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MARTIN

LUTHER

CARL E. KOPPENHAVER

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[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

THE MINER’S SON

Eisleben to Erfurt

The Turk was slashing his way up the valley of the Danube into the heart

of Europe. God sat far off, not as a loving father but as a vengeful

law-court judge inflicting all sorts of misery on mankind. In the forest

lurked witches and demons seeking to drag the unwary to destruction.

Into such a world threatened by the sword, ruled by fear, and plagued by

superstition, Martin Luther was born on November 10, 1483, in Eisleben,

Germany. Within such a world he became a man disdainful of bodily harm,

convinced of God’s love and mercy, endowed with abundant common sense—a

Christian worthy of study and emulation. Although his station of birth

was lowly, greatness sought him out, and the whole world has felt the

impact of his life.

The Luther child was baptized in the Church of St. Peter the morning

after his birth and was named Martin for the saint of the day. His

parents, Hans and Margarethe Luther, were simple, industrious folk. They

had moved recently from the farming community of Möhra, home of the

Luther family, to Eisleben where Hans hoped to make his fortune in the

copper mines.

When Martin was about six months old the family moved to near-by

Mansfeld. The first years there were hard and it was with difficulty

that Hans scraped together money to send his son to school. By the time

Martin was thirteen, however, his father was able to send him to a

school conducted by the Brothers of the Common Life at Magdeburg. As was

the custom, he earned his board by singing and begging from door to door

with one of the school choirs.

He stayed in Magdeburg for only a year and then was sent to the parish

school of St. George in Eisenach. While again earning his keep by

singing and begging, he became acquainted with Frau Ursula Cotta, a

woman of culture and refinement, who took the promising young scholar

into her home.

Hans Luther had been working diligently and by the time his son was

seventeen the family budget permitted his entrance to the University of

Erfurt. Martin worked diligently too, and at the end of four years had

passed not only his bachelor’s but his master’s examinations.

Into the Cloister

Obedient to his father’s wishes, Martin Luther on May 20, 1505, began

his post-graduate studies at Erfurt, preparatory to entering the field

of law. But after studying for only a few weeks he suddenly rejected the

whole idea and applied for admission at the town’s Augustinian

monastery.

Hans Luther was terribly angry and Martin’s university friends were

astounded. Why had he taken such a step? Many factors contributed, but

in the final analysis his decision to become a monk can be summed up in

the words “religious experience.”

His parents were God-fearing people whose piety undoubtedly had an early

influence on him. He shared fear of the horrors of hell, purgatory, and

the last judgment which was common to people at the close of the middle

ages. In the university library he had found a complete Bible and was

tremendously impressed with his own ignorance of its contents. He

attended church and daily chapel devotions regularly all through school.

His introspective nature made him starkly aware of his sins and

shortcomings. Life as a monk was held to be the best way to forgiveness

and heaven.

Several grim incidents increased his anxiety. While on a holiday from

the university he accidentally severed an artery in his leg with his

student sword. He almost bled to death and in distress prayed to the

Virgin Mary for help. The death of a number of students during a plague

moved him profoundly. While returning to Erfurt, following a visit to

Mansfeld, he was caught in a heavy thunderstorm and a bolt of lightning

struck so close that he was knocked to the ground. Overcome by panic he

invoked St. Anna for aid and vowed “Help me, and I will become a monk.”

Fifteen days later, on July 17, friends accompanied him to the gate of

the “Black Cloister,” monastery of the Order of Augustinian Hermits in

Erfurt.

That this decision came later in life than usually was the case, and

that his impressionable years had been spent not within the confines of

a monastery but in the unrestricted atmosphere of a great university,

later proved valuable to him and to the Protestant Church.

Monk and Priest

Luther was not received immediately into the monastery but had to remain

for several months in the monastic hostelry examining himself and being

examined. In September, 1505, all parties being satisfied, his head was

shaved and he was invested with the black Augustinian habit and cowl,

and formally received as a novice.

He scrubbed the floors, begged in the streets, and engaged in various

ascetic and spiritual exercises. When his probationary year was ended

Luther took the vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity and was

received into the order of the Augustinian monks. His sincere piety and

scholarship so impressed his superiors that he was urged to prepare for

the priesthood, and, on April 4, 1507, was ordained to that office.

The petty employments of the monastery did not consume all of Luther’s

energy and he devoted himself strenuously to studying the scholastic

theology available at that time. However, long hours with books did

little to ease his mind and give him the peace of conscience he sought

within the cloister walls. The books taught him to rely on his own

efforts to procure favor with God, and he was too honest to believe that

his penitence was deep enough and his fastings worthy enough to

compensate for his sins.

Although his heart was not at rest, Luther continued to perform his

priestly duties and undertake any new tasks assigned to him. In the fall

of 1508 he was appointed to the chair of moral philosophy which had been

entrusted to the Augustinians by the faculty at the newly established

University of Wittenberg. Desiring to teach theology rather than logic

and ethics, he availed himself of this opportunity to study for a

bachelor’s degree which would permit him to lecture on certain books of

the Bible. He had virtually completed his studies when he was called

back to Erfurt in October, 1509. There he lectured in the monastery for

about a year, and in November, 1510, was sent in company with another

monk on a mission to Rome.

In the Holy City he visited as many shrines and churches as possible.

His high opinion of the papal court was lowered by his observations of

its reckless luxury and scandal, but his confidence in the church

remained unshaken.

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

THE PROFESSOR

Dr. Luther

Luther returned to Erfurt from Rome, and in the summer of 1511 was sent

as one of three new professors to Wittenberg. Here he came under the

influence of John von Staupitz, vicar of the Augustinian order, who

showed warm sympathy and understanding toward the earnest young priest.

