg, the treatise ignited the whole of Germany in a common effort against Rome.

At the end of the previous work, Luther declared: *I have another song still to sing concerning Rome*. This came in the form of a second work entitled *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Addressed to the upper classes, it was directed not to matters of practice but to those of theory, having been composed in Latin as well as German. Taking up the historic precedent of the Babylonian Captivity, he argues that an analogous situation faced the church of his own day, only here the threat of open paganism had been replaced by that of a covert paganism hiding behind the sacramental system of the church. In this treatise therefore, he attacks the system of seven sacraments, which only a year before he had defended. In the first place he argues that they are unbiblical, but in the second place he also argues that they induce men to set aside faith for a system of ritualized works. Ultimately, he inclines to the view that there is only one sacrament, namely Christ (based on his reading of I Tim. 3:16). This sacrament, however, is made present to us in three signs: penance, baptism, and communion (thus, he denied sacramental status to the anointing of the sick, marriage, confirmation, and ordination). As far as penance went, he retained it as a kind of return to baptism. As far as baptism went, he also had little to argue: he supported the baptism of infants, and he regarded the rite as having regenerative efficacy as long as it was accompanied by faith. His main points of contention therefore had to do with the Eucharist. He attacked the practice of withholding the cup from the laity (a practice that began in order to better protect it against irreverence), transubstantiation (the idea that the elements were physically transmuted into the body and blood of Christ), as well as the sacrifice of the mass (the idea that the mass constituted a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ).

Martin Luther's third work, *The Freedom of a Christian*, was accompanied by a dedicatory letter to Pope Leo X. In that letter, he expresses respect for the man's person, but denounces his papal office. He also expresses regret that he should be made responsible for all the corruption in the papal court, which was due to factors beyond his control, and therefore, beyond his ability to remedy. Finally,

he dedicates to him his most recent book, in which he abstains from all polemic and seeks only to present in the gentlest possible terms the life of the Christian. And indeed, the book is written in just such a tone: it communicates his vision of religious life as a response to divine grace, and paradoxically one of both freedom and service. The Christian is the lord of all and subject to none by virtue of his faith, but he is also the servant of all and subject to all by virtue of his love. Faith binds him to God (through which he is justified), and love binds him to his fellow man (through which he is sanctified). *Who then can comprehend the riches and glory of the Christian life? It can do all things, has all things, and is in want of nothing; is lord over sin, death, and hell, and at the same time is the obedient and useful servant of all. But alas, it is at this day unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached nor sought after, so that we are quite ignorant about our own name, why we are and are called "Christians." We are certainly called so from Christ, who is not absent, but dwells among us, provided we believe in him; and are reciprocally and mutually one with the Christ of the other, doing to our neighbor as Christ does to us. But now, in the doctrine of men, we are taught only to seek after merits, rewards, and things which are already ours; and we have made of Christ a task-master far more severe than Moses.*

#### *The Public Burning of the "Exsurge Domine" (1520)*

In theory, the pope occupied the highest seat of authority in western Europe. A great deal depended therefore on the actual carrying out of his edicts, for this was a measure of the extent to which his claims to power were recognized by the various states. All throughout the middle ages, the decrees of the church were regarded as binding, but they depended upon the secular arm of the state for their reinforcement.

At the same time, one needs to bear in mind that the belief that a single authoritative church even existed was very much a luxury of the west, which had long since broken fellowship with the eastern churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Syria, and Constantinople. In these places, the western bishop was regarded with a high degree of reverence, but he had never fully succeeded in persuading his elder brothers of his claim to be the head over all Christendom. Such claims had originated as early as the second century with the famous debate over when to celebrate Easter, but they continued all throughout the following centuries until the east and the west mutually excommunicated one another in the Great Schism of 1054.

For these reasons, the Protestant Reformation cannot be regarded as the first or last schism in the history of the Christian faith, though it can certainly be regarded as the most influential. The pope's decree had no purchase in eastern Europe, though it had a considerable effect on western Europe, particularly in Italy, Spain, France, and the Netherlands. Even still, the pope experienced resistance



from patriots, humanists, and theologians, and most especially from the populace in regions throughout Germany. The bull was the last document of its kind to be addressed to an undivided west, and the first document of its kind to be met with widespread rejection. Even the famous patriot, humanist, and theologian Erasmus declared: *The inclemency of the bull ill comports with the moderation of Leo. Papal bulls are weighty, but scholars attach much more weight to books with good arguments drawn from the testimony of divine Scripture, which does not coerce but instructs.*

The bull's journey throughout the empire had the effect of advancing rather than hindering the Reformation, most importantly in Switzerland.<sup>6</sup> It came to the University of Wittenberg on October 3, 1520. At first Martin Luther treated it as a forgery composed by Eck, prompting him to write the tract entitled *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*. The tract's overall tone can be inferred from the following excerpt: *I admit I was wrong when I said that indulgences were the pious defrauding of the faithful. I recant and say, "Indulgences are the most pious frauds and imposters of the most rascally pontiffs, by which they deceive the souls and destroy the goods of the faithful."* After realizing that the bull was indeed official, he would later be prompted to write the tract entitled *Why the Books of the Pope and his Disciples were burned by Dr. Martin Luther*. As the title of this work suggests, he resolved at this point to undertake a very important symbolic act. Since the pope had begun burning his books, he wanted to show that he, too, could burn books (a practice for which he found biblical precedent in Acts 19:19). The public was given notice, and on December 10 at Wittenberg, Luther set fire not only to the bull of excommunication, but also to the papal decretals, the canon law, and the writings of Eck and Emser. The act was accompanied by the words: *As thou has vexed the Holy One of the Lord, may the eternal fire vex thee!* Many hundreds of students stayed around the fire and sang the *Te Deum Laudamus* (a traditional hymn of thanksgiving). The participants then made their way through town in a mock procession, gathering other books as they went, and these too were thrown onto the fire. Luther, however, returned home, by his own testimony more cheerful than ever. He regarded the pope's excommunication of him and his rejection of the pope's authority as a moment of great personal liberation. More importantly, however, it was a moment of liberation for believers everywhere for whom this institution, though having begun as a servant of the gospel, had become

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<sup>6</sup> **The Swiss Reformation**, which grew up alongside the German Reformation, began after the publication of the bull at Zurich in 1520. While the German Reformation is associated with the name of Luther, the Swiss Reformation is associated with the names of Zwingli, Calvin, and Bullinger. Hitherto, Ulrich Zwingli's pastoral leadership had been influenced by the humanist tradition of Erasmus, but after the publication of the bull he formally broke ties with Rome. Although the break did not precipitate any immediate conflict, the changes that he began to undertake would draw public attention in the years to come, and would also result in the production of a theological tradition more rationalistic and more hostile to tradition than that of Luther.

an agent of tyranny. The point was not that every individual pope was wicked, or that the papal office itself was fundamentally misguided, but rather that the entitlements which had grown up around this office and the abuses that had come in the wake of those entitlements had transformed it into a monster. There is nothing to prevent a charitable assessment of the papacy from the periods both before and after the Reformation. But neither is there any compelling reason to reinvest it with the same powers that made it vulnerable to corruption in the first place. For Protestants, no earthly institution could ever be identified with the Kingdom of God, and even Catholics are increasingly inclined to speak of the primacy of the invisible church over the visible church. As much as we may deplore the loss of the visible unity of the western church, it is at least arguable that this fragmentation prepared the way for a higher invisible unity based on freedom of conscience and mutual participation in the gift of the Holy Spirit. In that sense, it can be said that we have made it possible to take a more spiritual view of the church, one where there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

### **The Battle against the Empire**

Leo X had proclaimed the terms of the bull, and he now called upon the new emperor to prove his zeal for the church by enforcing it. Charles V realized that the future of church and state relations rested in his hands, but he also realized that his decision would affect the relations among the various states that made up his empire. In order to resolve the matter, he called for representatives of the imperial states to assemble at the city of Worms on January 28, 1521.

The first matter of business was to propose an edict requiring that the terms of the papal bull be legally enforced all throughout Germany. The proposal was rejected, however, partly because of past resentments against the church and partly because of the future prospects of creating a free Germany. In the meantime, Martin Luther was being hailed as a second Paul: pictures of him with a halo of light over his head were circulating throughout the city. Aleander, the papal envoy, complained: *For nine-tenths of the Germans the name of Luther is a war-cry, and the last tenth screams, "Death to the court of Rome!"*

Charles realized that he could not simply enforce the demands of the bull without creating political upheaval. Luther was therefore summoned to give an account of his views before the diet so that it could make its own independent assessment of him. He was also guaranteed safe conduct to and from the diet through the protection of Elector Frederick (a provision that was quite necessary given the treatment of Jan Hus at Constance in 1415). From the first, Luther saw in the imperial summons the hand of providence. Like Paul on his fateful journey

toward Jerusalem, he was determined to go to Worms: *You may expect everything from me, except fear or recantation. I shall not flee, still less recant.*

*The Testimony before the Diet of Worms (1521)*

Martin Luther left for Worms in early April. Melanchthon was unable to go along, but he was charged with upholding the cause of the gospel should his partner fail to return. Those who did go along included members of the order, university faculty, and some of his students. All along the way, their journey was dogged by crowds of enthusiasts and threats of impending doom. He encouraged them to be brave: *Though Hus was burned, the truth was not burned, and Christ still lives.*

After a two-week journey, Luther arrived at Worms. On the following day, he was led to the hall of the diet. Those in attendance included the emperor, six electors, papal legates, archbishops, bishops, dukes, margraves, princes, counts, deputies, ambassadors, and other officials of every rank (spectators numbered in the thousands). Having been brought before the assembly, he was interrogated by his old enemy Johann Eck. About twenty-five books were placed before him, and he was asked two questions: first, he was asked if the books were his; and second, he was asked if he would retract them. He openly acknowledged that the books were his, but he requested a day to deliberate before answering the second question.

On the following day, Luther was queried again: *Wilt thou defend all the books which thou dost acknowledge to be thine, or recant some part?* In Luther's initial response, he sought to give a more nuanced defense of his books by dividing them into different classes: those proclaiming the gospel, those describing the abuses of the papacy, and those written against his opponents. Although he confessed to having used more violent language than was proper, he said that he could not retract his words without giving aid to the enemies of the gospel, and that he would only do so if what he said could be shown to be contrary to Scripture. He also issued a warning to the emperor, not to repeat the errors of Pharaoh, or Nebuchadnezzar, or the kings of Israel. After completing this speech in German, he was asked to reproduce it in Latin (which he did).

Martin Luther's first speech was rather long. After it was over, the princes held a short consultation. Then, Johann Eck interrogated him again, claiming that he was being evasive and asking him to give a short and direct and non-combative answer. Luther complied and said that he would give an answer with neither horns nor teeth. The words which followed are justly famous: *Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the pope nor the councils alone, it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I cannot and will not recant*

*anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience.* Luther then closed in German with these famous words: “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

### *The Imperial Ban Falls on Luther (1521)*

Martin Luther’s refusal to bow before the authority of either the pope or the emperor marks an important milestone in western history. It asserts the dignity of the human individual over all civic or ecclesiastical institutions, and it grounds this assertion on the supreme authority of God. While many men and women today have inherited a profound sense of their own dignity as individuals, they have forgotten the source from whence this dignity comes. Paradoxically, the realization that the rights of the human individual could only be preserved within a religious worldview became most apparent at a time when western man’s hostility to the church was at its zenith, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment. In the founding documents of America, for example, the quality of inalienability that attaches itself to human rights arises precisely from the fact that they do not come from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

Charles had initially found it difficult to get the states to enforce the papal edict. Now, however, Luther had set himself in opposition to the highest seat of imperial authority. Unless the emperor was prepared to renegotiate the whole medieval system of church and state, he had little choice but to place the monk under the ban of the empire. Since the ban deprived the one under it of all rights, it would have been tempting to go back on his agreement to provide safe conduct to and from the diet. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Charles was counselled to immediately arrest Luther and deliver him over to Leo X. It is to the emperor’s credit, however, that he chose to uphold the unwritten moral law of his conscience over the written civic laws of the state. The agreement was honored and the ban was set to go into effect after a twenty-one day grace period.

