

# The Church in History

B. K. KUIPER

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*by*

B. K. KUIPER

Revised by the NUCS Committee on Church History

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## *Part Three*

### *THE CHURCH IN THE REFORMATION*

We have come to a high point in the history of the Church. In 1517, and the years that followed, a series of events occurred which ushered in a new era in world history. In that period the power of Rome over the Christian Church was challenged, men broke away from its tyranny, and Christian liberty was at last restored.

The men who led the way in this great Reformation were men of strong faith and convictions, high intelligence, and great moral and physical courage. They risked their lives and sacrificed all ordinary pleasures to work untiringly for the purity and freedom of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The period of the Reformation was an exciting and heroic one. The people were no less courageous than their leaders. War and persecution did not turn them aside. It was a time of high thinking and perilous living.

In spite of all opposition from the Catholic Church, the Reformation spread—through Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Norway, and Sweden. The fetters that had bound the people to a religion of superstition and fear had at last been broken, and the Church was once more free to worship God “in spirit and in truth.”

## *The Church*

### *Is Shaken, October 31, 1517*

1. *A New Era Opens*
2. *The Sacrament of Penance Becomes Central*
3. *Indulgences*
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**1. A New Era Opens** • The Reformation came “in the fulness of time.” It was not a movement that began merely because a man named Luther revolted

against certain teachings of the Church. Rather, it was prepared over a long period of time and came into full flower when the conditions were ripe for its develop-



Religious News Service Photo

This study of Martin Luther was executed by the great German painter Holbein.

ment. In the previous chapter we traced some of the preparatory movements for this great reform.

**2. The Central Importance of the Sacrament of Penance** • The Church in medieval times put great emphasis on sin and its punishment in purgatory and hell. Purgatory, according to the Church at that time and the Roman Catholic Church today, is a place to which those who are to enter heaven are assigned for a period of cleansing by fire before they are fit for entrance. The more faithfully the believer went through the rites and ceremonies on earth, the shorter would be his time of suffering in purgatory.

According to the Roman Catholic Church there are four sacraments which deal with the forgiveness and removal of sin and the cancellation of its punishment. These are *baptism*, the *Eucharist*, *penance*, and *anointment of the sick* (formerly called *extreme unction*).

In Luther's day the sacrament of penance occupied a central place in Catholic religious practice. The heart of this sacrament was the priestly act of absolution (pardoning of sins and release from the eternal punishment upon such sins). It involved three acts by the penitent sinner receiving this sacrament: (1) contrition, (2) confession to a priest, and (3) satisfaction.

After witnessing an expression of contrition for mortal sins committed and hearing a confession of these sins, the priest would grant absolution. This word of absolution declared to the penitent sinner the forgiveness of his sins, his release from eternal punishment, and his restoration to the state of grace.

The priest would then decide what satisfaction the sinner should make. Satisfaction usually consisted in something the penitent should do. It took a great variety of forms, but it was always in the nature of a penalty for sins committed. Most often satisfaction was made by the saying of a prescribed number of prayers, by fasting, by giving alms, by going on a pilgrimage to some shrine, or by taking part in a crusade. Frequently it also involved pain.

**3. Indulgences** • In process of time a certain development took place in this system of penance. The Church permitted the penitent to substitute the payment





### Tetzel Selling Indulgences

*Religious News Service Photo*

money for the soul of a dear one in purgatory to saying many prayers for that soul. To shorten the soul's sojourn in purgatory to any worthwhile degree took an enormous number of prayers.

The system pleased the Church. The sale of indulgences was a source of huge income. It kept money flowing into the pope's coffers.

More and more frequently the popes issued indulgences. Although they raised the price, the people bought them in ever-greater quantities. As the indulgence business grew, abuses attendant upon it also grew. At the time of which we are now speaking, Tetzel, an eloquent Dominican Friar and high-pressure salesman, was peddling indulgences in an unusually scandalous manner near the Saxony border in the neighborhood of Wittenberg. In his sales talk he said, "The moment you hear your money drop in the box, the soul of your mother will jump out of purgatory."

It was Tetzel's conduct that made Luther speak up concerning indulgences.

How did this come about? The story will have to be delayed until we get acquainted with Luther, the man who was to kindle the fires of the Reformation.

**4. Luther's Early Life** • Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483. When Martin was still a baby, the family moved to Mansfeld. His parents were pious people. The father had become interested in the mining industry. He slaved and saved in order to make it possible for his promising son to have an education.

Martin received an elementary and high school education and attended college in Erfurt. From the University of Erfurt he obtained his Master's degree in 1505. His father was very happy on this occasion. In accordance with the wishes of his father Luther now took up the study of law in the same university. Half a year later he suddenly dropped that study and entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

Luther's father was a man of strong will and fiery temper. To see his son a famous lawyer had been the great ambition of his life. Now his son, whom he dearly loved, had in gross ingratitude, as he thought, disappointed his fondest hopes and long-cherished expectations. He was not only disappointed; he was furious.

But Martin was equally strong-willed. He might have retraced his steps. But in spite of his father's terrible anger he persisted in his course. After a trial period of half a year, he took the vow. Brother Martin was now a monk. He fully believed at this time that he would be a monk for life.

Instead of law Luther now studied theology, and in 1507 he was ordained as priest. The next year he was sent from Erfurt to Wittenberg to become a tutor in the university in that place. While there he obtained his first degree in theology, that of Bachelor of Bible.

After one year in Wittenberg Luther was transferred back to Erfurt. There he received his second degree in theology, that of *Sententiarius*. He was called upon to teach the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the standard textbook of theology. At the youthful age of only twenty-six years, Luther occupied an important position.

While teaching in Erfurt, Luther was sent to Rome as companion to an older brother on business for his monastic order.

He visited all the famous shrines. On his knees he climbed the *Scala Santa*, the stairway which was said to be the one which Jesus had climbed to reach Pilate's judgment hall. This stairway was supposed to have been brought from Jerusalem to Rome. There is a story that when halfway up the stairway Luther heard a voice within him say, "The just shall live by faith." He got up from his knees and walked down. It has been said by many that this was Luther's conversion, but that is not correct. Luther's conversion took place late in 1512 in his own cell in the tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg, not in 1511 on the steps of the *Scala Santa* in Rome.

Religious and moral conditions were very bad in Rome at that time. Much of what Luther saw and heard there shocked

The House in Eisleben,  
Saxony, in Which Luther  
Was Born

Religious News Service Photo







*Brown Brothers*

### Luther Reading in His Cell at Erfurt

From a painting by Sir Noel Paton

his moral sense. Years later his memories of his visit to Rome did much to stiffen him in his opposition to the hierarchy. But at this time his faith in the Roman Church remained unshaken. He came back still a loyal Catholic.