As yet Luther had been unable to convince himself of God’s love, mercy,

and forgiveness. His quest carried him along the path of good works, but

he never could feel that he had done enough to save himself. He tried

the path of confession but concluded there was more wrong with men than

could be cleansed by enumerating a list of particular offenses.

Luther’s problems of faith did not mount up through clearly defined

stages to a sudden soul-free climax. Rather he passed through a series

of crises. Staupitz did much to comfort him in some of these grave

periods. He encouraged the zealous monk to trust in the God who loved

and sent his Son to redeem man, rather than try to appease God through

his own works.

Staupitz’ theology was quite different from Luther’s. It admitted man’s

weakness and called him to completely submerge himself in God. There was

no striving, no assertion of self. Eventually the individual found peace

in a blissful atmosphere surrounded entirely by God. Luther’s efforts

were virtually the opposite. His every act was replete with

self-assertion directed toward winning merit. He tried the mystical way

of Staupitz but could never completely lose himself in the essence of a

God whom he conceived to be an angry judge.

Luther’s troubled spirit did not lower him in the vicar’s estimation

and, perhaps to get his mind off it, Staupitz advised him to study for a

doctor’s degree and assume the chair of Bible at the university. It was

good medicine, for thus the distressed monk came to closer grips with

the source book of his faith. So far, writings about the Bible, rather

than the book itself, had been his main diet. He studied for the degree

and preached in the monastery’s rickety chapel until October 18-19,

1512, when he became Martin Luther, doctor of sacred scripture,

professor of Bible at Wittenberg University.

The Awakening

Since May, 1512, Luther had been subprior and regent in the school

connected with the Black Cloister at Wittenberg. In May, 1515, he became

district vicar for Thuringia and Meissen, having eleven monasteries

under his care. Meanwhile he was discharging his duties as professor in

the university.

Frequently the solution to great problems comes quite undramatically as

one goes about the daily tasks. Luther’s awakening to a God who makes

man righteous in order to save him came in such a way. He knew the

teaching that the righteous shall be saved by faith. But who, he asked

himself, is righteous?

As he studied and taught, and looked after his wards in the monasteries,

he gradually discovered he had been misled by the medieval concept that

grace could be earned. This, he found, was contrary to the New

Testament. Grace can’t be earned. God gives it. Man, therefore, does not

make himself righteous. It is God who makes man righteous. He makes man

righteous as a free gift (grace) so that he can be saved. Out of this

came the doctrine of “justification by faith.”

At this point Luther still felt that he was in total agreement with the

teachings of the Roman Church. In a humble way he believed that he had

discovered for himself what always had been—that he had just been slow

in catching on. Deeper study, however, made it clear to him that there

was a great difference between his own and the theology of the middle

ages. He became convinced that man can contribute nothing toward his

salvation, but that God, recognizing man’s unrighteousness, had redeemed

him and restored him through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ.

This indeed was not the work of an implacable judge, but of a loving

Father.

Luther now found himself rejecting most of the medieval writers and

teachers. He went back to the Bible, to Christ, and the apostles.

Convinced of the truth, he no longer was restrained by contradictory

views. His beliefs were contrary to many of the teachings of the church,

and while he didn’t plan it that way they brought him into open revolt.

The matter of indulgences opened the battle.

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

COLLISION WITH ROME

The Question of Indulgences

The Roman Church taught that forgiveness of sins could be secured only

through the sacrament of penance. This required contrition of heart,

confession to a priest, and satisfaction by good works. Release from the

penalty of eternal punishment was guaranteed by the absolution

pronounced by the priest. If not enough works of penance were done

before death, however, the remainder had to be atoned for in the

torments of purgatory for an indefinite period.

Gradually a custom developed which permitted one to purchase indulgences

to offset purgatorial punishment. It was at this point that Luther’s

theology conflicted with the church’s practice. Grace was God’s gift,

but indulgences implied that man can earn grace.

In 1515 the sale of indulgences was being pressed in the archbishopric

of Mainz which had been purchased recently by Albert of Brandenburg.

Because of the vast revenues the office controlled, it was a profitable

investment to become a bishop in those days. Although not old enough to

be a bishop, Albert already had procured two other sees before

negotiating for the purchase of Mainz. Pope Leo X was willing to

overlook these irregularities in exchange for ten thousand ducats which

he needed to complete the Church of St. Peter in Rome.

Albert borrowed the money from the Fuggers banking concern in Augsburg.

Then the pope granted him the privilege of selling indulgences so that

he could settle his account at the bank and at the same time raise

additional sums for St. Peter’s.

John Tetzel, a Dominican prior who had displayed shrewd aptitude in

selling indulgences, conducted the campaign. He didn’t enter Luther’s

parish because Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony, had an indulgence

traffic of his own in the form of a large collection of relics gathered

for veneration in the Castle Church, Wittenberg. However, some of

Luther’s people crossed the border and bought indulgences from Tetzel.

Luther saw the fundamental danger of the traffic when these folk

countered his preaching on repentance of heart and life by showing him

indulgences remitting their sins. On October 31 Luther tacked a placard

on the door of the Castle Church. The sound of his hammer reached to

Rome.

The Ninety-five Theses

The theses which Luther posted on the church door were not a declaration

of revolt. They were, after the custom of the day, an invitation to

theologians of Wittenberg and vicinity to debate on the indulgence

situation. So that all participants could be prepared, he posted the

ninety-five propositions he intended to defend in the debate.

The points for argument did not call for abandonment of indulgences but

merely advocated the elimination of evils in the system. Luther

maintained, in his theses, that repentance should be a lifelong

experience and should manifest itself in a continuing effort to overcome

sinful desires. Indulgences, he said, are simply remissions of penalties

which the church has imposed. They have no effect on the souls of the

departed and they don’t remit sin; only God can do that.

