

# THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

*By*

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## *Foreword . . .*

The Lutheran churches of this country are committed to bring a ministry of Word and Sacraments to students enrolled in institutions of higher learning. An important aspect of this responsibility is the ministry of teaching, for these churches are well aware that students should grow in their appreciation of the Christian faith and heritage as they progress in their understanding of secular knowledge.

Church colleges have certain course requirements in the field of religion for graduation. In public institutions, however, it is possible for a student to complete his academic work without having taken a single course in religion. Elective credit courses in religion are being offered in, or in connection with, about one hundred publicly supported colleges and universities. And yet, such courses do not begin to fill the need.

Consequently, the churches have been offering non-credit courses as an integral part of their campus ministries and programs. These courses are being given in student centers and student chapels, and thousands of students are enrolled each year.

*The Lutheran Reformation* has been produced as a syllabus by the Commission on College and University Work of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Division of College and University Work of the National Lutheran Council. Obviously, it can be only an introduction to a subject which has produced whole libraries of technical and popular titles.

The authors are highly qualified for their task. Dr. Jerald C. Brauer is Dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan is Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Yale Divinity School. The annotated bibliography in this printing was prepared by Mr. Richard Luman, A.M., Instructor in Church History in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

It is hoped that those who use this syllabus will be stimulated to delve more deeply into the theological and historical literature of the sixteenth century reformation.

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Chicago, Illinois  
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# I. The Age

Somebody has remarked that mankind comes into the world as into a furnished room. Most of the basic things in both personal and social life are simply given, and one must work with them. One does not choose his parents, geographical location, or the time when he shall live, and he is placed in the midst of a society already formed by long traditions and usage. Here one has to live out his life and make his contributions, to be molded by his age, and to help mold it.

Because of the obvious fact that the age, or civilization, or total culture is much greater than any one individual, many scholars argue that either physical or intellectual environment, or both, determine history. The individual is of little importance. This view contends, for example, that there would have been a reformation even had there never been a Martin Luther. If not Luther, then somebody else would have provided the impetus to break through Roman Catholic control.

But historic actuality points to a figure—Martin Luther, and because of the work of this man and of others such as Zwingli, Cranmer, and Calvin, there was a reformation of a certain kind. There might well have been a reformation without Luther, but it certainly would not have been the kind of reformation which occurred under his leadership. It is this peculiar reformation which has helped form western civilization. We are not interested in what might have been but in what was and is. Thus we must take seriously both the given conditions which determine the course of history in any epoch and also the unique twists and turns given to historical destiny by men operating creatively with some freedom.

Certainly Luther could be the reformer he was only because he was born and worked at a certain time in history. The process of history does move in mysterious ways to certain points of fulness when a crisis is reached and a new turn is taken. But no such turn is inevitable, though it is always a possibility. Divine Providence uses events, movements, and forces to His own purposes. In order to understand the crisis of the late medieval period, let us look at the age in which the Reformation was born.

During the papacy of Innocent III (1198-1216) the Roman Church achieved a high degree of control over western civilization. All of life was worked out under the overarching view of life held by the Church. There was one socio-religious body—the Christian body—with two supposedly equal sides, Church and state. But, of these two, the Church as the embodiment of spiritual power was superior over the state as guardian of the temporal power. Innocent made

and broke kings and emperors. He took England away from King John and gave it back as a fief.

The unity of life found its center in the Church as the guardian of revelation and as the proclaimer of reconciliation between all the tensions and conflicts in life. She was the bearer of God's law as revealed in Scripture and tradition, and so she was the interpreter of God's law as revealed in nature. All questions in law, in economics, in politics, or in morality were to be decided according to God's law as interpreted by the Church. Thus it was difficult to find any genuine or legitimate independence for the state or secular affairs. The Roman Church was co-terminous with western civilization and produced what some have chosen to call the greatest Christian civilization ever achieved.

Nevertheless, even at the high water mark of this so-called Christian civilization, the thirteenth century, there were present many non-Christian forces and many conflicts or tensions which could not be resolved by the law of God as interpreted by the Church. In fact, many of the things which passed for the law of God were nothing but the divinizing of certain medieval customs. For example, in economics, the Church was greatly concerned that justice be done for all classes of men—the princes and nobility, the rising merchants, the guild masters, the journeymen, and the peasants or serfs. However, under the system of the so-called just price, as much injustice was done to the lower classes, particularly the journeymen or apprentices in the guilds and the peasants on the land, as in any economic system where no attention was paid to the laws of God as directed by the Church. The same could be asserted concerning both local and international politics.

In addition to those inherent medieval conflicts that Rome never conquered or transformed, there emerged at this time an entirely new set of disruptive forces which slowly destroyed even the external facade of the so-called unified Christian western civilization. Irresistibly these forces moved on to break the domination of the papacy over the totality of life. When Rome found she could not subdue or conquer them, she attempted to manipulate or outmaneuver them in diplomatic negotiations. But, at that very point in history when Rome needed her most persuasive powers in order to cope with such things as the rising national state, the changing economy, and hostile new ideas, she was caught in the trap of internal strife and cursed with a series of weak popes.

Through two great blunders, the papacy did more damage to itself and to the Church than anything done by external forces. The first of these was the so-called Babylonian cap-

tivity of the Church when the papacy moved away from Rome and resided in Avignon (1309-1377), a territory under the domination of France. This was a terrible shock to western Europe, and the papacy lost moral prestige through this blunder. How was it possible for a pope to abandon the eternal city, to leave behind the holy relics, the very bones of the apostles Paul and Peter, to leave the most ancient Christian churches? It seemed to cut the Church off from her very roots and to subject her in an ignominious way to the greedy hands of an upstart monarch, Philip the Fair, of France.

It is remarkable that the papacy did not become a mere tool of France, but somehow it managed to retain some degree of integrity. However, on too many occasions, the papacy succumbed to French interests while at the same time it hounded the Holy Roman Empire almost to destruction. Meanwhile, the expense of maintaining an entirely new center for the papacy drove it to a careful scrutiny of its funds and compelled it to seek new ways of raising money. The result was a growth in systematic plundering of the various national churches in order to raise funds. This period became known as one of the most avaricious periods in the history of the Church, yet it also marked the shift of the financial basis of the papacy from a land basis to a money basis. In a new economic age, the support of the Church had to be collected in a new way. This was somewhat of a shock to many simple, pious people.

The second great blunder that undercut the moral power of the papacy was the Great Schism (1378-1417) when Europe was horrified by the scandal of two and at times three men all claiming to be the legitimate vicar of Christ on earth. In 1378, shortly after the papacy returned to Rome, a new pope had to be elected. With the Roman crowd crying for action, the cardinals elected an Italian, Urban VI, as pope. Several months later the French cardinals, a majority, decided they had been pressured into the election which was, therefore, void. They proceeded to elect one of their men as pope, Clement VII. Before this split or schism was healed, there were three men claiming to be pope.

The papacy suffered irreparable damage from this strange spectacle. Nations lined up behind the various popes. Each lacked sufficient support and had to depend heavily on those from whom he drew support. For the first time since the papal domination in the west, European nations and people were confronted with divided loyalties. With all popes claiming full loyalty and rights, the question naturally arose which one was right? If none was right, why was any necessary? Furthermore, if each depended for existence upon national support how could any pope claim control over those who kept him in office? Thus the whole moral basis of the papacy was subjected to serious questioning.

One of the most difficult problems with which to deal was how to solve the dilemma of several popes. If the pope was

superior over temporal powers, and he had so claimed for centuries; if the pope was not subject to the control of his fellow bishops but was lord over all of them, and he had so claimed for centuries; how then could the papacy be corrected or reformed by anybody? Was nothing of higher authority in the Church?

An answer given by the universities and advanced both by high prelates and princes, was that general councils of the Church were higher than the pope and could, therefore, solve the problem of two or three popes claiming ultimate loyalty. John Gerson (d.1429), Peter d'Ailly (d.1420), and Nicholas of Clemanges (d.1429) were typical of those men called conciliarists because they stressed the rights and privileges of church councils.

On the whole, conciliarists did not want to deny papal supremacy; they merely wanted to set specific limits to that supremacy by denying papal absolutism. The pope was thought of as a king who ruled supreme but not alone; he ruled in and through assemblies of the Church. These assemblies were elected by the clergy within the various nations, and so they represented Christians from all lands. In council, they were the final organ of authority, and when a pope went wrong or the Church had a situation such as the schism, councils had the right to depose all the popes and elect a new one or to find some other solution.

Many conciliarists were even willing to admit that councils had erred in the past, but they argued that it was possible for the errors of one council to be corrected by another. Scripture and previous councils were now the source of authority rather than past or present decisions by the papacy. Three special councils were convoked to deal with three burning issues — the schism in the papacy, the heresy of John Huss, and the much needed reform in the practices of the Church. The first council held at Pisa in 1409 accomplished little, and as a consequence, there were three popes. The second, held at Constance 1414-1418, put Hus to death and solved the Great Schism but did nothing about reform. The third, Basel 1431-1438, attempted to deal with reform but made little progress as the new pope, Martin V, had turned his back on councils and reasserted the supremacy of the papacy.

Thus the schism was healed but little or no reform took place in the Church and the conciliar movement was all but suppressed. It was not until the Reformation that it reasserted itself. During Constance a decree *Frequens*, 1417, was issued to guarantee the calling of future councils to serve as a check on papal absolutism and to assure periodic reform of the Church. As it said, "frequent holding of general councils is one of the chief means of cultivating the Lord's field. It serves to uproot the briars, thorns, and thistles of heresies, errors, and schisms, to correct excesses, to restore what is marred, and to cause the Lord's vine to bring forth fruit of the richest fertility."

The rejection of all such ideas was made absolute by the papacy in the bull *Execrabilis* issued by Pius II in 1460. It stated, "An execrable abuse, unheard of in former ages, has grown up in our time. Some persons, imbued with the spirit of rebellion . . . to escape the consequences of their misdeeds, presume to appeal to a future council from the Roman pontiff, the vicar of Jesus Christ . . . see how contrary this is to the sacred canons and how injurious to Christendom . . . we condemn such appeals and denounce them as erroneous and detestable."

While the papacy was busy using conciliarism to re-establish its supremacy, though denying it any continuing rule in the life of the Church, grave abuses in church life continued and were strengthened, hostile forces on the outside, too, were daily growing in strength. Reform had to wait while the papacy re-established its absolute supremacy over the Church. Meanwhile, having lost a good deal of prestige through the Babylonian Captivity, the Great Schism, and the continued need for reform, the papacy was unable to deal adequately with the new rising forces.

Nationalism was to plague Christianity in general and the papacy in particular throughout modern history. The rise of the national states such as Spain, France, or England was a serious threat to the universal western sway of Rome. Nevertheless, Rome by her greed, hatred, and presumption, helped to promote the very enemy that almost proved her undoing. In politics, the one major political factor which prevented the rapid rise of nationalism was the Holy Roman Empire. It represented universalism in politics and found its strength not in a single powerful national state but in a single powerful dynastic family which held together a variety of national states in a loose empire. The Holy Roman Empire attempted to hold together under one crown part of Italy, the Lowlands, Austria, Hungary, parts of Poland, and most of the German territories.

The papacy feared the Empire as its chief competitor for the loyalties of Europe, and as a force which it was unable to control. Continuous conflict between the papacy and the empire marked the medieval period. In 1250 Innocent IV saw to it that Frederick II went to his grave with little hope for the future of his family in the Empire. Rome was bent on the total subjugation of her enemy, and succeeded in achieving her goal so far as a powerful ruling family in the Empire was concerned. But the passing of the Empire as a political force was but one more factor encouraging the rise of powerful national states. There was no unusual political force left to check the national spirit; Rome had destroyed the political powers of the Empire.

Nevertheless, many other factors contributed to the rise of national states and their assertion of temporal supremacy as against the temporal claims of the papacy. The Crusades killed off many of the great feudal princes who stood in the way of a single prince consolidating his hold on a national

group. The rise of towns and a money economy gave the national prince new allies and a new form of wealth independent from his feudal supporters. Gunpowder and firearms made possible national armies rather than bands of soldiers borrowed from various feudal barons. Humanism and a renewed interest in classical learning provided the national states with a body of law which could stand against the supremacy of the Church's canon law.

With the breakdown of universal political control, the papacy had to find other means of dealing with political realities. In Germany, with the destruction of the Hohenstaufen family in 1250, each territorial prince became a local national leader and unlike France, England, and Spain, Germany was not united into a single political state although it developed a nationalistic spirit. The papacy was now forced to deal with all the large or smaller princes ruling absolutely in their respective national or territorial states. Little wonder that when the Reformation came the papacy found no political instruments to check it effectually. The national state or prince might be for or against it; there was no universal defense or opposition. In its dealings with these many national states the papacy employed diplomacy. It drew up treaties called Concordats which specified the rights of the Church and the state in all matters where their mutual interests clashed or coincided. Though still claiming ultimate spiritual authority even over all temporal states, the papacy admitted implicitly through the Concordats that it was dealing with equal powers.

Meanwhile, a fresh vital attitude of the heart and mind was developing, and this new spirit, called the Renaissance, marked profound changes in the lives of the people and in the papacy itself. It was both a continuation of certain forces inherent in medieval life and a fresh discovery of classical Greek and Roman civilization. These two forces fused to produce a new attitude towards art, literature, philosophy, religion, science, politics, and economics. Every facet of life was touched. Briefly put, the Renaissance re-discovered the centrality of man and nature in life. The traditional views of life inculcated by the medieval Roman Catholic Church were now either openly or implicitly denied. Not the doctrines and morality of the Church but the fresh exciting experiences of humanity were to provide the basis for life. The divine still controlled life but not through the Church or the hierarchy—the divine was found expressing itself creatively through the human spirit and through the richness and mystery of nature. The divine in man was to control life and not the divine expressed through the Church.

Rome's reaction to the Renaissance was mixed. At first it greatly feared the praise of man's creative capacities apart from the control of the Church. It was suspicious of the emphasis on sex and the human passions, and it deplored the usage of classical literature which embodied that spirit. Also,

it decried the Renaissance assertion of human autonomy in politics and economics, for if man lived according to the law of human nature he denied the ultimate laws of God revealed to the Church.

Slowly but surely the papacy succumbed to the spirit of the Renaissance. On the one hand it continued to deny the assertion of human autonomy, but on the other hand it employed the artists of the Renaissance to decorate and embellish the churches and chapels of the Church with an art that was the bearer of this new spirit. More than one pope conceived of his role as a Renaissance Prince patronizing the arts and fighting to expand his temporal territories in Italy in order to have a more lavish setting for the papacy.

The religious and spiritual concerns of the Church were buried under the pressure to obtain more and more money to build magnificent St. Peter's in Rome, to decorate it and other buildings, and to equip armies to fight Italian wars. Nicholas V (1447-1455) bent his whole energy to making the papacy the chief patron of the Renaissance. Under him the Vatican library was founded and Rome became a vast "factory of translations." Alexander VI (1492-1503) was more concerned with the political fortunes of his infamous son Caesar Borgia than he was with the religious role of the papacy. Julius II (1503-1513) acted as the model of a typical Renaissance prince and was famed for his warlike abilities; he strengthened the papal claims to the territories immediately surrounding Rome. Lorenzo de Medici, the famous patron of the Renaissance, was the father of Leo X (1513-1521) who was so busy enjoying the artistic benefits of the papacy that he had neither the interest nor the inclination to take seriously the Reformation when it occurred.

In itself it was certainly not bad that the Church promoted the art and studies of the Renaissance. But, when the task of the Church was completely ignored or subverted to serve this new movement then something was drastically wrong. Bribery and selling of offices were encouraged by the papacy to obtain large sums for artistic enterprises. Luxury, pomp, greed, avarice, and immorality were to be found at the heart of Christendom centering in the papacy itself. The Church was over-ripe for reform. The Italians, caught in the spirit of the Renaissance, might not have been too troubled by the condition of the Church, but the northern European peoples, who took much more seriously the claims and leadership of Rome, were deeply disturbed.

The Renaissance made its way northward at a slower pace, and when it arrived it found its greatest expression not so much in art or in the new-found human autonomy as in literary criticism and a fresh appreciation of philosophy and Scripture through the use both of original languages and of modern vernacular translations. Under the leadership of men like Reuchlin, Colet, and Erasmus, northern Europeans were led to a reappraisal of biblical literature and to an historical study of the Church and the papacy. This was to

become a fruitful source of reform in the life of the Church. Out of it was to come the biblical translations into the native tongue of the European peoples, and through it the means were found to brand false the historical claims of the papacy to absolute supremacy.

Meanwhile other forces for good continued to operate. In spite of the degradation of the papacy and of most sections of the Church, the Gospel was still being preached occasionally, the sacraments were administered, the poor were cared for, and a vast subsoil existed out of which reform could spring. Shortly before the Reformation, the Church was marked by this obvious contradiction of extremes. On the one hand, the papacy did not hesitate to use the Sacramental system to extort more and more money for its various needs. Superstition was not only condoned but in some cases encouraged if it helped control those who had to support the papacy. Flamboyant public demonstrations of the faith were common. And all this was not even disturbing to the Renaissance men busy building a magnificent Rome.

On the other hand, there were faithful parish priests quietly working among their people. There were conscientious bishops and laymen disturbed by the corruption and indifference of the papacy. In the homes of many common people, the Creed and Lord's Prayer were still taught, hymns were sung, and people were found faithful. If this were not so it would not have been possible for Luther to receive the spontaneous response which he experienced when he called for the reform of the Church in head and members.

In addition to the continuation of the Christian life in quiet and unpretentious ways, the vitality of the faith crying for reform was manifest in a variety of striking ways. In England, John Wycliffe (1320-1384), disgusted with the claims of the papacy and the practice of the popes, particularly during the Great Schism, rethought the entire concept of the Church, the role of the papacy and the hierarchy. He came to the radical conclusion that the pope was in no sense the head of the Church in a representative or any other way. The Church is composed only of the elect of God and not primarily of all those properly ordained. Those men who give evidence of grace in their lives are the elect and are to be followed, and those without such grace are not to be followed. Thus it would be possible for the Church to consist only of lay people. The prince should see to it that the wealth and the pretense of Rome are set aside in order that Christ might rule the Church for purely spiritual ends.

Wycliffe also attacked the Roman sacramental system and advocated the Bible as the ultimate source of authority to be read in the native language of various people. As a consequence of this work, a movement in England called Lollardy arose; John Huss preached and wrote about Wycliffe's idea in Bohemia. The Lollards went among the poor reciting by memory from an English translation portions of Scripture produced by Wycliffe's followers. So powerful did the move-



ment become that the English King Henry IV felt compelled to move against it with force and, starting in 1401, Lollards were put to death and the movement driven underground.

In Bohemia, John Huss advocated Wycliffe's idea with such success that he developed a powerful following. His ideals for reform combined with Czech nationalism pleading for a complete reform both political and religious. Wycliffe was too powerful to be touched and died a natural death in 1384, but Huss, granted a safe conduct to the Council of Constance, was betrayed by the emperor and prelates and was burned at the stake in 1415. Czech national feeling was enraged by this act and central Europe was plunged into a series of wars that were to rage for almost a century. Thus the feeling for reform ran high in Europe.

Other symptoms of vital piety just before the Reformation were to be found in the various mystics and the groups that developed out of them. In face of the secular-minded papacy and prelates, the Church developed at this time a large number of men and women who lived lives of deep piety and devotion. Though faithful sons and daughters of the Church, they stressed the union that existed between Christ and the believer as the central fact of the Christian life. Love, devotion, and service, not wealth, pomp, and glory, were the marks of the Christian life.