The imperial ban was harsh by any standard. It declared Luther legally dead, and deprived him of all rights and possessions. It gave legal force to the pope’s decree throughout the empire, which called for the arrest of Luther, the burning of his books, and the proscription of their printing, publication, and sale. In addition, it forbade anyone from providing him or his followers with assistance, lodging, or food. The authorities were instructed to seize him wherever found and deliver him to the emperor so that he might be burned at the stake. Laypersons were permitted to rob, injure, or kill him without consequences of any kind. Luther was dubbed a devil in the disguise of a monk, and his work was said to consist in taking old heresies and new and gathering them into one pool.

Although the church had the support of the empire, the ban remained very difficult to enforce. The empire was not one state, but a loose confederation of seven states, a greater number of principalities, and an even greater number of cities, towns, and hamlets. Although everyone recognized the need for unity, they harbored an even greater love for their independence. It wasn't difficult to disobey an imperial edict, and attempts to enforce obedience through military action carried with them the risk of civil war. Although Charles was deeply committed to the church, his commitment did not extend so far as to risk civil war, and so the religious questions of the day were left to the discretion of the individual states. As we shall see, this policy only managed to stave off the day of civil war, for the empire immediately began to fragment along religious lines, some rulers harboring Protestantism and other rulers maintaining Catholicism. Moreover, the hostility between these two camps was fueled by a virtual explosion of polemical literature that came pouring forth from the newly invented printing press. Books, pamphlets, and leaflets all created a unity of public opinion among the populace, especially those located throughout Germany. Luther, for his own part, proved a powerful rabble rouser, having a good command of the vernacular, as well as the gifts of humor, learning, and practical insight. The climate of free thought he created paved the way for the tremendous literary productivity we associate with names like Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Leibniz, Kant, Hamann, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Herbart, Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.

## The Establishing of the Protestant Church

In a letter to a friend, Luther summarized the proceedings of the diet as follows: *Have you written these books? Yes. Will you recant? No. Then get thee hence! O we blind Germans, how childish we are to allow ourselves to be so miserably fooled by the Romanists!*

On the journey back to Wittenberg, he visited various homes, convents, and churches. He preached along the way, even though he had been instructed to remain silent, citing the apostle's dictum "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). On May 4 1521, a company of armed horsemen stopped his carriage and whisked him away into the woods. Rumor had it that he had been killed. In actual fact, he was being secretly detained at Wartburg Castle. The measure had been arranged not only to provide for his safety, but also to release the local government from the charge of being disobedient to the emperor. The kidnapper was none other than Frederick the Wise.

Martin Luther's disappearance made sure there was no chance of enforcing the imperial ban. Meanwhile, Charles V turned his attention to other matters: insurrection in Spain, war with France, the encroachment of the Turks, and the conquests of Cortez in Mexico. Back at Wittenberg, Andreas Karlstadt had taken charge of the practical affairs of the church, and Philip Melanchthon had just finished producing the first systematic account of the new theology in a work entitled *Loci Communes*. Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* grew out of his lectures on the book of Romans, the text of which subsequently acquired a reputation as the fundamental basis of Protestantism. It does not treat of all areas of theology, but only that wherein it departs from the traditional canons of western orthodoxy, namely in the area of soteriology. It stands as the first carefully formulated statement of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith within the Protestant Reformation<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> **Melanchthon's Theology:** Philip Melanchthon's book underwent numerous revisions. In each of these revisions, we witness the emergence of new stages in his theological development, resulting not only from his continued reading of Scripture, but also from his continued attention to philosophy, patristics, and scholastic theology. In the first edition, the young author shows himself still very much under the influence of the more radical views of his master, such as the denial of free will, the predestination of the elect, and the sufficiency of faith without works. In subsequent editions, however, he began to make significant changes to the work, giving more space to free will, allowing for human and divine cooperation in justification, and placing greater emphasis on good works as evidence of saving faith. As a result, there began to develop two very different streams of soteriology within Protestantism, one which we find in the writings of Luther and Calvin (the Augustinian tradition) and the other which we find in the writings of Melanchthon and Arminius (the semi-Augustinian tradition). In spite of all these differences, however, Calvin and Melanchthon remained on good terms. Calvin even wrote a preface to the *Loci* in which he praised it for providing a summary of all things necessary for the believer to know, and even though it conceded to man a small share in his salvation, it did so in such a manner that the divine grace was not in any way diminished.

## Martin Luther's Odyssey (1521 – 1522)

The *Odyssey* is a story about a man whose journey back home was attended with strange adventures all the while his domestic affairs fell into disarray so that upon his arrival he was required to put his house back in order. This ancient storyline provides a useful model for understanding what happened during Luther's stay at Wartburg Castle. It was a time when he went on an inner journey through many trials and temptations, and it was a time during which things were becoming increasingly chaotic back at home, eventually requiring him to return to Wittenberg.

Martin Luther remained almost a year in hiding at what he affectionately called his Patmos from May of 1521 to March of 1522. During that time he was known as "George", growing out his beard, appearing in the dress of a knight, and imitating all the manners of courtly life. While alone in his room, however, he continued to maintain an active life of prayer, study, and writing.

The atmosphere was both exciting and deeply trying. Now away from the external noise of attacks, he began to suffer from the internal whisper of doubt. In the absence of his accustomed monastic disciplines, he began to experience powerful temptations to sensuality, anger, and depression. Especially at nighttime, he was pursued by insomnia, nightmares, and apparitions of the devil. He heard noises, saw shapes, and on one occasion was encountered by a large black dog lying on his bed which he threw out the window. In a letter to Melanchthon, he gives expression to the vexed condition of his mind: *You elevate me too high, and fall into the serious error of giving me too much credit, as if I were absorbed in God's cause. This high opinion of yours confounds and racks me, when I see myself insensible, hardened, sunk in idleness, seldom in prayer, and not venting one groan over God's Church... Here, a week has passed away since I put pen to paper, since I have prayed or studied, either vexed by fleshly cares, or by other temptations... My unsubdued flesh burns me with devouring fire. In short, I who ought to be eaten up with the Spirit am devoured by the flesh... You must take my place; you, richer in God's gifts, and more acceptable in his sight.*

### *At Wartburg Castle (1521)*

Whatever Luther's own estimate of his ability, all the evidence suggests he remained quite industrious throughout his time at the castle. In the spring, he spent much of his time writing letters, sermons, and working on his commentary on the Psalms. His most important work during this period was *On Confession: Whether the Pope has the Power to Require It*. Here, he rejects the idea of mandatory

confession, but he still retains the idea of a sacrament of penance (a practice that can still be found among more conservative Lutherans).<sup>8</sup>

In the summer, Luther penned a number of other important works. One of these resumed his previous campaign against indulgences. Another of these was his commentary on the Magnificat, an interesting work not only in view of the high esteem it gives to the Virgin Mary, but also in view of its belief in her Immaculate Conception and also in her Perpetual Virginity.<sup>9</sup> The most important, however, was his *On the Abrogation of the Private Mass*, in which he attacks the most prevalent ideas about the mass. In the Roman system, the belief in transubstantiation led naturally to the idea that the mass actually repeated the sacrifice of Christ, and this in turn to the idea that it was meaningful for the clergy to celebrate the mass with or without congregational participation. Here, Luther resumes his previous attack on the doctrine of transubstantiation, but extends the implications of his critique so as to challenge the practice of holding private masses among the clergy.<sup>10</sup>

In November, Luther also wrote an important work entitled *Opinion on Monastic Orders*. Here, he argued that monks and nuns were free to break their vows without sinning, since the taking of holy orders was nothing more than a misguided attempt to gain salvation through works and therefore was not legitimately binding. He further argued that the virtue of chastity was a special grace conferred upon only a few, that sexual desire was an irrepressible instinct for most human beings, and that the requirement of celibacy created an impossible situation which only served to impugn the dignity of the priesthood. The work proved very influential, and a great many individuals left their convents, some in pursuit of marriage and others in pursuit of licentious living. The latter scenario

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<sup>8</sup> **On the Sacrament of Penance** (i.e., confession): Martin Luther rejected the medieval system of seven sacraments, retaining only baptism, communion, and penance. Although the retention of penance may come as a surprise to modern evangelicals, he understood it as an extension of the rite of baptism, so that by repeated acts of confession one might continually renew one's initial acceptance of repentance and forgiveness. Like the other sacraments, he understood penance, not as a work that needed to be done in order to be saved, but as an occasion to renew faith in the promise that the work needed for salvation was being accomplished on one's behalf by God. As such, the rite of penance could never be mandated by an ecclesiastical hierarchy since the clergy were not vested with the power to dispense forgiveness, but only with the dignity of proclaiming it. In general, it included two forms: general confession done in public (audibly before communion); and individual confession done in private (either informally or by means of a confessional booth).

<sup>9</sup> **On Mariology**: Martin Luther remained very much a child of the Middle Ages in respect of his attitude toward Mary, the only caveats being that she should not be prayed to as a mediatrix, nor should the veneration of her be allowed to diminish the importance of Jesus Christ. He refers to her as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), asserts that she remained a lifelong virgin (her Perpetual Virginity), and asserts that she was born without sin (the Immaculate Conception [though here there is evidence that he wavered, asserting different views at different times]).

<sup>10</sup> **On the Mass**: The sacrificial imagery of the mass had been recognized as far back as the age of the apostles. As to the question of whether the elements of sacrificial imagery should be interpreted literally or figuratively, we find a wide range of views among the church fathers. Everyone agreed about the reality of the divine presence, but they did not necessarily agree about the precise mode of that presence, whether it was to be conceived of materially or spiritually. The former view ultimately prevailed in both the eastern and western churches, though the more spiritual interpretation was also upheld by such authorities as Augustine, Ratramnus, and Berengar. The matter came under fresh dispute in the 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (the victory of the purely spiritual view remaining one of the most distinctive features of Protestantism).



occurred quite frequently, and this furnished the enemies of the new movement with powerful arguments drawn from some of the ill effects it was having. Even Luther's old friend, John von Staupitz, complained that the most vocal advocates of his old student had become the frequenters of certain "houses".<sup>11</sup>

By far, however, Luther's greatest achievement during this period was his translation of the New Testament into the German language (drawn from the *textus receptus* of Erasmus). Although previous translations had been available in print, they were written in a high stiff dialect and had drawn censure from ecclesiastical authorities who thought the barbarian language unfit for divine revelation and the layman unfit to understand it. Luther's translation transformed the Bible into a book for the people. Now anyone could read it and interpret it for themselves. To this project he brought his knowledge of the original languages, his mastery over the vernacular of his own language, and his experiential insight into the heart of biblical religion. Because of his fame, the new version immediately commanded widespread attention and the other versions quickly went out of print. It is both a profound scholarly achievement as well as a deeply personal expression, investing the language of Scripture with the contours of his own theological experience. Perhaps the most notorious example of this is his insertion of the word *alone* into Romans 3:28. In so doing, he brought Paul into direct verbal confrontation with the contents of James 2:24. Martin Luther's New Testament is therefore both anti-Roman and Protestant. In the preface, he distinguishes between which books are more and less important, changes the order of the books, and casts an unfavorable judgment on the canonicity of Hebrews, James, and Revelation. In particular, the marginal notes containing his theological comments draw sharp a distinction between faith and works, expound on the meaning of justification by faith alone, and identifying the papacy with the Beast.

### *The Radical Reformers (1521 – 1522)*

While Martin Luther remained in hiding, a revolutionary form of his teaching began to spread throughout the region. It began with the appointment of Thomas Muntzer as pastor of the town of Zwickau in the summer of 1520. Although his initial teaching was like that of the other reformers, he also began to posture himself as the recipient of divine revelations, through which he promoted believers' baptism, rejected all forms of institutional authority, and predicted the near approach of a democratic millennium. In the course of time, it became increasingly apparent that he was making a revolutionary attempt to realize the

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<sup>11</sup> **On Clerical Celibacy:** Almost all of the earliest Christians leaders were married men. Peter, for example, was married (Matt. 8:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:5). Nevertheless, there are passages which suggest the possibility that he may have revoked marriage at a later time (Luke 18:28-30). Furthermore, Jesus appears to place a high value on celibacy (Matthew 19:12) as does the apostle Paul (I Cor. 7:32-33). Celibacy was therefore held in high repute throughout the life of the early church, though marriage appears to have remained the norm (I Tim. 3:2-4). The first legal requirement of celibacy does not appear until the councils of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., the Council of Elvira).

kingdom of heaven on earth by transforming it into a kind of communistic theocracy.