Luther believed he was being a loyal defender of the Roman Church by

attempting to correct these abuses, and correspondence revealed that he

thought the pope was unaware of what was going on. To his surprise the

theses released a great flood of favorable public opinion and were

applauded as a courageous and unrelenting attack. Within two weeks they

were distributed in German as well as Latin throughout Germany.

There had been a growing dislike of the indulgence system and of the

pope’s interference in what, to the Germans, were strictly their own

national affairs. The theses now became a rallying point not only for

those who opposed Rome’s continuous exploitation of German finances but

also for those who resented the dominating attitude of a foreign power.

Even though they attacked one of his own pet institutions, the Elector

Frederick stood by his daring young monk.

As the Augustinians rallied around Luther, the Dominicans upheld the

cause of Brother Tetzel. He was granted a doctor’s degree largely to

enable him to publish some theses of his own.

When the Tetzel writings came off press and were distributed, students

at Wittenberg collected a large quantity and held a public bonfire.

Luther, still a loyal son of the monastic system, was greatly displeased

by their sophomoric act.

Rome Moves to Attack

Luther sent a copy of his theses to Albert of Brandenburg who forwarded

them to Rome where Pope Leo X reportedly brushed the incident off as a

row between rival monastic orders. Later the Dominicans charged Luther

with heresy and formal proceedings were begun. On August 7, 1518, Luther

received notice to appear in Rome for trial within sixty days.

By no means a coward, Luther was nonetheless unwilling to be the victim

of a mock-trial in the territory of the enemy. He asked Elector

Frederick to have the trial transferred to German soil where he might at

least have the benefit of impartial judges.

On second thought the pope decided not to wait sixty days and ordered

the elector to arrest Luther at once and turn him over to Cardinal

Cajetan for delivery in Rome. Although Frederick was not sympathetic to

heresy he was determined that the man who had brought so much attention

to his university at Wittenberg should have fair play. He prevailed upon

the pope to have Cardinal Cajetan give Luther a personal hearing in

Augsburg where he would be attending a diet or parliament.

In a benign manner the cardinal offered to help Luther out of all his

difficulty if he would simply submit to the pope’s authority and retract

his errors. Luther of course refused and tried to defend his positions.

A fruitless and oft-times heated controversy ensued and at the end of

three days Cajetan told Luther to leave his presence and not return

until he was ready to recant.

The cardinal was quite upset by the Augsburg incident and wrote Elector

Frederick a letter calling upon him to turn the heretical monk over to

the Roman authorities. Frederick’s reply indicated his increasing

resistance to papal dictatorship. He asked for a free trial and a

statement of Luther’s errors in writing.

The pope’s chamberlain, Carl von Miltitz, was dispatched to Germany in

an attempt to rectify Cajetan’s blundering. He correctly estimated that

much of the populace was on Luther’s side and the time for forcibly

suppressing him was past. Resorting to diplomacy he persuaded Luther to

have his case submitted to a German bishop and to refrain from further

attack in the meantime. Luther agreed, but only on the condition that

his opponents would remain silent too.

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

THE BREACH WIDENS

Pushed into the Arena

Even while Luther was meeting with Miltitz circumstances were shaping up

which drove him to break silence. He had stated his willingness to

recant if someone proved his error. An ambitious professor at the

University of Ingolstadt, John Eck, with an enviable reputation as a

disputant, saw in this his opportunity to win renown and also favor with

Rome.

Andrew Carlstadt of the Wittenberg faculty had espoused the cause of

Luther publicly and had been engaged in an extended debate with Eck

through the medium of pamphlets. Now a public debate between the two was

arranged for Leipzig. In preparation Eck drew up a series of twelve

theses, directed not so much at his differences with Carlstadt as with

the theology of Luther. The champion of Roman orthodoxy clearly was

baiting Luther into the arena.

After months of wrangling about procedures and proper invitations, and

with much pomp and pageantry, the debate got under way on June 27, 1519.

Several hundred Wittenberg students were there—a sixteenth-century sort

of college cheering section. During the ensuing eighteen days of debate

they frequently became embroiled with the Leipzig University students

who sided with Eck. Carlstadt and Eck matched wits for four days over

the relation between grace and free will. The erudition and cleverness

of Eck gave him a decided advantage over the Wittenberg scholar, but

spectator interest was being reserved for July 4 when Luther would take

the field.

For another four days Eck and Luther discussed the divine right of the

pope with the Ingolstadter insisting that the divine plan of government

was a monarchy with the pope at its head. Luther agreed that the church

was a monarchy but that Christ was its head. The passage in St. Matthew

concerning the rock upon which Christ would build his church was quoted

by Eck with the interpretation that Peter was the “rock” and since he

also was the first pope it was clear that papal supremacy had been

established by Christ.

Luther declared the passage should be considered along with Peter’s

previous statement, “Thou art the Christ....” This confession, he said,

is the “rock” on which Christ built his church.

The Shadow of Hus

The crisis at Leipzig was reached when Eck backed into a dialectical

corner and had to resort to foul tactics. How discredit Luther? Perhaps

if he made him synonymous with heresy....

Craftily Eck pointed out the similarity between Luther’s arguments and

those of the Bohemian reformer, John Hus, whom the Council of Constance

had condemned to the stake a century before. Luther denounced the

insinuation and declared the Bohemian heresy irrelevant to the debate.

It was inevitable in opposing the Roman Church’s contention to primacy

that Luther would use arguments similar to those of previous reformers.

The condemnation of Hus as a heretic did not necessarily make all of his

views heretical. In fact, Luther insisted, some of Hus’s articles were

genuinely Christian and evangelical.

The spectators and visiting theologians were stunned, and perhaps Luther

shocked even himself. Clearly his remark would be interpreted to mean

that the general councils—the highest earthly authority—were not beyond

fault. This was heresy.

Luther had long been aware of the need for reform in the church. As his

ideas developed it became apparent that the pope was not above human

weakness. The church militant needed an earthly head, and for the sake

of good order it was necessary that he be obeyed. But that didn’t make

him infallible. After all, he was human.