In Germany, a series of great mystics arose. Outstanding were John Tauler (d.1361) and Henry Sus (d.1366). In the Lowlands, John Ruysbroeck (d.1381) and Gerhard Groote (d.1384) formed a lay brotherhood through their preaching. This group known as the Brethren of the Common Life embodied in practice the highest ideals of the pre-Reformation mystics. They stressed preaching in the vernacular, service in love to orphans and poor, teaching the young, and looked for the imminent return of Christ. Perhaps the finest example of their piety is to be found in the book coming out of their group and ascribed to Thomas a Kempis (d.1471), *The Imitation of Christ*.

In addition to the mystics, further examples of dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of Christianity and advocates of a new spirituality and reform were to be found among a series of outstanding preachers. The most famous of these was Savonarola, who was put to death in 1497 at the insistence of the papacy which could not stand his sharp criticism of its greed, deceit, and unspirituality. At one time, his fiery preaching won most of Florence to his following, and led to temporary reforms in morals and customs. John Geiler of Strassbourg (d.1510) was another great preacher who advocated reforms in moral and social customs. People came from far and wide to hear him.

Thus, on the eve of the Reformation, there were numerous men dissatisfied with the worldliness of the papacy. Some

advanced Scripture as the supreme basis of authority in the Church as against the pope and his interpretation of tradition. Others attacked the hierarchy, the misuse of the sacramental system, and some attacked the abuse of selling indulgences. Not a few men stressed the distinction between the visible and invisible Church, and decried the false position of the papacy. All this was fermenting at the same time the national states were beginning to feel their new born strength. Meanwhile the invigorating spirit of the Renaissance was raising questions concerning the prerogatives of the papacy. But before the Reformation could emerge someone had to appear on the scene with the religious conviction and insights which alone could produce a theological and religious movement which would strike at the center of the corruption and move out from there to influence all of life.

## QUESTIONS

1. What was both the strength and weakness of the so-called Christian civilization of the medieval synthesis?
2. Is such a thing as a "Christian Civilization" possible? If so, what makes it specifically Christian? If not, what is the importance of Christian faith for civilization?
3. To what an extent was the papacy responsible itself for the disintegration of its "ideal" civilization?
4. What was the significance both of the attempt and of the failure of conciliarism? How was it important for the Reformation?
5. Evaluate the role of nationalism in the disintegration of the medieval ideal.
6. Can you say, as some Roman Catholic historians, that the Reformation was primarily responsible for the rise of nationalism?
7. What was the relation of the papacy to the Renaissance?
8. Distinguish between the southern and the northern Renaissance and their respective relations to the Church.
9. What were some positive forces preparing for the Reformation? Why is Wycliffe called the "morning star of the Reformation?"
10. In view of the preparation evident before the Reformation, would there have been the Reformation without Luther?

## II. Luther the Man

In the fulness of time, a man appeared out of the age who both reflected the age and yet broke through it. What kind of man was this reformer Martin Luther? Enemies show no hesitation in denouncing him as a minion of the devil, a rebellious monk who shattered the unity of the Church that he might indulge in the lusts of the flesh—a strange indictment from those whose leaders oftentimes indulged in licentiousness but never found it necessary to destroy the unity of the western Christendom. These same men stand convinced that Luther was profoundly immoral, thoroughly depraved, obsessed by hates, fears, drink, and the sexual impulse. He supposedly came from a family of drunkards and disorderly men, and was himself psychopathic.

On the opposite extreme are those who praise Luther as the paragon of all virtues, a prophet of God and a theological genius. Some single out his work of reaffirming the centrality of Scripture and of founding pure Christian doctrine as the true measure of his greatness. Others are more interested in the young Luther whose personal religious faith was so profound that it shattered the chains of Roman institutionalism and reasserted the primacy of the converted Christian in small convinced groups. Moderns delighted in calling him the founder of modern individualism and liberty. Did he not defy both emperor and pope with the bold assertion of the sacredness of the individual conscience? Was he not the one who swept away all mediators between God and man?

The interpretations of the man Luther are almost as numerous as the works written about him. Several thousand books and monographs have been written on Luther in almost every modern language. He himself produced a vast body of literature. Little wonder that it is extremely difficult to find a simple, clear, and objectively correct picture of the man. Two things are abundantly clear both to his enemies and to his admirers. Luther was a giant figure in history, one of the keys to modern western civilization. And, Luther was a complex and complicated man. Perhaps this is true of any genius who is motivated by a simple yet profound conviction which reflects itself in everything he says and does and so many times appears contradictory.

For example, the very things which draw many men to Luther, repel others. His full humanity expressed in a love for music, for dance, for children and family life, and his ability to participate in all the common joys of humanity, repel those who conceive of the essence of religious life in terms of celibacy, poverty, and obedience. Luther felt he could accept all these things as free gifts of God, he could

participate in them both for their own sake and as a means of service to his fellow human beings. He was fully a child of his age (witness his severe and uncouth language against certain enemies) yet he was transformed by his religious experience into a man of a new age—the Reformation.

Luther does not belong to the so-called liberals, the seventeenth century orthodox, the children of the enlightenment, or the pietists. Certainly he is not the man portrayed by his Roman enemies. He stands forth as one grasped by the redemptive love and forgiveness of Christ Jesus; as a consequence, he was driven to break through the Roman perversions of the Gospel, and in so doing he unconsciously let loose a flood that was to change western civilization. As he said, God had put blinders on him as on a horse and had driven him he knew not where. In fact, Luther felt that had he known where he was to go, he probably would have been unwilling to go, but so God works out His will in history.

In order to understand the man Martin Luther and why he became the reformer he did, it will be necessary to look briefly at his background, home, and education. In a very real sense, the child is father of the man. Born November 10, 1483, in Eisleben, Luther was taken to Mansfeld the following year. There his father, a poor struggling but conscientious laborer, raised himself by sheer industry from being a copper miner to being a part owner in a little foundry. Luther was the second son in the family of eight children. There was nothing remarkable about his home life. As was the case with most medieval peasants, Gross-Hans Luther had a long and terrible economic struggle in order to get ahead. Though his progress was never great, he achieved some little security. Meanwhile, the children were subjected to a very stern upbringing. Typical of the age, the switch and beatings were the most common way to raise a family, and young Martin received his share.

There was nothing unusual about the religious convictions of his family. His parents were God-fearing but certainly not unusually devout. As most children of his day, he learned the Creed, Commandments, and Lord's prayer at home. Witchcraft was taken for granted throughout Europe at this time, and young Martin had ample opportunity to witness the mischief and grief of evil spirits, and he soon learned the marvelous power of the Church to control the demons. Activity of the devils and demons was recognized as much as a reality in his day as is psychopathic maladjustment in the twentieth century. Luther never forgot the early days of poverty, the harsh treatment yet genuine concern on

the part of his parents, and he carried over a good many typical German peasant superstitions of his day.

For one year he attended a local school in Mansfeld, and then he went away to Magdeburg and studied in a school operated by the Brethren of the Common Life. There he had to help pay his way by singing with a little choir group that went about receiving alms for their efforts. Even this was typical of the day. Luther's gifts and interest in music had been aroused at Mansfeld and were now increased at Magdeburg. Also, in this town he beheld a sight that was firmly etched on his mind, and which he recalled many years later. One of the great princes of the day had entered the Franciscan order and went to extremes in mortifying his body. Luther as a boy saw this mendicant prince, a ghost of a man, yet a truly holy man by monastic standards. Nevertheless, this appeared not to have affected Martin's religious zeal at the time.

Luther went to Eisenach in 1497 where he experienced one of the happiest periods in his life. He attended St. George's school under an excellent master, John Trebonius. There he excelled in Latin and took great delight in his studies. Meanwhile, his voice attracted the attention of a wealthy merchant's wife, and young Martin was soon staying in their home and acting as a supervisor of their young son. The Schalbe family was one of the most pious in Eisenach, and young Luther was taken by the earnestness of the family. It is probably here that he first learned to take religion really seriously.

Having completed his work at Eisenach, it was determined to send young Martin to an outstanding university. In 1501 he was in Erfurt where he was to remain until 1505. He quickly passed his bachelor's examinations in 1502 and proceeded to the master's work. Here his training was typically medieval, following the school of Occam. He was trained in Aristotle's rhetoric, logic, and poetics, and he participated in weekly dialectical debates. Thus the instrument of the mind was sharpened and prepared for its task. While Luther spoke disparagingly of the content of his education, though even this influenced him more than he would admit, he was always grateful for the methodical way it taught him to think and prepared him to engage in useful polemic.

Certainly the fact that he was trained under the Occam nominalists, helps account for his dissatisfaction with the traditional medieval scholastic systems of Thomas Aquinas or Duns Scotus. Occam's insistence that human reason cannot attain to the knowledge of divine truth or faith led to the elevation of churchly dogma as the only source of certainty in matters religious. While the Occamist critique of reason was employed by Luther, he never felt at home with its conclusions. In order to make certain the role of dogma in life, the Occamists asserted the unlimited quality of the human

will through which one can lay hold and believe such dogmas. Later Luther was to reject all this, but only after he had tried it fully in the monastic life.

Meanwhile, Luther built quite a reputation among his fellow students as one of the finest disputants, and they dubbed him "the philosopher." Also at Erfurt he learned to play the lute while he was convalescing from a severe wound caused by an accident. His interest in music continued to grow. Although there were some humanists at Erfurt, Luther was never identified with them. During these years he was privileged for the first time to handle a full copy of the Bible, and the impression this made on him indicates that his interest in religion first strengthened at Eisenach was not dormant. When he completed his master's work, his father decided that Martin was to proceed to a doctor's degree in the faculty of law. A marriage with a wealthy girl could be arranged and perhaps the young lawyer could find a position in a prince's court. Hans Luther had great plans for his brilliant young son whom he now addressed in a formal way.

But Martin Luther's life was destined to play a far different role from that of an obscure young court lawyer. He had a period of one month of free time before the lectures in law started, and he indicates that during this time he was possessed by a sadness and restlessness. What caused this? We really do not know, though he later said it was fear over the condition of his soul. Only two months after he began his lectures in law, he traveled home to see his parents. Again, nobody knows why. It was on his return trip in July of 1505 that he was thrown to the ground by the air pressure created by a lightning bolt that struck close by. In his fear, he cried out for help to St. Anna and promised to become a monk if his prayer was answered.

Obviously this was not something which suddenly entered Luther's mind. For several months previous to the July experience he had been worried about the state of his soul. Any religiously sensitive person of the age could not escape a careful consideration of his ultimate end. The Church through her services, her monks, and her clergy, and civilization and culture through its art, music, education, customs, and morals constantly kept before the individual the pressing choice between heaven and hell. Little wonder that Luther had been worried about the state of his soul. However, it took a sudden crisis such as the thunderbolt to force a decision from him.

It was no easy decision for even after uttering the vow, he carefully considered his obligation to it. Though his father was angry and several of his teachers thought it not binding, young Luther could not avoid going through with his promise. With heaviness of heart, he cleared up all his affairs at the University, and in the fall of 1505 he entered the Augustinian Order in Erfurt. It is interesting to note that he se-

lected the most rigorous of the local monastic groups. The Augustinian mendicants were famous in Erfurt for their piety and asceticism.

Admitted to the monastery as a novice, he sought there the peace of soul which he could not find outside. His search was for no psychological technique that would produce a manipulated peace. Rather, he was asking the basic question—How can sinful man find a merciful God? How can one escape the wrath of the Creator? As a novice, Luther found himself in a methodical, busy routine deliberately constructed to lead one in a life of holiness which would bring a sense of acceptance in God's sight.

All monastic novices have to learn a prescribed mode of life which includes manners, study, and menial tasks, as well as meditation, prayer, and performance of the hours of worship. Luther had to learn how to conduct himself as a monk, how to walk, sit, eat, speak, and communicate. Greatest stress was placed on confession and reading the Scriptures. While this new and arduous routine brought Luther a genuine degree of consolation, it was not long before his basic anxiety reasserted itself. Luther's father confessor, Grebenstein, noted that the young novice was especially sensitive about his spiritual condition. If one's relationship to God really depends upon the perfect fulfillment of all monastic obligations as well as the fulfillment of the whole will and law of God, then Luther found many, many things in which he failed. Grebenstein assured him that God was not angry with him but that he was angry with God. Others in the order noted the ardor and zeal of the young novice.

When he was formally accepted into the order, after his year's novitiate, he was reminded that he was now as an innocent child who had just been baptized. This second baptism could be renewed each time a monk renewed his resolution to keep his monastic vows. Luther was highly thought of in the order, probably because of his expert education, because of his intense zeal, and undoubtedly because they believed he had experienced a direct call from God in the thunderstorm. His next step was the priesthood, and he prepared himself for this office by one year's study of Gabriel Biel's *Canon of the Mass*.

The occasion of Luther's first celebration of the mass (1507) proved memorable for Luther beyond the unusual importance of the event for any young priest. First, it brought into sharp focus all the spiritual anxieties which he felt, and secondly, it prompted a most interesting and striking comment from his father.

The Roman mass was the high point of medieval religious life. In it, according to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, the celebrant, through the power of his office, transformed the substance of the bread and wine into the very body and blood of Jesus Christ, and he offered this sacrifice to God as a repetition of the sacrifice on the cross. Only the priest of the Church could do this; no prince, no man of

wealth, not the holiest of laymen, not even the angels themselves could perform this sacrifice. Little wonder the new priest approached his first mass with awe and fright for he had the power of making God become man.

In addition to these fears, Luther carried a deeper fear, that of God! The Church had made ample provision for all errors. Centuries of practice produced practical answers to the problems constantly arising out of the first mass. What shocked Luther as he repeated the words of the silent mass was his belief that he had in his hands the holy of holies, God himself. How could he stand before such a presence? He felt himself to be dust and ashes, a sinner, yet here he was speaking to the living, eternal, holy God! He later said that the feeling of awe and terror was so great that he wished he could have fled from the altar, but he saw it through.

Hans Luther had come to Erfurt in grand style for this event. He was accompanied by friends and brought twenty horses carrying gifts for the monastery. After the mass, a great feast was held and all appeared in good humor. Luther turned to his father and asked why he had been so opposed to his becoming a monk. To this Hans replied, "Have you never heard of the commandment to honor your father and your mother?" At the time this direct conflict of loyalties did not disturb Luther too much, but he was not soon to forget it, and later it was to help him in his break with monasticism.

The next step for Luther was the study of theology. Undoubtedly this was good for him at this particular time as it kept him busy and occupied. Between his studies and other duties, he had little time for self-inspection. So, from spring 1507 to the fall of 1508, he studied the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard under the direction of a follower of Gabriel Biel. All his studies were along the lines of the Occamist school. Luther probably had time for some work in biblical exegesis as well. Thus he laid the intellectual foundations for his beliefs which were to remain unchallenged until after he started his serious biblical studies in 1511 and 1512. One thing is certain, he could not avoid in his studies the personal questions which had tormented him for so long. Rather, they dealt directly with such personal questions as perfect acts of contrition, man's abilities to win the grace of God, predestination, and many others.

Luther's order then assigned him to the chair of moral philosophy at the newly founded University of Wittenberg. In 1502 Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, established a new university at the insignificant rustic town of Wittenberg in order that he might bring some distinction to the capitol of his electorate and might compete with the duchy of Saxony's University of Leipzig. The Augustinian order

was responsible for filling two chairs in the school, one on biblical exegesis, and one on moral philosophy in the school of arts. At twenty-five years of age, Luther found himself teaching a regular load and attending the theological lectures as a student in the University. After the spring of 1509, he received his doctorate, and thereafter taught another course on the Bible.

He was not to stay very long at Wittenberg on this occasion but returned to Erfurt in the fall of 1509. For the next year, he lectured in his own monastery, although as a university theological instructor, on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. This was the medieval textbook of theology, a sort of compend of the comments of the Church fathers and great theologians on the major topics and questions of theology. Each school taught it from its own slant. The Thomastics presented the material with their particular interpretation, and the Occamists used it to inculcate their point of view. Luther's own notes in the margins of the *Sentences* indicate that he was still satisfied with the Occamist approach.

There were several points, however, where he had already moved beyond his masters, although he probably was not conscious of it. The Occamists had stressed the necessity and possibility of a perfectly ordered will far beyond what Luther thought necessary or possible. He was convinced, along with them, that God demanded perfect love from man, a fully God-centered life, and that man's will had to be turned completely and consistently toward God. What a man willed was far more important than what a man thought, for the will was the highest faculty of man. Because this was so, it made little difference to these men that man's reason and God's revelation did not complement or fulfill one another at many points. The will of man to believe and accept what God has willed or given was sufficient for salvation.

Here is where Luther stumbled with his scholastic masters. He was positive that God willed perfect obedience from man, but he was not convinced that all men had the power of exerting such complete obedience. In short, he was not convinced that the human will was capable of that which God demanded. Therefore, at this time, Luther was already departing somewhat from the Occamist tradition in stressing the necessity of God's predestinating grace as essential for the possibility of man's proper response to God. As yet he was not plagued with the question of which men were or were not the recipients of such grace.

Just as he was engaged in his theological studies and lectures, he was selected to accompany a brother monk to Rome. Luther's companion was to present the viewpoint of the strict monasteries. A dispute over discipline had arisen within the Augustinian order. From November of 1510 to April of 1511 Luther was engaged in this long trip by foot. For the first time he saw some of the rest of the world, especially the holy city, Rome. How he anticipated what he would find there! How disappointed he was! He engaged in all the activities of the typical devoted medieval monk. In spite of bad weather, he visited many of the holy places and participated in the prescribed devotions in order to obtain the indulgences available. As he later said, he believed in the holiness of every place visited, and he accepted as true every tale and story told by the Italians to the gullible travelers.

Luther was shocked by the impiety of the Italians, and was especially distressed at the ignorance and unconcern of typical Italian priests. They were interested only in speeding through as many masses as possible in order that grace might be obtained for as many as would pay for it. Luther was well aware of the mutual disdain and distrust which existed between the Italians and Germans. In spite of all these obvious evils, he was at the moment deeply impressed with the relics, bones of martyrs, and catacombs, although he was thoroughly disgusted with the vice, filth, and unholy pride of Rome. In 1511 he was back at Erfurt. He had not found peace and security for the deep struggle within his soul. All the masses, the saying of a full confession, the visits to the holiest of sanctuaries, did not bring him the certitude he so desperately wanted.

## QUESTIONS

1. Was Luther's decision to enter a monastery born of a vow uttered in a moment of superstitious fear? What was he really searching for?
2. Why should Luther's father's statement at his ordination make such a profound impression on the young man? What was at stake in the clash between father and son?
3. What did Luther fail to find in his monastic life?
4. What role did the study of theology play in Luther's problem?
5. What did Luther learn on his trip to Rome?

### III. Luther Becomes the Reformer

Once more Luther found himself at Wittenberg, but he was still a man in deep anguish of soul. Fortunately, he found there one who could give him some relief in his struggle. Staupitz, vicar general of the Augustinian order, turned out to be not only Luther's guiding star with regard to his teaching career at the new university in Wittenberg, but also Luther's father confessor. He desperately needed such aid in the fall of 1511.

Medieval monasticism reflected the deepest insight of Roman Catholicism concerning the relation of the eternal God to finite man. It felt that in the last analysis, a holy, righteous, and just God could have fellowship with and accept only a holy, just, and good man. How could such a God of perfection accept as His own a sinful man? Therefore, the real problem was to make man sufficiently holy so that his acceptance by God, if not certain, was at least highly probable.

Monasticism stressed both the sinfulness of man or the demands of God and God's acceptance of man in such a way that a constant balance was struck in the spiritual life. They, above all, were aware of the great gulf between the divine and the human; hence their demand that the monastic fulfill all the laws and commands of God including poverty, chastity, and obedience. Only in this way could man bring his body and spirit under subjection so the grace of God could operate unimpeded. Then man's fellowship with a holy God was possible. Monasticism always balanced these demands of God with the promises of God's acceptance. The life of the monk was terribly hard, but it was also pleasing to God. The benefits were certain and sure. It was the true religious life which alone was certain of acceptance before the throne of the most high.