Although Thomas Muntzer gained a sizeable following, he and the so-called Zwickau Prophets found themselves driven from place to place, so that they eventually had to seek refuge at Wittenberg in December of 1521. Here, they found a kindred spirit in Andreas Karlstadt, who had already embarked on a series of radical reforms, the aim being to restore what were thought to be the primitive conditions of the apostolic church. The leadership increasingly grounded their teaching on direct revelations from the Holy Spirit, required that all their members be married, and denounced all use of clerical titles, dress, and mannerisms. The laity were discouraged from making any attempt to pursue secular or religious learning, and young men and women were urged to devote themselves wholly to agriculture and child rearing. Private property was forbidden, the secular government held in contempt, and total authority given to the rule of Jesus Christ (as understood by the leadership). As for church life, the baptism of infants was forbidden, the confessional was abolished, communion administered in both kinds, and pictures, icons, and statuary along with vigils, fasts, and holy days declared idolatrous.

The magistrate was fearful that the new teaching might lead to a violent confrontation between the people and the government. The people were overwhelmed by the new claims to Spirit-led authority which demonized all who resisted them as “unspiritual.” Melancthon wrote Luther regularly about all that was going on, eventually persuading him to come back home. Luther arrived at Wittenberg in early March. Ascending his old pulpit, he reappeared before the congregation and delivered the first of what would be eight of his greatest sermons. The tone was unlike anything he had written before or since, combining the authority of the preacher with the gentleness and charitableness of the pastor. Although he sought to refute the teaching of the radicals, he declined to mention any of them by name and refrained from his usual tactic of burying them under a heap of abuse. The main point of his message was that evangelical freedom should always be used in the service of love. Although practices that went against Scripture should be abolished (e.g., public confessions, mandatory celibacy, and private masses), there remained a large number of issues that the believer should be free to decide for themselves (e.g., private confession, marriage, and such things as fasts, images, and festivals). Moreover, all such decisions should be made in a manner respecting the rights of the individual conscience and the structures of civil authority (which he reminded his audience was instituted by God).

Martin Luther’s sermons won the day. Andreas Karlstadt stepped down from his position of leadership, but he harbored a long-standing bitterness that would re-emerge in the years to come. As for the Zwickau Prophets, it was insisted that they receive their calling through the normal processes of ordination,

or if they believed their calling of a higher order, to demonstrate the fact through miracles. No miracles were forthcoming, and the prophets departed in wrath, calling down curses on the opponents of true spiritual religion. In the meantime, most of the old practices were temporarily re-instituted, save that the liturgy declaring the mass a repeated sacrifice was excised and the communion was offered in both kinds. Adherence to social order was also re-instituted.

### **The Magisterial Reformation (1522 – 1524)**

Martin Luther had taken a great risk. Now that he was out of hiding, his enemies could resume their efforts to enforce the imperial ban. To their great frustration, however, circumstances connived once more to put him out of their reach—Pope Leo X died.

When Adrian VI took the reins of ecclesiastical power, a very different spirit began to sweep through the papal court. A man of rigorous piety, he discharged his office in the fashion of a simple monk, walking about barefoot, eating simply, and sleeping on a couch. Although strongly opposed to the Reformation, he openly denied papal infallibility, frankly confessed the corruptions of the church, and called upon its members to undertake radical moral and spiritual changes. Hoping this change of tone would embolden leaders to enforce the ban, he called for a general meeting of the most influential statesmen at the Diet of Nuremberg. By now, however, the governors no longer hoped for the rehabilitation of Rome, and everyone was afraid of an uprising should anything happen to Luther.

Martin Luther's return home and his apparent immunity from political or ecclesiastical censure marked a new phase in his career. Whereas before he faced the easier task of uprooting corruption, now he faced the more difficult task of planting something better in its place. The whole medieval way of life was beginning to dissolve, and the ensuing power vacuum was in danger of being filled by revolutionaries, utopians, and anarchists. Those members of his congregation who had followed him up to this point were looking for him to lead the way forward, and he was now being asked to pronounce upon virtually every conceivable subject of human life. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the task which lay before him, for he was now engaged in the task of reforming the whole fabric of western culture, from its personal life to its political life to its religious life. As we shall see, he sought to steer a middle course between the extremes of the traditionalists and the radicals, preserving as much as he possibly could of the existing structures of the church and the state. This policy of political and ecclesiastical conservatism has come to be known as the "Magisterial Reformation."

### *The Order of Natural Life*

As always, Luther continued to improve his knowledge of Scripture, writing prefaces, translations, and commentaries. Now, however, the urgent task of reorganizing affairs back home required that he apply the principles of Scripture to the problems of life. Broadly speaking, his writings from this period may be divided into three types: those dealing with natural life, those dealing with the state, and those dealing with the church. As we shall see, his thoughts in these areas led him to divide all of life up into three corresponding spheres of divinely mandated activity.

Martin Luther's thoughts about natural life deal with such subjects as labor, marriage, and children (though always from the perspective of the believer). In *On the Spiritual State of Popes and Bishops so-called* (1522), he attacks the medieval division of labor into sacred and secular, condemning the vices of the clerical class and extolling the virtues of the working class. In *The Christian Assembly* (1523), he argues for the existence of a priesthood of believers, asserting that the possession of faith is able to transform any kind of labor into a sacred office, and therefore, that the community of faith constitutes a sacred assembly. All believers were to be counted among the saints, and this had the effect not only of raising the dignity of common labor, but also of authorizing the laity to perform certain functions ordinarily reserved for the priesthood. They could read the Scriptures for themselves, appoint clergy from among their own members, and participate in the sacraments of penance, baptism, and communion. As we shall see, this did not entail that certain individuals were not be better suited to these tasks than others, but it did mean that the dignity of performing them was open to all.

In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522), he takes up medieval ideas about matrimony. Since believers were already regarded as priests, the freedom to marry should be open to laity and clergy alike. Although some are gifted with the virtue of celibacy, most are not and have more to gain than to lose by entering into this holy estate. Marriage is a divine gift for the enjoyment of companionship, the creation of family, and training in the school of love. It also serves as a safeguard against moral weakness, since attempts to repress the sexual instinct lead inevitably to masturbation, fornication, and homosexuality. When Luther writes about sexual desire, his earlier writings fail to draw any distinction between legitimate desire and inordinate lust, though his later writings are inclined to speak of sexual intimacy less and less as a necessary evil and more and more as a positive benefit (significantly, these writings appear after he himself had been married for some time). As for divorce, he rejected the view that all forms of divorce were morally impermissible, allowing for divorce on grounds of (1) failure to fulfill conjugal obligations, (2) failure to produce offspring, or (3) sexual infidelity.

In *On Schools* (1524), he argues that abandoned convents should be converted into schools for boys and girls. Although the reigning wisdom of the day was that parents should homeschool, most were ill equipped having not been educated themselves. Moreover, the glory of a town did not consist in the accumulation of wealth but in the training of a refined, educated, and moral citizenry. This new emphasis on education had a tremendous impact on the movement. Although there were many schools in the Middle Ages, they were reserved for the privileged few, the common people being ignorant, superstitious, and illiterate. It was the advent of the printing press that made mass education possible, but it was the freedom that came with being able to think for oneself that made mass education desirable. This meant not only being able to reason for oneself, but also being able to read the Scriptures for oneself, thereby setting one free from the authoritarianism of the medieval church. Even today, Protestant nations are far ahead of Roman Catholic nations when it comes to the advancement of popular education (a simple case in point would be the difference in the state of education we observe between North and South America).

#### *The Orders of the State and the Church*

The next order is that of covenant life. This in turn is divided into the life of the state (i.e., God's covenant relationship with all humanity) and the life of the church (i.e., God's covenant relationship with his special people). For Luther, it was important to insist upon the traditional idea that both of these orders were divinely sanctioned, thereby opposing the views of the radical reformers who rejected the legitimacy of secular authority and who promoted the attainability of a purely religious utopia.

All throughout history, a sharp distinction had been recognized between the church and the state. For most of antiquity, the state was hostile to the church, declaring its faith and practice a *religio illicita* (i.e., during the time of the Roman Empire). In the Middle Ages, however, the church became the savior of the state, protecting civilization from barbarism (i.e., after the fall of the Roman Empire). Although the union of church and state often involved the two in a struggle for power, it also involved them in a cooperative effort to help one another out. The former devoted itself to man's eternal welfare, but could still count on the state to give external force to its requirements through legal action. The latter devoted itself to man's temporal welfare, but could still count on the church to shape the internal moral character of its citizens.

Martin Luther's earliest exposition on the relation between the church and the state is found in a little work entitled *On Temporal Authority* (Wittenberg, December of 1523). He was the first to argue for a separation of church and state, a system in which the sword of the state and the word of the church pursued their respective goals alongside one another, but did not attempt to either help or hinder

each other in their respective affairs. His idea was taken up by Puritans like John Milton, philosophers like John Locke, and political theorists like Montesquieu. James Madison, the father of the American Constitution, would later praise ...*the excellence of our system, to which the genius and courage of Luther led the way, that by a due distinction between what is due God and what is due Caesar best promotes the discharge of both obligations.*<sup>12</sup>

Martin Luther's reforms in the life of the church provide a delicate balance between Scripture and tradition. In his view, the church is bound to remove all practices that are contrary to Scripture, but it is free to retain those practices that are not contrary to Scripture. For these reasons, he preserved far more of the practices handed down from the Middle Ages than his successors (the more radical approach of removing any practice not specifically called for in Scripture was a hallmark of the Swiss rather than the German Reformation). He retained the term "mass", using it to refer to the whole public service. He also retained certain ritual acts, such as kneeling, using the sign of the cross and elevating of the communion elements, as well as the traditional order of the service: e.g., readings, short prayers, the Apostles' Creed, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the *Benedictus*, and so forth. Nevertheless, a change of incalculable consequence was the use of the vernacular instead of Latin (though for certain traditional hymns he still retained the Latin). As for the arrangement of space and time, he was not opposed to using robes, candles, or images, and though he maintained that for the righteous all times are sacred, he also maintained that set times are desirable, both to help the spiritual weakness of the individual and to encourage the solidarity of the community (the belief that man was still bound to a literal observation of the fourth commandment does not appear until the time of the Puritans). There were three services on Sunday: an early service for servants, a late service for freemen, and an afternoon service which focused on the study of the Bible. The annual festivals were largely reduced to Christmas, Lent, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity (but he also kept the festival of the Virgin Mary, the festival of the Apostles and Evangelists, and All Saints Day). The chief part of the service was given to the sermon, and this was to consist primarily in the exposition and application of the Scripture. As for the sacraments, infant baptism

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<sup>12</sup> **The Doctrine of Two Governments** is the name given to the theory of government presented in this work. Although both the systems of government which it treats of are said to be divinely instituted, the earthly system of government is designed to check evil by force of law (drawing its authority from the deity's general revelation to mankind through reason) while the heavenly system of government is designed to promote good works through the inspiration of grace (drawing its authority from the deity's special revelation to mankind through the faith in the gospel). Contra the radicals, the earthly system of government needs to be preserved in order to keep fallen man in check, and also to preserve an atmosphere in which the gospel can flourish. Contra the traditionalists, the heavenly system of government needs to refrain from meddling in temporal affairs, lest it endanger itself through the abuses of power and luxury, and lest it endanger others by violating the natural rights of reason and conscience. As for the question of whether an individual might be permitted to serve in both spheres, as for example a believer serving in the army, Luther answers in the affirmative (see *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved*, 1526).

continued to be practiced, but children were subsequently required to study the catechism, undergo confirmation, and only then participate in communion. The sacrament of communion was taken once a week, revered as being attended by the real presence of the deity, and prepared for either by the general confession of the congregation (mandatory) or by the private confession of individuals (voluntary). As for church music, the first hymns of the Reformation were inspired by the deaths of its first martyrs, Henry Voes and John Esch (burned at the stake for their public profession of Lutheranism in Brussels of 1523). Martin Luther responded by writing a piece entitled *A New Song We Raise*, but which subsequently became known as *Flung to the Heedless Winds*. In all he would write thirty-seven hymns, some of them versified Psalms, others adapted from existing Latin hymns, others spiritualized German folk songs, and still others created out of his own head. His music is characterized by a focus on message over mood, and he is justly famous for his paraphrase of Psalm 46, best known by the title *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* (written sometime between 1527 and 1529).