Now this same reasoning had pushed from Luther’s lips the admission that

councils could err also. Unwittingly Eck had contributed what probably

was the greatest outcome of the debate—Luther’s growing conviction that

even general councils could be unreliable. Henceforth he would take his

stand on the unassailable Word of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

Results of the debate were weighed by judges at the University of Paris

who condemned Luther and his views as heretical. When Philip

Melanchthon, a Wittenberg associate and close friend of Luther,

questioned the opinion on the basis of Scripture, the Parisians looked

down their noses at the upstart, informing him they were chief among the

few to whom interpretation of Scripture could be entrusted.

For Such a Time as This

Luther was frankly disappointed with the outcome of the debate. He had

hoped his opinions would be accepted and reformation of the church

effected.

The controversy did much, however, to crystallize his own views: The

pope did not have absolute authority; a council can err in its

decisions; the Bible is above popes and councils in authority; the

Church of Christ is not limited to the Roman fellowship alone but is the

community of believers throughout the world.

Gradually Luther realized these views differed so fundamentally from

those of Rome that there was small chance of healing the breach. The

notion that he might become a martyr recurred frequently but it didn’t

cause him to relinquish his zeal. In fact he received inspiration from

it and kept three presses rolling at full speed to turn out tracts,

sermons, and commentaries.

In addition to the Leipzig debate, the summer of 1519 brought forth

another event which was significant in Luther’s life. Maximilian, the

Holy Roman Emperor, died in January and the election of a successor was

of utmost concern to the rulers and populace of Europe. Consequently,

there was rejoicing in Germany on June 28 when the electors named

Charles of Spain in preference to Francis of France. Charles was a

Hapsburg and the Germans confidently expected he would unite them into a

strong, independent nation. However, the new emperor favored his Spanish

mother more than his German father and treated his fatherland like an

outlying province of Spain.

Wide distribution of the Ninety-five Theses and other writings, as well

as prominence resulting from the Leipzig encounter, had fixed the eyes

of many Germans upon Luther. When Charles failed to step into the role

of national figure they switched their enthusiasm to Luther. Few

understood his ideas on Christianity but they believed he could lead

them to political, intellectual, and economic freedom. Scholars,

princes, knights, and commoners gathered about the Wittenberg professor

who had demonstrated his fearlessness in the face of tyranny. Gradually

Luther sensed his mission as leader in a mighty movement. History called

it the Reformation.

LUTHER EXPLAINS HIMSELF

The Christian Nobility

Luther’s attempts to interest the pope in reform had proved futile. He

was likewise unsuccessful in having a general council convened to

consider his propositions. Now, in the first of three great treatises,

he called upon the secular rulers to concern themselves with the state

of the church.

Appearing in August, 1520, the “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of

the German Nation” flatly attacked corruption among the clergy and

prodded the laity into doing something about it. Since all Christians

are priests before God, Luther held it was incumbent upon them and

particularly upon Christian rulers to feel responsible for the conduct

of the church within their domains. As Christians they should abhor vice

and wickedness regardless of whether it flourished on the main street or

in the monastery.

No one, said the open letter, has been able to reform the Romanists

because they have erected three walls of defense, “\_First\_, when pressed

by the temporal power, they have made decrees and said that the temporal

power has no jurisdiction over them. \_Second\_, when the attempt is made

to reprove them out of the Scriptures, they raise the objection that the

interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to no one except the pope.

\_Third\_, if threatened with a council, they answer with the fable that

no one can call a council but the pope.”

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

Luther demolished the first wall by showing that everyone is equal

before God. Those holding the title of priest or bishop are not superior

to other Christians nor do they differ except in vocation, by which also

a cobbler differs from a blacksmith. The title of “priest” is conferred

by laymen who themselves are priests in the sight of God. Thus the

holder of a church title is not beyond the reach of temporal government.

He breached the second wall by pointing out that every enlightened

Christian—layman or priest—has the right to seek God’s message for him

in the Scriptures. The third wall tumbled through Luther’s insistence

that every man, as a priest, shares responsibility for right management

in the church.

The Babylonian Captivity

Before his letter to the nobility was off press, Luther was writing his

second treatise, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.” The first had

been primarily for lay people while the second was for theologians. It

aimed directly at freeing the Christian fellowship in Europe from the

“captivity” of the Roman sacramental system.

The Roman Church taught that it alone could dispense the saving grace

associated with the sacraments, and that the sacramental acts could be

performed only by ordained priests. Anyone who denied that the church

controlled the flow of grace from God was striking Catholicism in its

most vital spot. Without its sacramental system Rome could no longer

bind its subjects. This was the front at which Luther aimed his heaviest

artillery.

He reiterated his views on the priesthood of believers. Priests should

be servants of the people who comprise the church, rather than servants

of a papal hierarchy. They cannot interfere with grace. It is God’s free

gift to the individual believer.

In the course of his treatise Luther also asserted that there are only

two sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—rather than seven as taught

in Roman Catholicism. A sacrament, he held, had to be instituted by

Christ, contain a divine promise of the forgiveness of sins, and make

use of an earthly element (water, bread, wine). Confirmation,

ordination, marriage, penance, and extreme unction were rejected as

sacraments because they lacked some of the prescribed characteristics.

The mass had been seen as a repetition of Christ’s incarnation and

crucifixion at the hands of a priest before the altar. By this sacrifice

man tried to earn grace. Now it became the Lord’s Supper—a communion of

the believing Christian with his Saviour. Both the bread and the wine

should be received by the communicant, Luther insisted. While Christ is

really present in the elements, the bread does not become flesh nor the

wine blood through a magical act called transubstantiation. Moreover,

Christ is not sacrificed anew whenever the mass is celebrated. His

sacrifice on the cross was for all time. Through that sacrifice a man’s

sins are remitted if he has faith.