Monasticism knew that this concept of the balanced religious life, the fluctuation between despair and hope, between unbearable demand and partial fulfillment, would produce doubts and spiritual torment in many of the good brothers. But this would only serve to keep them from complacency and self-righteousness. Once their sinfulness was fully exposed, there were ample ways to reassure the weak and troubled.

At the center of the assurances were the sacraments, particularly those of penance and the Lord's Supper. Penance consisted in a deep concern for the evil of one's sins, contrition, the oral confession of all sins, and the absolution. Even if one did not feel the necessary contrition, if one was only genuinely fearful of his destruction at God's hands, this would suffice as the motivation to confession. Making such

an act of confession and receiving God's forgiveness through His priest, one was free to do the necessary penance to make concrete one's spiritual sorrow.

Luther availed himself of this comfort, but it did not produce the desired results. He confessed every sin he could recall but found after leaving his confessor that he had forgot others. Sins not confessed, were not covered by absolution—how, then, could he stand before God? He knew that many times man deliberately blotted sin out of memory, and it made little difference whether these were large or small sins. Staupitz could not understand Luther's constant preoccupation with such trivial sins, and once told him that he should not confess unless he really had grave sins, such as theft, adultery, or blasphemy of God, to confess. This is what Christ covered and not little insignificant sins. But confession brought only temporary relief to Luther, not the adjustment of balance from fear to hope.

Furthermore, monasticism provided, through its form of life, a variety of ways in which one could wash out his sin and improve his spiritual estate. One could fast, pray, meditate, perform mass, beat his body, and engage in other physical-spiritual exercises. Out of this would come the defeat of the body and of pride. Luther tried this, sometimes to an extreme. He fasted, he beat himself, engaged in endless prayers, he tried to lose himself in study and in work for his Chapter, but at best it brought only temporary relief. The traditional methods of relief for wounded consciences did not work for Luther.

Undoubtedly this was partially due to the way Luther was trained under the Occamist scholars. They held a picture of God as absolute sovereign will who did what He did simply because He was God. There was no way to understand this in terms of human intellect, and there was no way to move to God through human reason. Although God was pure will shackled by nothing, it was clear that he had determined how man was to find his way to God. Just as God was defined as will rather than as reason or as love, so man was defined primarily as will. Gabriel Biel, one of the Occamist professors whom Luther studied carefully, argued that it was possible for man through exertion of his will to perform a perfect act of contrition and thus prepare himself for the reception of God's grace through the sacraments of the Church. Thus man would be saved.

This simply didn't work for Luther. First, he had a picture of God who, though a God of perfect will, transcended all the categories of will, reason, or even love. He had a profound sense of the holiness of the Divine before Whom



all men were but dust. God is God and man is man. When God demands "be perfect" He does not ask for the best that man can do; He demands what He asks, perfection. But who can be perfect as God wills? This is what bothered Luther in his constant confessions.

To be sure, Luther had committed no great crimes, he was not tempted by women. He was not confessing merely a series of little sins, though at the time he, and his confessor, thought he was so doing. Rather, he was giving expression to the deep anxiety of his soul that at heart he was a sinful man, at odds with God in the very center of his life. He was seeking to make the terms through which God would accept him, but he knew that this was not possible. For what God demanded, perfection, he could not give, and with Paul he cried out—wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this dilemma.

Not only was Luther possessed by the sense of the absolute holiness of God, but in light of this he had a brutally honest picture of himself as a creature. It is so easy for man to picture himself in the best possible light, always admitting some shortcomings but more than willing to counter-balance them with the obvious good that exists in each person. Thus, in spite of his failures and even extreme self-centeredness, man is usually willing to forgive himself and rest assured that God, too, has forgiven him. So long as one does the best that is in him, he is sure it is enough. But Luther was too sensitive to be satisfied with the average response. He saw himself not in terms of what he or others expected of him, but in terms of what his Creator expected of him, and what he saw was a self-centered sinful man still holding sway under the cover and pretense of monastic holiness.

Little wonder that his confessor Staupitz could not really understand him. He looked upon young Luther as an outstanding, devout, holy, gifted monk who was bothered by temporary pangs of conscience. So, he did his best to aid the young man through his troubled period. In fact, he felt that young Luther probably could not have lived without these torments for they were "his meat and drink." They were simply the way his religiousness expressed itself.

Staupitz did bring Luther temporary relief from time to time, but above all he unconsciously set Luther to a re-examination of his entire theological position and gave him the task of teaching biblical theology. At Staupitz's insistence, Luther became a doctor of theology in 1512 with an appointment to teach that subject in Wittenberg University.

Meanwhile, Staupitz reminded Luther that he had been striving too hard to please God, that God was not angry with him but that Luther was angry with God, and that true repentance does not begin with human resolution but with the love of God. Little statements, such as these, helped Lu-

ther from time to time. He turned from the contemplation of the stern, inscrutable God who predetermines the fate of all men to the contemplation of the wounded Christ who suffered for all sinners. All this did not solve the basic problem for Luther, but it did bring him some relief. At least, it turned his attention from the vexing question of his possible predestination to hell.

In the final analysis, even Staupitz failed to understand Luther and gave him an answer which was still essentially Roman. He shifted the emphasis from man's will striving to perform perfect acts acceptable to God, to man quietly and assuredly awaiting an influx of divine grace which was certain to come either through the sacraments or through special divine gifts. But the consequence was the same—man was enabled to perform works of merit which completed the work begun by Christ on the cross. Staupitz proposed the mystic way in place of the ethical striving of the Occamists. Thus the vicious circle was merely started from a different point with the same consequences.

The problem still was — does God continue to offer His forgiveness, His mercy, and His grace to those who once received it but apparently did not make of it what they ought to have achieved. It is better to shift from man's striving to man's acceptance of grace as the point of departure, but if the consequence is still the same, namely, the production of holy men acceptable in the eyes of God, what happens when such holiness is not achieved? The burden still rests on man's achievement as the ultimate guarantee of God's mercy and forgiveness. Grace is given that man might become holy, might do works acceptable in the sight of God. Again, Luther found that depending on grace rather than on the striving of will still did not make him the kind of man who could be assured of God's acceptance of himself. Perhaps he was one of the damned!

In the spring of 1513, Luther was busy preparing lectures on the Psalms for the fall semester when he encountered once more, in Psalm 30, a passage which often troubled him—"in Thy righteousness deliver me." Here was the old problem! The demanding righteousness of a holy God never let him escape. For short periods he might find temporary surcease but ever and again this demanding righteousness of the divine Judge would find him out. He feared and hated that word, he could hardly bring himself to read Romans because of it.

Something compelled him to turn to Romans and once more wrestle with the phrase "the righteousness of God." First, he felt that the Gospel merely confirmed the dreaded juridical interpretation of God's righteousness as demand. As Paul put it, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith to faith. So, said Luther, even this "is only a revelation of punitive righteousness of God,

only a means of further torturing and tormenting men who are already fearfully burdened with original sin and the Ten Commandments."

He would not let go of the passage as he struggled and raged against the demands of a God Who keeps demanding that which man cannot give and damns him for not giving it. Out of this prolonged struggle to find a merciful and forgiving God of Whom he could be certain, Luther was grasped by the good news of God's revelation of His nature and will to man as encountered in Jesus the Christ—the just man lives not by his own righteousness but by faith! This is how God shows forth His righteousness, not as a demanding tyrant of the law but as a redeeming, forgiving God.

Luther found a tremendous weight lifted from his soul; at last, after years of struggle, an answer was given him not through anything he had achieved but through God's own Word, Jesus the Christ, as testified to by Paul in Holy Scripture. Luther discovered nothing new; he felt he had only recovered the heart of the Gospel. This is the righteousness of God! Not what God demands of man but what He gives to man shows forth God's righteousness. This is known to man only from faith and to faith and in this the truly just man lives.

What a vast difference from the interpretation of the Gospel proclaimed by Rome for a thousand years. A man is not righteous because of what he achieves but simply because he's a man of faith finding his being in Christ Jesus. He simply trusts God at His Word! He does not try to lay down the terms on which fellowship occurs; he simply accepts in trust that God in Christ has accepted him as a sinner, has forgiven him—if only man can believe that! No act of will can bring man to this estate for then man would still trust to his own efforts. When man is at the end of his tether, seeing himself as he really is—a vain, self-centered, capricious creature, pretending to be creator of his life and destiny—precisely at that point of his sinfulness, God finds him and accepts him, covers his sin with mercy, and gives him forgiveness and fellowship.

Out of this there can arise a new life in which God is God and man is truly man in all of his limitations yet potentialities. But how can man encounter this God of mercy and forgiveness? Here is where Luther depended heavily on Paul. In Jesus the Christ, His life, death, and resurrection, man is confronted by God's righteousness, His struggle with wrath and judgment, His victory over sin, death, and the devil. God Himself, the Divine Logos, became man, entered history in lowly form, took upon Himself the sin, suffering, and frustration of man, paid the uttermost price to overcome sin and reveal the redemptive love and mercy of God.

Thus Luther's certainty of God's righteousness as found in mercy and forgiveness was not founded on a personal vision or ecstasy, not on a miracle, or on the adjustment of

his personality to the tensions he experienced, for none of those would have been sufficient for him. He was certain he had been grasped by the Holy Spirit through Scripture which testified to God's action in Christ Jesus. This was the Gospel proclaimed by Paul, by the Church, and later distorted by Rome. It was not a personal aberration or peculiar fancy; it was God's own word to man. God had shown Himself to be a forgiving God and still revealed Himself as such today. If only men could cease playing God in trying to determine their own salvation. Man's sin is forgiven not through merit or effort before or after grace, in the Roman sense "but alone by the mercy of God without any merit."

For the first time in his life Luther discovered what peace meant, not a cheap self-induced peace of mind or even a profound resting secure in an ancient and hallowed tradition, but a childlike trust in God's own promise to mankind in Christ Jesus. He was a forgiven sinner. Luther attacked his lectures with renewed energy. It took a long time for this central insight to work out its implications in all of the young professor's work, but it showed itself immediately in his lectures on the Psalms (1513), Romans (1515), and Galatians (1516).

Luther saw no reason to break with the Church. It took him years of experience and frustration before he discovered that one could not reform the Church of Rome, and he was thrown out and excommunicated by the Pope. There was no doubt that he would eventually clash with the authorities over some basic question, but he certainly sought no clash. When he finally came out in open conflict, it was only to discuss with fellow professors and students an abuse which he felt could and must be corrected.

Nevertheless, his new insights were a radical departure from the contemporary Roman views on such things as grace, justification, and faith. Undoubtedly they were but reaffirmations of the Pauline position and had found partial advocates throughout Christian history, but they were utterly alien to contemporary Roman thought and practice. They were opposite both from the later scholastics represented either by Aquinas or by Scotus and from the Occamists and the Mystics.

One of Luther's basic problems had always been that of the operation of grace in the Roman Church. It meant in the tradition of Augustine a divine illumination through the Holy Spirit which reconstitutes the nature of man by making one conscious of his misdirection in concupiscence and sin and turns him to his proper end in God. It is both through the sacraments and the entire spiritual pilgrimage that one receives this divine light. Those following Aquinas viewed grace more as a metaphysical substance infused into the person through the sacraments. This produces in man a new attitude so one can perform proper works of love. In



either case, grace is used as the basis to achieve proper works which make man holy and acceptable in God's sight. Salvation is always dependent both on grace and works.

Luther now saw grace not as a divine light redirecting to good works or as a substance producing a proper bent or character but simply as God's own attitude towards man as revealed in God's specific and general actions in behalf of man. Grace is but God's mercy and love toward man as shown throughout His dealings with His people from Abraham to the present. More specifically, it is shown in Jesus, the Christ. Here man really sees how God not only feels toward man but acts towards man and how He is related to man both in wrath and forgiveness, with mercy as His last word.

Faith, unlike the medieval Roman view, is not assent to the doctrines of the Church, or belief in the dogmas and practices of the Church. It is not centered on the Church at all although it is encountered in the Church. Faith is taking God at His word as He reveals Himself to be in His mercy or Grace. It is a humble trust, a total surrender of the whole person in response to God's revelation of His nature and will in Christ Jesus. It is the deepest affirmation of trust possible to man, to trust God as accepting man even while man is a sinner or is turned about from trust in self to trust in God.

Likewise, justification is not viewed as a physical miracle in which sin, as a substance in man, is overcome and driven out by the supernatural infusion of grace. Nor does it mean acceptance by God in virtue of man's reception of grace and its consequent production of good works. It means that prior to any works or action on the part of man, God in Christ reaches out with His love and covers the sin of man, knows it no more, accepts man in mercy and forgiveness. It is God's act in Christ whereby He accepts man into fellowship and knows him not as sinner. The just man lives in this belief in this confidence and trust. It is God alone Who justifies him or Who accepts him as just.

Thus God renews the sinful man, recreates him, turns him about, not in order that He might make him holy so that He might have fellowship with him. This is the way God shows Himself to be the graceful, creative, loving, redemptive God.

In Christ Jesus, He accepts sinners and offers them forgiveness exactly where they are as sinners—they are justified. The just man believes God at His word. In faith, he believes he is accepted by God in Christ and in reality at this point, he is shaken loose from his pride, pretense, and self-idolatry. It now becomes possible to love God and serve Him in gratitude not to use Him to win one's security before Him!

So the religious struggle of Martin Luther produced a reformer which in turn was to produce, quite unknown to him, a chain of events culminating in the Reformation. The original break through the Roman system did not come because of politics, economics, or rediscovery of the classics, or the new science. It came out of the deep spiritual turmoil of a German monk who was interested in only one basic question—how does sinful man find a merciful God? The answer given in the Gospel shattered the control of Rome and reformed the Christian Church in the West. This fresh religious impulse to reform inevitably drew into itself all the other efforts at reform.

### QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the nature of the monastic life as to its purpose, means, strength, and shortcoming. Do you feel it has any place in the Church today?
2. Why couldn't Luther find the answer to his problem in the Bible at an earlier date? What has this to say concerning Luther's explanation of the third article of the Creed? What to a view of Scripture?
3. What was the value of Staupitz to Luther during his prolonged struggle? Might this suggest something positive concerning confession?
4. Was Luther's view of the righteousness of God something completely new in Christian history? What does this mean about the Reformation?
5. What are possible Protestant misinterpretations of Luther's views on grace, faith, and justification?
6. What is the particular relevance of Luther's doctrine of justification for modern man?

## IV. The Break

The fresh understanding of the Gospel set Luther free to engage in truly creative work as a professor of biblical theology. The students sensed that here was a man with something unusual to say, and his classes were soon the most popular in the University. Luther was not content to engage in the traditional old exegetical lectures. Already he was basing some of his work on the Greek New Testament although he had to use the Latin Vulgate for his students. Also, he was dissatisfied with the medieval four-fold interpretation of Scripture and sought primarily one meaning in a text, a meaning determined by the language and by the major insights or concepts of Scripture itself. His new insight into the Gospel was a basic point from which he surveyed all Scripture.

Meanwhile, wherever he found in the history of the Church men or literature who appeared to agree with this understanding of the Gospel, he turned to them with great joy and acknowledged an indebtedness to them. In 1516 he published a special edition of a mystical tract entitled the *German Theology*. It stressed the centrality of salvation through a unity of the believer with Jesus Christ. Although its point of view was by no means identical with Luther's, it was much closer to him than the prevailing practice, and so he rejoiced in it.

The same year he prepared a series of academic theses on scholasticism, and attacked it as a perversion of the Gospel. Rather than make clear the Good News of God's forgiveness in Christ, scholasticism was an illegitimate blending of Christ and Aristotle that shut off Christ from man. Its whole purpose was to stretch a bridge between God and man through human reason. Luther certainly did not hesitate to use philosophy, as will be seen, in his controversy with Zwingli, but already he felt that it was improperly used by the medieval Church as a means for man to control his salvation. It was but one more way devised by man to escape God's own way with man. He proposed the reorganization of theological education on the basis of biblical exegesis and theology. Little wonder that he excited students.

In addition to these stimulating lectures, Luther carried on countless other duties in the years 1515-1517. He was sub-prior in his monastery and vicar over a number of other Saxon monasteries in his order. He was engaged in constant work and correspondence in these positions. Then, he added to his regular preaching duties at the monastery by becoming a substitute priest in the town. Here he was confronted by a rough, uncouth, superstitious people. How

could the Gospel be brought to these men and women, and how could theology be made relevant so, through it, they were confronted by God?

It was in his role as confessor and preacher to these people that Luther hit head-on against indulgences, which he felt completely destroyed the value of the confessional and, far worse, endangered the eternal welfare of his people. Indulgences first arose in the Roman Church at the time of the Crusades. The practice depended upon two basic doctrines.

First was the belief that a sinner had to pay a specific price or penalty for each sin committed. This took a twofold form—eternal penalty, which could be remitted only by God, and temporal penalty, which the Church could remit upon proper satisfaction being done. Purgatory was necessary in order to purge away all remaining penalties by proper satisfaction. The second basic doctrine was the belief that Christ, by His sacrifice on the cross, had acquired a treasury of merit beyond His need, to which treasury even saints added merit which they did not need for themselves. This vast treasury of merit was at the disposal of the pope.

At the time of the Crusades popes began declaring indulgences of the temporal penalties of sinners if they would engage in such a meritorious act as a crusade. This was in effect a penance but often beyond the immediate need of penance. For this act the papacy declared an indulgence which transferred to the crusader merit from the treasury of grace to cover all temporal penalties incurred through his sins; thus purgatory was shortened or escaped. Of course, his eternal penalties could be remitted only by God through proper confession and absolution. Soon cash payments took the place of service, originally for those who for various reasons could not participate in the crusades. Thus there soon developed the practice of selling indulgences.

This was a most lucrative and profitable business for all involved. People could make their confession to strange priests who hawked the indulgences under special arrangements through the papacy. In due time people began to confuse the purpose of the indulgences, and it was felt that one could obtain remission from guilt and eternal punishment through them. In fact, they were often sold on that basis by unscrupulous agents. As early as 1516 Luther preached against this practice, including the indulgences sold by the agents of his own Prince Frederick, the Elector. Frederick, through the usual financial arrangements, had procured from the papacy the right to sell indulgences based on the merits of his outstanding collection of relics kept in the Cas-

the Church. Needless to say, the Elector was not too happy at this as the indulgences helped finance the very university in which Luther taught.

It is interesting that Luther's central attack even in 1516 did not center so much on the external abuse of indulgences (many had attacked this in the past), but his concern was the false sense of security produced in those who purchased indulgences. The practice produced an attitude that was completely contradictory to the true meaning of repentance. It did not drive people to a close scrutiny of their lives with the consequent turning to God for forgiveness and assurance. Rather, it gave them, as one author stated, a spiritual check made out to them to cover the temporal penalties for all sins past and a letter of confession guaranteeing absolution from all ordinary offenses in the future. All this for a sum of money! Even Roman historians admit the terrible *abuses* of the system, but Luther was concerned not only with the abuses but with the false conception of repentance and salvation.

Thus, it is not strange that Luther found himself in open opposition to the Church on precisely this point. Indulgences were at the very center of medieval piety, and an attack on them from this angle was different from a mere attack on their abuse. That which precipitated the entire crisis was a particularly flagrant example of the improper indulgence. In order to obtain his third great ecclesiastical office Albrecht of Mainz struck a deal with Leo X to pay a huge amount for the privilege. The money was to be raised by a special general indulgence of which the papacy was to get a certain percent to aid in the construction of St. Peter's, Albrecht was to get his particular cut to pay off his debt, and a percentage was to be paid the banking family of the Fuggers for financing the whole project.