Soon after his return, Wittenberg became his permanent residence. For the rest of his life he lectured on the Bible in the university at Wittenberg. He also began to preach, and the degree of Doctor of Theology was conferred upon him. From 1512 to 1517 he did what every professor does, he studied and lectured.

**5. Luther's Conversion** • Such, in short, had been Luther's outward career up to 1517. What had been his inner development during this time?

Luther was of a deeply religious nature,

and from childhood on he had absorbed the teaching of the Church of his day. He was greatly concerned about the salvation of his soul. Under the influence of the Church's teaching he came to the conclusion that the best way to gain salvation was to flee the world. That is why, in spite of the bitter grief and anger of his father, he had buried himself in a *cloister* (a residence for monks or nuns) and become a monk.

In the monastery he lived a life of strictest asceticism. With all his might he tried to earn salvation by his good works. He cheerfully performed the humblest tasks. He prayed and fasted and chastised himself even beyond the strictest monastic rules. He wasted away till he looked like a skeleton. His cell, even in the severest cold of winter, was unheated. He often spent the night in vigils and only occasionally slept on a mat.

He was oppressed with a terrible sense of his utter sinfulness and lost condition, and this cast him into the deepest gloom of black despair. No matter how hard he tried, never, it seemed to him, had he done enough to earn salvation. In a letter he wrote to the pope after his conversion he said: "I often endured an agony so hellish in violence, that if those spells had lasted a minute longer I must have died then and there."

But from time to time rays of light fell into the darkness of his soul. He found some comfort in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux who stressed the free grace of Christ for salvation. The vicar of Luther's monastic order, Johann von Staupitz, spoke to him many a word of cheer. Some of the writings of Augustine helped him. Above all he began to study the Bible.

Sometime toward the end of the year 1512, Luther was sitting in his cell in Wittenberg with his Bible open before him. He had begun to study Paul's letter to the Romans, and coming to Romans 1, verse 17, he read, "The just shall live by faith." He paused. He pondered. Then joy unspeakable flooded his heart. The burden of his soul rolled away. Up until now he had tried to earn salvation by his good works, but never had he been able to feel that he had done enough. Now God had spoken to him. Luther had learned that man is saved not by *works* but by *faith*. Romans 1:17 had become to him the "gate to Paradise."

*That* was Luther's conversion.

**6. The Ninety-five Theses** • It will be easy for you now to understand how Tetzel's conduct led Luther to talk about indulgences. Luther's soul was now filled with peace and joyful hope. He began to look at life round about him and at the Church with new eyes. He began to see the many abuses in the Church, and more and more clearly and boldly he spoke out against them.

The traffic in indulgences had long been the cause of great scandal. Now Tetzel was hawking indulgences at the very gates of Wittenberg in a most shameless manner. Luther saw that the people were being deceived for eternity.

He went up to his cell in the tower of the Black Cloister, took his pen, and wrote out his views about indulgences in ninety-five *theses*, that is, in ninety-five statements or propositions. Then around noon on the thirty-first day of October, 1517, he went out and nailed these ninety-five theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. In this way he



*Religious News Service Photo*

**Luther nails his ninety-five theses to the Castle Church door.**

made his views about indulgences known to the public.

This act of Luther was not the Reformation. But it was the first in a series of acts which were to lead up to the Reformation.

**7. Luther Is Already a Man of High Attainments** • Luther is often spoken of as being at this time only a simple and obscure monk. This is by no means true to fact. Surely, Luther was young at this time. He was only thirty-four years old. But he was experienced and accomplished far beyond most young

men of his age. He had lived in Magdeburg, Eisenach, and Erfurt. He had been to Cologne, and to Leipzig, and had crossed the Alps and traveled to Rome. He had met a great number and a great variety of people. In Rome he had seen Pope Julius II. He had read and studied the writings of many great men.

He was prior of his monastery and district vicar over eleven other monasteries. He had to appoint and remove priors; he had to instruct, counsel, and comfort brother monks beset with temptations, and discipline those who misbehaved. He had to attend to the repair of buildings and the auditing of accounts. He had to take care of legal matters pertaining to these monasteries.

He was a Master of Arts and a Doctor of Theology. He was one of the great preachers of all times. By now he had been teaching for nine years, and had gained a high reputation as a teacher. He was one of the first theological professors in Germany to base his lectures in the Old and New Testaments on the original Hebrew and Greek texts. He was also one of the first professors in Germany to lecture in the German language instead of in Latin.

Luther was favorably known to his prince, the elector Frederick the Wise, and he carried on correspondence with some of the most prominent men of his time.

No, Luther at this time was not a simple or obscure monk!

**8. He Is Still a Catholic in Good Standing** • It should be borne in mind that when Luther published his ninety-five theses, he was a member in good standing of the Roman Catholic Church.

Luther himself was baptized, brought up, and confirmed in the Catholic Church. He attended its services, went to mass, made confession regularly and often, bought indulgences, visited shrines, revered relics. He prayed to the saints and to Mary. He believed that they could intercede for him, and also that they had power to work miracles.

Luther was a monk, an ordained priest, a preacher, and a professor in the Roman Catholic Church.

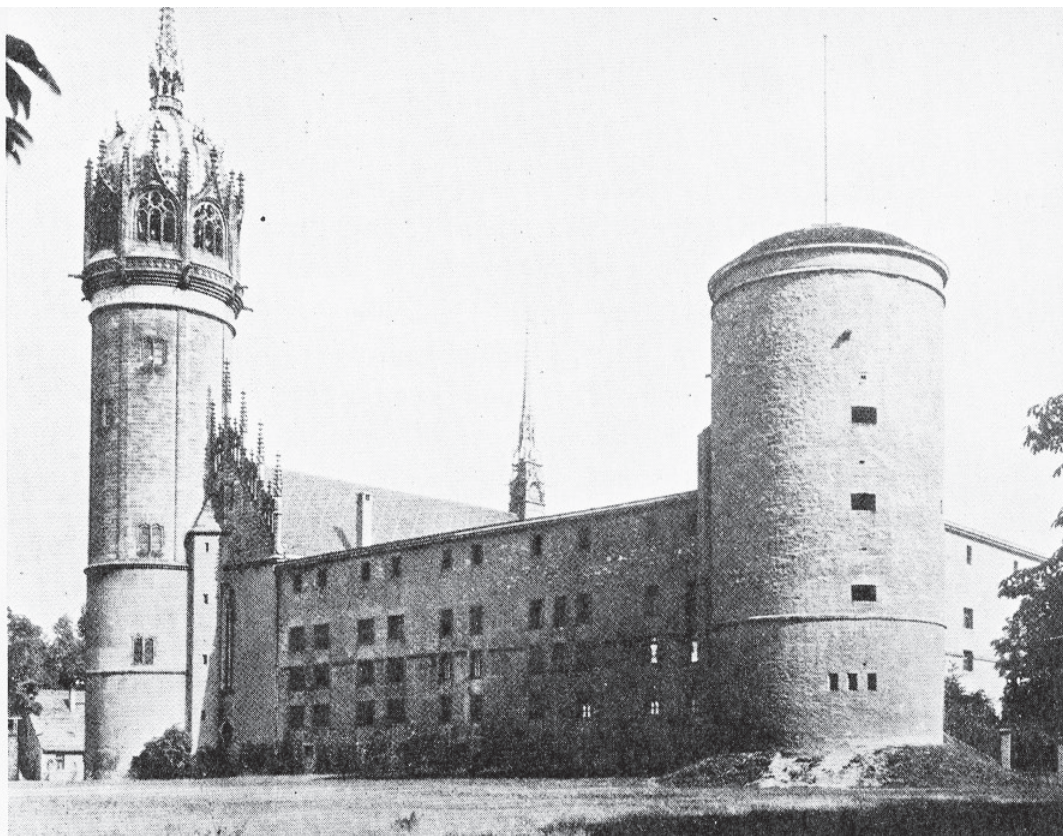
**9. Posting of Theses Is a Common Practice** • When Luther nailed his theses to the door of the Castle Church, he did nothing unusual. The door of the Castle Church served as the University bulletin board. In posting these theses he invited any doctor of theology who might so wish, for the purpose of clarifying the truth, to debate with him publicly on the value of indulgences. This procedure was very common.