Christian Liberty

Miltitz, the papal nuncio who previously had failed to reconcile Luther

and the pope, tried again in October, 1520. He had Luther agree to write

a letter to Leo X assuring him that there was nothing personal in his

attacks on the papacy.

In the letter, Luther cautioned Leo against listening to those of his

advisers who would make him a demigod, who put him above councils, who

make him the final authority in interpreting Scripture, “for through

them Satan already has made much headway.” He also assured Leo that he

was an obedient servant of the church and that he was not inveighing

against him personally.

Accompanying the letter was a copy of Luther’s latest pamphlet, “A

Treatise on Christian Liberty.” It expresses calm Christian reflection

quite different from the theological conflicts which were carried

forward in his other treatises. At the outset it poses two propositions

which seem to be a paradox: “A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of

all, subject to none,” and “A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful

servant of all, subject to all.”

The first proposition acknowledges man as a sinner, but one who has been

liberated and restored to a right relationship with God through

justifying grace. In justifying man, God has freed him from the

consequence of his sins because of Christ’s atonement.

This freedom affects a man’s whole life. Not only is he free from the

consequences of sin, but he is no longer shackled by his own hates,

passions, and wilful desires. Because this freedom is based on his own

personal relationship with God, no one can interfere. He is “subject to

none.”

The second proposition indicates that the free man’s life takes a

different direction. Originally he was concerned with himself, but now

the reborn person, in gratitude for his own freedom, serves his

neighbor. His motive is not merely humanitarian, but stems out of a

sincere desire to help others become free too. Love permits him to do no

less than become the servant of all.

The treatise and letter would have scant effect on Pope Leo. Five months

previously he had signed a bull excommunicating Luther.

The Papal Bull

A chronological listing of events can be misleading—for instance those

concerning the papal bull. It was signed by Leo on June 15, 1520. It

reached Luther officially on October 10. He immediately wrote a fiery

epistle denouncing it and Eck, whose style and invective he recognized.

Aware that the bull was being circulated and that his literature was

being burned, he nevertheless sat down in November and wrote a friendly

letter to the pope accompanying it with his treatise on Christian

liberty.

On the surface this would indicate insincerity, but events shaped up to

prove he was being consistent. Although he knew he had personal enemies,

he never lost sight of the fact that he was fighting a system rather

than individuals. The pope, for him, was merely a figurehead, in this

instance the symbol of an intolerable autocracy in an area where

individual freedom before God was essential.

The papal bull credited Luther with forty-one errors, called for the

burning of his books, charged heresy, gave him sixty days to submit, and

warned everyone against sheltering him in his excommunication.

Distribution of the bull was in the hands of Eck and papal legate Jerome

Aleander. They succeeded in posting copies of the bull and burning books

in several cities, but largely their efforts were unsuccessful due to

strenuous opposition by the German people.

On December 10, probably in reprisal for a book-burning at Cologne,

Melanchthon posted a notice on the Wittenberg University bulletin board

inviting students and faculty to a bonfire outside the Elster gate of

the city. Books on scholastic theology, and especially those works of

canon law on which the pope and the Roman hierarchy based their claims

to power, were tossed into the flames. Then Luther stepped forward

quietly and with a prayer on his lips added the booklet containing the

papal bull to the fire. He and the professors withdrew but the students

made a holiday of the affair, parading and singing throughout the town

and burning books of Luther’s opponents.

Significantly, the bonfire marked the end of the sixty-day period of

grace. From now on no one was to communicate with Luther or provide him

with the necessities of life. In the eyes of Rome he was an outlaw.

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

THE MONK STANDS FIRM

The Diet of Worms

Overtones of intrigue and statecraft are dominant in the prelude to the

imperial assembly at Worms. The church at Rome had given its decision.

Would the secular authorities now take action and turn him over to the

papal authorities?

Charles, at his coronation as emperor, had subscribed to the imperial

constitution which said no German should be taken outside his country

for trial, and also that no one should be outlawed without a hearing.

Frederick the Wise, Luther’s elector, took no action against him, using

these same reasons as an excuse. Aleander, the papal representative,

wanted the case settled arbitrarily by the emperor since he was well

aware of the support Luther would receive at a public hearing. The man

had been condemned by the church, he argued, and as good churchmen the

rulers should simply apprehend the Wittenberg monk without a further

examination of his views.

For the first three months of 1521 the diet devoted itself chiefly to

transacting state business. During this period Emperor Charles changed

his mind several times about inviting the Wittenberg monk for a hearing.

Finally, on March 6, against his will, he offered Luther a safe-conduct

to Worms.

In a two-wheeled cart Luther and a few companions set out from

Wittenberg on April 2. Cities along the way welcomed him and invited him

to preach, but no reception equaled the one on his arrival at Worms.

When the party was sighted from the cathedral tower at 10 A. M., on

April 16, a group of horsemen dashed out to act as an escort through the

city gate. Two thousand spectators thronged the streets so that Luther

was barely able to reach his lodging in the house of the Knights of St.

John.

He was summoned to appear at four o’clock the following afternoon, and

because of the crowds in the streets was conducted through gardens and

alleys to the episcopal palace where the diet was meeting. When the door

of the assembly hall was opened, Luther was ushered through a company of

princes, nobles, and ecclesiastics to the foot of a canopied chair. On

it sat Charles, the twenty-one-year-old emperor. Near by was a table

loaded with books.

Answer Without Horns

After the opening courtesies had been dispatched the presiding officer,

an official of the archbishop of Trier, pointed to the books, asked

Luther if he was the author, and if he was ready to retract what he had

written.

Luther had been instructed to speak only in answer to direct questions

and was not to seek a discussion. However, this double question could

not be answered yes or no. He paused and his legal adviser asked that

the titles be read. Luther then acknowledged that the books were his.