The Dominicans were commissioned to proclaim the indulgence, and they pursued their task with vigor. Although Frederick the Elector forbade the indulgence agents in his territory, the people of Saxony, including Luther's parishioners, flocked across the borders to obtain this highly favorable document from Tetzel, the Dominican agent. Luther felt the time had come for a thorough discussion of these matters, so he prepared a set of ninety-five theses to be discussed by professors and theological students. This document was in Latin and was quietly posted by him on the University billboard, the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, October 31, 1517.

What Luther thought to be a perfectly harmless document aroused a whirlwind of discussion and debate. Quickly the theses were printed in German and distributed throughout the nation. Some said they were spread as if by angels. Although they made no impact in academic circles, the popular response was so great that those involved in the indul-

gence, particularly Tetzel and his Dominican order, felt compelled to deal with the theses as a personal attack. So the great stone slowly started to roll.

What was so drastic about the theses that they commanded such sudden attention throughout Germany? Certainly not their attack on indulgences for this had been done before. Perhaps it was the bold sarcastic way in which it was done. More likely, the people sensed that this was more than a mere attack on abuses; it undercut the entire religious basis of indulgences.

From the first thesis with its bold words "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying 'Repent ye, etc.', meant the whole life of the faithful to be an act of repentance," to the last four theses closing with the words, "And so let all those prophets depart who say to Christ's people 'Peace, peace' and there is no peace. And farewell to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, 'the cross, the cross' and there is no cross. Christians are to be exhorted to endeavor to follow Christ, their Head, through pains, deaths, and hells. And so let them trust to enter heaven rather through many tribulations than through the false confidence of peace."

In the theses, Luther attacked the belief that indulgences were efficacious beyond what the contrite believer had available through true repentance. "Every Christian who is truly contrite has plenary remission both of penance and of guilt as his due, even without a letter of pardon. Any true Christian, living or dead, partakes of all the benefits of Christ and the Church, which is the gift of God, even without letters of pardon." With one bold statement, Luther denied the whole basis of the indulgence system, namely, the treasury of merit. "The true treasure of the Church is the Sacrosanct Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Shortly after the written exchange between Luther and Tetzel along with his fellow Dominicans, Luther prepared some theological theses to be defended before the German chapter of the Augustinian meeting at Heidelberg, 1518. In this way he was to show the orthodoxy of his views on the basic questions of sin and grace. Here he stressed the theology of the cross in which the Holy, Majestic God, Creator of all, humbled Himself on the cross so that man must acknowledge his sin before such a marvelous event. This can produce only a response of surrender and gratefulness on the part of man. God's true glory is to be seen not in His wrath or majesty but in His self-giving humiliation. Against this, man places a theology of glory whereby he claims from God an acceptance of his religiousness or holiness. This was the trouble with scholastic theology both Thomastic and Occamist; it was built on the glory of man's intellect. As a consequence of Luther's presentation, he won over many young men including the future great reformer of Strasbourg, Martin Bucer.

Further attacks and replies involved Luther in conflict with Johannes Eck and other scholars. All this was yet in-

definite as the battle lines were not clearly drawn; at least they were not evident to the disputants. Meanwhile, Rome could no longer ignore the uproar. The first reaction of the Pope Leo X was to write off the whole affair as another unimportant dispute involving a drunken German peasant. But the problem grew more serious each day until the Roman Curia decided that Luther should appear in Rome to be examined and to be required to justify himself. At this juncture, the politics of the Empire intervened to save Luther.

The throne of the Holy Roman Empire was vacant, and the papacy decided it would be safer to have a relatively unknown German prince as emperor than to have the king of France or the young Hapsburg king of Spain and the Netherlands. In view of this, the papacy bent every effort, including the use of great sums of money, to have Frederick the Elector of Saxony elected emperor. Thus he wished to placate him with regard to Luther. Luther was looked upon by Frederick as a tremendous asset who brought fame to the little University and town of Wittenberg. Thus he demanded that Luther be examined on German soil.

In 1518 at Augsburg, Cajetan, one of the outstanding cardinals, met Luther to remonstrate with him. Frederick had seen to it that the new jewel of his University was not to be bundled off to Rome. At Augsburg, Cajetan held a series of meetings which showed only the condescension of the Curia for an ignorant German monk. He tried to win Luther over as a superior teacher, but having failed, he demanded that Luther recant. Luther certainly did not appreciate the high-handed treatment from the cardinal, but Luther's friends sensed his danger and secretly got him out of Augsburg before Cajetan could have him arrested.

Again Rome had failed in her effort to silence the German monk and to restore peace in the pamphlet war that raged between Luther and his opponents. Still Rome was playing for high stakes in the election of the emperor, so once more an attempt at peaceful settlement was made in the person of Miltitz, a German minor official of the Curia. It was felt that the golden rose might lure Frederick away from Luther thus leaving the papacy free to deal with him without antagonizing the Elector. This mission also failed. Not only was the Elector not interested in becoming emperor, but also his advisers saw great political advantage in protecting Luther. All this was utterly unknown to Luther who was, in his own words, simply letting God work out His will in the whole affair. He had only recently concluded, with great shock to himself, that God was using him for some purpose far beyond what Luther wanted to accomplish.

In 1519 Luther engaged in a theological debate with one of his earliest opponents, the famous Roman theologian, Johannes Eck. Out of this was to come a further step in the break with the papacy. Luther did not plunge into such a rupture but step by step his new insight into the Gospel compelled him, under pressure from his opponents, to re-

think many accepted traditions and beliefs about the Church. Shortly before the Leipzig debate of 1519, Eck and Luther exchanged theses in which it became apparent that the real issue would be the power of the papacy. In the short time available, Luther studied history and found that the papacy did not have power over the entire Church until after the pontificate of Gregory the Great in the seventh century, and never did have it over the Eastern Church. Thus he argued, that many of the papacy's claims to power were based on false documents and could not be taken seriously.

At Leipzig Eck could not disprove Luther's position so he resorted to trickery and insinuated that Luther was a Hussite and maintained the same opinions for which Huss was burned. Luther finally replied that among the doctrines of the Hussites, were some that were Christian. At this, Duke George and the Leipzig people turned against Luther because it was only two generations previous that their territory had been ravaged by war over this issue.

Eck made other assertions concerning the activities of the Church council while Luther argued that even Conciliarists admitted councils could err and be corrected by other councils. Again Eck pounced on him. There was no final decision on the debate though Eck succeeded in clouding the whole issue by the Hussite accusation. Luther came away determined to study more history in order to understand the origin, nature, and power of the papacy. As a consequence, he found positive documentation for his hunch that the papacy had no such divine right as it claimed. At best, it deserved a place of honor, a place with no juridical power. Furthermore, the nature of the Church in no way depended on the papacy—wherever God's Word was preached and believed, there was the Church! Because of the papacy's arrogance and pride in seizing on the prerogatives of Christ as head of the Church, it was in reality anti-Christ! Now the break was inevitable.

Once the papacy lost its political battle and Charles V, of Spain and the Netherlands, became Holy Roman Emperor, and once it became evident that Luther's insights were gaining strength, it was determined to try him as a heretic. In June of 1520 the bull *Exsurge Domine* was published. It declared Luther a heretic, and he was given sixty days in which to recant or be excommunicated with his followers. The affair of Luther was now a formal problem for the whole of Europe—his books were to be burned and his errors renounced. At first Luther did not believe that the bull contained what rumor asserted. Once he found out that his treatises were being destroyed and that the bull condemned him even without refutation, he replied by burning a copy of the bull and of the canon law to show his attitude toward the papacy.

Luther realized fully what this action symbolized. The next day he opened his lecture to 400 students by indicating

that the die was cast. There were only two roads: hell or martyrdom, and he found strength to take up the struggle against the false Christianity of Rome, even if this meant death. He found joy and strength in the decision. To Luther, the burning of the canon law was far more significant than the bull, for this repudiated the whole mask of legalism by which the papacy had bound society and individuals to an un-Christian system.

Meanwhile, tracts, articles, and books poured from Luther's pen. Among them, four were outstanding and presented in a bold case the fullest insights of the young reformer. It took years to work them out fully. The first to appear in 1520 was a *Treatise On Good Works*. Because of Luther's attack on merit as a necessity for salvation, his opponents accused him of denying good works and upholding immorality and lawlessness.

To refute this charge once and for all, Luther wrote a powerful treatise on the meaning of the Ten Commandments. In it he argued that he did not do away with obedience to God's commands but strengthened such obedience by placing it on a new basis. One is not to keep commands in order to placate God's anger and win merit or salvation. That is utterly contrary to the commands themselves which ask for full love and trust in God as the only true God. Obedience has nothing to do with winning favor in God's sight; it can come only out of gratitude to God arising out of faith in His mercy and love as revealed in Christ. Living in responsive trust to God, one then seeks to express this faith and trust in faithful living. The law does not compel one to be faithful out of fear or to be calculating for favor, but rather love and faith compel the Christian to be active in expressing his faith in relation to his neighbor. Here was a new basis for ethics and morality.

Also, in 1520, Luther penned the three famous so-called Reformation treatises, *An Open Letter To The German Nobility*, *On The Babylonian Captivity Of The Church*, and *The Liberty Of The Christian Man*. These contained his views on reform, the Church, the priesthood of all believers, and the Sacraments. The *Open Letter* laid bare the threefold basis on which the papacy controlled life, and it denied all three. The political order was not subject to the domination of the Church, councils had been and could be called by other than the pope alone, and the papacy alone did not have the right to determine what the Word of God means. Having destroyed the wall behind which the papacy hid, Luther then turned to an appeal for reform.

All members of the Christian community were responsible to God for each other and for their fellow human beings. They were priests to each other: this was the priesthood of believers. When the hierarchy would not reform the Church, then those lay priests, holding responsibility in

the community, must take action for the sake of the whole body; hence the appeal to the nobility to undertake reform. This included decent education for children so they could read the Bible, it demanded reform of social life and public morals, and it was concerned with economic reform.

In the *Babylonian Captivity*, he undertook a critique of the Roman sacramental system as that which destroyed the true meaning of Sacrament by using Sacraments to control and manipulate salvation. What was given by God to confront the believer directly with His presence and benefits was prostituted to a means of manipulating the relation between God and man. He argued that at most there were only three Sacraments, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Penance, and perhaps the latter might not be a sacrament. He showed how Rome had distorted each of the Sacraments, and called for a reformation of the sacramental system centering on the Word which brings it into being and makes it effectual. This was a radical departure from medieval piety and created dismay and shock in many centers.

*The Liberty of the Christian Man* sought to establish the relation between piety and action in the Christian life. With an opening paradoxical statement, Luther laid the basis for evangelical ethics. "A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." In faith the Christian man is bound to no law but lives a life of freedom in the spirit of trust. Yet this freedom finds its center in loving obedience. It cannot help but express itself in service and concern for the neighbor. Again, a repudiation of Roman ethics!

After further exchange of writings by both sides and a good deal of political maneuvering on the side of the Elector and of Luther's opponents, it was arranged to bring Luther to the German Diet at Worms, meeting for the first time under the new emperor, Charles V. The emperor was determined to stop Luther but his wars with France, pressure from the Turks, and large debts, prevented him from taking any hasty action that would alienate the Germans. He needed their financial and military support.

Nevertheless, when Luther was brought to Worms, he confronted both the hostile prelates and a hostile emperor. It was here, in April 1521, that Luther presented himself before the assembled might of Church and state. He was given no opportunity to defend himself or even to argue the case; he was asked only one basic question—will you recant? On his final appearance before this august group, he made a short address explaining his position and concluded by saying that unless he could be proved wrong by reason or Scripture, he could not recant his theological position. He had no other alternative if he were to be faithful to God's Word, his reason, and his conscience. The break was complete.

## QUESTIONS

1. What, according to Luther, is the role of repentance in Christian life? If one takes this seriously should it have some definite outward form or manifestation?
2. What is the significance of Luther's last four theses in the 95 and of his theology of the Cross for modern Protestant views of peace born of religious experience?
3. What was the significance of the Leipzig disputation for Luther? What bearing does this have on the modern ecumenical movement?
4. Why should Christians obey the Ten Commandments and lead a life of responsibility in specific ways?
5. Did Luther's *Appeal to the German Nobility* lay the basis for the modern secular state?

## V. The Reformation Becomes a Movement

The Emperor, Charles V, had determined to stamp out Luther and his Reformation immediately after the appearance at Worms. In May, 1521, an edict was passed after a majority of the Diet had returned home, including all of Luther's supporters, and Luther was declared a convicted heretic with only twenty-one days to recant. At the end of that time he was to be hunted down and destroyed, his books were "to be eradicated from the memory of man," and his friends also were to be condemned.

When Luther started his return trip, he was ambushed by a group of knights and carried away prisoner to the Wartburg castle. Nobody was to know what happened. Even Frederick the Elector did not know where Luther was, although he had been abducted with Frederick's knowledge. Only in that way was it felt that he could be saved from the wrath of Rome. He remained in two small rooms in the castle until he had grown a full head of hair and a magnificent beard. Then, disguised as a knight, he could move about more freely.

Luther was very unhappy in exile. He was removed from the front of the battle at a most crucial period, and he was forbidden to communicate with the outside world except through a few carefully chosen correspondents. In his solitude he brooded on his position over against Rome, and more than once wondered if he had the right to stand against the whole Church. His only consolation was his certainty in the Word of God; his was not a new gospel invented from his fancy. Ill health brought on by the severe strain of over-strict monastic discipline also plagued him.

His only relief came from his work and from his observations of nature, the beautiful Thuringian hills and the little birds that sang so sweetly and played so gayly. In addition to numerous letters and small tracts, two major works were produced from his pen during this period. Both were to have tremendous consequences for the life of the Church and for the common people.

By far one of the most important works ever achieved by Luther was his splendid translation of the New Testament into the German language. When it was published in the fall of 1522, although written at Wartburg, it became a land-

mark for the history of the German people as well as for the Christian Church. It helped to form the German language as it was used widely by all the people. Remarkable in the translation was the way Luther understood how to render the insights of the Greek text into a new form of the German language. He was the first to use a critical Greek text as a basis for a translation of the entire New Testament into the vernacular.

The real importance of this translation is its effect on the laity. Through the modern printing press it was now possible to print sufficient copies at a low enough price so that the rising merchants and young students could afford copies. Even the poorer classes had an opportunity to see and handle a copy of the New Testament. For the first time in Christian history the Holy Scriptures were available to laymen. Out of this was to come profound consequences for lay devotional, piety, incitement to learning, and a fresh resource for daily Christian living. It marked a turning point in the history of the Reformation.

The second important work to come from Luther during the Wartburg years, was produced under the pressure of events at Wittenberg during his absence. Many of the priests and monks began to question the entire system of celibacy enforced by Rome. Carlstadt, Luther's fellow professor, took seriously certain statements of Luther concerning the impossibility of the laws of men annulling the laws of God. A true marriage between priest and wife could not be broken. Furthermore, it was common knowledge that many priests lived with their housekeepers or some other women and often had children. Carlstadt struck a blow against this state of affairs by taking a wife. Shortly after, fifteen monks withdrew from the Augustinian cloister in Wittenberg.

Confronted with this situation and with cries for help from Melancthon, his fellow theologian at Wittenberg, Luther sat down and made a careful study of the problem in Scriptures. He then wrote *On Monastic Vows*, dedicated to his father. His father's statement, at his ordination to the priesthood, returned to him with full force. Luther was convinced that he had acted wrongly against his father but that this was forced upon him by God in order that he might dis-



cover, through personal experience, the failure of monasticism. The monastic vow is against Christian liberty in its utterly binding obligation, and it builds on a false pride that this is the holiest way to serve God. In fact, because of this it misleads man into a false security.

As a result of Luther's writings and a seething dissatisfaction with the role of monasticism in life, whole monasteries and convents were emptied. A true calling was not to serve God through such vows but to serve God in a variety of activities out in the world. The calling, the vocation, belonged to all Christians and not only to a special group of holy men. All people of faith were called to serve God and their neighbors in their daily tasks.

Meanwhile, in the absence of Luther, affairs had reached a stage of anarchy in Wittenberg. Without his guiding hand, young Melancthon could not provide the leadership necessary to see the infant movement through its trying initial years. In 1521, Melancthon indicated the stature of his genius by producing the first systematic theology written from the evangelical point of view, *Loci Communes*. But, he could not exercise restraint over the more violent reformers in the town. Carlstadt, older than Luther, had great ambitions to distinguish himself as a leading reformer, so he took the lead in advocating new reforms.

Carlstadt proceeded to make radical changes in those areas which Luther had left largely untouched, chief among them being the mass. The one thing in the mass blasphemous to Luther was the canon which embodied the sacrificial concept. Such repetitious sacrificing was impossible to Luther's evangelical faith because God alone in Christ Jesus had sacrificed Himself once and for all on the cross. He alone is the source of all self-giving love, mercy, and sacrifice, and to try to induce such actions from God through the sacrifice of the mass is to deny God's own self-giving as revealed in the cross. Carlstadt took this to mean a repudiation of the practice of the mass and held a special communion service at which he refused to wear vestments and distributed both elements to a vast congregation.

Immediately there was an uproar from the people. They could not comprehend what this was all about. Some liked it, but most were shocked. At the same time, several prophets appeared on the scene; two of them were Mark Stubner and Nicholas Storch who preached in their hometown in Bohemia, Zwickau. They believed themselves to be in union with God's Spirit and therefore capable of uttering prophecy. Not in Holy Scripture but immediate revelation through the Spirit was the way one encountered God's will. And they were certain that they knew God's will for all matters including the future destruction of God's enemies and the establishment of His Kingdom in the near future.

Wittenberg was agog at the rapid changes taking place. Under the leadership of Carlstadt and an ex-Augustinian

monk, Gabriel Zwilling, iconoclastic riots occurred in which students and some townspeople invaded the churches and smashed images, relics, altars, and pictures of saints. Carlstadt, even went so far as to throw organs and music out of the church. The city was bordering on anarchy when the Elector called a halt to any further reform. The Elector feared Luther's return might incite the Emperor, but when Luther heard of the Wittenberg situation, he politely informed the prince that he was returning regardless of the royal wish. He informed Frederick that there was One whose protection was far greater than any offered by a prince. This was not a case for the sword but for God.

Luther swept back into Wittenberg in March, 1522, but this time with no promise of help or aid from anyone. He faced possible capture and death by the Romanists, the Emperor's men, or by a hostile mob out of control. His calm, understanding attitude quickly dominated the scene. Perfectly certain of his ground, he preached a series of eight sermons in which he outlined to the people where they had gone wrong and pointed out the direction they should take.

What greatly disturbed Luther about the violence and extremes of his colleague Carlstadt and the Zwickau prophets was first their distortion of the Gospel and second, their utter lack of concern for weaker brethren. Luther was determined that the Gospel not be made into a law again. It was the Good News of God's gracious forgiveness in Christ to which man could respond either in faith or disbelief. Nobody could or should be forced to respond. But here were the Wittenberg radicals saying that priests must marry and must have children because the Gospel commands it. Likewise, they demanded that all religious art be abolished from churches and that the Lord's Supper be celebrated in a certain way.

To Luther this was but a new form of bondage distorting faith and the Gospel. Just as each man must live and die for himself, so each must believe for himself; this could not be forced. The radicals defined the Gospel as a series of injunctions and made another law of it by forcing their interpretation on all others. Luther knew how long it had taken him to work through to his present position. How could any one expect untutored, ignorant peasants to arrive at the same point in a matter of hours or days? There was no sense in destroying their faith unless something positive replaced it.

Thus Luther urged caution and patience. Caution would hold back the intemperate zeal of the reformers and substitute instruction for destruction. The people had to be turned from their old habits of superstition and Romanism to a proper understanding of the Gospel. This could be done adequately only through preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments stripped of Roman abuse, plus an adequate training program for the laity in which the basic insights of Scripture were made clear. During this period of

slow reform, men of evangelical faith should not rush or push their weaker brethren but should bear with them in patience. A man of faith is strong in love and in concern for his neighbor; therefore, he will tolerate his weaker brethren while at the same time he seeks to lead him to a deeper comprehension of the faith.