## The Trials of Protestantism

Martin Luther's life could never be described as peaceful. Nevertheless, it is evident that the first seven years of his reforming activity met with a success far beyond what anyone could have dreamed. From 1524 to 1525, however, dark clouds began to gather over the dawn of the Reformation.

As yet, no political leader had officially endorsed the doctrines of Protestantism. Although Luther had managed to escape the wrath of the church and the empire, it would be impossible for the movement to survive without some kind of ecclesiastical or political support. It had already seen its first martyrs, and it was to be expected that new measures of forcible suppression would follow. Most ominous of all, an ecclesio-political league had just been formed between the bishops of Germany and the dukes of Austria and Bavaria for the protection of Romanism (Ratisbon, July 6, 1524).

As if these challenges were not enough, the movement was also beset by divisions from within. The revolutionary tendency had not simply vanished, but was spreading its vision of a communistic utopia everywhere it went. Moreover, the ideas of the radical reformation were not limited to the German Reformation, but had begun to make themselves felt in the Swiss Reformation.<sup>13</sup> Although the magisterial reformers were united in their opposition to these groups, significant tensions were now beginning to develop between Luther and Zwingli. Luther was an impassioned traditionalist, determined to retain what he regarded as the legitimate core of mystical piety handed down from the Middle Ages. Zwingli was a cool-headed progressive, determined to throw off what he regarded as a yoke of superstitious ritual and lead the church into the modern world. The Reformation was beginning to splinter off into a multiplicity of sects, each with its own distinctive understanding of the Scriptures.

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<sup>13</sup> **The Radical Reformation in Switzerland:** As we shall see, there was no future for the kind of radicalism that emerged in Germany. There was, however, a very big future for the kind of radicalism that emerged in Switzerland. This movement, which is still with us today, began in Zurich in 1523. Although they referred to themselves as the "brethren", their enemies called them "Anabaptists," and they are the direct ancestors of the Amish, the Hutterites, and the Mennonites. The primary aim of the movement was to create a pure church that would separate itself not only from the power of the papacy but also from the power of the state. In order to create this pure community, it became necessary to reject the practice of infant baptism and replace it with the practice of believer baptism (a move which delegitimized the baptism of virtually every believer in Christendom). Among those doctrines which they held in common, we may include the rejection of *sola fide* and the belief that it was possible to keep the law and reach perfection. Among certain branches of this group, there was also a tendency to emphasize socialism, charismatic gifts, mysticism, millennialism, and anti-Trinitarianism.



## The Storms of Love and War (1524 – 1525)

Although Luther had written much about family and politics, he had very little experience with either. A life-long cleric, he had neither wrestled with the problems of marriage nor with those of statecraft. But all of that was about to change: in a single year he would set important precedents for both the family and the state that would leave a lasting impact on Protestantism.

As we have already seen, Martin Luther's ideas persuaded many to leave the convent. Among these was a group of nuns from the monastery of Marienthron in Saxony. One of them, a girl in her mid twenties named Catharina von Bora, requested assistance from Luther. In response, he arranged to have the herring delivery man smuggle her and her friends out of the convent in a covered wagon. A student at the university is said to have remarked: *A wagon load of vestal virgins has just come to town, all more eager for marriage than for life. God grant them husbands lest worse befall.* Martin Luther attempted to persuade the families of the girls to readmit them into their homes, but they refused. As a result, he was compelled to find homes for them, a task at which he succeeded in every case but one. The girl Catharina would not have the hand of any clerk, student, or pastor, though she privately indicated she would not be averse to marrying Luther. The reformer was resolute: *I shall never take a wife, as I feel at present. Not that I am insensible to my flesh or sex (for I am neither wood nor stone); but my mind is averse to wedlock because I daily expect to die as a heretic.*

In the meantime, Martin Luther's reforms were also speaking powerfully to the downtrodden peasantry, the lowest rung on the ladder of medieval society (and indeed, the one in which he himself had been raised). For many centuries they had been oppressed through overwork, heavy taxation, and poor living conditions. They could not use the land, marry, or leave possessions to their posterity without the permission of their overlords. As they did not enjoy access to the justice system, most had simply consigned themselves to a life of involuntary servitude. There were others, however, who banded together in leagues in order to protect each another, and they had already been the cause of revolutionary outbreaks in 1476, 1492, 1493, 1502 and 1513. The new religious teaching gave dignity to their labor, along with the promise of upward mobility and the prospect of tearing down the upper classes. Although revolution was not the reformer's primary aim, his message could hardly have been taken in any other way by a people whose material needs far outran their spiritual aspirations. Travelling preachers stirred up their sense of injustice and gave legitimacy to their cause through appeals to the authority of the Bible. The rejection of social hierarchy and the establishment of democracy came to be identified with the restoration of pure Christianity.

### *The German Peasant War (1524)*

Thomas Muntzer saw his opportunity. After being ousted from Wittenberg, he and his fellow prophets assumed the posture of travelling evangelists, using fiery oratory to stoke the flames of discontent. Although he continued to posture himself as a religious reformer, the content of his message became increasingly focused on the problem of economic and political inequality.

The revolt began south of the Black Forest in the fall of 1524. In a few days, over a thousand serfs had banded together, creating a list of grievances, electing leaders, and raising a banner. In a few weeks, nearly the whole southern half of the country was threatening violence if the leaders did not respond to their demands, which they had drawn up in a document entitled *The Twelve Articles*. As a defense of the articles, they asserted that all of them had been drawn from the Scriptures, and that they were willing to retract any that were not. They included such things as the right to elect officials, reduction of taxes, reduction of mandatory service, abolition of bond-slavery, freedom to hunt, property rights, increase of salaries, reduction of costs, freedom from harsh punishments, etc.

When the political demands of the rebels were not met, they turned to violence. In addition to making public demonstrations, they seized, tortured, and killed members of the upper class, also destroying convents, palaces, and castles. As these things were being done under the banner of the Reformation, everyone naturally waited to hear the opinion of Luther. Prior to the outbreak, he had expressed sympathy with the peasants in a work entitled *Admonition to Peace*. In this work, he admonished them to use words instead of violence, and he reminded them that the secular government had both the right as well as the responsibility to wield the sword in the service of peace. After the outbreak, he turned against them with all the powers of his pen in a work entitled *Against the Murderous, Thieving, Hordes of Peasants*. In this work, he called upon the upper class to use all the means at its disposal to put down the rebellion, branding it as “the devil’s work”. *The peasants have taken upon themselves the burden of three terrible sins... First, they have sworn to be submissive and obedient to their rulers, now deliberately and violently breaking this oath by starting a rebellion, thereby forfeiting body and soul... Second, they cause uproar and sacrilegiously rob and pillage monasteries and castles that do not belong to them, for which, like public highwaymen and murderers, they deserve the twofold death of body and soul... And third, they cloak their frightful and revolting sins with the gospel, call themselves Christian brethren, swear allegiance, and compel people to join them in such abominations. Thereby they become the greatest blasphemers and violators of God's holy name, and serve and honor the devil under the semblance of the gospel, so that they have ten times deserved death of body and soul... Therefore, whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab, secretly or publicly, and should remember that there is nothing more poisonous, pernicious, and devilish than a rebellious man. Just as*

*one must slay a mad dog, so, if you do not fight the rebels, they will fight you, and the whole country with you.*

The terms of the treatise were put into effect by both Protestants and Catholics. All the forces of secular and religious government banded together in opposition to the peasants, the decisive battle taking place at Frankenhausen on May 25, 1525. The number of peasant casualties was upward of a hundred thousand and their families were left destitute. Muntzer fled, but he was captured, tortured, and executed, and other surviving rebels were rounded up and imprisoned, mutilated, or beheaded. For the foreseeable future, the living conditions among peasantry would be even worse than before. A great many of them felt that they had been betrayed by the reformer, and his enemies lost no time in blaming him and his doctrines for the outbreak of the rebellion. Even his friends urged him to issue a retraction of his harsh statements as out of step with the spirit of Christ. In *An Open Letter On the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*, Luther admits that the reaction of the government was too harsh, but he defends the severity of his language, asserting that rebels are not to be dealt with by the word but by the sword. Martin Luther had defended not only word but also, in practice, the fundamental principles of the Magisterial Reformation. On the positive side, he had affirmed the divine right of secular government, doing away with any fears that his teaching might be used to support an attempt at armed revolution. On the negative side, he had done this in so sweeping a manner as to leave the impression that the government's right to wield the sword in no way depended on the justice of its cause. By virtue of this precedent, he bestowed divine sanction upon the *status quo* of whatever the government happened to be, and this in turn resulted in a policy of passive conservatism within the church that he founded. While this proved expedient for some of the problems in Saxony, over the long term it resulted in the formation of a state-run church for the rest of German Protestantism. This very unsatisfactory relation between the church and the state would later be captured in the slogan: *cuius regio, eius religio* (translated "whose realm, his religion").

#### *The Marriage of Martin and Catharina (1525)*

Martin Luther resisted marriage largely in view of the likelihood of his own martyrdom. That he changed his mind is well known, though the reasons which led him to do so are not. He himself felt that it was unwise to talk much about such matters with others, even if they were close friends. All we know is that on May 4, 1525, he wrote: *I will take Katie to wife before I die, in spite of the Devil.* On June 13, the forty-one-year-old Luther married the twenty-six year old Catherina: *Suddenly, and while I was occupied with far different thoughts, the Lord has plunged me into marriage.*

Martin Luther's marriage was an event of great public interest. His enemies found plenty of occasions for slander, suggesting that he had broken his vow of chastity, and even that his unholy union would result in the birth of the Anti-Christ. Among his friends, some saw in the marriage "the wonderful hand of God" (Jonas), while others felt he had committed "a lamentable act of levity and weakness, injuring his influence at a time when Germany most needed it" (Melanchthon). As for Luther, he found himself in unfamiliar territory. His initial reaction was one of bemused irony: *I have made myself so vile and contemptible forsooth that all the angels, I hope, will laugh, and all the devils weep.* His later reaction was one of great joy: *Catharina is, thanks to God, gentle, obedient, compliant in all things, beyond my hopes. I would not exchange my poverty for the wealth of Croesus.*

Martin Luther's marriage transformed him from an emaciated monk into a portly patriarch. He and his wife shared the trials and joys of family life for twenty-one years. Although he earned a very low income, the reformer and his wife were able to afford a house, a garden, and a dog, and they regularly entertained visitors and raised six children (three boys and three girls, of whom two died while still young). *Table Talk* is a very valuable work which records some of the more casual statements made by the reformer in conversation with family and visitors (although a great conversationalist, he could at times grow very quiet). Luther's attitude toward married life was overwhelmingly one of praise: *Next to God's Word, there is no more precious treasure than holy matrimony. God's highest gift on earth is a pious, cheerful, God-fearing, home-keeping wife, with whom you may live peacefully, to whom you may entrust your goods and body and life.* At the same time, he was not immune from the troubles of domestic life, acknowledging that he was negligent, forgetful, and ignorant, and that a wife could be sharp, bitter, and quarrelsome: *I would not marry again, not even a queen.* In his attitude toward children he was very affectionate, praising the fact that they speak and act from the heart, and that while they have small intellects, they have great faith, and to that extent "are wiser than old fools like us." Although Luther was in many respects the master of the house, he left the machinery of the household largely in the hands of his wife. She had a strong will, and he sometimes referred to her as "Lord Katie", and to himself as "her willing servant." He, in turn, oversaw the religious upbringing of the house, each morning reciting with his family the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and one of the Psalms. Together, they observed the religious festivals, and he was particularly fond of Christmas. In his personal habits, he was simple, eating meagerly and drinking beer and wine according to the custom of his time and place. For recreation, he enjoyed the beauties of nature as well as bowling, chess, and music (which he honored as second only to theology as a remedy for the trials and temptations of the heart). He loved all forms of literature, whether legends,

fables, or proverbs, or the higher compositions such as those of Virgil, Plautus, and Cicero.