Again the question, “Will you retract...?”

The monk believed his writing was an accurate interpretation of God’s

Word. In his mind was Christ’s admonition to the disciples “whosoever

shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father....”

Since salvation was involved he asked time to think over the answer. The

diet agreed that he should return at four the next afternoon.

After a night of prayer Luther again appeared before the impressive

assembly. This time a larger hall had been chosen because of the

tremendous crowd. Again the formalities, and again the question, but

this time phrased a bit differently. “Do you defend all of your books or

are you willing to recall some things?” This was the opening Luther had

been seeking and he quickly shaped his strategy to take advantage of it.

They were forcing him to make a speech since a categorical answer was

impossible.

The books were in three classes, Luther explained. The first was purely

devotional and had been commended even by his enemies. The second was

against the papacy. If he recanted these he would open the door to

further tyranny and impiety. The third class inveighed against

individuals, and in these he admitted he had used caustic and

intemperate language. Still the facts had to stand unless refuted by the

Scriptures, in which case he would be first to cast his books into the

fires.

Obviously the diet could not at this moment disprove his works by the

Bible. There was a consultation. The interrogator turned to Luther.

“Give us a direct answer—one without horns. Will you or will you not

recant your errors?”

Neither Right nor Safe

The Spanish guards were mentally stacking faggots around the lonely

little figure in the middle of the room. Princes, nobles, and the Holy

Roman Emperor leaned forward to catch his words.

“Since Your Majesty and Your Lordships want a direct reply, I will

answer without horns or teeth,” he began quietly.

The spectators looked at each other significantly, then back to the

earnest friar. Confidence was returning and his voice carried plainly to

all corners of the room.

“Unless convinced by the testimony of Scripture or right reason—for I

trust neither the pope nor councils inasmuch as they have often erred

and contradicted one another—I am bound in conscience, held captive by

the Word of God in the Scriptures I have quoted. I neither can nor will

recant anything, for it is neither right nor safe to act against

conscience. God help me! Amen.”

There was silence for an instant. Then pandemonium broke loose. The

interrogator tried to restore order but the emperor walked out and the

meeting adjourned. Luther was escorted back to his rooms by the admiring

populace. Nobles who had been on the fringe now openly praised the

courageous preacher and vowed their support. During the night warning

notices were surreptitiously posted on the doors of his enemies.

Charles summoned the electors and princes the following day to decide

what should be done. His own impulse to condemn Luther right away was

restrained because he needed the good will of the Germans in other

measures coming before the diet. A plan was evolved whereby a select

group of theologians would call on Luther and try to effect a

reconciliation through persuasion. The discussion always bogged down

when Luther insisted he must be persuaded on the basis of Scripture.

Having received a twenty-one-day safe-conduct Luther set out for

Wittenberg on April 26. The diet closed officially on May 25, and the

next day, following a rump session of prejudiced nobles, the emperor

signed the Edict of Worms. According to it, Luther was the devil himself

in a monk’s habit. He was to be seized on sight and turned over to the

emperor—an outlaw of the church and the state.

DRASTIC CHANGES

Wartburg to Wittenberg

Fortunately for Luther there was more than noisy adulation among the

people. A few sober minds knew how relentless the papal wolves would be

in tracking him down after the safe-conduct expired, and so a

“kidnapping” and removal to a safe place was planned.

Luther made a detour along the road to Wittenberg in order to visit

relatives at Möhra. For months the outside world knew only that he had

been captured near there in the Thuringian forest by a band of knights.

Many lamented him as dead, but gradually the flow of thorny letters to

his adversaries and the new treatises rolling from the press allayed

their fears.

By a circuitous route Luther had been conveyed to the Wartburg, an

ancient fortress-castle near Eisenach. He arrived on May 4 and, with the

exception of short trips into the forest and to near-by villages, did

not leave for seven months. To outward appearances he was Junker George,

a carefree, bearded knight with sword swinging impressively at his side.

The secret was well kept and at the outset even the elector, who

authorized the masquerade, did not know Luther’s whereabouts.

Luther chafed at his forced inactivity, and, ever the monk, fell to

contemplation and examination of himself. Could past generations and

earlier scholars have been so completely out of step with the gospel?

Could a mere friar be right against them all? Might he not be in error

and drag many others to eternal damnation?

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

Hard work helped take his mind off his problems. During his stay in the

Wartburg, in addition to correspondence and pamphlets, he authored a

work on confession, expositions on several Psalms, a commentary on the

Magnificat, had a volume of sermons on the Epistles and Gospels well

underway, and had translated the entire New Testament into German.

Prayer and study restored his conviction. To doubt, or even to remain

silent was like going against conscience—neither right nor safe. With

conviction came a sense of divine commission. When events called him

back into the world again he went courageously and with determination.

He was a revolutionary, but a conservative one. That quality is what

took him back to Wittenberg.

From Freedom to License

So often a new movement suffers from overenthusiasm. The Reformation was

no exception in this respect. Zealots took the usual shortcut from

bondage to freedom by way of turmoil instead of restrained orderly

procedure.

In parts of Germany the old ways were thrown off hastily. Organs,

paintings, and statues were thrown from the churches, vestments were

discarded, bread and wine were both administered to the laity, priests

married, nuns took husbands, monastic vows were renounced, various forms

of the mass were discontinued, priests and worshipers who persisted in

the traditional forms were attacked.

Rumors of violent acts reached the Wartburg. Luther, still in the guise

of Junker George, made a hurried trip to Wittenberg early in December,

1521. Matters there had not yet reached the unrestrained stage which

they later assumed. Nevertheless he cautioned the people in a “warning

against riot and rebellion,” written on his return to the Wartburg.