**10. The Ninety-five Theses Are Widely Read** • When Luther published his ninety-five theses he did not say to himself, "Now I am going to start the Reformation." No man was more surprised than Luther himself at the results of his action. No one accepted Luther's challenge. It was not until two years later that an opponent presented himself.

What did happen? That is a long but interesting story. Wittenberg was located in Saxony whose ruler at this time was the elector Frederick the Wise, a very pious Catholic. He had collected more than five thousand relics from all over Christendom. To house these relics Frederick had built the Castle Church.

Wittenberg's famous  
*Schlosskirche*  
is part of a fortress.

*Brown Brothers*



The day after Luther had nailed his theses to the door of the Castle Church was All Saints' Day. On that day, as was customary, the relics in the Castle Church were solemnly displayed. From far and near people came to see them, and to be benefited by the graces attached to them. They naturally saw the large sheet of paper tacked to the door, and they stopped to read it. When they came home they told their neighbors what they had read. These told others. In this way the news spread like wildfire.

Printing had recently been invented. The theses, which had been written in Latin, were translated into many languages, printed, and carried with unbelievable speed to every country of western Europe. Within two weeks the theses of Luther became known throughout Germany. Four weeks after their publication they were read all over western Europe. They had a tremendous and immediate effect. They almost stopped the sale of indulgences.

The archbishop of Mainz, who was to receive a share of the proceeds from the sale of indulgences by Tetzel, naturally did not like this. He sent a copy of the theses to Pope Leo X in Rome. The pope at first did not think it was a serious matter. He simply asked the general of Luther's monastic order to advise that monk in Wittenberg to keep quiet.

Tetzel with the assistance of a friend published a set of theses defending the sale of indulgences. Mazzolini, a Dominican monk and inquisitor in Rome, wrote a book in which he severely criticized the conclusions of Martin Luther. John Eck, a theological professor, answered Luther in a pamphlet. Luther soon published his answer in another pamphlet. Luther's friends did not rise to his defense; they thought he had been too rash in his criticism. This made Luther feel bad.

In April, 1518, the monasteries connected with the Augustinian Order held their annual meeting in Heidelberg. Luther found the opposition much stronger

than he had expected. However, the discussion was frank and friendly, and this put Luther into a happier frame of mind.

Upon his return from Heidelberg to Wittenberg he wrote a general answer to all his opponents. This book bore the title *Resolutions*. It was very carefully written and was addressed to the pope. In it Luther defended his theses point by point.

**11. Their Real Significance Is Recognized** • In his theses Luther did not attack indulgences themselves, but only the abuses connected with their sale. Already Wycliffe and Huss had protested against these abuses. But the Church was quick to see that the thrust of Luther's protest was more far-reaching. By raising the question of indulgences, Luther, guided by the Spirit of God, had laid his finger on the most sensitive spot in the whole Catholic system of his day.

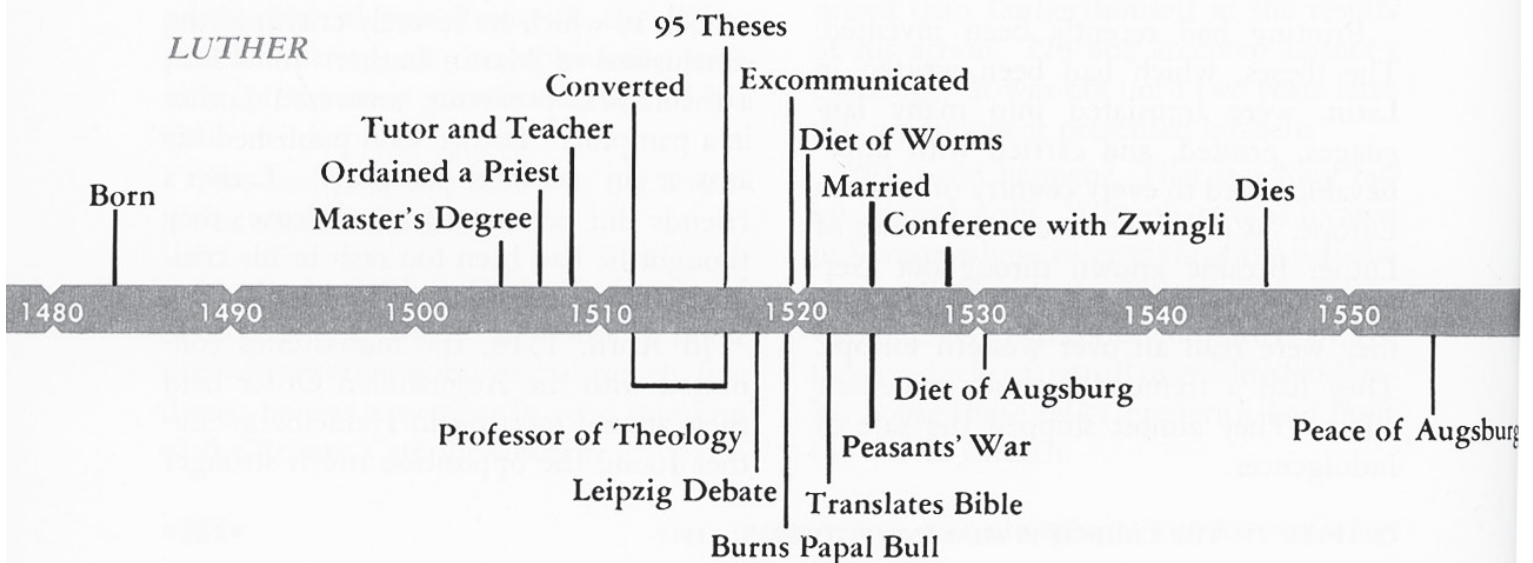
It was from the sale of indulgences that the Church and its head, the pope, received an immense income. And furthermore, the Catholic system had declined to the point where it placed all importance on the sacraments and the priests. The Roman Catholic Church held that only the priest could adminis-

ter the sacraments; and without the sacrament of penance, without absolution and indulgences, there was no salvation. Man's salvation, his eternal weal or woe, lay in the hands of the priest. And so the Church, through the priests, had a strange hold on the people.