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the marriage of Martin and Katie. The clerical family had not been seen in the west for over a thousand years (even though it had been familiar enough in the earliest periods of Judaism and Christianity). Although the earliest trends toward celibacy arose out of the spiritual aspirations of individuals, the early medieval church transformed these free expressions of devotion into a legal requirement for the clergy, thereby creating a kind of moral hierarchy. The popular perception was that there were two moralities, a lower one for the common folk and a higher one for the clergy. Accordingly, the marriages of the reformers created a tremendous amount of sensation, giving rise to the popular slander that one of the chief motives for their rejection of papal authority was the indulgence of sexual desire. Indeed, there is evidence that the increasing advocacy of marriage among the clergy was accompanied by indiscretions. But it must also be remembered that the practice of enforced celibacy was itself beset by the problem of secret indiscretions (a problem that has remained to this day). In any case, we may detect behind these slanders certain wrong ideas about celibacy, as though it were praiseworthy not because it exalted the greatness of God, but because it avoided the impurity of sex. The reformers changed the prevalent moral idea from one where the individual was encouraged to flee from the evils of the world into the sanctity of the cloister, to one in which the individual was encouraged to transform the world by sanctifying it. As one writer puts it, "The one abstains from the wedding feast: the other attends it, and changes the water into wine." The pastor increasingly came to be seen as a brother rather than a holy man, as an example rather than an intercessor. Indeed, the pastor's family quickly became a subject for the romantic treatment by writers, such as we find in works like *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Hermann und Dorothea*, and *Deserted Village*. It has been calculated that within the next two centuries, as many as ten to fifteen million people owed their existence to the abolition of clerical celibacy. Moreover, it is a demonstrable fact that a large number of the most eminent men have come from clerical families, to name a few: Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Grover Cleveland, Lewis Carroll, Stephen Crane, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Matthew Henry, Albert Schweitzer, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Vincent Van Gogh, Heinrich Schliemann, Carl Jung, the Wright Brothers, Reinhold Neibuhr, Karl Barth, Woodrow Wilson, Alfred North Whitehead, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., etc.

## Dissension in the Ranks

Much happened in the year 1525. A point we have not yet mentioned, the New Testament was translated into English by a scholar named William Tyndale.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, the beginning of the year was marked by the outbreak of violence among the peasantry. While the war was going on, Luther got married and Frederick the Wise died. Most important of all, Prussia became the first state to officially embrace Protestantism.

Prussia had originated as a crusader state, having been opened to colonization through the decree of the pope and the conquests of the Teutonic Knights. By the time of the Reformation, however, the military order had outlived its usefulness. Albert, Grandmaster of the Teutonic Order, forsook the order, got married, and converted his lands into a hereditary duchy (all on the personal advice of Martin Luther). Now the Duke of Prussia, he transformed the religion of the state into Lutheranism, and established a Protestant university at Königsberg (the chairs of which would be graced by such important scholars as Andreas Osiander, Immanuel Kant, Johann Georg Hamann, and David Hilbert).

Now that Protestantism had established a political foothold for itself, the battle against the church and the empire was all but over. Still, the problems of internal division had already begun to make themselves felt. As we have seen, the first of these were the political revolutionaries, those otherwise known as the radical reformers. The second of these were the Humanists (led by Erasmus) and the Swiss Reformers (led by Zwingli). Near the end of what had already been a busy year, two major controversies would emerge within the church, one concerning the philosophical problem of free will and one concerning the theological problem of the divine presence in the Eucharist. The repercussions of these two controversies are still with us today.

### *The Free Will Controversy (1525)*

The shining intellectual light of his day was Desiderius Erasmus. He had been a monk in the Netherlands, a scholastic at Paris, and a humanist in England. In that time, he had seen the avarice within the papacy, the vice within the monasteries, and the empty word games being played among the scholastics. It was his desire to reform the church by reviving the spirit of classical antiquity, for which he prepared the way through his contributions to biblical, classical, and

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<sup>14</sup> **William Tyndale** was born in England in 1494. A gifted linguist and inspired by the critical text of Erasmus and the ideas of the Reformation, he conceived the notion of producing a fresh translation of the Bible into English. Although he was never granted official permission to carry out the work, he appears to have begun in earnest at Wittenberg in 1524. He is famously quoted as saying to one clergyman: *I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!*

patristic studies, and especially through his preparation of the text of the Greek New Testament.

From the beginning, Erasmus sympathized with the cause of Luther: *What Luther wrote of the tyranny, avarice, and iniquity of the Roman curia—would that it were false!* At the same time, he favored the program of reformation from within: *I have opposed the pamphlets of Luther more than any other man, not because he does not give good advice, but because I realize it is better to keep a respectable silence than to attempt a remedy by questionable means... Even if Luther had written all things truly, his disruptive lack of restraint would displease me greatly. I for my part would prefer to be deceived in a good many things rather than to fight for the truth in so great a universal tumult.* In public, the great humanist was very cautious in his statements about the reformer, saying that he was neither his advocate nor opponent. When queried about his own views, he simply said the reformer was a man of good character whose points had not been refuted. When offered a position within the church if he would write against Luther, he said that he did not have time or sufficient knowledge of the man's writings. The pressure to enter the fray did not relent, however, and he was eventually persuaded to take up the pen by Henry VIII of England.

In 1524, Erasmus published a work entitled *Discussion, or Collation, concerning Free Will*. In this work, he declared his opposition to the teachings of the reform movement on philosophical grounds, arguing that through an exaggerated emphasis on divine grace it undermined the ideas of free will and moral responsibility. Thus, he resurrected the fifth century debate between Pelagius and Augustine, a match in which the former argued that salvation could be attained through the operation of human freedom, and in which the latter argued that it could only be attained through the operation of divine grace. In his view, Luther had impaled himself on the horn of a false dilemma: in his eagerness to avoid an extreme emphasis on works he went into the opposite direction of an extreme emphasis on grace. Erasmus sought a moderating position between works and grace, essentially arriving at the semi-Pelagianism of John Cassian. According to this view, man is saved by grace, but his acceptance of grace is a function of his free will.

In 1525, Martin Luther wrote his response entitled *The Bondage of the Will*. As the title of the work suggests, he set against the idea of a free will the idea that the will is in bondage. His point was not to deny the obvious fact of the will's capacity for volitional activity, but rather, to point out that it was not on that account capable of emancipating itself from the shackles of the sinful nature. Thus, while the necessity of grace for salvation was a point agreed upon by both Erasmus as well as Luther, the former argued that the will was free to receive it, while the latter argued that the will was bound to reject it. This led to the conclusion that the reception of grace was itself a work of grace, the point being to

deny merit even a minimal role in the process of salvation so that the credit could be given solely to God. Indeed, Protestants have espoused this view ever since, though there have appeared two separate formulations of it, one involving the predestination of the elect (the view taken by Luther),<sup>15</sup> and one involving the empowering of the elect (the view of Melanchthon).<sup>16</sup> Although the idea that God predestines the elect for salvation is usually thought of as an innovation of Calvin, it was asserted in a much stronger form by Luther, and both of them were simply revisiting the ideas of Saint Augustine. Needless to say, the two did not succeed in persuading one another. Erasmus regarded Luther's views on predestination as fatalistic and immoral. Luther regarded Erasmus' views on free will as the enemy of the gospel.

### *The Eucharistic Controversy (1525)*

Another major controversy arose over the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In both the eastern and the western church, the ritual of communion was understood as delivering grace in a straightforwardly objective way. The traditional thought was that the elements were physically transubstantiated into the body and the blood of Jesus. We find this idea among some but not all of the early church fathers, though it wasn't until the eleventh century that it was formally admitted into the doctrinal canons of the west.

Although the reformers were agreed in their rejection of transubstantiation, they still had to answer the question of whether or not there was a real presence of Christ at the Eucharist (and if so, how). The German Reformation led by Luther said "Yes," the argument being that the elements of the ceremony were mysteriously accompanied by the real body and blood of Christ (a view often referred to as consubstantiation). The Swiss Reformation led by Zwingli initially

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<sup>15</sup> **Augustinianism** is the term usually applied to this view. When Luther took up this view, he placed the emphasis on man's moral inability. When Zwingli took it up, he placed the emphasis on sovereign election by the deity. In practical effect they come to the same thing, but the different emphases allowed for a fuller development of the doctrine of predestination among the Swiss than among the Germans. It receives its fullest treatment in the thought of John Calvin, who argued that the deity eternally decrees the elect for salvation (to display his mercy) and the reprobate for damnation (to display his justice). As for the reason behind this divine choice, it lies hidden within the divine will, and is therefore not to be examined by man. John Calvin defended this view by appealing to Scripture, but he realized its offensiveness, and he himself described it as a *decretum horribile*. Although the view was frequently attacked, it provided its adherents with a profound humility (contra the pride of merit) and an unshakeable hope (contra the uncertainty of salvation). Also, by making salvation dependent on election rather than sacrament, it holds out hope for unbaptized infants, who according to the traditional view are *eo ipso* damned. Calvin's most thorough defense of it is found in *On the Eternal Predestination of God*, and the Swiss acceptance of this doctrine was officially ratified in the *Geneva Consensus* (both in 1552).

<sup>16</sup> **Semi-Augustinianism** is the term usually applied to this view. It seeks to maintain the classical emphasis on grace, while also seeking to avoid the idea that the predestination of the elect for salvation is conditioned solely upon the inscrutable will of God. According to this view, a prevenient but resistible grace is provided to all human beings, through which they are empowered beyond the limits of their fallen nature to accept the gospel, and through which their acceptance of it is deprived of all the pretensions of merit. The view makes its first appearance in the Synod of Orange in AD 529. In the German Reformation, it makes its first appearance in the writings of Philip Melanchthon. In the Swiss Reformation, it makes its first appearance in the writings of Jacob Arminius.



said “No,” the argument being that the elements of the ceremony were merely outward symbols that commemorated the death of Jesus (a view referred to as memorialism).<sup>17</sup>

The memorialist view had a long history before Zwingli. The most obvious scriptural argument in favor of it was the words “Do this in remembrance of me.” At the same time, there could be no overlooking the immediately preceding verse which read “This is my body.” Thus, the question was raised whether these words should be interpreted literally or figuratively. As in so many other biblical debates, the acceptance of a literal interpretation was often taken as a sign of robust faith, while the acceptance of a figurative interpretation brought one under suspicion of religious skepticism. An unfortunate result was that the question came to be decided more out of a fear of rationalism than out of an honest assessment of the evidence. In spite of all this, the more figurative view had received numerous advocates over the years, such as Ratramnus (ninth century), Berengar of Tours (eleventh century), John Wycliffe (fourteenth century), and John Wessel (fifteenth century).