Luther had remarkable faith in the power of the Word to accomplish all necessary reforms if only it was given sufficient time. As a consequence, he felt that two basic shifts in worship should be made; first, making the proclamation of the Word central in the service; second, removing the canon of the mass in order to eliminate the sacrificial aspects from the Lord's Supper; finally, the entire service should be in German. This must not be done suddenly but gradually as the people are prepared for it. Also, in keeping with his view of the law, he contended that monks should not be forced to marry but should be allowed to do so if they so decided on the basis of their persuasion by the evangelical faith.

Once peace had been restored in Wittenberg, Luther again picked up his task of ministering to the people of the parish, teaching in the University, and preparing various tracts and books. One of his most important works was to encourage the congregation to sing the hymns. This had fallen into eclipse under the Romanists. Luther loved music and esteemed it lower only than theology. He felt that people of faith could not avoid expressing their faith in hymns of adoration, joy, and thanksgiving. In 1524, he published a hymnal for use in local parishes. Many of these hymns were from his pen. Later he was to write both the words and music to "A Mighty Fortress," a perfect example of his piety and religious conviction. The people were trained to sing both by instruction at home and by special weekly meetings of the congregations. The Lutheran Church became known as a singing Church. Certainly this was one of the greatest contributions of the reformer.

Meanwhile, the Reformation spread throughout Europe and found a ready response in many places. There was no problem of how it would spread because a half dozen sources stood ready to carry the movement. One of the basic channels for the spread of the evangelical faith was the monastic movement. Perhaps this was because Luther himself was an Augustinian and his teachings received a quicker hearing among his fellow monks. Be that as it may, some of the earliest and truly outstanding reformers came out of monastic ranks to follow Luther's teachings. Rhegius, Eck's best

student at Ingolstadt, quit the Carmelite order to embrace the evangelical faith. Another outstanding example was John Bugenhagen. As a theologian of the Premonstratensians, he was given the task of refuting Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, but was converted by it.

The fact that many of these monastics were friars with the right to preach anywhere encouraged the spread of the Reformation. Given to much preaching anyway, these devout men now found a new message to present and they preached wherever the opportunity presented itself. Even secular priests and bishops declared for the Reformation. Modern printing greatly facilitated Reformation developments. It made possible a vast body of pamphlet literature, such as the cartoons and other propaganda which could be produced inexpensively.

The intelligentsia and rising merchants in the city were predisposed to the Lutheran Reformation. Because they were tired of papal control, greed, and avarice, they quickly turned to the Reformation. A whole series of theologians and leaders undertook reform in the light of Luther's insights. The most important of these were the famous Martin Bucer and Matthew Zell in Strasbourg, Oecolampadius and Rhegius of Augsburg, Osiander of Nuremberg, and dozens of others. Above all, the students at Wittenberg provided Luther with thousands of messengers who were to go forth and spread the good news. Through these men the Scandinavian countries were later reformed, and the Reformation spread throughout Europe.

## QUESTIONS

1. What was and is the significance for the life of the Church of Luther's views on monastic vows? Might monasticism be possible under these views?
2. What was the significance of his translation of the New Testament?
3. Were Carlstadt and the Zwickau "prophets" only carrying through to their logical conclusions Luther's insights into the Gospel?
4. Discuss both the strength and danger of the belief that stronger Christians must refrain from offending their weaker brethren in matters of reform.
5. What did Luther feel would ultimately accomplish the essential reform?
6. Why and how did the Reformation spread so quickly?



## VI. Pressures From Right and Left

With the rapid spread of the Reformation many forces aligned themselves with Luther, but they did not understand his position or really appreciate what he was trying to do. Often in the moment of fresh creation in an historical movement certain forces initially attach themselves to that movement as expressive of their own deepest interests. Often it turns out later that these respective movements not only are not complementary but often contradictory. Luther was to discover this to his great sadness. Though he did not go about seeking support, his stand against Rome rallied all dissatisfied forces to his side. From 1521 until 1525, no reform movement repudiated Luther and all thought they were building on him.

The first such unwanted support was offered by the efforts of certain knights who sought to restore the privileges of that class by overcoming the princes within various states and by setting out on a reform of the nation which included breaking loose from Rome. Ulrich von Hutten and Franz von Sickingen were the leaders of this abortive attempt, and they tried to persuade Luther to become spiritual head and symbolic leader of the movement. They felt there was no basic difference in their interests. Luther absolutely refused as he was not interested in leading a political movement or using the Gospel to establish what some men felt to be a just form of society under the leadership of their class. The Reformation was not to be advanced by sword, bloodshed, or political chicanery. Enough of this would be involved without seeking it. This would emerge inevitably from the conflicts of history itself, rather than from the machinations of a religious leader. Sickingen tried a rebellion but it failed, and with his death in 1523, the knights' rebellion came to a close.

This was but the first in a series of movements from which Luther had to distinguish his cause. Insofar as they represented an attempt to recapture the past, they represented the right; but insofar as they tried to achieve this by rebellion, they represented the left. Luther was not interested in either. The next great challenge was more impressive in scope and consequences. Since the late medieval times, the serfs or peasants had been gradually deprived of the few rights belonging to their class. The decline of the feudal system and the rise of capitalism put heavy burdens on the feudal lords who in turn sought relief by greater exploitation of the peasants. Their lot, never an easy one, was made unbearable.

They had ample reason to seek a redress of grievances but little opportunity to achieve it. They made an appeal on mixed grounds, that of their medieval rights and a threat

to revolt and overthrow their oppressors. For centuries, the peasants had revolted from time to time, but this particular Peasants' War was one of the latest as well as fiercest. Medieval sectarian groups had implanted in them equalitarian ideals in terms of which they hoped to throw off their yoke and achieve new rights beyond their feudal status. Though not all of these found their way into the peasants' general program, the spirit of equality certainly moved them.

Also they were further excited by the creative new movement of the Reformation which promised great possibilities for all men. Such things as the priesthood of all believers, the use of the vernacular in worship and Scripture, the abandonment of payments to Rome, all had a tremendous appeal. They could sense a new age dawning with new hopes for them, and they looked to Luther as the prophet of this age. This attitude of excitement in the presence of a new age was enhanced by another strain that had long predominated among the lower classes—apocalypticism. They felt this was but a sign of what they had long believed, that Jesus Christ was soon going to return and set up His Kingdom in which they, the downtrodden, would rule as His saints.

It was but a short step to advocate violence to hasten the Kingdom or to play the role of those who prepare for and make straight the way of the Lord. Thus the Peasants' War was caused by a strange combination of economic, political, and religious reasons. They drew up, from time to time, statements of their purpose. The most famous of these was the Twelve Articles in which they demanded the abolition of the tithe and other unfair exactions and asked for a return of their medieval rights.

Luther could not avoid this controversy because he was originally from the peasant class and because of his role as the reformer. They looked to him for leadership. One cannot escape the conclusion in his writings that he sympathized with the peasants' economic complaints. He wrote harshly against the princes urging them to do something before it was too late. He placed full responsibility on the princes for the peasants' present conditions and complaints. Then he exhorted the peasants not to resort to violence to achieve their goal and certainly not to identify the Gospel with their cause.

Before anything could be done by Luther or others to make some kind of adjustment possible between the peasants and princes, the peasants simply arose in an unplanned, leaderless revolution. Their frustration at years of horrible injustice expressed itself in an excess of pillage and murder. Anarchy resulted. At first the princes were helpless but

then they struck with fury. It was while the peasants ran wild and the princes were frozen into inactivity that Luther wrote his infamous tract *Against the Robbing and Murdering Horde* in which occurred those oft quoted words telling the princes to burn, stab, and kill. This was the language of wrath and fear, and it is to be regretted that he expressed himself in such an extreme manner.

Yet it cannot be denied that given his position, Luther had to oppose the revolution. His wrath was kindled by the peasants' identification of their program with the Gospel. He felt that it was impossible to deduce programs of social justice from the Good News of God's redemptive love in Christ Jesus. This was a question of economic justice to be settled by reason, precedent, common sense, and the law. To base such a claim on the Gospel is to make a law out of the Gospel.

To make matters worse in Luther's eyes, was the appeal to force to uphold this program of the Gospel. He felt that it was not possible for a Christian to revolt against tyranny. Only passive acceptance or resistance was possible. Order is ordained by God and man is not to break it—certainly not the Christian man. If injustice comes in, God will destroy and punish that order. But man cannot play the role of God in history and try to anticipate God's move by forcing things through revolution. The peasants were trying to play God and made a law out of the Gospel, said Luther.

Furthermore, Luther saw in the war only a restless outburst with no possible chance of achieving anything good. Bloodshed was its only consequence. It was in this context that he wrote his book. Something had to stop the roving bands of peasants. Even ordered tyranny was to be preferred to anarchy. Within several months the revolt was broken, and the princes wreaked their vengeance on the peasants.

Then Luther once more turned against the princes and, in the face of the carnage and bloodshed, attacked them unmercifully. He upbraided them: first, for their hardness of heart in letting matters reach such a point of injustice that revolution was necessary; second, for having failed in their initial duty to suppress the revolt with dispatch and justice; and finally, for their hatred expressed in terrible acts of vengeance against the peasants. He reminded them that God is a sure and certain judge Who would not ignore their actions for which they would certainly have to pay.

The consequences of the revolution were far reaching. As a result of his stand, Luther alienated a good many of the peasants who could not forgive him for not having led their revolt. The Reformation lost much ground among the masses who either lapsed into lethargy or became Anabaptists. Luther grew to distrust the common man and his possibilities for the future. The princes had come out on top by defeating first the knights and now the peasants. Nobody was left to check their power. Luther distrusted them as

much as the peasants because both proved merciless and selfish in the hour of need. Above all, Luther found out that the power of the Word could not stop either side. This produced in Luther a real pessimism as to the possibility of making basic adjustments in social justice through peaceful means.

During this same year Luther broke with another segment of the Reformation. His ex-colleague, Carlstadt, and a young radical, Thomas Müntzer were in the forefront of a movement which made great headway with the peasants. Everybody in the evangelical camp had reacted against Rome's hierarchical and institutional control.

The radicals went to the opposite extreme and denied all institutions by upholding the direct, immediate operation of God's Spirit as the source of the religious life. One prepared himself for this experience of a new birth in the Spirit by a deliberate choice of suffering and the Cross as a means of purging oneself, they taught. Once possessed by the Spirit, he had no need of the old political forms to preserve order and justice. In fact, the man in the Spirit was to destroy all such forms as productive of injustice and ungodliness; thus they were political radicals.

By 1525, Luther engaged in a vigorous polemic with these men and completely disassociated himself from them. He attacked their position as one of subjective mysticism which distorted faith and the concept of the Holy Spirit. God's spirit does not operate directly on man apart from the Word and Sacraments. Completely apart from how one feels about it, the Word of God is true forever. To be sure one must experience it, but for Luther the important thing was to make certain the truth and validity of the Word which one experiences.

Also, he attacked these men as introducing the law through the back door. The man in the Spirit moves into that life and stays in it through a rigorous self-control according to the commandments or law. The law is now a means through which one draws closer to his goal of absorption into the Spirit. Luther contended, against them, that the law is nothing more than a road-sign pointing out the way.

Finally, Luther was opposed to the utter lack of a sense of history displayed by these so-called radicals. They wanted to jump backward from the Reformation to the Pauline Church. Everything in between was a falling away, a corruption; thus, they wanted to break with all the practices of the Church—theological, liturgical, and devotional.

Luther argued that if you take God's revelation in history as something real and important then you cannot ignore the historical developments that have occurred in the Church. It is only through these channels, distorted though they are at times, that one encounters God. The problem was not the elimination of all previous practices and tried forms in order to undertake the reformulation of primitive Christianity,

it was the reformation of forms and practices which, because of their historical development, often contain much that should not be lost. There was no doubt that Luther could not get along with these men.

In 1524, a more serious loss occurred when Erasmus, the prince of the classical scholars, broke with Luther's conception of Reformation. He was inclined to tolerate it at first, but those supporting him demanded some kind of anti-Lutheran statement or he would lose his financial support. Erasmus finally attacked Luther in a tract entitled *The Freedom of the Will*. In it Erasmus used the typical Roman argument of the adequacy of the human being in his present state to choose the good over against the evil.

Erasmus had also been a reformer of a type, but his type was utterly removed from Luther's position. As a man of letters and some of sophistication, he apparently had no deep religious convictions. He was, however, a man who detested the greed, avarice, and immorality of the papacy. He attacked this through the use of satire and humor. In no way did he appear to differ from the basic Roman theological orientation.

Erasmus chose a subject which he was certain he could employ against Luther. As a man who considered morality as the center of the religious life, he expressed surprise and dismay at Luther's denial of free will. Erasmus felt, as did all good Romans, that man as he lives in this world has the ability to choose the good and to follow it. Without this freedom to select the good and follow it, man would not be able to live a good life. To be sure, he often failed and so fell into sin but either this was overcome by grace through the Sacraments, or it had no profound effect on future actions.

After accusing Luther of separating religion and morality, Erasmus went on to support his contention through Scriptural exegesis. By this technique, he hoped to demolish Luther's stand on Scripture for Erasmus was one of the foremost Greek scholars of his day. At no point did Erasmus pass beyond the traditional way of handling the argument, and he entirely missed the religious basis of the controversy.

In 1525, Luther replied in the *Bound Will or Bondage of the Will*. He argued against Erasmus on two grounds—one as to Scriptural interpretation and the second as to a theological or religious misinterpretation. Erasmus, said Luther, did not exegete Scripture in its own terms, that is, in its own content in which clearer passages always made sense out of more ambiguous passages. Because Erasmus did not see this, he missed the whole question in his exposition of Scripture.

For Luther, the really profound question was that of the extent of evil and the freedom of man to turn his back on the evil by seeing the good and then in following the good. This was not an academic question for Luther, it involved his own spiritual welfare. Man, as we know him, is not free

to see the good and to follow it. Man is a finite, selfish creature. He does not have a fresh start with each problem. His past decisions, his very nature, prevent this. He is a sinner!

For Luther, sin is something deep and pervasive that insinuates itself into all of life. One does not overcome it either by being a gentleman or by receiving infused grace. A man is not free to start anew on each major decision or even minor ones, rather, he is conditioned by his past actions, habits, and nature. He really does not seek to do God's will, and even when doing it, is only partially successful. Man cannot escape the evil and demonic in life.

Against this, Luther placed the just man living in a new relation to God and man. Out of this relationship of faith, produced wholly by God, there arises a new impetus to responsible action. But all this comes from God through the gift of faith. To this extent then, the will is no longer bound, man finds his freedom in Jesus the Christ. But even this is an ongoing struggle in life. At no point does man achieve that degree of perfection where he is able always to see the good and do it. He does this, but he also distorts it. Thus he is constantly in need of mercy and lives only by faith in God's mercy at every point in life. Religious faith underlies all morality, it is not man's ability or his morality that underlies good actions! Luther felt Erasmus handled this problem as something external to himself, a strictly theoretical vindication of man's ability, and so was truly a Roman Catholic. Luther handled it as a religious problem centered in God's nature and will rather than in man's. From that point on the humanists and evangelicals went different ways.

A far more serious break was that which occurred between Zwingli, the great reformer of Zurich, Switzerland, and Luther. Zwingli had reformed the territory around Zurich on his own initiative, and he owed little to Luther. He was an outstanding humanist, scholar, and a Roman priest when he broke with Rome, 1523-1525. Reform went rapidly and it soon became apparent that the evangelicals in Switzerland would have to fight for their lives against the Romans. Likewise, in Germany, the Emperor was starting to bring military pressure against the Lutheran princes. Some of the Lutheran princes wanted to join with the Zwinglians in a common front against an enemy that was already united in a league for common action.

Meanwhile, a basic theological difference on the Lord's Supper became apparent between Luther and Zwingli. In exchanging views through polemics, Luther sensed a subtle tendency to settle these issues on the basis of political necessity. With this he would have nothing to do! When Bucer, in Strasbourg, attempted to interpret Luther's views so as to mediate with the Zwinglians, Luther grew extremely suspicious of all such efforts.

By 1528, Zwingli's view on the Lord's Supper was fully worked out. He contended that it was primarily a meal commemorating the Lord's passion and the Last Supper; in

it the congregation expressed its unity in fellowship with each other and with Christ. When Jesus the Christ said, "This is My Body," he meant this signifies My body. Common sense tells us it could mean nothing else, said Zwingli. Furthermore, he pointed to the statement of the Creed, that Jesus the Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father. How then could He be present in the bread and wine? No, said Zwingli, he could only be present in memory, in faith.

Luther rejected Zwingli's entire argument as denying not only Scripture but the entire history of the Church's doctrine and worship practice. While Luther felt the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation was idolatrous, he insisted that, along with the bread and wine, in faith and actuality, one received the body and blood of Christ—His was an objective presence.

He used every means available to illustrate and make clear his point. He argued, "this is My body," meant literally what Christ said. Also, he argued that Zwingli had a peculiar view of God, nature, and history. Somehow for the Swiss reformer, God was absent from this universe and from history, and the relationship between God and man had to leap clear across nature and history to make some kind of connection through memory or mind.

For Luther, God was present as the ground and basis of all reality, upholding it, and creating at every moment. Everything lives and moves and has its being through God. God was not a static entity far removed from life; He was active, living, ever present. Yet God is not nature or history. He is in them giving them reality and direction, He also transcends them for He is their source and creator. Nature and history do not comprise God, He uses them as His masks through which He works out His will for the universe and for mankind.

Because this is so, Luther can argue that in the Lord's Supper, Jesus the Christ is actually and really present through the elements of bread and wine. Here man confronts God in actuality and whoever eats or drinks unworthily eats and drinks to his damnation. Those partaking in trust and humility, receive in the gracious presence, forgiveness of their sins. For Luther, this was a high point in the religious life.

At Marburg, 1529, an attempt was made to reconcile the differences between the two men. Though they could agree on fourteen or fifteen disputed points, they could not find agreement on the Lord's Supper. As a consequence, a deep rift developed between these two phases of Protestantism. Between 1525-1529 Lutheranism found itself defined over against the peasants, radicals or Anabaptists, the humanists and the Zwinglians.

These years, 1525-29, were not simply years of disagreement and separation from other reform movements. They were also some of the most creative years in Luther's life

and in the Reformation. One of the most important events of the history of Lutheranism and the Reformation, was Luther's marriage in 1525 to Katherine von Bora, an ex-nun. By this act, done to spite the devil and show the pope, as Luther said, a good deal more was accomplished than even he realized. Once more he reaffirmed the sanctity of marriage and the family as a calling just as high as that celibacy. Six children were born to the couple. The tenderness and concern exhibited by Luther for his wife and family are but another indication of how the Christian is to live out his life in God's world.

It was during these years that Luther turned his attention to carrying the Reformation to the people throughout Saxony. He had no divine plan for Church government, though he was greatly concerned that a good ministry be free to preach the Word everywhere. Committees of visitations went out to the parishes within a territory to quiz both laity and clergy. The princes took the lead in their own territory and acted as bishops in things external. Under them, a superintendent and consistory were appointed to care for the life of the Church. To the superintendent fell the control in spiritual matters.

The greatest achievements were signaled by the various tracts prepared by Luther for lay instruction. The service was somewhat reorganized and translated into German, a little book on special services such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, and marriage was prepared. And in 1529, appeared Luther's *Large Catechism* for adults and *Small Catechism* for children. Here were two small volumes which could be used to train both children and adults in the evangelical faith. The *Small Catechism* proved to be one of the great religious documents of all times, utterly devoid of polemic and breathing a spirit of deep devotion and religiousness. So, Luther's Reformation slowly took shape in its own forms distinguished from other forces in Protestantism to the left and from Catholicism on the right.