That is why, by raising the question of indulgences, Luther shook the Church. What he said in his theses had the tendency to loosen the priests' hold on the people. Now the Church was not merely stirred. It was shaken to its very foundations.

**12. The Reformation's Fundamental Elements** • Before we outline the important events of the Reformation, we should sketch the elements of its teachings which all the leaders of the movement considered fundamental ones.

1. The Reformation leaders went back to the Apostolic Church, as described in the New Testament, to find there the spirit and practice of the Church as they believed it should operate. The republishing of the works of the early Church Fathers—Jerome, Cyprian, Origen, and Athanasius—was a great aid to them. Au-



Large sums of money were needed by the pope to construct and furnish magnificent buildings. This is a view of the Vatican Library.

*Brown Brothers*



gustine was a favorite of most of the reformers. From these men they learned the simple character of the early Church and found it widely different from the adorned service of their own day. They therefore sought to eliminate the forms, customs, and traditions in the formal keeping of which men had come to trust for salvation, and to stress the preaching of the Word as the Gospel of salvation by grace alone.

2. Closely related to this aspect of reform was the stress on the priesthood of all believers. This meant that men went directly to God; they did not gain salvation through the Church, but became members of the Church when they became believers. The Roman Catholic Church used the name priest for clergyman, which meant that they stood, as in Old Testament times, between man and God. The reformers spoke of all men as priests, personally speaking to God, without the mediation of the Church.

3. All the reformers thought of the Church as the community of believers rather than the hierarchy of officials. This concept was already evident in Huss, one hundred years before Luther, and persisted all through the Reformation days. They thought of the Church as an organism, a living body of which each believer was a member; they did not think of it as an organization made up of officials. Organization they did consider necessary for efficient functioning, but they did not think of it as the dispenser of divine grace.

4. Many church leaders in the days before the Reformation had urged the distribution of the Bible to the common people. Wycliffe had translated large portions of the Vulgate into English. Tyndale had translated the Bible. But the Roman Catholic Church had bitterly opposed unofficial translations. Tyndale paid for his offense with his life, being burned at the stake. Now all the reformers accepted the Bible as the final authority on

all questions of faith and morals. Luther translated the whole Bible; Zwingli copied in handwriting all the letters of Paul from Erasmus' Greek text; Lefèvre translated the New Testament into French, as did John Calvin. Whether a reformation

principle was to be accepted or not was determined by the support one could find for it in Scripture. That became the touchstone; and of course this led to a careful study of the Bible as the source for all religious teaching.



1. *List specific practices to which Luther objected. Write a brief statement giving the reasons for his objections.*
2. *From one of the many fine biographies of Luther trace some of the stages of his reformation thoughts. Why did his insights come gradually?*
3. *Write a short summary of those events that show that the Reformation was in the making for a long time. Be sure to add dates to your summary, so that the time involved in this movement becomes clear.*
4. *List the four important religious practices of the Roman Catholic Church that centered around penance and write one explanatory statement for each.*
5. *How did the practice of issuing indulgences rise out of these practices? Why would men think of indulgences as paying for sins?*
6. *What is meant by the treasury of merits?*
7. *List and describe in your own words the basic elements of the reformation movement.*
8. *Identify: Tetzel, works of supererogation, Scala Santa, Wittenberg, Sentences of Peter Lombard, ninety-five theses, mass.*
9. *Read the ninety-five theses. (See Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Volume VII; or The Banner, October 25, 1963.) Write out the five that are of the greatest interest to you.*

make his confession, and offered to pay the expenses of the journey.

**4. Eck Challenges Luther to a Debate** • If the pope had supported Von Miltitz, and if both sides had remained still, there is no telling how far the reconciliation of Luther with the Roman Church might have gone.

But at this time the pope's attention was distracted from his differences with Luther. He had become deeply absorbed in another matter. In January, 1519, the emperor Maximilian died. A new emperor had to be elected and the pope was greatly concerned about the selection. He had to work hard for the election of Frederick. The election campaign occupied his mind entirely to the exclusion of everything else. For fourteen months he failed to push the charge of heresy against Luther. Meanwhile, the two opposing sides in Germany did not remain silent.

One of Luther's fellow professors of theology at Wittenberg University, Andreas Carlstadt, came out with a set of theses against Eck. Eck, you will recall, had written a pamphlet against Luther's ninety-five theses. Eck answered Carlstadt with some counter theses in which he advanced an extreme view of papal supremacy. Luther then took up the cudgels and published twelve theses. In the twelfth he declared that the claim of the Roman Church to supremacy over all other churches rested only on weak papal decrees of the last four hundred years, but that in all the eleven hundred years before no such supremacy had existed.

An attack like that on the authority of the pope had never before been heard. It caused a tremendous sensation. Eck could not possibly ignore it. He challenged Lu-

ther to debate with him on the question of the supremacy of the pope.

The supremacy of the pope had been one of Luther's earliest and most cherished beliefs. His mother had taught him as a little boy that the Church is the pope's house, in which the pope is the house-father. The nine months until the debate with Eck in July, 1519, Luther spent in hard study. He had to find arguments against many things he had always held to be true, and which he had only recently found to be false. He plunged into the study of church history and canon law. *Canon law* consists of the decretals or decisions of popes and general councils. Luther was dismayed to find that many decretals were forgeries. Thus he saw another pillar of the Roman Catholic system cracking before his eyes.

**5. The Leipzig Debate** • In Leipzig the atmosphere was tense. A company of armed burghers stood guard at the duke's palace where the disputation was to be held. In the inns at mealtime an armed guard was posted at every table to keep the Leipzig and Wittenberg students from fighting.