The memorialist view was taken up publicly in the year 1525. From that time forward, a stream of polemical literature poured forth from the reformers in Switzerland and those in Germany. Over the next three years, a great many divines threw their two cents into the debate, but everyone knew that the heavyweight contenders were Zwingli and Luther. Eventually, Zwingli would directly confront the views of his opponent in a work entitled *Friendly Exegesis* (1527). In this work, he brings very damaging criticisms against the doctrine of consubstantiation, but he maintains a tone that is scholarly, moderate, and tolerant. Luther lost no time in writing his response, a work entitled *That the Words of Christ, “This is my Body,” Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics* (also 1527). In this work, he not only responds to the objections raised by his opponents, but pours all the fiery oratory that had hitherto been aimed at the papacy onto his fellow reformers. Indeed, it is evident that his hostility to this movement was even greater, for he avers that he would rather drink blood alone with the papists than wine alone with the sacramentarians. He boldly proclaims that the memorial view of the sacrament owes its origin to the inspiration of the Devil. He argues vigorously that the burden of proof lies on those who would deny the literal sense of Scripture. He further argues that the reality of the divine presence is secured not through

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<sup>17</sup> **The Spiritual Presence** view took time to materialize. It receives its clearest formulation in the writings of John Calvin, who attempted to steer a middle course between the extremes of Zwingli and Luther. Along with Zwingli, he emphasized that the sacrament was a physical sign of a spiritual reality (thereby denying the corporeal presence of Jesus Christ). But along with Luther, he insisted that the sacrament was more than just a memorial, for when the outward sign was combined with inward faith, there was effected a real union of the believer with Jesus Christ (that is, through the forgiveness of sin and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit).

transubstantiation but through the invisible omnipresence of the body of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Zwingli answered in a work entitled *That the Words, "This is my Body," Still Have the Old and Only Sense* (1527). Again, he abstains from abusive language, proceeds systematically, and urges that arguments drawn from Scripture must decide the matter, not inflammatory terms like fanatic, heretic, devil, etc. Luther responded with his *Great Confession on the Lord's Supper* (1528). It is an elaborate work, full of deep argumentation, but also full of fury. Neither of these works would deliver the final word on this wearisome subject, nor would future publications have any success in persuading one side or the other. They serve rather as a prelude to the dark side of the Reformation, which consists in the fragmentation of believers into mutually hostile camps. Even today, Lutherans typically do not share the sacrament of communion with those outside their own confessional tradition. Nevertheless, a shining light in the midst of all this controversy was found in the voice of Martin Bucer,<sup>19</sup> a reformer from Germany, but deeply sympathetic with Switzerland. He sought to mediate between the two camps, arguing that if unity could be established on the basis of their mutual faith in Christ, then their differences in secondary doctrine could be mutually tolerated. Although his attempts were ultimately unsuccessful, he became an early forerunner of the ecumenical spirit, later captured in the phrase: *In necessariis unitas, in non-necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas*.

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<sup>18</sup> **The Ascension of Jesus** is theologically important as the point at which the divine presence goes from being directly mediated by Jesus to being indirectly mediated by his Spirit. The biblical narrative about this event raises some interesting questions about the relationship between the metaphysical world and the physical world. If his body simply leaves the physical world, then the event simply refers to his reabsorption into the Godhead. But if his body is relocated within the physical world, then we are left to explain the location of his body in space and time. For Zwingli, Jesus' glorified body ascended into a local heaven (an idea that was soon to be discredited by advances in modern cosmology). For Luther, Jesus' glorified body became omnipresent (an idea that involved an awkward conflation of the physical and the metaphysical, but which he believed was necessary to maintain the doctrine of Christ's continued presence with believers on earth).

<sup>19</sup> **Martin Bucer** was a monk who was personally present at the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. After being exposed to the new theology, he broke ties with Thomism and became a Lutheran. After serving the movement in various capacities, he eventually joined a team of reformers at Strasbourg from 1523 – 1525. Here, while remaining faithful to the ideas of Luther, he was also exposed to the ideas of Zwingli. It was through the debt he felt toward both of them that he conceived the idea of serving as a mediator in the debate over the Eucharist. Although deeply indebted to Luther, he was more persuaded by the ideas of Zwingli. At the famous conference between the two over the sacrament of communion, his former teacher aimed a finger at him and called him a "good-for-nothing knave."

## From Zenith to Nadir

As Martin Luther approached the end of his life, he would see some of his finest moments as well as some of his worst moments. His career reached its zenith in the publication of the Augsburg Confession. It reached its nadir with the onset of acute physical and mental decline, accompanied by an increasing inability to control his temper, and the publication of vitriolic attacks on the Jews, Zwinglians, and Romanists.

The hand of providence had used this man's tempestuous nature to overthrow the tyranny of the papacy, to re-open the Scriptures, to reassert individual freedom, and to pave the way for a separation between the powers of the church and the state. But even his most loyal advocates were grieved by the ferocity of his wrath, and here we are forced to confess that he fell woefully short of the biblical pattern of saintliness found in such examples as Peter, James, and Paul. As time went on, the man who once had been the leader of the new church was increasingly met with an attitude of kind tolerance in view of his past services.

Still, with all his faults, he remains one of the greatest men in the history of the church. In the post biblical period, the only individual to have exerted even remotely comparable influence is Saint Augustine. Moreover, the militant nature of his life's work carries with it an important message for the church of today, echoing one of the more troubling statements made by Jesus: *I come not with peace, but with a sword* (Luke 12:51). In a letter to a friend, Luther once wrote the following: *Do not think that the gospel can be advanced without tumult, trouble, and uproar. You cannot make a pen of a sword. The Word of God is a sword. It is war, overthrow, trouble, destruction, poison. It meets the children of Ephraim, as Amos says, like a bear on the road, or like a lioness in the wood.*

### **The Mountaintop (1527 – 1530)**

By now, it had become virtually impossible to enforce the papal and imperial edicts against Luther. The growing sympathy for reform at both the official and popular level betrayed widespread disenchantment with the existing structures of authority. Moreover, the unity of the papacy and the empire had begun to break down as a result of the seemingly interminable Italian Wars (1494 – 1559).

How did the break between the empire and the papacy come about? In one of the many struggles for imperial power, Charles V won a victory over Francis I. But while the papacy had sided with the Germans during the war (in an effort to

combat the Reformation under Pope Leo X), it sided with France after the war (in an effort to preserve its territorial holdings in Italy under Pope Clement VII). The sudden change in loyalties drew forth the wrath of the soldiery, who unbidden sacked the city of Rome in 1527, “raping, killing, burning, and stealing like as had not been seen since the days of the Vandals.”

The stage was set for the advancement of Protestantism. The emperor wasn’t even able to attend the annual diet at Speyer in 1526. In the presence of his representative, a large number of princes openly declared their sympathy with the cause of reforming the church. They resolved that the terms of the edict should be temporarily suspended until the question of the church could be resolved by a general council. In the meantime, every state should live, rule, and believe as it saw fit to answer before God. Theoretically, this was a temporary measure, but the practical effect was to establish the territorial sovereignty of the various states, and the proposed council would be twenty long years in coming. In the following year, the reform movement was further advanced by the pope’s refusal to grant an annulment of marriage to Henry VIII (an event that ultimately precipitated his separation from Rome and the birth of the Anglican Church).<sup>20</sup>

### *The Trials of Earthly and Spiritual Fatherhood (1527 – 1529)*

Martin Luther was now a father. His first child was a son whom he named after his own father, “Hans.” In the years that lay ahead, he would find himself confronted with a rather different set of problems than those to which he was accustomed, namely, how to protect the physical and spiritual lives of his children. Moreover, this paternal role was not limited to his immediate family but is one he would extend to the whole church.

The black death had been known to reappear sporadically after its initial ravaging of 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe. To the alarm of all, a case of it was announced in Wittenberg on August 2, 1527. The public institutions were shut down and people began to leave town. Many of those who stayed died and still more became sick. Nevertheless, Luther stayed in order to care for his congregation, even though the sickness had begun to afflict his only son Hans. The suggestion was made that he

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<sup>20</sup> **The Anglican Church:** Henry VIII’s desire to seek an annulment was based not only on his wife’s inability to produce a male heir, but also on his attraction to Anne Boleyn. His fidelity to the pope had now become a major obstacle to his personal happiness as well as his prospect of creating a royal dynasty. His separation from Rome in effect replaced the papacy with the crown, resulting in the birth of what we now call the Anglican Church (officially established in the year 1534). How did the people react to this display of royal bravado? The vast majority were prepared to acquiesce to anything that might avoid the kinds of civil strife they had only recently left behind them in the Wars of the Roses. A positively favorable reaction could be found among the Lollards, a small persecuted remnant of poor persons who still clung to the teachings of John Wycliffe. A more mixed reaction was found among the educated elite, some of whom remained faithful to Romanism (e.g., Thomas More), others of whom had already become supporters of Protestantism (e.g., Thomas Cromwell). Of the three main branches of Protestantism, Anglicanism remained the closest in spirit to its medieval forebears, the ground of its separation being not so much the advocacy of any particular doctrine as freedom from papal authority. Indeed, very few of its doctrines and practices were even recognizably Protestant before the Elizabethan Era (1558 - 1603).

might publish a treatise about the moral responsibility of believers in such situations, a task which he undertook in *Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague*. Against those who reasoned the plague was a divine judgment to which one should simply submitted, he urged that the instinct to self-preservation was a gift from God. Against those who broke all bonds of fellowship in order to escape, he argued that it was the responsibility laymen, officials, and especially clergy to risk their lives in the service of their fellow man. Although he accepted the medieval view that the origin of disease was probably due to the influence of evil spirits, he was open to the quasi-scientific explanation that it might have something to do with the spread of noxious vapors, and he encouraged people to resist its influence through the use of medicine, the creation of hospitals, and the pursuit of a more thorough knowledge. It was in the midst of the trials that accompanied his care for the sick that he penned the words of his most famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.

In the course of time, the plague was lifted. His son survived, but his wife gave birth to a sickly daughter who died after eight months, and his own physical and mental health was significantly diminished. Nevertheless, he promptly resumed his efforts to reform the church, now proposing a general visitation of all the churches throughout Saxony. The imperial diet's temporary grant of religious liberty had made it possible for him to openly pursue change within existing congregations. For the better part of a year, therefore, a survey of the flock was conducted by a group of hand-picked shepherds, the most prominent of whom were Luther and Melancthon. In order to guide the process, the latter drew up a summary of the doctrines of the Reformation. The results of their inquiry were not encouraging, giving strength to the charge of their enemies that the doctrine of justification by faith alone could only lead to moral anarchy. Churches had been left in ruins, leaders were unequipped, and laypersons were living in indifference, ignorance, and dissipation. To restore order, the administration of church affairs was given to the civil authorities, a measure which in the short run proved effective, but which in the long run cast the church into the hands of the state. The result was the creation of a large number of state run churches, a situation which still obtains today in Germany and other parts of Europe. Although the country has since seen the appearance of a small number of "free churches", most continue to be sustained by the income taxes of the citizenry.

For Luther, however, the most urgent need was not funding for the churches, but teaching for the common man. It is out of this need that he began to write what is often regarded as his best and most enduring writing, *The Small Catechism*. The task of catechetical instruction had long been a practice of the church in preparing individuals for membership. The most basic elements always consisted of the Apostle's Creed (what to believe), the Ten Commandments (how to live), and the Lord's Prayer (how to pray). Usually, these were accompanied by discussions

about the sacraments, and then expanded by later creeds, lists of vices and virtues, and other prayers, psalms, or hymns. The oldest such document going as far back as the end of the first century is the *Didache*. Catechisms were produced for the eastern church by Cyril and in the western church by Augustine. In the middle ages there were many catechisms, two popular ones being those of Kero and Notker. The Reformation had already seen the production of catechisms within just a few years of its inception by Lonicer and Melanchthon. Luther's catechism was very conservative and consisted of six parts: the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and instructions concerning baptism, communion, and confession (again, the insistence on private confession is uniquely Lutheran and does not appear in various other forms of Protestantism). He also added an appendix containing a selection of short prayers, a list of duties for households, and a manual for conducting marriages and baptisms. Next to his translation of the Bible, this was the most widely published work of Martin Luther (and his own personal favorite): *I am a doctor and a preacher, yet I am like a child who is taught the catechism, and I read and recite word by word in the morning the Ten Commandments, the Articles of the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and cheerfully remain a child and pupil of the catechism.*

#### *The Meetings at Speyer, Marburg, and Augsburg (1529 – 1530)*

In the years following the imperial diet, a forged document entered into circulation alleging that a military league had been formed to exterminate the reformers. This in turn called forth counter measures from Prince Philip of Hesse, the so-called War Panic of 1528. Apart from the cool headed intervention of the theologians at Wittenberg, there most certainly would have arisen armed conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

Although open war was avoided, the whole ordeal awakened suspicion over the violent potential of the reform movement, and a large number of clergy convened to overturn the temporary grants of religious liberty at a Second Diet of Speyer in March of 1529. This in turn evoked a massive reaction from governing authorities in April of 1529. A document protesting the diet was drawn up and signed by a large number of rulers who now openly adhered to Lutheranism (Zwinglianism had not yet achieved recognition, and Anabaptism was still punishable by death). Thus, the religious turmoil within the empire had now effectively brought about its political dissolution. From this event, the new movement acquired the name "Protestant" (a purely negative term referring to their common opposition to popery). In the years since, the adherents of this movement have struggled to make good their claim to being "Evangelical" (a positive term referring to their common devotion to the gospel).