In it he reasoned that reform is not so much a matter of externals as of

faith. Breaking up the furniture in a church does not change the heart

of a man. Vandalism is by no means a sign of repentance and trust in

God—in fact it approaches the old form of seeking favor through works.

Giving wine as well as bread in the Lord’s Supper is not as important as

the spiritual attitude of the communicant.

Finally the tumult in Wittenberg reached the point where he had to step

in, so—in the face of the imperial ban—he returned on March 6, 1522.

Insisting that no drastic change should be made until, through

re-education, those affected requested it as a matter of faith, he

restored order in the university city in a remarkably short time.

The peasants meanwhile took the shortcut to freedom, too, in a series of

bloody uprisings. Chafing under their bondage to the nobles, they

adapted Luther’s “free lord of all” statement to their own demands for

social reform. Luther preached the Christian duty of submission to

lawful authority, but the peasants ravaged and plundered until finally

defeated in 1525. It was a dark hour in the Reformation.

Pigtails on the Pillow

Wittenberg, June 14—Katherine von Bora, 26, late of the Cistercian

nunnery at Nimbschen, and Martin Luther, 42, professor of Bible at the

local university, were married last night at a simple ceremony in the

Black Cloister. Dr. John Bugenhagen officiated. In attendance were

Artist Lucas Cranach and Mrs. Cranach; Dr. Justus Jonas, prior of Castle

Church; and John Apel, professor of law at the university....

If there had been newspapers in 1525, Luther’s wedding might have been

announced to the public in this way. However, newspapers weren’t to

appear until much later, and the lack of publicity gave gossips and

slanderers choice opportunity to vilify the former monk and nun. The

malicious stories were partly offset by a public ceremony, complete with

a special service in the town church, a wedding dinner in the cloister,

and a dance at the town hall on June 27.

The wedding was a direct result of Luther’s reform teachings. He

disliked the monastic system because men and women sought merit before

God through restraints and vows rather than depending upon grace.

Celibacy, he had written earlier, is not founded on Scripture but

marriage is. These teachings found their way into many cloisters and

convents, among them the one at Nimbschen where Katherine von Bora, at

the age of sixteen, had been received into the Cistercian Order.

She and eleven other nuns sought Luther’s assistance in effecting a plan

of escape. Although he had no idea of what it would involve for him

personally, he arranged for them to be smuggled out of the convent in

empty fish barrels on the day before Easter in 1523. The plan succeeded

and some of the nuns came to Wittenberg where they found homes,

husbands, or new positions. Two years later Kathie was the only one not

permanently cared for despite Luther’s several attempts at matchmaking.

Then the spunky miss hinted rather boldly that the Reformer himself

would be an acceptable husband and he resolved to take the course which

he had urged on so many others.

It was strange for one accustomed to solitude. “Formerly at the table I

was alone,” he wrote, “now I am with someone. When I awaken I see a pair

of pigtails on the pillow which were not there before.”

The Cloister Becomes a Home

Marriage probably extended Luther’s life for a number of years.

Previously he and his dog enjoyed an irregular sort of existence in the

Black Cloister. Dishes were covered with dust, the bed hadn’t been made

in over a year, his clothes were in disorder. Sometimes Luther forgot

his meals altogether and at other times stuffed himself.

The vigor with which his industrious wife established order can be

imagined by his reference to her as “my lord Kathie.” She was an

efficient housekeeper and thrifty manager of what little they possessed

at the outset. Neither had any money. Luther refused pay for his

writing, although the publishers grew rich, nor did he receive any tax

revenues from the cloister since he had laid aside his cowl.

Things improved when the elector gave Luther the cloister for a home,

and adjacent to it a vegetable garden with a small brew house where

Kathie prepared the family beverage. His small salary as professor was

augmented somewhat when they took in boarding students attending the

university.

The Luthers had six children. Two of them died in childhood, but

otherwise the family enjoyed a merry, wholesome life. The house was

always full of visitors—some of them more or less permanent—including

traveling dignitaries, numerous aunts and relatives, monks and nuns

seeking a permanent residence, and four orphaned children from among

their kinsfolk. Because it was large and suitable, the cloister

sometimes was used as a hospital, and it was not unusual for the

“family” to number as many as twenty-five. Guests who stayed for any

length of time were expected to take part in household duties,

participate in daily prayers, catechetical study, and family devotions.

Music, singing, chess, and outdoor bowling were forms of recreation.

Through Kathie’s economy, improvements were made in the Luther house. An

orchard, hop garden, and finally a farm were purchased.

When Luther worried about his children’s future he overcame it with

faith. A pious training is most important, he wrote. It is good to leave

an inheritance, but preparing children to manage wisely is more

important. We parents are fools if we don’t train them to fear God, to

control themselves, and to live honorably.

[Illustration: (uncaptioned)]

A CHURCH REBORN

The National Conscience

The people at Wittenberg and in other cities of influence were gradually

learning to think of the church as separate from the Roman hierarchy.

Now there was need for reorganization. A steady supply of ministers was

essential and arrangements had to be made for their training and

support. A bond of some sort was necessary to establish unity of

endeavor, and mission work was imperative in areas where conviction had

lapsed into indifference.

Luther didn’t care for organizational work. The thought that the new

church might degenerate into a system of laws and regulations haunted

him. Although his revised order of worship was finding its way into use

he felt that still more urgent matters demanded attention. Proper

instruction of young and old was essential and to accomplish it there

had to be some sort of oversight.

The bishops had neglected instruction of the laymen and the princes were

loath to reinstitute it. Luther, therefore, laid the task directly upon

the congregations and in some cases the city councils to select

competent men as pastors, establish pastoral districts, and set up

schools. To advise and assist in this work, visitation committees

comprising learned laymen and theologians traveled throughout Saxony

beginning in 1527. The visitation was carried on in other areas of

Germany too, and in this way the groundwork for future organization

began.