On the fourth of July, 1519, Eck and Luther faced each other. As far as the learning and speaking ability of the two opponents was concerned the debate was just about a tie. But Eck out-manuevered Luther. He drove him into a corner, and finally got him to say that some of the teachings of Huss had been unjustly condemned by the Council of Constance. As soon as Luther made this statement, Eck had achieved his purpose. He had made Luther take his stand openly on the side of a man officially condemned by the Church as a heretic. When Luther ad-





*Schoenfeld Collection from Three Lions*

### The Leipzig Debate with Dr. Eck

mitted that he did not think Huss wrong in all respects, a wave of excitement swept over the audience. Duke George of Saxony said so loud that everyone could hear it, "God help us; that is the pestilence!"

Luther's arguments had been historical. He called to mind that the Eastern Greek Church is a part of the Church of Christ, and that it had never acknowledged the supremacy of the bishop of Rome. The great councils of the early Christian centuries knew nothing of papal supremacy. But no reasoning on Luther's part could save him after he had taken his stand on the side of the condemned heretic, Huss.

One result of the Leipzig debate was that Luther greatly strengthened his cause among his followers. He made them feel certain that their position was right. Luther also won many new followers, one

of whom was Martin Bucer, who became an important leader of the Reformation, and who helped to shape the views of John Calvin.

As is usually the case, neither debater was able to change his opponent's views. However, the debate did much to clarify Luther's ideas for himself. This was undoubtedly the most important result.

This debate was also an important stage in the Reformation movement. It made it clear to everybody that reconciliation between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church would be impossible.

**6. The Storm Gathers** • Luther had rejected the supremacy of the pope and the infallibility of councils. His break with the Roman hierarchical system was now complete. Luther was in the thick

of the battle. From now on it was to be a life-and-death struggle between him and the Roman Church. Soon after the Leipzig debate Eck went to Rome to ask Pope Leo to issue a bull excommunicating Luther. The pope was more than willing.

The first thing Luther did was to publish an account of the Leipzig debate. Soon pamphlets and letters followed in great abundance. In May, 1520, he published a pamphlet with the title, *On Good Works*. This was only a little book, but it had a far-reaching effect. In it he applied to practical, everyday life his newly won conviction that *man is saved by faith alone*. "The noblest of all good works," he said, "is to believe in Jesus Christ." We must serve God in the midst of the world by faithfully performing the tasks of our daily occupations. Shoemakers, housekeepers, farmers, and businessmen, if they do their work to the glory of God, are more pleasing to Him than monks and nuns.

This was one of Luther's most important and fundamental teachings. It was also the widest possible departure from ancient and medieval asceticism, and it became one of the most distinctive traits of Protestant Christianity.

The period between the Leipzig debate in July, 1519, and the Diet of Worms in April, 1521, was a hectic time for Luther. Every incident that took place, every friend he made, every book he read carried him forward from one position to another.

Two books especially which he read at this time influenced him powerfully. Several Hussites had been present at the debate. Two of them, after that memorable meeting, had written to him and sent him one of the works of Huss. He had no

time to read it just then, but when early in 1520 he read it, he learned that Huss had taught the same things that he, Luther, had come to believe, and he avowed himself to be a disciple of the Bohemian.

The other book which influenced Luther profoundly at this time was a work by the brilliant Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, who proved beyond the possibility of contradiction that the "Donation of Constantine" was a forgery. This discovery roused Luther to such a passion that he scarcely doubted any longer that the pope was the antichrist.

**7. Excommunication** • On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo ratified and signed the bull excommunicating Luther. The bull began with the words: "Arise, O Lord, plead thine own cause; remember how the foolish man reproacheth thee daily; the foxes are wasting thy vineyard, which thou hast given to thy vicar Peter; the boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it." These opening words are quotations from the *Psalms* and the *Song of Solomon*.

The bull mentioned forty-one propositions, which it said were Luther's, and which it condemned as "heretical or scandalous, or false or offensive to pious ears, or seducing to simple minds, and standing in the way of the Catholic faith."

The bull called upon all faithful people to burn Luther's books. It forbade Luther to preach. He and all who followed him were ordered to recant publicly within sixty days. If they did not, they were to be treated as heretics. The bull ordered the government to seize and imprison Luther and everyone who followed

him. All towns or districts that sheltered them would be placed under the interdict.

The publication of the bull in Germany was entrusted to Eck. He soon found out that it was easier to prepare the bull than to get it published. He could get permission to do so in only a few places. At Erfurt the students seized all the copies they could lay hands on and threw them into the river.

Luther came out with a tract: *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist*.

**8. Three Great Reformation Treatises** • All Germany hung breathless on Luther's every word. His books circulated far and wide and were eagerly bought and read. In his day there were no newspapers, so he poured out small books or pamphlets, which were like editorials or magazine articles. Luther used the press as a means of molding public opinion. It was chiefly by means of the press that Luther gained the support of vast numbers of followers, not only in his own country of Germany but also far beyond its borders.

To cushion the shock of the papal bull, and to rally the German nation around the standard of revolt against the Roman hierarchy, Luther published three works in the latter half of the year 1520. They are known as "The Three Great Reformation Treatises."

The first, *To the Christian Nobility of Germany*, was a trumpet call to do away with the abuses fostered by Rome. In the second, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther exposed the falsity of the Church's claim that men could be saved only through the priest and the Roman system of sacraments. The third, *The Liberty of a Christian Man*, is a very





Martin Luther  
Burning  
the Pope's Bull  
Against Him

*Historical Pictures  
Service—Chicago*

small work of only thirty pages, but it contains the whole sum of the Christian life.

**9. Luther Burns the Pope's Bull •** Writing against Rome, however, did not satisfy Luther. He decided to do something more. If the pope ordered his writings to be burned, he would burn the pope's writings.

On December 10, 1520, a large crowd of students, professors, and citizens assembled outside the walls of the city of Wittenberg. One of the professors kindled the pile. Luther placed the books of canon law (church law) on the burning wood. Then amid solemn silence Luther placed a copy of the bull on the fire, and said: "As thou hast wasted the Holy One of God, so may the eternal flames waste thee." He waited until the books and the bull were consumed. Then with his friends and colleagues he returned to the town.

Some hundreds of students remained behind. Under the spell of the solemnity

of the occasion they sang, as they stood around the dying fire, the *Te Deum* (We Praise Thee, O God). Then youthful mischievousness got the upper hand, and they sang funeral dirges in honor of the burnt papal decretals and bull.

**10. Luther Is Summoned by the Emperor •** Pope Leo was almost at the end of his rope. He had exhausted all ecclesiastical means to bring Luther to his knees. There was only one thing left that he could do. He turned for help to the highest secular authority, the emperor.

The pope had been unsuccessful in his efforts to have Frederick the Wise elected emperor. Frederick himself, feeling that he could not afford the expenses incidental to the imperial office, had thrown his weight in favor of Charles, king of Spain. During the days of the Leipzig debate Charles was elected emperor.