## QUESTIONS

1. What was the theological basis of Luther's opposition to the peasants? What has this to say to the modern problem of relating faith and politics?
2. Why did Luther disagree with the so-called radicals such as Müntzer? How did their views of history and revelation differ?
3. What is the consequence of Zwingli's view of the relation between God and nature? How then can a Christian take seriously art and music?
4. How did Erasmus understand the relation between religion and morality? What does this have to say to modern man?

## VII. Lutheranism Becomes a Church

In Chapter IV we saw that through the spread and acceptance of Luther's ideas, what had begun as a struggle within one man became a large movement. The next step in the gradual consolidation of the Lutheran Reformation took place when Lutheranism became a church. This step was partly symbolized, and partly effected, by the composition and adoption of the Augsburg Confession in 1530.

When the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire met at Augsburg in that year, its purpose was certainly not to adopt what was to become the charter of the Lutheran Reformation. The issue of what was to be done about the Reformation was indeed one of the questions confronting the Empire at Augsburg, along with the problem of what was to be done against the threat of the Turk now hanging over Western Europe as it had over Eastern Europe less than a century before. Relations between Emperor Charles V and the Pope were themselves less than ideal, with the Emperor's armies having sacked Rome in 1527. In addition, the Emperor was involved in an ongoing struggle with King Francis of France. The German princes were asserting their independence of imperial control; and to make matters worse, they were using the outlawed heretic, Martin Luther, as their excuse for this rebellious conduct.

It was this use of Luther by the princes that seems to have made the problem of the Reformation so important to Charles. Even his most sympathetic biographers will not attempt to portray the Emperor as the sort of politician-theologian that Justinian had been in the sixth century. The finer points of the theological debate between Rome and the Reformers did not concern him; nor did an interest in such points bring him to Augsburg. He came to Augsburg because of the threat that came from the combination of forces we have enumerated. Among those forces, the Lutheran party appeared to be the most vulnerable doctrinally—with the obvious exception of the Moslem Turks, whom no denunciation as heretics would harm—and thus the question of the doctrinal orthodoxy of the Lutherans became a matter for discussion at the Imperial Diet.

That question had been debated since early in Luther's reformatory career. One of the favorite devices of his theological opponents had been to associate his position with that of some ancient or recent heretic whose teaching had been condemned by the Church, and thus to show that Luther's theology had already come under the Church's ban. Thus almost every heretical label, from the Arian of the fourth century to the Hussite of the fifteenth, was pinned on Luther. Though he sometimes disregarded this strategy and,

in the case of the Hussites, even came to accept the labels, Luther generally repudiated the suggestion that his teaching was the revival of ancient or recent heresy. On the contrary, Luther and his followers insisted that they stood for the faith of the ancient and true Church, while the real innovators were their opponents. Therefore, they also refused to concede the name "catholic" to their opponents, for the Reformers claimed to be defending the catholic, that is, the universal faith. Ever since the Leipzig Debate of 1519, this argument had been going on.

At Augsburg, the Lutheran side of the argument achieved its decisive literary formulation. Ironically, its author was not Luther, but his younger colleague, Philip Melancthon. He was more learned than Luther, but also more irenic. As a scholar, he believed that a clarification of the theological issues between Rome and the Reformers on the basis of careful analysis would do much to remove the misunderstandings between them. Regretting the excesses to which the heat of argument had led both sides, Melancthon sought to bring the scholar's calm and clarity into the debate, and to conciliate without compromising. Because he was under the ban of both church and empire, Luther did not come to Augsburg, but had to view the proceedings from a distance. Thus the task of composing the confession fell to Melancthon. Though he would have preferred a more exhaustive discussion of the mooted doctrinal points—a discussion more like the so-called "Apology" than like the Augsburg Confession—Melancthon was prevailed upon to write the confession as the consensus of the teaching of the churches, estates, and free cities represented at Augsburg, not as the private position of an individual theologian.

In the composition of the confession, Melancthon relied heavily upon the so-called Marburg, Schwabach, and Torgau Articles, which had been composed in the preceding years as summaries of the Lutheran position in relation to Rome and in relation to other parts of the Reformation. This "middle way," which we described earlier, also came to voice in the Augsburg Confession, which thus helped to define more precisely the place of Lutheranism within Christendom and in this way to make it a "church" in the modern, denominational sense of that word. There are many similarities of format and of language between the Augsburg Confession and these earlier articles; as a consequence, Luther was able to say, "The Augsburg Confession is mine."

Speaking, then, as the consensus of the churches and drawing upon these earlier formulations, the Augsburg Confession attempted to summarize Lutheran teaching in such a

way as to make clear both its similarities to the Roman stand and its divergence from that stand. As the foundation for the entire discussion, Articles I, II, and III discussed the doctrines of God, man, and Christ, respectively. In these articles, each of which dealt with an issue on which there had been some differences between the Lutheran and the Roman approach, the Augsburg Confession showed a restraint in its thought and a conservatism in its vocabulary that seem very remarkable to a modern reader. Article I described the doctrine of the Trinity in terminology that could have been used by a medieval theologian; Article II formulated the doctrine of original sin, which was a point of considerable controversy, in the language of a distinction coming from the Middle Ages; and Article III discussed the person and work of Christ in a brief paraphrase of the Apostles' Creed. On these three pivotal doctrines, Lutheranism and Rome were in sufficient agreement to make possible their adoption of a single creedal statement. The Augsburg Confession opened with a testimony to the extent of this agreement.

All the more effective, therefore, is the radical divergence between Lutheranism and Rome on the subject of Article IV, justification. On the Trinity and on the doctrine of Christ, even on original sin, the Augsburg Confession was willing to use conciliatory language. But when it came to the doctrine of justification by faith, it had to make clear that the difference was not one of language, nor yet of mere emphasis, but a fundamental difference in the interpretation of the Christian Gospel. Though the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563) adopted statements on justification that seem to go rather far in conciliating the Lutherans, the Roman reaction to Article IV, together with the Lutheran answer to that reaction in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, revealed just how fundamental the difference was. On what basis does a man become acceptable to God? The right answer to this question was the key to the meaning of the Gospel and of Christian doctrine.

For this reason, Article IV is the central article of the Augsburg Confession. Its distinction between human merit and divine grace became basic for the presentation of other differences between Rome and the Lutheran Reformation. Thus Article V defined the Lutheran doctrine of the Word on this basis, in contradistinction to any other doctrine that would make the power of the Word of God dependent upon human preparation or works. Article VI made it clear that even the Christian could not hope to purchase the favor of God with his works. In Articles VII and VIII, the Augsburg Confession emphasized that the guarantee of the presence and the unity of the Church was not to be sought in human organizations, traditions, or works, but in the Word and in the sacraments which God had instituted. The discussion of these sacraments in the subsequent articles made the same point with respect to baptism, the Lord's Supper,

penance, and ordination. While in each case the vocabulary was cautious and conservative, the Augsburg Confession strove to clarify, between or rather beyond the alternatives of Rome and extreme Protestantism, the Lutheran understanding of the means of grace, now that grace no longer meant something in the believer, but the good will and favor of God.

In Articles XV to XXI, the Augsburg Confession picked up several issues related to problems discussed in earlier articles. For example, Articles XVI and XXI are closely connected to questions discussed in connection with the doctrine of the Church in Articles VII and VIII. Article XVIII really belongs to the doctrine of man presented in Article II, just as Article XIX belongs to Article I and Article XX to Article VI. The last seven articles were different from the first twenty-one, in that they dealt with specific abuses which conflicted with divine or ecclesiastical law and which, in the eyes of the confessors, needed correcting. Incidentally, it belongs both to historical honesty and to Christian charity to point out that at Trent and subsequently, Roman Catholicism took many steps toward the elimination of these abuses; and it is "neither safe nor honest" to speak as though this were not true.

Elimination of moral or canonical abuses was not, however, the burden of the case against Roman Catholicism. The division of the confession into the two parts symbolized that fact. The case was to stand or fall on the strength of the theological issues dividing the two, not on the moral purity or impurity of their clergy or laity. And the theological issues, in turn, were not to be solved on the basis of dialectical skill or philosophical learning, but on the basis of the Gospel. In defining and settling the issues as it did, the Augsburg Confession claimed to represent the orthodox and catholic faith of the Church. Spokesmen for that faith were not only the bishops and official theologians, but the silent in the land, who in their worship and prayers had based their hope of salvation on the mercy of God rather than on their own merit. In the Augsburg Confession, so the Lutheran theologians maintained, these silent spokesman had at last had their say; and the real theology of ancient Christian thinkers like Augustine had also found its true exposition. So the Lutheran Reformation maintained.

The validity of that claim is still a major point of conflict between the churches of the Augsburg Confession and Roman Catholicism. Even more basic, of course, is the conflict over the meaning of the Gospel itself. Though they may not all use the terminology of the Augsburg Confession—and they have never all used it, including and especially Luther and Melancthon themselves—the theologians of Lutheranism have sought to keep these questions, and others like them, at the center of the debate between the churches. Church history demonstrates that they have not always succeeded. It also shows that they have frequently failed in



their effort to define the meaning of the Lutheran church by the use of the Augsburg Confession, and this for a variety of reasons.

No confessional document can hope to capture or to preserve the full genius of a church body or a tradition. The Augsburg Confession is no exception to this rule. But it is also the perennial symbol of what the churches of the Lutheran Reformation take to be the meaning of the Gospel, and as such it is the confession of the laymen in those churches as well as of the theologians. Acceptance of the Augsburg Confession is part of the constitution of most Lutheran church-bodies and congregations, as well as of the ordination formulas used in Lutheranism. Where this acceptance has not degenerated into a mere formality, the Augsburg Confession still serves to define the Lutheran church in relation to other parts of Christendom, even though, as we have pointed out, it does not exhaust the meaning or genius of the Lutheran Reformation and of the church that emerged from it.

## VIII. Luther the Biblical Theologian

If Luther were teaching at a modern theological seminary, we tend to suppose that he would be teaching the courses in Christian doctrine, usually titled "dogmatics" or "systematic theology." As a matter of fact, his courses were in the field of biblical interpretation, more specifically in the Old Testament. At the urging of his friend Staupitz, Luther had become "Doctor in Biblia" in 1512; and as we have seen in Chapter III, it was in his function as a lecturer on Holy Scripture that Luther discovered and formulated the insights that made him the Reformer. A consideration of his career and life would therefore be incomplete without some attention to his work as a biblical theologian.

That work covered a period of more than thirty years, almost exactly half of Luther's life. It ranged over the books of both the Old and the New Testament, from brief notes on crucial biblical passages to the massive *Commentary on Genesis*, which took Luther ten years to deliver. In the English edition of Luther's works, his commentaries and biblical works will occupy thirty volumes—and this is not all of them. Most of these are not carefully polished literary productions that Luther prepared for publication with meticulous care; he did not usually work that way. Rather they are notes on his lectures, taken down by the loving but not always accurate hand of his students and then edited,

### QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the Augsburg Confession show the marks of the political situation surrounding it? What does this mean for modern Lutherans in their relation to the Augsburg Confession?
2. Does the acceptance of a confessional standard like the Augsburg Confession hamper freedom in a church? What are the implications of this acceptance for freedom of thought and action?
3. Which of the condemnatory clauses in the Augsburg Confession are directed against Rome, which against other Protestants, which against ancient heresy?
4. What differences do you note between the terminology of the Augsburg Confession and the language to which you are accustomed, for example, in Articles VII-VIII or in Article X? How do you account for these differences?
5. The Augsburg Confession has frequently been suggested as the basis for a discussion of church reunion. After reading it, do you think it would be suitable as such a basis?

sometimes long after his death. Thus Luther's biblical works often show the freshness of the spoken word, as well as the repetition made necessary by the teaching process. Even in works that were not intended primarily as expositions of the biblical text, Luther frequently worked on the basis of biblical materials. His sermons, moreover, often amounted to little more than verse-by-verse homilies on the lesson for the day.

As a biblical theologian, Luther learned much from the Bible. In addition to specific doctrinal and theological insights, some of which we have discussed in earlier chapters, biblical theology gave Luther a set of perspectives that ran through all his theological insights and judgments. In some ways these perspectives are even more important than the particular judgments that came from them, for they provide us with an understanding of the inner dynamics that shaped his thought and that enabled him to respond as he did to specific doctrinal and theological issues.

One such perspective in Luther's theology is what has often been called his "biblical realism." In the way he looked at the world and in the way he thought about ethical decisions, Luther should be classified as a "realist" rather than an "idealist"—to the extent that such classifications have any meaning or value. That is to say, he strove to see

the world as it really is, not as he imagined it to be. He was, therefore, quite willing to acknowledge the presence of evil—and of good!—where it appeared. He admitted sin in himself and recognized it in others with a candor that many moderns would find embarrassing. He did not suppose, as have many theologians and Christian leaders since, that the Gospel would change the natural order or restore Paradise to earth. From his study of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, he knew that the power and presence of the Word of God does not effect a miraculous transformation in the world around the believer, and that the believer himself is “righteous and a sinner at the same time.” This biblical realism about the world, about other men, and especially about himself enabled Luther to escape, at least to some measure, the oscillation between naive optimism and bitter disillusionment that has marked much so-called “Christian idealism.”

Honesty about himself also affected Luther's attitude toward the matter of “having the truth.” Luther's reported words at Worms, “Here I stand,” have been quoted so often that the popular conception pictures the Reformer as a man who was always sure of everything and who, after a certain date, never changed his mind about anything. It is, of course, true that in theological debate Luther could be firm to the point of stubbornness. The man who stood as he did against the opposition that faced him was no reed shaken by the wind. Yet this popular conception often ignores the other side of the coin. The Worms quotation prefaced “Here I stand” with the words, “Unless I am persuaded . . .” Thus he left himself open to persuasion, and as a matter of record did change his mind frequently on various questions. He was able to proceed this way because he thought of himself as a biblical theologian, obedient to the Word of God in the Bible and, therefore, free of any ultimate obligation to human theological theories, including the theological theories of Martin Luther. He strove to be, as he himself says so often, a pupil of the prophets, always ready to be instructed by them, but meanwhile insistent upon what he had learned from them.

To be a pupil of the prophets and apostles did not mean merely repeating what they had said in the way they said it. Nor did it mean putting everything all of them had said on the same level. For Luther, fidelity to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures meant the development of what might be called theological proportion, that is, the capacity to recognize what is central and what is not. Such a capacity was also the mark of the truly biblical theologian, for biblical meant evangelical. In the evangelical witness of apostles and prophets to the grace and mercy of God, promised to Israel and accomplished in Christ, Luther saw the unity of the Scriptures. Repeatedly he refused to let himself become involved in controversies over peripheral matters; and when he did become thus involved, he came to regret it after-

wards. What he was defending against Rome and all comers was not, first of all, the Bible, but the Gospel. As the Bible itself pointed out to Luther, written language was not the primary means by which the Gospel was communicated, but the “living voice of the Gospel.” Biblical theology finally meant a theology that derived its underlying convictions from this living voice of the Gospel, and its documentation from the Scriptures.

Corollary to this interpretation of the relation between theology and the Bible was Luther's interpretation of the connection between theology and preaching. Luther did not use the distinction between the theoretical and the practical that appears so often in modern speech, including theological speech. Because he tried to function as a biblical theologian, he kept out of his theology questions that would be only of academic or scholarly interest, without relevance to the Christian faith and life of the people in the Church. On the other hand, he discussed the Christian faith and life of the people on the basis of his biblical theology, not from prudential considerations. He objected that medieval theology had frequently lost contact with the faith of the Church and become mere speculation, without relevance. The fact that his theology functioned as biblical theology helped him to overcome the cleavage between scholarship and relevance. Indeed, this fact made Luther what he was.

At the same time it seems clear that Luther did much for biblical theology, just as it did much for him. For one thing, his emphasis upon it assured it at least theoretical centrality in Lutheran and Protestant theology ever since. The great creative periods in the history of that theology have been the times when theologians took another look at the biblical message and sought to recover its meaning for their situation. Conversely, when Lutheran theology has lost itself in a concern for doctrinal purity or moral purity as ends in themselves, it has used the biblical message to support its preconceived notions. Repeatedly it has become necessary for Luther's stress upon biblical theology to return to the Church, when the Church discovered the anomaly that it claimed to defend Luther's theology without giving fresh attention to the Scriptures from which he claimed to derive that theology. But his refusal to advance his own theology and his insistence that theology had to be biblical, Luther made it possible and even necessary for his theological descendants to go along with him, and to go beyond him, in their theological thought. Thus he made biblical exposition, and not private speculation, the queen of the theological sciences.

In the course of his development, Luther made an even greater contribution to the method of biblical exposition itself. While medieval theology had also claimed to be biblical and some medieval theologians had gone rather far in their assertions of the primary authority of the Scriptures, they had vitiated much of this by resorting to allegory in their



actual interpretation of the Scriptures. Finding a fourfold or even a sevenfold sense in the statements of Scripture, they were able to force the Bible into conformity with the current or traditional views of theology and ethics. Allegory there has always been in the Church; there is more than a little in the Bible itself. But the reckless application of allegory in the interpretation of the Bible made it, in Luther's phrase, "a nose of wax" that anyone could twist into any shape he chose. This, Luther objected, made the theologian the master of the Scriptures, who was so busy allegorizing that he did not listen to them. In opposition to such allegory Luther set what he called the "grammatical" method of interpretation, and he sought to make this basic for whatever other interpretation was to follow.

It is, therefore, not accurate to say, as many handbooks of church history do, that Luther insisted upon the literal sense of Scripture and the literal sense alone. One has only to read his commentaries on the Old Testament to see him finding Christ throughout the Old Testament as consistently as any allegorist had done. The point is that for Luther this Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament was the "literal sense." In other words, the term "literal" did not mean to Luther what it has come to mean to many Protestants, the rigid application of individual biblical proof-texts irrespective of their historical and theological context. Luther viewed the Scriptures as a totality, and he interpreted them as a totality, bringing the full weight of biblical faith to bear on the exposition of any individual part. In the art of finding the real meaning of the Bible by this means, Luther was an undisputed master. His method of interpretation was faithful to the grammatical sense of the Scriptures without being literalistic; it was theologically imaginative in its analyses and combinations without permitting allegory to obscure the message of the text itself.

In some ways, Luther's biblical interpretation itself was more important than either his estimate of the centrality of biblical theology or his view of the proper method for its study. In his translation of the Scriptures, he made the Bible speak to the common man about the wondrous works of God as it had never spoken before. And in his expositions, he expanded on this work of translation to make the message of the Bible speak to his time and his church. His commentaries on the Psalms made the repentance and trust of the psalmists a part of his own piety and urged it upon his readers. His sermonic exposition of selected chapters from the Gospel of John ranks among the outstanding commentaries of all time on that Gospel. His three commentaries on the Epistle to the Galatians sound the themes of liberty in the

Gospel and slavery to Christ in a manner that still speaks to the needs of the Church. And this is as Luther wanted it. He wanted to serve as a window to the Scriptures. He sought to make these expositions a guide to the biblical message, not a substitute for it.

It is really this effort that makes Luther a biblical theologian. Some of his interpretations have stood up under closer scrutiny, others have not. But when the rejection of his interpretation was on the basis of a more careful and complete analysis of the meaning of the text, the rejection was truer to Luther than a traditionalistic acceptance would have been. And when later students of the Scriptures have accepted his interpretation, they have been faithful to him if they did so because, in his phrase, "the text forced them," not because Luther had said so.