Now that the empire was beginning to crumble from within, it was all the more menaced by the prospect of invasion from without (i.e., from the Muslim Turks). If there was going to be any chance of restoring unity, it was going to have to renew its ties with Rome. In spite of all that had happened, the emperor and the pope reconciled, and they pledged to use their joint powers to bring the secessionist states into line and to settle once and for all the religious questions at a diet in the following year. As for the secessionist states, they, too, felt pressure to present a united front before the diet, and therefore they sought to unite the various territories that had become involved in the Swiss and German Reformation. In order to make this possible, they called for a forum to settle the religious differences between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians to be held at Marburg in September 1529. All the most famous reformation theologians were in attendance, but while there was joy in the heart of Zwingli, there was no corresponding joy in the heart of Luther. At the castle of Marburg, in early October, the divines discussed the sacrament of communion for many days, the most vigorous portion of the debate consisting in their exegesis of the Bible. Luther began his case by stating that he would never change his mind about a real corporeal presence in the sacrament: he rested his case on the literal sense of the words, "This is my body," and he challenged his opponents to prove otherwise from Scripture, adding that he would not listen to any arguments drawn from reason. Zwingli rested his case on the observation, "It is the Spirit that gives life, but the flesh profits nothing", and "the words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life." He provided numerous examples of Scripture passages with figurative meanings, and urged that the soul is fed with Spirit and not flesh. Although initially agreeing to abstain from arguments drawn from reason, he could not help pointing out the incongruity between physical and spiritual nourishment, or the apparent contradiction in asserting that two substances could be in the same place at the same time, or the further contradiction in asserting the simultaneous presence of the body of Christ on earth and in heaven. The dispute was not resolved. Zwingli, with tears in his eyes, extended the hand of brotherhood and declared: *Let us confess our union in all things in which we agree; and, as for the rest, let us remember that we are brethren. There will never be peace in the churches if we cannot bear differences on secondary matters.* Luther declined to shake and said: *I am astonished that you wish to consider me as your brother. It shows clearly that you do not attach much importance to your doctrine. Yours is a different spirit from ours.*

The conference did not achieve the desired union. Although both sides claimed victory for themselves, a great many of the laymen in attendance were secretly won over by the arguments of Zwingli, in large part because he had evolved from his earlier memorialist view to one which emphasized the spiritual presence of Christ (the view later taken up by Calvin and the rest of the Reformation). In the meantime, the draft of a common confession was drawn up

consisting of fifteen articles, and it is significant that the two sides expressed agreement in every area of doctrine except the one concerning the real presence within the sacrament. This draft was to exercise a formative influence on the proceedings shortly to occur at the diet of Augsburg. The primary aim of the diet was to restore the religious-political unity of the west and to present a united front against the Muslim Turks. Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, stood on the side of the Romanists, but he was prepared to give a hearing to the Protestants. As for Luther, he was still considered an outlaw and was therefore unable to attend, but he kept a regular correspondence with those involved from his sanctuary at Coburg castle. The reformers were instructed to prepare a document containing their confession of faith, the contents of which were furnished by Luther, but the language of which was cast by Melancthon. The Augsburg Confession remains to this day the first official symbol of Protestantism, and it exercised a profound impact on the subsequent symbols of Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans.<sup>21</sup> It was signed by seven princes at a considerable risk since it was very likely the empire would reject their cause and deprive them of their crown.<sup>22</sup> The sacramentarians also wished to put their signature to the document but were refused, a sad testimony to the ongoing acrimony between the Swiss and the Germans. On June 2, 1530, it was read in the German language before the diet (a two-hour process during which the emperor fell asleep). In view of the fact that the medieval church still allowed a certain amount of freedom on controverted points of doctrine, the document closed with the following striking observation: *This is the sum of doctrine among us, in which can be seen nothing which is discrepant with Scripture, nor with the Catholic or even the Roman church, so far as that church is known from the writings of the Fathers.* Martin Luther's life task was now substantially complete (at least in human terms). The movement he began now had a confession of faith, had been organized into a community with forms of worship, ecclesiology, and ties to the state. Moreover, it was no longer

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<sup>21</sup>**Augsburg Confession** is divided into two parts. The first part exhibits in twenty-one articles those doctrines which they maintained. The second part exhibits in seven articles those practices which they reject: (1) withdrawal of the cup from the laity; (2) clerical celibacy; (3) the sacrifice of the mass; (4) obligatory confession; (5) ceremonial feasts and fasts; (6) monastic vows; (7) and the granting of secular power to the clergy (an important step toward the separation of church and state). Those areas of doctrine which were most distinctively Lutheran were the belief in the corporeal presence of flesh and blood at the sacrament of communion, the use of the confessional as part of the sacrament of penance, and the belief in amillennialism. A number of statements condemn the doctrine of the Zwinglians (who deny the corporeal presence) and the Anabaptists (who deny infant baptism). The creed also endorses the ancient belief that unbaptized infants were damned, a belief that was already being challenged by both of the aforementioned groups.

<sup>22</sup> **The Seven Protestant Princes** who signed the confession were: (1) Elector John of Saxony; (2) Philip of Hesse; (3) George of Brandenburg; (4) Ernest of Luneberg; (5) Duke John Frederick of Saxony; (6) Duke Francis of Luneburg; (7) and Prince Wolfgang of Anhalt. In addition, signatures were provided by representatives of the cities of Nuremberg and Reutlingen.



dependent upon his person and would henceforth assume a life of its own. Luther wrote to Melanchthon: *We have reached our Mount Sinai.*

### **The Valley of the Shadow of Death (1530 – 1545)**

Although Martin Luther's primary work was over, he continued to study, write, and preach for a further fifteen years. His physical and mental condition continued to decline, however, and it has been observed that the tone of the already polemical writer began from this point forward to grow in impatience, vulgarity, and severity.

During the Diet of Augsburg, the Swiss Reformation produced its first symbol, a document known as the Tetrapolitan Confession (a joint confession of the cities of Strasburg, Constance, Memmingen, and Lindau). The contents were furnished by Zwingli, but the language was that of Bucer. Although moderate in tone, it was more bold in proclaiming Protestantism and less conciliatory toward Romanism. The confession was treated with contempt, in part because of its boldness, but also in part because the political support enjoyed by the reformers in Germany had not yet been established in Switzerland. In the following year, war erupted between Protestants and Catholics, and Huldrych Zwingli was slain on the field of battle at Kappel in 1531. His body was quartered for treason, burned for heresy, mixed with the ashes of swine, and scattered to the four winds. Martin Luther's response is a sad testimony to his narrowness of vision, for he denied his brother the status of a martyr, averring that he died in his sins and expressing doubts about his salvation: *Zwingli got what he deserved.*

Nevertheless, Germany was not immune from the danger of warfare. In spite of the Augsburg Confession, the empire rejected the movement's right to exist, and the church drafted a refutation in support of its judgment. The reformers were given an ultimatum of just under a year to recant their views, and the territories under their influence began preparing for war. Martin Luther affirmed the right of the states to employ armed resistance against the empire in a work entitled *Warning to Beloved Germans*. Accordingly, the Lutheran princes formed a legal and military alliance at Schmalkald in December of 1531. It consisted of a large number of cities, as well as the regions of Saxony, Hesse, Luneburg, Anhalt, and Mansfield. Although matters were rapidly progressing to civil war, attitudes were suddenly changed by the invasion of 300,000 Turks under the leadership of Sultan Suleiman in April of 1532. In a treaty entitled the Peace of Nuremberg, a temporary truce was established between Protestants and Catholics, and together they prevailed over the Muslim Turks. Once more, the reformers had received a temporary grant of religious freedom until such time as the matter could be resolved by a general church council.

### *The Future of Protestantism (1533 – 1538)*

The next five years were taken up with events that concerned the future of Protestantism. Perhaps the most important of these was the conversion of a young humanist student named John Calvin (France, 1533). In the days ahead, he would prove himself the greatest theologian of the early Reformation. His writings were unmatched for their clarity, efficiency, and sensitivity, eventually drawing the praise of Melancthon and ultimately avoiding the wrath of Luther. Under his influence, the movement's center of gravity began to shift from Germany to Switzerland.

As John Calvin was just beginning his life's work, Martin Luther was putting the finishing touches on his. He had completed the New Testament in 1522 and would complete the Old Testament by the end of 1534. Shortly after this he completed his celebrated commentary on the book of Galatians (1535). The *Commentary on Galatians* is in many ways a work of spiritual autobiography, expounding how the troubled conscience finds refuge in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was also during this year that he began his commentary on Genesis, a book with rich implications for the future of Protestantism. The *Commentary on Genesis* would take him ten years to complete, and it forced him to weigh in on a large number of matters that were shortly to be revolutionized by advances in modern research. One of these was the scholarly problem of the authorship of the book.<sup>23</sup> Another of these was the scientific problem of the nature of the cosmos.<sup>24</sup> Still another of these was the philosophical problem of the nature of human

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<sup>23</sup> **On the Pentateuch**, the reformer takes up the popular view that the whole text was authored by Moses. He seems unaware of the problems accompanying this supposition, which were discussed in the Talmud as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Internal evidence had already caused this view to be challenged by Rabbi Ibn Ezra in 12<sup>th</sup> century and by Rabbi Yosef Bonfils in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the centuries following the Reformation, the re-awakening of the spirit of critical inquiry into the Scriptures would eventually give birth to the first sustained attempts at providing a theory of authorship, such as we find in Benedict Spinoza, Richard Simon, Jean Astruc, and Julius Wellhausen's famous Documentary Hypothesis.

<sup>24</sup> **On the Genesis Cosmology**: Martin Luther strongly objected to the idea that Scripture should ever be interpreted figuratively rather than literally (though this forced him to confess at various points the he did not understand Moses). Predictably, therefore, he advocates a geocentric universe of about 6,000 years old, though ancient writers had always speculated that the universe was much older and the heliocentric theory had appeared as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Nicholas Copernicus' new cosmological ideas were just beginning to make broad circulation at the time the commentary was being written and had even been met with a favorable reception by the papacy (these ideas wouldn't be declared heretical by the church until the reactionary spirit set in at Trent in 1545). When Luther heard that a certain astronomer wanted to prove that the earth moves and not the sun, he responded: *So it goes now. Whoever wants to be clever must agree with nothing that others esteem. He must do something of his own. This is what that fellow does who wishes to turn the whole of astronomy upside down. Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth* (Josh. 10:12). *Indeed, it is more likely that the bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and that they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire, to shed light at night, each according to its endowment and its creation* (the view of Aristotle). *We Christians must be different from the philosophers in the way we think about the causes of these things. And if some are beyond our comprehension (like those before us concerning the waters above the heavens), we must believe them and admit our lack of knowledge rather than either wickedly deny them or presumptuously interpret them in conformity with our understanding.*

consciousness (especially its fate after death).<sup>25</sup> In all these areas, Luther was acutely aware of the fact that he was treading on matters about which scripture was not wholly silent, but which also lay beyond his usual range of competence. At the conclusion of his commentary he wrote: *God grant that after me others will do better.*

In the year 1536, John Calvin had published the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>26</sup> That year also saw renewed attempts at ecumenism, which at this stage in history meant healing the breach between the German and the Swiss Reformation (the latter having just seen the publication of the first edition of John Calvin's *Institutes*). Martin Bucer remained the driving force behind this movement, and after years of persistence he had managed to create a climate of hopefulness on both sides. Seven years after their previous abortive attempt at unity, a new conference was scheduled to occur at Wittenberg in 1536. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that the atmosphere of hopefulness had been due to a good deal of well-meaning misrepresentation on the part of Bucer. As a result, each side approached the meeting with the mistaken impression that the other side was about to convert to their way of thinking. Perhaps Bucer hoped that the meeting, once arranged, would bring out the best in the disputants, but it was not to be. Luther immediately took control of the proceedings, insisting that no other matters could be discussed before achieving resolution about the sacrament of communion. Melancthon was ordered to draft an agreement, which essentially offered terms of peace on the condition that their opponents accept the other side's understanding of the real presence. The delegates signed it, but averred that it would not go into effect until all the churches which they represented agreed (which they never did). Thus ended the "*Wittenberg Concord*".