This Charles, known to history as Charles V, had inherited the Austrian domains and Spain. As king of Spain he also ruled over the Netherlands, a large

part of Italy, and the parts of America discovered only twenty-nine years before by Columbus. Now that he had been elected also emperor of Germany, he ruled over a larger territory than any man since Charlemagne.

To this powerful monarch Pope Leo appealed for help in an attempt to bring Luther either to obedience or to the stake. Charles V was a devout Catholic, and Leo prevailed upon him to summon Luther before the Diet—the council of German rulers—which was to be held the next year in the city of Worms.

**11. The Diet of Worms •** Protected by the safe-conduct of the emperor, Luther started for Worms on April 2, 1521. Luther believed that he was going to his death. To Melanchthon, one of his colleagues at the university, he said at parting, "My dear brother, if I do not come back, if my enemies put me to death, you will go on teaching and standing fast in the truth; if you live, my death will matter little."

His journey was like a victory parade. Everywhere he went crowds lined the roads and streets to see the man who had dared to stand up for Germany against the pope, and who, so they thought, was going to his death for his faith.

At four o'clock in the afternoon of Wednesday, April 17, Luther appeared before the Diet. In the midst of a scene of pomp and splendor, before the throne of an emperor who was the most powerful to appear in many centuries, stood a poor and powerless priest, offspring of peasant parents. Charles V and Martin Luther saw each other for the first time.

Charles was at this time a youth of twenty-one. Luther, now thirty-seven

years old, was a man in the prime of life. He wore the black robe of an Augustinian monk. The crown of his head was newly shaven, according to the custom of priests, and was fringed with short, thick hair. At Luther's side stood his legal counsel, Jerome Schurf. Pointing to the books on a little table, an official asked Luther: "Are those your writings; and do you wish to retract them, or do you adhere to them and continue to assert them?"



*Religious News Service Photo*

The trunk of the famed Luther Elm in Worms, Germany, has been transformed into a lasting monument in honor of the sixteenth-century reformer. According to legend, the tree furnished shade for Luther when he was on the way to the fateful Diet of Worms in 1521. The trunk, dead since 1949, has been transformed by a German sculptor, G. Nonnenmacher, into a 36-foot-square bas-relief which shows Luther before the Diet.



*Historical Pictures Service—Chicago*

### Luther Before the Diet of Worms

Luther spoke. With precision he first repeated the two questions. Thereupon he answered the first question in the affirmative. The second question he answered by begging the emperor graciously to allow him time to think it over, in order that he might answer the question without injury to the Word of God and without peril to his soul.

The members of the Diet went into conference. After a short consultation it was announced that the emperor had decided to grant Luther's request. He was to give his answer in twenty-four hours. Then the meeting was adjourned.

**12. The Political Question Is Settled** • Luther's first appearance before the Diet had been brief and simple. But it had great historical significance.

The papacy during the last two hundred years had suffered many severe defeats in its struggle with the secular pow-

ers. Pope Leo X now wished the Diet of Worms to handle Luther's case in such a way that the old papal claim—that the spiritual (papal) authority is superior to the secular (royal and imperial) authority—would be recognized. In other words, Pope Leo X tried to bring down two birds with one stone. He tried to manipulate the handling of Luther's case by the Diet of Worms in such a way that suppression of heresy by the Diet would at the same time elevate papal authority above imperial authority.

The pope had excommunicated Luther. He wanted the Diet, that is to say really the emperor, to condemn and to punish Luther as a heretic without any further ado. He wanted the emperor, the secular ruler, to be merely a tool of the spiritual ruler, the pope. He wanted the emperor merely to execute the pope's orders without asking any questions. On the other hand, if the Diet first heard Luther, even

if it then did condemn him—and it was a foregone conclusion that it would—it would then do so not because the pope said so, but because the Diet itself decreed his condemnation. That is why the papal party did not want the emperor to give Luther a hearing.

Luther's request for time to think it over seemed reasonable and also entirely innocent. But it was far from innocent. His request for time involved the request to be heard the next day by the Diet. And that request was momentous. The Diet had been in session a long time before Luther's appearance. The papal party, under the leadership of the very skillful and crafty papal nuncio Aleander, had been working day and night, and had left no stone unturned to prevent Luther from being heard by the Diet. When the Diet decided to grant Luther's request, the pope lost his game.

On the political issue, the question was whether the pope or the emperor should be supreme. The Catholic emperor and all the German princes, also the Catholic princes, sided with Luther against the pope. Thus for one brief moment Martin Luther, a poor man, risen from total obscurity, and a heretic excommunicated by the pope, stood forth as the champion of the emperor and of a united German empire against the foreign Italian pope.

On the day of Luther's first appearance before the Diet the political question had

been settled. The religious question remained.

### 13. Luther's Second Appearance Before the Diet

The following day, Thursday, April 18, Luther appeared before the Diet for the second time. Dusk was gathering. Torches were lit. Their flames cast weird shadows in the now gloomy hall.

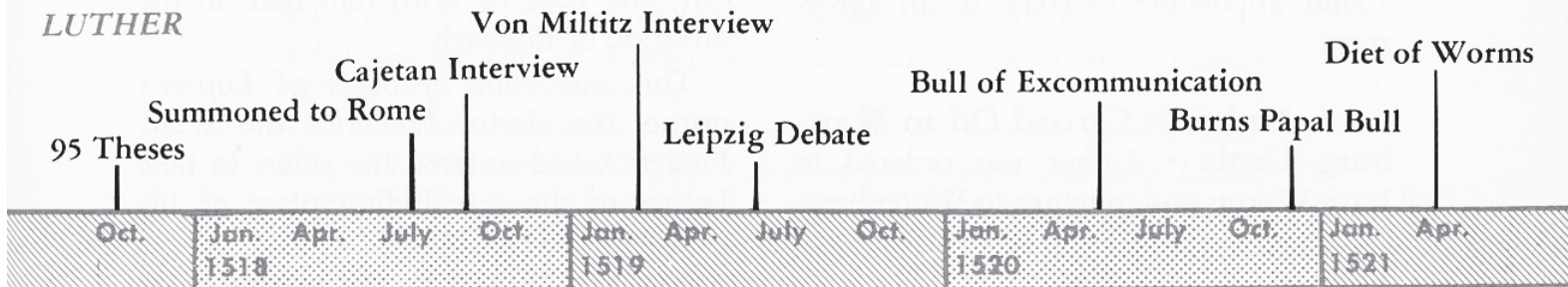
Many of those present took notes on what Luther said that day, but we have not a single complete account of Luther's address. All the accounts we have are only summaries. First Luther spoke in Latin. Then he was asked to repeat in German.