In the meantime two distinct factions had developed among the princes of

Germany. One espoused the Roman cause, the other the Reformation. From

1525 to 1529 a series of diets and assemblies was held. The rival

princes concerned themselves largely with attempts at, and opposition

to, the invoking of the ban against Luther, his works, and his cohorts

which had been executed at Worms. At Speyer in 1529 the Catholic

princes, with the emperor’s backing, tried to force a resolution

preventing the spread of Luther’s teachings in any new areas, but the

Reformation princes protested. Matters concerning salvation were of an

individual nature and could not be legislated. Conscience bound them to

oppose the resolution. Principles which the Wittenberg monk had declared

only eight years before were becoming the national mind.

The Augsburg Confession

Sparks of the Reformation had caught fire elsewhere in Europe developing

into Reformed, Mennonite, Anabaptist, and other denominations. A major

purpose of the diet called by Emperor Charles at Augsburg in 1530 was to

harmonize these various groups and attempt a final reconciliation with

Rome. To this end each body was to define its teaching in a statement or

confession, but not all were represented at the diet and only three were

actually submitted.

As usual the papists were laying for the Lutherans. They had prejudiced

the emperor against a fair hearing and were reserving their best

ammunition for the Saxon “heretics,” fully confident that a Lutheran

defeat would speedily bring the downfall of the others.

Still under imperial ban, Luther could not attend the diet but stayed at

a castle in Coburg from which he advised Melanchthon and others

appearing before the emperor. The confession, a series of twenty-eight

articles setting forth the Lutheran position, was read on June 25. The

first twenty-one present fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures

regarding God, Original Sin, the Son of God, Justification, the Church,

the Sacraments, Civil Affairs, the Freedom of Will, the Cause of Sin,

Good Works, and the Worship of Saints; while the last seven treat of

Roman abuses which contradict the Word of God.

The emperor commissioned the Roman theologians to prepare a refutation.

On the basis of it he rejected the Lutheran confession, ordered church

property restored to Roman bishops, and forbade witnessing and the

printing or sale of Lutheran writings.

Dejected by their failure to reform the church, the Lutherans went home

in the fall of 1530 unaware that their confession would become a basic

creed of the largest Protestant body in the world.

Threatened with coercion by the Romanists in Germany, they joined with

other Protestants in 1531 to form the League of Schmalkalden. War was

averted when the emperor enlisted both groups to meet the Turkish

invasion of Austria, and armed conflict over religious principles was

delayed until the summer of 1546. Luther didn’t see it. A few months

earlier he went to stand before the Judge he had learned to love instead

of fear.

Back to Eisleben

The circuit of Luther’s life was completed in Eisleben, his birthplace,

where he had gone to mediate between the princes of Mansfeld. He died

early on the morning of February 18, 1546, after fervently committing

himself to God’s keeping and reaffirming the doctrines he had preached.

Luther’s lifetime was marked with concern—concern first about himself

and God. It wasn’t selfish; a man has to find his treasure before he can

share it. Luther had searched through lonely tormented hours in a

monastery; he brushed aside centuries of proud speculation until he

found the truth. It was written in a book, the record of God’s

revelation of himself to man—the Bible. From it he learned that God is

love instead of wrath; that no one, pope or king, can stand between man

and that love, or gain it for another; that one can’t even win it for

himself. It is God’s free gift.

Then his concern was for others. This treasure was too priceless to

keep; he had to give it away. He preached it, though all the forces of

evil railed against him. He printed it, though emperors ordered him to

stop the press. He sang it and helped the church to sing—in tones so

soft they lull a child to sleep; in battlecries resounding from the

ramparts of his mighty-fortress God.

“The devil prefers blockheads,” he said, therefore, “the school must be

the next thing to the church.” Concern led him to teach. Professor was

the only job he held—but that for all his life. He hated those who

arrogantly claimed sole right to knowledge. So that each might know the

truth himself, and in that truth be free, he translated the sacred

Scriptures. Matthew to Revelation first, and then the Old Testament were

translated, not in high-sounding phrase or platitude, but in majestic

simplicity—the words of Hans and Hilda. The lords and ladies would

understand it that way too.

The principles of faith which Luther proclaimed, brought fame and the

promise of power. But the words addressed to the nobles at Worms recount

the humility of his service: “I seek nothing beyond reforming the church

in conformity with the Scriptures. I reserve nothing but to bear witness

to the Word of God alone.”

CHRONOLOGY

1483 November 10 Martin Luther born at Eisleben

1484 Family moves to Mansfeld

1497 Luther goes to Magdeburg school

1498 Luther goes to Eisenach school

1501 Enters University of Erfurt

1505 Receives master of arts degree

July 2 Vows to become a monk

July 17 Enters Augustinian cloister at Erfurt

1507 April 4 Ordained to priesthood

1508 Teaches at Wittenberg

1509 Lectures at University of Erfurt

1510 November Begins journey to Rome

1511 Returns to Wittenberg as professor

1512 October 18-19 Receives doctor of sacred scripture

degree

1517 October 31 Posts ninety-five theses

1518 August Pope wants Luther brought to Rome

1519 July 4-14 Luther debates with Eck at Leipzig

1520 June 15 Papal bull signed

October 10 Luther receives bull

December 10 Luther burns bull

1521 January 27 Diet of Worms begins

April 16 Arrives at Worms

April 17 Makes first statement

April 18 Luther will not recant

April 26 Leaves Worms

May 4 Arrives at the Wartburg

May 26 Banned by Edict of Worms

1522 March 6 Returns to Wittenberg

1525 June 13 Marries Katherine von Bora

1527 Composition of “A Mighty Fortress”

1530 June 25 Augsburg Confession read

1534 Publishes complete Bible in German

1546 February 18 Luther dies at Eisleben

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—Corrected a few palpable typographical errors.

—In the text versions only, text in italics is delimited by

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