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<sup>25</sup> **On Soul Sleep:** Martin Luther struggled to understand the Old Testament passages which describe the dead as being in *Sheol*. Although popular belief gravitated to the idea of the immortality of the soul, he espoused the idea that we have a mortal soul, asserting that its continuance after death was conditioned not on its indestructability but on the bodily resurrection of the dead. The implication was that the soul rests in a state of unconsciousness until the day of the resurrection, a view called "soul sleep". Interestingly, John Calvin's first attempt at theological writing took up this very issue. In *The Sleep of the Soul*, he argues that the idea of soul sleep is incompatible with the Scriptures, urging instead that the deceased pass immediately into a state of conscious communion with Jesus Christ (France, 1534).

<sup>26</sup> **The *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:** After John Calvin's conversion, persecution broke out against the Protestants living in France in the year 1534 (under King Francis I). He, therefore, spent a year of scholarly seclusion in Basel Switzerland from 1535 – 1536. During that time, he composed the first edition of what would become the greatest theological work of the Reformation (ultimately overshadowing Melancthon's *Loci Communes*). Although it was not a book for the people, it immediately established a reputation for itself as a theological classic, unmatched in its originality, depth, clarity, fluidity of language, systematic cohesion, and command of scriptural exegesis. In place of polarizing combative rhetoric, he allied his interpretation of Scripture with reason, scholarship, and precedents laid down by the church fathers. The Romanists immediately perceived the power of this work, dubbing it the "Koran and Talmud of heresy."

After these events, John Calvin began the pastoral activity which would occupy him for the rest of his life in Geneva.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Martin Luther continued in his efforts to promote doctrinal unity among the members of the German Reformation. He therefore produced an official statement of faith to be used by the aforementioned Schmalkaldic League. At whatever point a general church council finally assembled, it would be important for this league to be able to present a unified account of the beliefs which they held in common as well as the practices which they rejected. The latter was produced by Melanchthon in a work entitled *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (a very interesting work, in which he denies the papal claim to jurisdiction by divine right, but suggests that it continue to exercise jurisdiction at the behest of the people and on the condition that it tolerate Reformation teachings). The former was provided by Luther in a work entitled *The Schmalkaldic Articles* (a work in which he reiterates his doctrinal position in terms far less conciliatory than those found in the Augsburg Confession). The meeting in which the articles were to be considered took place at Schmalkald in 1537. It was attended by Melanchthon, but not by Luther (whose health had taken a turn for the worse). In the end, the articles were rejected as being too strict to facilitate constructive negotiations with Rome. Instead, the princes chose to stand behind the more moderate statement of faith prepared by Melanchthon in the Augsburg Confession.

*“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” (1538 – 1545)*

Martin Luther’s final years coincided with the exile of John Calvin from Geneva, who for a brief period of time stayed in Germany.<sup>28</sup> It is well known that Luther did not “go gentle into that good night.” If old age should burn and rage at close of day, then he certainly set the standard. His final years were attended by

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<sup>27</sup> **The Genevan Reforms** (beginning in the summer of 1536): John Calvin’s original intent was to pass through the city. However, the governor urged that he stay and become its teacher, pastor, and administrative counsellor, as only two months prior it had been introduced to the doctrines of the Reformation. As Luther had his Wittenberg so Calvin had his Geneva (a project which would occupy him for the duration of his life). His work there took place in two stages: the first from 1536 – 1538 (after which he was expelled by those who disapproved of his moral severity); and the second from 1541 - 1564 (having been invited back by those who approved of his efforts at reformation). Its primary interest for us today lies in the fact that he implemented a theocratic approach to the church and state, a program that was later imitated by the Puritans in the New England colonies. Although each had separate functions, they mutually supported one another in bringing about the earthly rule of Christ, the civil and religious laws of whom were thought to be revealed in the Bible. Accordingly, the civil discipline within this system became known for its moral severity. It regulated language, dress, food, drink, entertainment, and unnecessary luxuries. It punished by censure, fine, imprisonment, and even torture, and execution.

<sup>28</sup> **The Ecumenical Climate at Strasburg**: Martin Bucer had labored long to bring together the two wings of the Reformation. After Calvin had been exiled from Geneva, he was invited to stay at Strasburg, which subsequently became known as the “Antioch of Protestantism.” Calvin stayed there for three years, planting a church of the Swiss Reformation which peaceably co-existed with churches of the German Reformation (1538 – 1541). It was during this time that he came into a very positive literary correspondence with the old line reformers, never ultimately meeting Luther, but establishing a lifelong friendship with Melanchthon. Although the two never saw eye to eye on the doctrine of predestination, it never soured their mutual respect for one another.

increasing tempestuousness and deteriorating health (including arthritis, kidney stones, a heart condition, and digestive problems). Among his personal tragedies, his wife suffered her first miscarriage. A little later, their daughter, who had been exposed to the effects of plague, died at the tender age of fourteen. On her deathbed he inquired: *Lena, my little daughter, thou would love to remain here with thy father. Art thou willing to go to that other Father?* And she replied: *Yes, dear father. Just as God wills.* To a friend he later wrote: *We ought to be glad at her departure, for she is taken away from the world, the flesh, and the devil. But so strong is natural love that we cannot bear it without anguish of heart, with the sense of death in ourselves.*

One of Luther's most important works, written late in his life, was *On the Councils and the Church* (1539). It is essentially a treatise on ecclesiology, and it testifies to his positive concern over the preservation of orthodoxy, which as we shall see was accompanied by a negative concern over the removal of heterodoxy. The work treats not only of the church council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), but also of the next four ecumenical councils (i.e., Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon). Although he notes the positive role that such councils have played in the past, his real emphasis lies on the church, not as an institutional organization, but rather as an *ekklesia*, that is, a community of persons who have been called out from among the nations to bear witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. He then proposes seven marks of the true church, which are the seven avenues of divine grace: (1) the word of God; (2) the sacrament of baptism; (3) the sacrament of communion; (4) public confession; (5) the appointing of ministers; (6) the practice of worship through prayer, praise, and thanksgiving; (7) and the symbol of the cross.

Martin Luther's views on religious freedom were considerably advanced for the age in which he lived. In all his writings, he champions the inalienable right of the individual to follow the dictates of his reason and conscience: *No one can command the soul except God.* Although he was accustomed to use violent language against his opponents, he did not believe that they should be treated with cruelty: *I can in no way admit that false teachers should be put to death. It is enough that they should be banished.* This was an attitude he even extended to heretics, the most despised of whom were the Jews: *If the apostles, who were Jews, dealt with the heathen as we deal with the Jews, no heathen would have ever been converted.* Nevertheless, near the end of his life, an unfruitful correspondence with several rabbis persuaded him that their alternative ways of understanding the Scriptures made them dangerous public enemies. Furthermore, since he had come to the conclusion that they were beyond conversion, he urged that their people should be expelled, their books prohibited, and their houses, schools, and synagogues burned. His violent treatise, *Against the Jews*, put an irreparable blot on his reputation, and although it did not envision bloodshed, it set a precedent for

the crimes which were to be committed much later under the banner of Nazism. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that his motive was not racial but religious: his vision of the future was not that of a free society, but that of a free Christendom, and this did not include the heathen, the Jew, or the Muslim.<sup>29</sup>

Martin Luther had a song for the heretics as well. On the one hand, he had always despised those whom he called the fanatics, by which he meant the radical wing of the Reformation. But he saved the real fire for the Romanists, upon whom he poured out a final bowl of wrath in a work entitled *Against the Papacy at Rome Founded by the Devil* (1545). A similarly vitriolic work was also composed against the Zwinglians, this one entitled *Short Confessions on the Holy Sacrament* (1545). The work is devoid of argument, but simply reaffirms his position regarding the sacrament of communion. It condemns the use of reason in Scripture interpretation as a harlot of the devil, and it brands his enemies as heretics, liars, blasphemers, soul-murderers, devils, etc.<sup>30</sup> Poor Melancthon declared it the “most atrocious book ever written by Luther,” and prayed to be delivered from what he called the *odium theologicum* (i.e., the hatred of the theologians). John Calvin, at a somewhat more comfortable distance, regretted “the vehemence of Luther’s natural temperament, which was so apt to boil over in every direction.” Nevertheless, he wisely remarked, *I hear that Luther has at length broken forth in fierce invective, not so much against you as against the whole of us ... I would beseech you to consider first of all, along with your colleagues, that you have to do*

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<sup>29</sup> **On Protestantism and Religious Liberty:** Martin Luther’s heroic stand against the papacy and the empire is in large part responsible for inspiring the West’s progress in the area of religious liberty. Nevertheless, it is a historic fact that the man who claimed this right for himself was guilty of denying it to others. But it is well to remember that this is inevitable in any society where there is a union of church and state, since such a society is not in a position to draw a distinction between civil treason and religious heresy. The impulse to religious persecution must be traced further back to the union of church and state that was effected under Constantine in the East and Charlemagne in the West. Accordingly, it would never fully be extinguished until there could be effected a separation of church and state, such as we find in the founding documents of America: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof* (the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the Constitution). Nevertheless, historically at least, there are three institutions where the interests of the church and the state have come to blows: Sabbath observance (in connection with Judaism), the provision of public schools (in connection with Romanism), and the enforcement of traditional marriages (in connection with Mormonism). The present conflict over the definition of marriage may or may not be a case in point, depending on whether one traces traditional family values to natural morality or revealed morality.

<sup>30</sup> **On Protestantism and Reason:** Martin Luther’s attitude on this issue underwent a striking shift. In early life, he spoke very favorably of reason. Now, late in life, he speaks of it as the devil’s harlot. What had happened? The change occurred during his ongoing dispute over the sacrament of communion, and appears to have been occasioned by the suspicion that his opponents were less concerned with being faithful to the Scripture and more concerned with being faithful to reason (in other words, they were “closet” rationalists). This sheds light on the vehemence with which he pursued this issue, since he perceived from afar the storm of religious controversy that was shortly to erupt in the movement we know as the Enlightenment. Christianity, in its best expressions, has more than weathered this storm, largely through the insight that all legitimate forms of knowledge are parts of divine revelation, inclusive not only of the more subjective dimension of spiritual experience, but also the more objective disciplines of mathematics, science, and scholarship, etc. On this view, the historic events recorded in the Scriptures, along with the faculties of reason, conscience, and experience, work together in providing humans with a total knowledge of divine revelation.

*with a most distinguished servant of Christ, to whom we are all of us largely indebted. That, besides, you will do yourselves no good by quarreling, except that you may afford some sport to the wicked, so that they may triumph not so much over us as over the gospel... I wish, therefore, that you would consider and reflect on these things, rather than on what Luther has deserved by his violence.*

In the final years of his life, Martin Luther became increasingly discouraged about the spiritual climate of Wittenberg (a place he now referred to as “Sodom”). On several occasions, he asked his wife to sell their things and made preparations to leave for good. It is noteworthy that the place at the very center of his influence had come into such a bad state, and one cannot avoid the impression that this was caused by the undue emphasis he placed on doctrine over morals. It would be for another generation of reformers to supply what was lacking, the movement we know as Pietism, and associated with such names as Arnd, Andrae, and Spener.

In the end, he was persuaded to stay. In 1545, he had the opportunity to write the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his writings. In that short exposition, he expressed the wish that all his works would perish and that the Scripture alone would be read.

Finally, in February of 1546 at Eisleben, the place where he was born, he died of heart failure.