The hall was packed. The flaming torches gave out their heat. The ventilation was poor. The air was getting to be almost unbearably close.

When Luther had finished, the official told him that he had not spoken to the point. The question was whether he would recant or not. The emperor demanded a plain answer. Then Luther said, "If the emperor desires a plain answer, I will give it to him. It is impossible for me to recant unless I am proved to be wrong by the testimony of Scripture. My conscience is bound to the Word of God. It is neither safe nor honest to act against one's conscience. Here I stand. God help me. I cannot do otherwise."

The torches had burned down. The

## LUTHER





*Religious News Service Photo*

### **Luther Is Carried Off**

hall was getting dark. The emperor gave a sign that the meeting was over. He left his throne and went to his private apartments. The other members of the Diet also went to their lodgings.

Luther turned and left the tribunal. A number of Spaniards broke out into hootings. Then many of the German nobles and delegates from the towns formed a circle around Luther, and escorted him back to his lodgings.

Several conferences were held with Luther during the next few days, but it was found impossible to come to an agreement.

**14. Luther Is Carried Off to Wartburg Castle** • Luther was ordered to leave Worms and to return to Wittenberg.

He was forbidden to preach. It was planned that after the safe-conduct expired he would be seized and put to death as a pestilent heretic.

There is a very small gate in the wall of Worms. By that gate Luther left the city on the night of April 26. It is pointed out to tourists today as Luther's gate.

After a few days rumors spread that Luther had suddenly disappeared. Nobody seemed to know what had become of him. Luther's enemies rejoiced, but among his friends there was consternation. The great painter Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg wrote in his diary: "Luther, the God-inspired man, has been slain by the pope and his priests as our Lord was put to death by the priests in Jerusalem. O God, if Luther is dead, who can expound the Holy Gospel to us?" In Worms excitement ran high. The imperial court was in an uproar. Aleander, the papal nuncio, was told he would be murdered even if he were clinging to the emperor's bosom.

This is the true story of Luther's disappearance: On April 28 Luther reached Frankfort on the Main. On May 1 he reached Hersfeld, where he preached. On May 2 he entered Eisenach. The next day he preached there. On May 3 he rode through the beautiful forests of Möhra. On the morning of May 4 he preached in the open air. After dinner he continued his journey. And then, in the heart of the forest, five masked riders suddenly swept down upon him, lifted him out of the cart, and rode off with him back in the direction of Eisenach.

This was done by order of Luther's prince, the elector Frederick the Wise. Frederick had ordered the riders to take Luther to the safe hiding place of his



Wartburg Castle, famed refuge of Martin Luther in Eisenach, East Germany, has now come under the control of Dr. Karl Hossinger, known as a loyal member of the Socialist (Communist) Party in East Germany.

*Bildarchiv  
Foto Marburg*



castle, the Wartburg, whose wooded rocky heights overlooked the pretty little town of Eisenach. Here Luther stayed for ten months while the storm quieted. Writing occupied most of his time.

Luther was a volcano whose eruptions from 1517 to 1521 caused the quakes which convulsed the Church, first in Germany, but soon also in many other countries of western Europe.



1. *You will notice from this chapter that Luther's ideas were developing out of the conflict which was begun by the ninety-five theses. Which ideas now come into prominence? Why did these particular ones develop?*
2. *Questions 1 and 2 of the study aids of Chapter 21 are appropriate here also.*
3. *What political issues influenced the papal relation to Luther?*
4. *What were the results of the Leipzig debates?*
5. *Identify: Cejetan, Von Miltitz, the Wartburg, Luther's Table Talk.*
6. *Why did Luther use the press for his purposes? What did this use of popular appeal imply about the attitude of the people toward the papacy?*
7. *List the three great treatises of Luther and indicate the important thought of each one.*
8. *What was the significance of Luther's burning of the papal bull?*
9. *What was the Diet of Worms supposed to decide? Was this a Church meeting or a political meeting?*
10. *Why was Luther's request for time to rethink his position so important?*
11. *Why did Prince Frederick find it necessary to capture and hide Luther secretly? What would be involved if a public announcement that he had hidden Luther had been made?*

# *The Church*

## *Is Reformed in Germany*

1. *The Reformation*
2. *Luther Restores Christian Liberty*
3. *A Form of Church Government Is Developed*
4. *Materials for Study and Worship*
5. *Luther Has Many Helpers*

1. **The Reformation** • The events we have observed so far, centering around Luther's life, were, however, not the Reformation. They were things that led up to and paved the way for the Reformation.

What, then, was the Reformation? It was first of all a reformation of the Church. It consisted of changes for the better made in the Church. Every church teaches certain doctrines, and has certain forms of government, of worship, and of life. The changes for the better had to do

with every one of these various aspects of the Church.

But it was not only a change *in the Church*. The Reformation brought about certain changes also *outside* the Church. The Church deals with what is most fundamental in life. Men carry their religious convictions with them and reflect them in every phase of life. Consequently, what was first of all a reformation in the Church also wrought changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the nations which accepted its princi-

ples. The result has been that right down to our own day there is a vast difference in almost every way between Catholic and Protestant nations.

**2. Luther Restores Christian Liberty** • Luther's character was made up of strangely contradictory traits. He was at the same time very *radical* and very *conservative*. Luther was the man who was to bring about a tremendous change in the Church; but he was very slow in discarding the old and substituting the new. At first he made only a few changes. In this he showed great wisdom and tact.

Luther's followers were not always as wise as he was. While he was in hiding in the Wartburg Castle, some of his followers in Wittenberg were trying to make many and radical changes. This led to confusion, conflict, and disorder. As a result, Luther left his hiding place against the advice of Elector Frederick the Wise; and in spite of the fact that he was under the sentence of death, he returned to Wittenberg. For eight successive days he preached, and thereby restored order.

Step by step many important changes were introduced. The papacy was rejected. The distinction between clergy and laity was discarded. Said Luther: "All believers are priests. There are only two and not seven sacraments. The sacraments are not indispensable to salvation." Thus Luther rang the death knell of what is the very heart of the Roman system. He broke the yoke of Rome under which believers had groaned for centuries, and established Christian liberty. For us who have never been under the yoke of Rome it is impossible to realize what this meant for the Christians of Luther's day. Praying to the saints and to Mary was done

away with, as were also the worship of images, the veneration of relics, pilgrimages, religious processions, holy water, outward asceticism, monasticism, prayers for the dead, and belief in purgatory.

While Luther changed many things, his conservative nature led him to adopt the principle that everything in the old Church that was not directly forbidden in the Bible should be retained. For example, the side altars and the images were removed, but the Lutheran Church kept the main altar with candles and picture of Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice, and that to offer a sacrifice a priest is required. It teaches that when the priest pronounces the sacramental words, the bread and wine are miraculously changed into the actual body and blood of Christ. This is called the doctrine of *transubstantiation* (a change in substance). The priests alone are allowed to partake of the wine, for fear the laity might spill some of it and shed Christ's precious blood anew. The laity is allowed to receive only the bread, in the form of a wafer called the *host*, which is placed upon the tongue by the priest.