## QUESTIONS

1. It is often said that Luther did not have a theological system. From what you know or can find out about him, do you think this is true? Why do you give the answer you do?
2. Was modern theology justified in defending its methods of biblical criticism by reference to Luther's views of the Scriptures?
3. What significance does Luther's rejection of allegory have for our study of the Scriptures today? Under what circumstances is the allegorical interpretation of the Bible valid?
4. It was said that Luther found Christ throughout the Old Testament. To what extent was this justified, and may we proceed the same way today?
5. Critics of the Reformation have sometimes said that Luther's thought overemphasized the writings of Paul at the expense of "the historical Jesus." Is this criticism warranted?
6. Does it seem to you that the Lutheran church has kept the Reformer's stress upon the centrality of biblical interpretation? Why is it that lay members of other churches, especially of groups that seem to be extremists, have a more detailed grasp of the Scriptures than most Lutherans?
7. In connection with the last part of question six, do you believe that there is a difference in the way Lutherans interpret the Bible and the way others do? (Use the words of institution and the Revelation of John as examples.)

## IX. Lutheranism and the Common Life

One of the most fallacious criticisms directed against Luther is the claim that he was an enemy of culture, a coarse and insensitive man, who did not appreciate and, therefore, wanted to destroy the beautiful and pious creations of the medieval church. Yet this very criticism has found its way into many history books, not a few of them by Protestant writers who feel obliged to apologize for Luther at this point.

There are many points at which Luther needs apology, but this does not happen to be one of them. Ironically, his Protestant contemporaries tended to criticize him from exactly the opposite angle—that he had retained entirely too much of medieval culture and piety. While one may disagree with this criticism, at least it had the facts behind it, however one may interpret them. For it is a fact that in matters of liturgy and piety, Luther kept whatever he could keep, and rejected only what he felt he had to reject, of the heritage of the ancient and medieval church. The extent to which he did this is difficult for a modern Lutheran to imagine.

Perhaps the best way to indicate the situation is to say that a twentieth century Roman Catholic would probably feel more at home in Luther's liturgy than a twentieth century Protestant. Yet the phrase "Luther's liturgy" might itself be misleading, for the various Lutheran churches in the various lands of Germany and Scandinavia actually developed and adopted liturgical forms and customs that differed from each other rather widely; but each in its own way represented an adaptation of medieval patterns, with some significant subtractions and a few additions. The reason for this situation lay in an attitude toward the medieval development that was quite different from the attitude of the Zwinglian and Calvinist Reformations, and especially from the attitude of the "left wing of the Reformation." More in liturgy perhaps than in any other aspect of the Church's life does the "middle way" of the Lutheran Reformation, discussed in Chapter VI, make itself manifest. For with all due allowance for the variations, it is nevertheless accurate to say that the liturgies of sixteenth century Lutheranism were a revised form of the Western Catholic rite that immediately preceded them.

They were a revised form because certain offensive features of the mass and of the minor services were removed. From the actual texts of the Lutheran rituals, however, it would seem almost impossible to formulate a set of general principles on the basis of which the Reformers and their

associates proceeded in revising the Roman rites; what one group regarded as offensive or at least expendable, another group retained, and that for a long time after the Reformation. More easily discernible are some of the major additions to the service. Of these, the most significant religiously and the most influential culturally was the contribution of the Lutheran Reformation to Christian hymnody. Congregational singing had never died out completely in the history of the Church, and at times, even before the Reformation, it had experienced a revival. But it was the work of the Reformation that gave it the added impetus it had needed. And it is also through hymns more than through liturgies that the Lutheran Reformation has a direct connection with the Protestant churches of our day.

Luther himself took a leading part in providing these hymns. Rare indeed is the Protestant hymnal that does not contain at least two or three of them. Some were original compositions in both words and music, others were adaptations of words or of music or of both. Here as elsewhere, Luther borrowed as freely as he lent. In addition, contemporaries of Luther like Walther and Lazarus Spengler contributed hymns that belong to the thesaurus of Protestant worship ever since. These hymns, in turn, provided the stimulus for the hymnody of Johann Gerhardt in the tribulation of the Thirty Years' War, and for the work of composers like Schuetz and Buxtehude that climaxed in Johann Sebastian Bach. In this way the hymnody of the Lutheran Reformation made a significant contribution to the history of Western culture.

That was not, of course, its primary purpose. Primarily, the hymns of the Lutheran Reformation were designed to support and to express the piety of the Lutheran believers in their private and corporate Christian life. The close relation to medieval patterns is not as evident in the piety of the Reformation as in the liturgy, by the very nature of the case. But an examination of such evidence as devotional booklets, gravestones, and personal correspondence and diaries suggests that in many ways the pious life and practices of the devout continued much as they had before the Reformation. When the application of the principle, "*cujus regio, ejus religio*," whose importance we shall discuss in Chapter X, brought about shifts in the religious allegiance of whole provinces, this seems to have caused the German Lutherans no more trouble than a similar development caused most Anglicans at about the same time. The cause of this indifference is partly the lack of theological knowledge or concern in many church members, who could not tell the difference.

But the indifference was partly due also to the fact that there was not much difference to tell in the practical piety of the people.

The problem this situation suggests was one of which Luther and his associates were very conscious. To meet this problem, as they had found it in their visitation to the churches of Saxony, they prepared manuals of instruction, devotion, and proclamation for the use of the churches. From their concern for this problem arose the Small and the Large Catechism of Luther, as their prefaces graphically point out. Because he knew at first hand that both clergy and people needed help in the cultivation of a piety consistent with the teachings of the Reformation, Luther assembled his postils, consisting of sermons and homilies that pastors and people could use for such cultivation. Luther's associate Melancthon devoted even more attention to the development of educational philosophies and practices that would advance the work of the Reformation among the common people and among the learned classes. Regrettably, he permitted his enthusiasm for the ancient Greek and Roman classics to dull the edge of some Reformation teachings, and thus he bequeathed to later Lutheranism a theology, a piety, and an educational philosophy that failed adequately to transmit the teaching of Luther. Nevertheless, Melancthon's work was largely responsible for the dissemination of the Reformation into the education, and thus into the piety, of the Lutheran church.

According to Luther, one of the most valuable resources for the growth of Christian piety were the sacraments. By a curious misreading of isolated statements, Protestant historians and theologians gain and give the impression that Luther set a Bible-centered piety against a sacrament-centered piety, and that he opposed the medieval emphasis upon the Church with his emphasis upon the individual. Actually, one of Luther's charges against the medieval church was that it was emphasizing the unbloody sacrifice of the mass at the expense of communion. Therefore, one of the differences between Lutheran piety and Roman Catholic piety in the period of the Reformation was supposed to be the Lutheran insistence upon the frequency of communion. The fact that, for whatever reason, later Protestantism and Lutheranism have lost this emphasis ought not obscure Luther's emphasis upon the Lord's Supper as a means of grace.

A like fate has befallen Luther's emphasis upon baptism and upon the Church as fundamental elements in the Christian life. He did not regard baptism as a mere point in the past of the individual, much less as an empty symbol. He looked upon baptism as a state in relation to God and in relation to the Church of Christ. Christian piety consisted in living under the Word of God, in daily remembrance of Holy Baptism, in frequent reception of Holy Communion, and in a life of fellowship and prayer in the company of the Church. Viewing piety as he did, Luther would not recog-

nize, much less acknowledge, a Protestantism which emphasizes the relation of the individual to God, without mediators or means, and which calls such a relation "the universal priesthood of believers." All believers were indeed priests—not to themselves but to each other. And as priests, they ministered to each other by the means of grace and what Luther called "the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren." Hence the sacraments were a prime means for the strengthening of the Christian life in its individual and corporate forms, always in the context of the Church.

The Church was also the context for the use of the Word of God in Christian piety. Luther translated the Bible into the language of the people and he wanted the people to read the Bible. Yet he knew that in the hands of knaves the Bible was a dangerous book, and he experienced with bitterness the results of a stress upon the Bible without the Church. Such an experience confirmed him in his conviction that the Gospel should be proclaimed, not merely written, and in his insistence upon what he called "the oral Word." But the Word was not to be preached irresponsibly; it was to be preached by and to the Church. In the actual practice of Lutheran piety, the stress upon the Word as preached could and sometimes did lead to formalism and a religion of the clergy. At other times, it produced a living and responsible church membership that was nurtured by the Word and the sacraments and tried to live in the fear of God.

In Lutheran piety at its best, such church membership was not restricted to questions of church attendance and the like. What the Reformation sought to achieve in the common life of Christian people was an interpretation of its duties as calls from God, so that as citizen, father, or workman a man worked in response to God's call. No longer were the clergy the sole possessors of a divine vocation; any honorable work could now be a calling from God, however humble or menial it might appear in the eyes of men. The purpose of the Word and the sacraments in this connection was to sensitize the Christian's awareness of God's call to him in his work, and it was the function of the Church to guide and support him in the selection and pursuit of his divine vocation. Thus the "imitation of Christ" did not consist in a literal adoption of what Jesus Christ had done. It meant, rather, being as faithful in one's own calling as Christ had been in His calling. The Lutheran Reformation set this doctrine of vocation in opposition both to the monastic morality of the Middle Ages and to the piety of certain Reformation sects: against the former it emphasized the divine calling of all Christians; against the latter it insisted that this divine calling did not abolish man's natural, created situation.

One area in which this divine calling could manifest itself was the area of culture and the arts. Luther's own interest, ability, and results in the field of music would be enough to exonerate him of the charge that he was an enemy of

culture. But beyond this, artists like Cranach and Dürer owed not a little of their inspiration to Luther and the Reformation, and in the field of literature it is no exaggeration to say that by his own work, and through men like Hans Sachs, Luther is the father of modern German literature. Unlike the devotees of the arts who forgot everything else, however, Luther refused to let the artist be an aristocrat elevated above the man who toiled with his hands. Each was using God's gifts in God's service. Therefore, each had a calling from God, in which, as in every stewardship, it was required that he be found faithful.

The history of German Lutheranism demonstrates that the dynamic understanding of Christian piety and the Christian calling which Luther advanced did not continue in his church. The calling became a static device by which men were compelled to keep their places in society; piety became a matter of conformity to certain rules of external conduct; worship became a question of sporadic attendance at formal services. Over and over, the dynamic of the Reformation understanding has broken through these static shells with new freshness and vigor; and it is doing so still.

## QUESTIONS

1. Examine as many different hymnals as you can to determine how many of Luther's hymns appear in them. Note at the same time the varied denominational origin of the hymns in Lutheran hymnals. What possible significance does this have?
2. Compare the Order of Holy Communion in the Lutheran liturgy with the Roman Catholic order of the mass and, if possible, with earlier Lutheran liturgies.
3. Let someone in the group who is particularly concerned with education analyze Luther's Small Catechism for its method and approach of teaching, and let the group discuss this analysis and evaluation.
4. What factors are responsible for the disappearance of Luther's ideas about piety and the calling from German Lutheranism?
5. In what specific areas of our church life could Luther's concept of "the universal priesthood of believers" be more adequately applied than it is being applied now?

## X. The Settlement

The Diet of Augsburg, which we discussed in Chapter VII, was intended to restore religious unity in the Empire and so to guarantee political peace. It actually did neither, and by the time it was over both the emperor and the Lutheran princes knew that they were in for continued political conflict. To prepare for this conflict, the princes banded together early in 1531 to form the Smalcaldic League, whose purpose was to forestall any enforcement of the edict passed at Augsburg that the Lutherans must return to the Catholic fold. The consolidation of Lutheran political power which the formation of the Smalcaldic League effected brought the power struggle to a virtual stalemate for fifteen years, with occasional defections and victories on both sides but no real settlement. Various conferences, treaties, and diets were necessary to continue the stalemate, while both sides waited for an opportunity to decide the political conflict in a favorable way.

This stalemate continued until just after Luther's death in February, 1546, when religious and political negotiations between the two sides broke down. In the summer of that year the Smalcaldic War broke out, lasting until 1547. Though the forces of the emperor were successful in defeating the German Lutheran princes, the war was actually indecisive. Neither politically nor religiously did its results

effect any permanent settlement in Germany. Religiously, its immediate result was the so-called "Interim of 1548," which the emperor imposed upon Germany as an effort to restore religious unity. Despite some concessions to the evangelical party, the Interim was a Catholic decree in its tone and provisions; and where it was not Catholic, it was ambiguous. Politically, the Smalcaldic War meant further maneuvers and conflicts, and the actual peace settlement did not come until after these.

Indeed, it was not till eight years after the Smalcaldic War that terms of peace were prepared in the Religious Peace of Augsburg, 1555. These terms of peace made three provisions for the relations between Lutheranism and Catholicism in the religious and political life of Germany. First, the treaty recognized the Lutheran and the Catholic as the only legal Christian groups in the German states, and it proscribed all others. Second, it provided that when a prince chose either the Lutheran or the Roman faith, his subjects had to choose between accepting his faith and emigrating; this was the famous doctrine of "*cujus regio, ejus religio*," Third, it stipulated that when a Roman bishop or other ecclesiastical official became Protestant, he should lose control of his territory and be replaced by a Roman successor; this principle was called "ecclesiastical reservation." In

confirmation or elaboration of these provisions, there were other stipulations on matters like property, jurisdiction, and the like.

What is the meaning of the Peace of Augsburg, and what did it accomplish? Compared with the laws of modern states on the matter of religious toleration, its provision of "*cujus regio. ejus religio*," seems narrow indeed. Yet this was the candid acknowledgement that more than one religious profession was to be tolerated; and though it limited the number to two, it had already crossed the line from the medieval notion of a universal church. At the same time it had established the principle, which was eventually to prove disastrous, that the prince should determine the confessional status of his province. Luther had used the princes as "emergency bishops" to reform the provinces. With the Peace of Augsburg, they saw this status legalized and confirmed. Augsburg thus helped to retard the political development of Germany and to earn for German Lutheranism the reputation of diehard conservatism that still clings to it.

From the perspective of the historical development that followed it, the Peace of Augsburg appears as a delaying action. Neither the problem of religious toleration nor the political question of relations in the empire could remain permanently on the dead center that Augsburg symbolized. To the credit of the Peace of Augsburg it must be said that it prevented the outbreak of open warfare for two generations. When open warfare did come in 1618, it brought anguish and suffering to Germany in a measure that had been unknown in the history of warfare until that time. The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648, which closed the Thirty Years' War, carried through to their conclusion some of the provisions of the Peace of Augsburg; hence one could argue that Westphalia is more entitled to the name "settlement" than is Augsburg. But for the immediate consequences of the Lutheran Reformation, one must look to the Peace of Augsburg. Though it did not freeze historical development or prevent further change, it did lay down the terms within which that development and change were to occur during the important decades following the death of Luther.

During those same decades, the theological situation of Lutheranism was also one of conflict and change; and as the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 represented a temporary cessation of political controversy, so the Book of Concord of 1580 brought on an armistice, if not a truce, in the theological controversies of German Lutheranism. In the fifty years after the Augsburg Confession, the Roman Church had met at the Council of Trent and there had given definite formulation to many of its theological teachings. At the same time, there had arisen a number of movements which claimed to share Luther's opposition to the Papacy, but which took a position differing in many ways from the Lutheran stand; if it was to retain its theological identity, Lutheranism had to relate itself to the various Protestant

movements and to explain just how its approach differed from theirs. In addition, the theological situation with Lutheranism itself had become confused after the death of the fathers, and what has been called "the confessional generation" had to state the meaning of Lutheranism on the basis of the struggles within its own ranks. All three of these developments—the Council of Trent, Protestantism, and the Lutheran civil war—met their match in the great Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz; he and several others accomplished the restatement of the Lutheran position in the Formula of Concord.

Perhaps the principal problem addressed to Lutheran theology by later sixteenth century developments was the question of the relation between Lutheranism and the Protestant churches of the time. Given the break with Rome and the separation from Western Roman Christendom, what was the position of Lutheranism within non-Roman Western Christendom now that it was no longer alone in its protest against Rome? In its earliest form, the problem of the relation between Lutheranism and Protestantism had come during Luther's lifetime. His controversy with Zwingli on the Lord's Supper foreshadowed some of the issues that were to be basic to that relation, but it was especially in his conflict with the "left wing of the Reformation," discussed in Chapter VI, that he enunciated much of the Lutheran program against what Lutheran theologians regarded as the extremism of Protestant theology. Yet that program did not achieve definite formulation till the confessional generation, for this was the generation that was compelled to address itself to Calvinist Protestantism. It did so in several of the articles of the Formula of Concord.

Article XI of the Formula of Concord, which deals with the doctrine of election, manifests a concern for the Church and a desire to formulate the doctrine of election in such a way as not to invalidate the ministrations of the Church. In the medieval system, human merit and human responsibility had received the emphasis which they did at least partly to make room for the sacramental system. When both Lutheranism and Calvinism took a strong stand on the bondage of the human will, they ran the danger of ignoring the means of grace and of making the relation between man and God dependent upon the arbitrary will of God rather than upon God's condescension in Christ and in the means of grace. That danger became a reality in the theology of some later Calvinists—though, it seems clear now, not in the theology of Calvin himself—and it was not absent from the stand of certain extreme Lutherans. Articles I and II of the Formula of Concord, dealing as they do with original sin and free will, explicitly rule out any interpretation of either that would make a mockery of the means of grace. And in Article XI on election, the Formula continually stresses the importance of the Word and the sacraments as the means by which the election of God actualizes itself.

No less important are the other articles of the Formula devoted to Protestantism, Articles VII and VIII on the Lord's Supper and on the person of Christ. Many Protestant theologians had made the validity of the Lord's Supper dependent upon the individual and upon his faith. The presence of the body and blood of Christ was brought on by the faith of the individuals participating in the sacrament. Some extreme Protestants had even taken the position that the faith of the officiant helped make the sacrament valid. In opposition to this, Article VII of the Formula of Concord insists that not the faith of man but the promise of God grants validity to the sacrament. And in Article VIII, the Formula seeks to show that the understanding of the person of Christ which Lutheranism had defended against Protestantism was consonant with Scripture and the ancient church. Thus the Formula of Concord sought to turn the conflict between Lutheranism and Protestantism away from the polemical extremes to which both sides had let themselves be drawn, and to center attention upon the theological issues involved in their relation to the teaching of the Scriptures and the tradition of the ancient church.

That same concern also predominates in those articles of the Formula which take up theological questions that had been raised within the Lutheran camp itself. In its discussion of peripheral theological problems, as in Article IX, and in the way it handles problems of terminology, as in Articles V and VI, and in its consideration of theological exaggerations, as in Article IV, the Formula of Concord shows itself to be just that, a formula of concord. The two principal parties in Lutheranism after Luther's death were the Philippists and the so-called Gnesio-Lutherans. Following the example of their leader Melancthon, the Philippists were willing to make all sorts of concessions to both Romanism and Protestantism for the sake of civil and religious peace. Lined up against them were the Gnesio-Lutherans, who claimed to be more Lutheran than Luther but were in some ways more Melancthonian than Melancthon. They insisted upon a purging of all those elements in Lutheranism who refused to follow their line of self-styled orthodoxy. It is worth noting that these two parties continued into the seventeenth century, and have repeatedly occurred in the history of Lutheran theology since. Between these two parties the Formula of Concord was asked to choose.

"Against both these parties the pure teachers of the Augsburg Confession have taught and contended"—these words

or similar ones occur several times in the Formula. For the Formula refused to take either side in the controversy between Philippists and Gnesio-Lutherans, nor did it place itself squarely between them in a mediating position. Rather, it pointed out that the alternatives were false. In Article II, it sought to show that neither side had grasped the truly complex character of the problem. In Article IV, it pointed out that the positions to which combatants had been forced were both untenable. In Article X, it displayed an awareness of how apparently insignificant external matters can become important in the light of the church's total situation. Instead of declaring that one or another formulation was beyond the pale of the kingdom, the Formula sought to unify by distinguishing, and thus to restore clarity to the theological discussion.