Luther denied the sacrificial character of the Lord's Supper. He denied that every time the Supper is celebrated Christ is offered anew upon a thousand altars as a sacrifice. He taught that Christ was offered once for all as a sacrifice upon the cross. There was therefore no place in the Church for priests. Since Luther's day Protestant churches have had ministers of the Word, rather than priests; and at the Lord's Supper all members partake of both the bread and the wine.

Although Luther denied that the bread

is changed into the body of Christ, he nevertheless taught that Christ's body *is* present in the Lord's Supper because, said he, since Christ's ascension, His body, like His godhead, is present everywhere.

**3. A Form of Church Government Is Developed** • Luther was not greatly concerned about the form of church organization or government. The form of government which he did adopt was not first of all based upon the teachings of Scripture, but was developed to meet the conditions within the Church at that time.

Luther introduced a system of church visitors. When these visitors inspected the various churches it became evident to everybody that there was an urgent need for reformation. The Roman clergy had shamefully neglected their duties. Both people and priests were almost unbelievably ignorant of religious truth. Most priests were totally unable to preach. They could only mumble masses. As a result of church inspection by the visitors, a set of *Regulations* was drawn up for the guidance of church life.

The Lutheran Church does not have bishops. The denomination has officers who are called superintendents. They exercise somewhat the same functions as bishops. The congregation is the basic unit of Lutheran government, which is usually administered by a church council consisting of the pastor and a number of elected lay officers.

The most characteristic feature of Lutheran church government is the place it gives to the State. Luther to a great extent adopted the principle that the State should be above the Church. He did that largely under the influence of circumstances. His own personal safety he owed,

humanly speaking, entirely to the protection of his prince, the Elector of Saxony. Likewise it was possible for the Protestant Church to exist only in those German lands which were ruled by princes who had accepted Protestantism. Due to this circumstance Luther gave these Protestant princes a great deal of authority in the affairs of the Church. For a short time Luther hoped that there would arise in Germany a national Protestant Church embracing all the German people. That hope, however, was never realized. Some German lands remained Roman Catholic. Even the Protestant Church in Germany was divided into a number of territorial churches.

In various ways and under varying circumstances the Church in the course of the sixteenth century was reformed also in the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In these countries the Church adopted the Lutheran type of Reformation.

The victory of the Reformation in Denmark and especially in Sweden was going to be of decisive importance in the wars of religion which followed the Reformation.

**4. Materials for Study and Worship** • While Luther was in hiding in the Wartburg for ten months—from May 4, 1521, to March 3, 1522—he did not spend his time in idleness. He translated the Bible into the German language, the language of his people. In the Roman Catholic Church the Bible was studied only by the church leaders and scholars. Luther held that every man has the right and the duty to read and study the Bible for himself. In the church services Latin language was replaced by German.



Philip Gendreau

### Martin Luther in His Study

Luther also did a great deal for education. To relieve the dense ignorance of the people he labored tirelessly for the establishment of schools everywhere. In order that the children might become thoroughly grounded in evangelical doctrine, Luther wrote his *Shorter Catechism*. It was only a very small book; yet it was one of the great Reformer's most important works. Luther's *Shorter Catechism* was the doctrinal dish on which generation after generation of Lutheran children were reared. The new Church also needed a new hymnbook. One of the most remarkable things about this very extraordinary man Luther is that in the midst of his terrific combat with Rome and when he was already forty years old, he blossomed forth as a poet and wrote many of the hymns for the new hymnbook. A large number of Luther's hymns

have no great poetic beauty. But he wrote one hymn that will live forever. That is "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott," known to us as "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Luther retained the idea that there is only one, true, visible Church. He did not think of himself and his followers as having left the Church. The Romanists were the ones who had departed from the New Testament Church. Luther did not feel that he had established a new church. All that he had done was to reform the Church that had become deformed.

It was considered desirable that the Lutheran Church should present to the world an official statement in which it declared its faith. Such a statement was drawn up, and handed in to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. This statement of the Lutheran faith has become known as the *Augsburg Confession*. It was the first confession or

creed to be formulated since the ancient Church formulated the Christian faith in the creeds of the Ecumenical Councils.

The Augsburg Confession did not replace the creeds of the ancient Church. The Lutheran Church believed wholeheartedly in the doctrines of the ancient Church as formulated in the Apostles' Creed, and in the Creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon. The Augsburg Confession was based upon and included them, but at the same time it enlarged upon and expanded them.

### 5. Luther Has Many Helpers •

Luther soon had many helpers. His closest friend and most helpful co-worker was Philipp Melancthon. In 1518, at the extremely youthful age of twenty-one, he had become a professor of Greek in Wittenberg University. He was therefore associated with the Reformation movement practically from the beginning. While Luther was in the Wartburg, Melancthon published the first systematic presentation of Luther's ideas under the title of *Loci Communes*. He was one of the most learned men of his day, and was called

the Preceptor of Germany. The Quiet Reformer, as he was called, exercised a moderating influence on late Lutheranism.

Another friend and valuable assistant was Spalatin, the private secretary of the Elector of Saxony. Surprisingly, in spite of Prince Frederick's high regard and friendship for Luther, the prince and Luther never met. Spalatin acted as intermediary between the two.

On June 13, 1525, Luther received a very special helper, for on that day he married Catherine von Bora. She had been a nun. Luther had been a monk-priest.

On becoming a monk or a nun a person must take the vow not to marry. For more than three hundred years it had been one of the greatest laws in the Roman Church that a priest must not marry. This practice among priests of refraining from marrying is known as *celibacy* of the clergy.

When Luther married, many priests, monks, and nuns followed his example; thus another step was taken in the Reformation movement away from Rome.



1. *What are some of the differences between the Roman Catholic countries and the Protestant countries?*
2. *Why did Luther's church regulations call for an extensive educational program?*
3. *Why was Luther's form of church government closely related to the civil government?*
4. *Luther wrote over fifty hymns. Can you find some of these, other than "A Mighty Fortress"? Notice that he wrote both words and music to many of these hymns.*
5. *Identify: Augsburg Confession, Loci Communes.*
6. *You will find the life of Philipp Melancthon very interesting. Find some facts about this scholar that show his influence in Luther's life.*
7. *Luther had a very happy family life. Find some of the letters that Luther wrote to his wife or to his children. They will give you an interesting insight into the life of Luther. (See Schaff's History of the Christian Church, Volume VII, p. 464.)*