In the long run, it must be said that the Formula did not succeed in its settlement much better than did the Peace of Augsburg. Each represented a temporary settlement rather than a decisive and final one. The parties and positions that had been in conflict before continued to struggle afterwards, even though each now claimed the settlement for his own. Still the settlement did give some indication of the direction in which the development was going, and it brought to the development a clarity it had not possessed before.

## QUESTIONS

1. Was the alliance between Lutheranism and the political powers of Germany beneficial or harmful to the cause of the Reformation? How would you defend your answer?
2. Did Luther's attitude to the territorial prince and the provisions of the Peace of Augsburg prepare the way for the coming of Hitler?
3. What similarities and differences can you find between the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in Article X of the Augsburg Confession and Apology, and that found in Article VIII of the Formula of Concord?
4. How does Article X of the Formula manifest the "middle way" discussed in Chapter VI?
5. Give specific instances illustrating the Formula's way of distinction and definition in dealing with theological controversies.

## XI. The One Church

The Lutheran Reformation—success or failure? This is the question with which every heir of the Reformation must be concerned. Each generation of heirs must ask again whether the reasons that called for the Reformation were valid, whether the Reformation accomplished what it was intended to accomplish, whether a new day with its new problems may not call for another answer.

Particularly urgent is this need in the question of the unity of the Church. The movement inaugurated by Luther sought to establish the Church once more upon the foundation of the Gospel, and thus to root the unity of the Church in the redemptive action of God rather than in human merit and human organizations. But an examination of the contemporary scene in Christendom will reveal that the Reformation, which was intended to reform the Church, has issued instead in a divided Christendom, with dozens of separate groups and denominations. Not even the church that bears the name of Luther and claims his message is united. Because of this situation, a consideration of the meaning of the Lutheran Reformation is incomplete unless it examines the Reformation as a church movement, as an action which was performed in the name of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Only from this point of view does Luther's break with Rome come into proper perspective. The grounds for that break were churchly grounds, and Luther's break was basically a catholic criticism of Roman Catholicism. Indeed, nothing else would have been possible in the light of Luther's doctrine of the Church. According to Luther, the Church's life is rooted in the Gospel. What calls the Church into being is the Word of God in the Gospel. That Word, communicated through preaching and through the sacraments, is the "constitutive element" in the Church's life. Where the Word is being proclaimed and the sacraments are being administered, there the Church is present. Organizational and liturgical order are a good thing for the Church, but they do not make the Church and it may be present where they are absent. But without the creative Word of the Gospel, there is no church, regardless of what else may be present.

As long as the Gospel is being proclaimed through the spoken Word and the sacraments, the Church continues. And it does so in spite of doctrinal and theological aberrations that may be present at a given time. These are not good for the Church; in time, they may even destroy the Church—if they destroy the Gospel, but only then. For the presence of the Church is not dependent upon purity of doc-

trine, important as that is. The presence of the Church is dependent upon the Gospel, and the Church can continue despite error. In fact, Luther knew from history that the Church has never been without its error and its errorists, but that it had nevertheless continued wherever and whenever the Gospel was proclaimed and the sacraments were administered.

From this profound understanding of the basic nature of the Church's life, Luther developed an equally profound interpretation of the meaning of the Church's unity. The unity of the Church is to be sought, first of all, in the Gospel, and not in anything external or human. Not what a man thinks about the Gospel (theology) or what he wears when he proclaims it (liturgy) or how he organizes a church to proclaim it (polity), but God proclaiming the Gospel through Word and sacraments brings about the unity of the Church. And Luther pronounced a "Woe" upon the man who would interject himself between the Holy Spirit and this process—the man who would substitute an artificial, human unity for the unity which God alone creates; and the man who would tear asunder that which God has joined together and frustrate the unifying work of the Holy Spirit by his own pride.

In the light of this doctrine of the Church it is understandable why Luther maintained throughout his life that the Church had always continued, even under the Papacy. To be sure, the shadow of human works had frequently obscured the light of the Gospel, and the machinations of an ecclesiastical organization had frequently replaced the power of God. But like the leaven, the Gospel was still there; and where the Gospel is, there the Church is, too. Against this Church, preserved even under the medieval Papacy, the gates of hell had never prevailed, and could never prevail; for it was founded on the rock of God's promise in Christ. In the continuity of Christianity despite medieval Roman error, Luther saw that promise fulfilled. There he saw the Church.

Of this Church, corrupt and weak though it may often have been, Luther regarded himself as a member. For with all its frailties this Church had baptized him with a baptism that was his comfort in all temptation. Since he saw himself as standing in the "sucession of the faithful" of all ages, including the Middle Ages, he was highly reluctant to break with the Church which had mothered him. He did not take this lightly, this separation from the body of Western Christendom. The protests he voiced were based upon his responsibility as a priest and a theological professor. He voiced them not as a revolutionary, nor even as a protesting



critic, but primarily as a member of the Church, as one of its doctors and professors. He addressed his appeal from one member of the Church to other members of the Church for a consideration of that Gospel which creates the Church. Others may have left the Church in order to find greater purity of doctrine or life elsewhere, but not Luther. He stayed where he believed his calling had placed him, and from that calling he spoke to the Church of the peril which he saw threatening it. That peril he sought to correct, not by separation but by proclamation, not by schism but by the Word.

How long he would have continued to do this is a matter that is open to conjecture. The fact is that the Papacy as then constituted could not tolerate such a proclamation of the Gospel in its midst. And therefore, after several warnings, the pope excommunicated Luther. Luther maintained that by this action the pope was declaring his unwillingness to put up with the Gospel for which Luther was contending. To Luther this meant that the pope had condemned not merely Luther but the Gospel itself. He had spoken the Gospel to a church that was supposedly built upon the Gospel. Now that church had forbidden him to speak that Gospel, and when he refused to be restrained, had expelled him. There seemed to be no room any longer in that church for this kind of Gospel.

From this situation the true character of Luther's work in relation to the unity of the Church becomes apparent. There seems to have been room in the Roman Church for almost anyone and anything except Luther and the Gospel he was proclaiming. In the very Italy from which Pope Leo X issued his decree of excommunication, there were men whose skepticism denied basic Christian tenets; but they were not excommunicated. Whatever may have been the status of Leo's own religious life—and our reports on this vary somewhat—some of his predecessors on the throne of St. Peter had been no more Christian, and a good deal less virtuous, than Cicero or Plato; but they were not excommunicated. Luther's own contemporary, Erasmus, certainly disagreed with much of what Roman Catholicism represented, and he made his disagreement exceedingly vocal; but Erasmus was not excommunicated. Yet Luther was. Why?

The answer to that question is exceedingly complex. Its roots lie in the situation of imperial and papal politics in the first half of the sixteenth century, in that triangle of pope, emperor, and princes that is the framework for so much of the Lutheran Reformation. In addition, there is a theological answer to the question, lying at the very foundation of Reformation theology. Irritating and troublesome as these other men and movements may have been to the Roman Church, the Reformation alone constituted a basic threat to the medieval theological and ecclesiastical system. For the Reformation had as its central theological thesis the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the uselessness

of human or ecclesiastical merit in the process of salvation, the free forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. If all this were true, then the traffic in merit and grace dispensed by the hierarchy was worse than useless. This was the threat of Reformation theology to that hierarchy, and against this threat the pope acted when he excommunicated Luther.

Yet by his teaching of justification by faith, Luther stood in the continuity of the faithful in all generations. He was proclaiming the Gospel by which and for which the Church lives. The pope excommunicated him and condemned justification by faith alone. As far as Luther was concerned, the pope had thereby also condemned the Gospel. And so, in Luther's eyes, it was Rome that had left Luther, and not Luther that had left Rome. As long as the Roman Church would tolerate the Gospel, despite its error, it remained the Church for Luther. But when it condemned the Gospel and forced Luther out, it became sectarian. If, as Luther maintained, the Church is where the Gospel is, then it followed that by condemning the Gospel Rome was condemning the Church. It was in this spirit, and not primarily in a spirit of boasting, that Luther said of Worms: "Then I was the Church!" Because he was contending for the Gospel and the Gospel made the Church and Rome condemned the Gospel, Rome had condemned the Church as represented in this case by the Church's loyal servant, Luther. Luther believed he was standing for the same Gospel for which the Church had stood before it became corrupt and condemned him. When it condemned him, so he believed, it was forsaking the Gospel to which it had previously been loyal, while he continued in his loyalty. Thus Rome turned its back on the Church, while Luther remained with the Church. Such was Luther's interpretation of what happened when he severed his relations with Rome.

This interpretation is of great importance in the determination of Luther's responsibility for a divided Christendom. He was convinced that as there was no church without the Gospel, there was no church unity without the Gospel either. Therefore, the Gospel was the only valid basis for true church unity. It is inaccurate, then, to maintain that Luther left the Roman Church because he was dissatisfied with this or that in its doctrine or practice. He did not leave the Church at all, but Rome left him. And once this split had come, it proved to be increasingly difficult to restrain the centrifugal forces in church and culture, until now, after four centuries, we see the Church divided into splinters and sects.

It is easier to exonerate the Reformation of more than its share of responsibility for a divided Christendom than it is to determine what the responsibility of its heirs ought to be within a divided Christendom. Evidence for the difficulty of this is the fact that in the current ecumenical movement, aimed at bringing the churches closer together, some Lu-



therans have been in the very lead while others have been most vociferous in their opposition. Is it Lutheran to lead an interdenominational movement, or is Lutheran to oppose the interdenominational movement? Only the most extreme positions at either end would maintain that the answer to this question is easy or that any answer can escape ambiguity. Luther's attitude toward Rome even after his excommunication shows that he regarded schism more gravely than most of us seem to. Luther's attitude toward Zwingli at Marburg shows that he took differences of doctrine more seriously than most of us seem to. Which attitude, or which combination of attitudes, is called for in the present situation of the churches?

The answer to this question is closely related to the answer which the Lutheran churches of today must try to offer to the question of our closing chapter: Was the Reformation worthwhile?

### QUESTIONS

1. Was Luther's interpretation of his break with Rome realistic, or was it a rationalization, like the proverbial, "I wasn't fired; I quit" in reverse?
2. Is the attitude of the Lutheran Reformation to Roman Catholicism different from its attitude to Protestantism on the question of church unity? Why?
3. What is the relation between religious, political, and social factors in bringing about divisions in the Church? What does this mean for efforts to abolish those divisions?
4. Do you believe the Reformation was permanent, or do you think that at some future time the Christian churches will all be reunited, at least in the West? Give reasons for your answer.
5. What attitude is your church body taking toward current efforts aimed at closer relations between the churches? Do you agree with this attitude?
6. Are the grounds of the Reformation division valid? Has Roman Catholicism changed? Has Lutheranism changed? What bearing does this have on the question of church unity?

## XII. An Assessment

A failure to understand Luther and the Lutheran Reformation in their full scope has caused various interpreters, some of them sympathetic and some of them critical, to attribute Luther's Reformation to false grounds and to evaluate it on the basis of a false assessment. As a consideration of the Reformation's meaning for the unity of the Church is an essential part of such a study as this, so an examination of various assessments of its meaning and value also belongs to this study.

One very serious charge against the Reformation is the claim that it helped to destroy not only the unity of the Church but also the influence of the Church upon Western culture and life. Beginning with a churchly protest against the medieval church, Luther has apparently produced the great apostasy of modern times. This interpretation of the Reformation has become almost standard in Roman Catholic textbooks—with the exception of books like that of Professor Joseph Lortz—which see the Middle Ages as the golden age of Christian civilization and the Lutheran Reformation as the vulgarization and paganization of the West. In this judgment Roman Catholic interpreters have sometimes been joined by liberal students of the Reformation, who interpreted it as the beginning of the liberation of the

human mind from the authority of revelation. Thus Ralph Waldo Emerson said that if Luther had known his ninety-five theses would lead to Boston Unitarianism he would rather have cut his arm off than have posted them.

Nor are Roman Catholics and liberals alone in this view. More than once, American Lutherans have stated that Luther's Reformation brought on the Declaration of Independence, and that there is a direct line of descent from Luther's doctrine of the liberty of the Christian man to the Jeffersonian doctrine that all men are created free and equal. Actually, there is a great gulf fixed between the two doctrines. Luther maintained that the only freedom that mattered was the freedom from sin, death, and hell available in Christ to men who otherwise were enslaved; Jefferson maintained that freedom in political and economic affairs was provided, but also limited, by the natural law, and that it was the function of historical religions to teach and support this natural law. It has been argued that Jefferson's ideas are closer to those of other Protestant leaders or to those of certain Roman Catholic thinkers than they are to Luther's conception of freedom.

Another charge frequently heard from unsympathetic historians is the view that Luther's break with Rome was mo-

tivated by personal considerations. He developed some theological notions, so runs this view, or he decided that he wanted to break his monastic vow and marry Katherine von Bora. And when Rome in her wisdom refused, he left the Church in a huff and took some of his blind followers along. The entire Reformation, with its theology, was nothing more than the extension of the irritations of one man, whose proud spirit refused to bow to the supreme authority of the Holy Father.

Such a shallow interpretation of the thought and work of Luther is suspect on the face of it. But since it has received such wide circulation, it needs examination. The fundamental assumption of this interpretation is the claim that Luther was a schismatic, who was willing to divide the Church in order to retain his private notions. Even a cursory study of Luther's writings will show that this assumption is wrong, as the more moderate Roman Catholic historians admit. Luther sought to subject his private notions to the Gospel; and as he said at Worms, his conscience was bound by the Word of God. We have pointed out the reluctance with which he came out against the prevailing religious views of his time and his efforts to stay with the church of his day. He always remained willing to discuss the controverted points and to consider the reestablishment of church unity in his time. This is what drove him, in 1535 and 1536, to enter into negotiations with Martin Bucer of Strasbourg and with the Bohemian Brethren. Luther's entire life and thought stand as a refutation of the claim that the Reformation was motivated by personal considerations.

Another interpretation of the Reformation that appears very frequently, especially in Protestant and even in Lutheran treatments, is the thesis that the essence of the Reformation consisted in the recovery of the authority of the Bible, and that Luther's great historical achievement was the fact that he replaced the authority of the Church with the authority of the Bible. Like many pat statements, this view can be true and it can be false.

In a sense, it is true that Luther's achievement did consist in the recovery of the Bible—but of the Bible as the bearer of the Gospel. He had been loyal to the Bible even before he discovered the meaning of justification by faith alone, but it was only with that discovery that, as he himself said, the Scriptures were opened to him. For that matter, the Middle Ages were quite articulate in their views of biblical authority, as well as of biblical inspiration. In Luther's day there were several theories of biblical inspiration circulating in theological circles, and the doctrine of the supreme authority, if not the sole authority, of the Scriptures was almost universally acknowledged by the medieval scholastic theologians. The Church did not need a Luther to tell it that the Bible was true.

But it did need a Luther to tell it what the truth of the Bible is. The distinctive contribution of the Reformation

to the Christian understanding of the Bible, as we saw in Chapter VIII, was its discovery that all theology is related to the Gospel, and that the purpose of the Bible is not merely to provide sacred information but to communicate the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. The Bible must be understood in the light of God's redemption in Christ, or it is not understood at all, regardless of how one thinks of biblical authority or biblical inspiration. From this insight Luther developed his characteristic views of biblical authority and biblical inspiration, and, as we have seen, his characteristic method of biblical interpretation. But it is inaccurate to designate his work as that of restoring the Bible to the Church. It would perhaps be more accurate to interpret it as the task of restoring the Gospel to the Bible. For he did not seek to enforce a carbon copy of New Testament Christianity. When Zwingli tried to do just that in his mode of celebrating the Lord's Supper, Luther repudiated this mode as irrelevant. What was always relevant in New Testament Christianity was its Gospel.

There is another misconception of the Reformation that has gained currency from time to time, especially in so-called "evangelical" circles. This is the claim that the basis of Luther's protest was the low level of morality in the church of his time. The morals of fifteenth and sixteenth century Roman Catholicism were indeed nothing to be proud of, although sober scholarship does not emerge with as black a picture as is sometimes painted by Protestant writers and preachers. It is a simple procedure, though not a completely honest one, to describe moral conditions in the pre-Reformation church with such vividness as to shock the reader, then to portray the Reformation as the awakening of a new moral consciousness, the abolition of clerical celibacy with its attendant evils, and the creation of a healthy, normal, respectable morality.

The Reformation was indeed responsible for a "reconstruction of morality," as Karl Holl has called it, but this cannot be regarded as the basis of Luther's break. There had been groups throughout the Middle Ages who protested against the moral decline of the Church and who separated themselves from the Church because of it. Perhaps the most notable among them were the Donatists of the time of St. Augustine, who refused to acknowledge the validity of the ministry of evil men in the Church. But Luther was no Donatist, and any interpretation of the Reformation on this basis fails to strike at the core of the problem. Moral conditions in the Roman Church are not today what they were in the heyday of the Renaissance, and it is neither fair nor honest to describe them as though they were. Nor dare the Lutheran observer forget that the moral level of Lutheranism has often left much to be desired. For example, a comparison of moral conditions in Lutheran courts and Roman Catholic courts of Germany during the sixteenth century reveals no appreciable moral superiority on either side. It

was not moral degradation that brought on the protest and the split, and no amount of moral improvement will heal the split.

With all this in mind, we can more intelligently relate Luther's Reformation to other protest movements. The protests contemporary to him were on several grounds. Men like Ulrich von Hutten and Franz von Sickingen are typical of the political and nationalistic rejection of medieval Catholicism. The Peasants' War is an example of the economic opposition to the medieval feudal order. Erasmus, Giordano Bruno, and many others typify the intellectual protest of the Renaissance against what they regarded as the obscurantism of medieval thought. Regardless of their importance for other areas of life, these movements were all more or less anti-ecclesiastical in character. For that reason, as his writings on all three groups attest, Luther rejected the political, the economic, and the intellectual as basic grounds for his criticism of Roman Catholicism. If it was to be criticized at all, this had to be in the name of the Church and on the basis of the Gospel.

Much the same relationship exists between Luther and the modern thought to which he is often linked. As mentioned earlier, it has become fashionable in some quarters to attribute to Luther the origins of modern individualism, the view of human life that sees each man as the molder of his own destiny. When applied to Christian thought, individualism produces an outlook that either is hostile to the Church or at best regards it as an afterthought in the Christian life. But Luther was as opposed to such individualism as he was to a false estimate of the Church. With characteristic penetration, he saw that despite its emphasis upon the Church, medieval religion was actually very individualistic. For it demanded that a man relate himself to God through his moral life, thus putting the ultimate responsibility for human destiny into human hands, with grace serving as an auxiliary.

Thus, far from being an individualist, Luther defended the doctrine of the Church against individualism. It would seem, therefore, that he cannot be praised or blamed for

the rise of modern individualism, Protestant or secular. The real assessment of the Reformation cannot be on any of the grounds we have listed here, nor on others that are frequently cited in defense or criticism of Luther. Fairness would seem to require, after all, that a man or movement be evaluated on the basis of the goals and directions he set for himself. Seen in this light, both the "success" and the "failure" of the Reformation—if we may use these words—become clear. On the positive side, the Reformation did serve as an agency in the hands of God to make the Gospel clearer and to glorify His mercy in Christ. It has made the central message of the Christian faith more meaningful to many people. But on the negative side, the Reformation did involve a loss as well as a gain, more perhaps in its by-products than in its products. For many Protestant Christians, it has meant a severance with the traditions of the Christian centuries—theologically, liturgically, emotionally. Only in our own time have some of them come to appreciate the depth and the tragedy of that severance.

Ultimately, the true assessment of the Lutheran Reformation in our time will have to come in the faith and life of the contemporary church, and in the way it interprets the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to its world.

### QUESTIONS

1. Is Luther the "father of modern democracy"? If so, why has so little of Lutheranism developed democratic government? If not, what can Lutherans in a democracy do to combine the two?
2. Examine the interpretation and assessment of Luther's work in several Roman Catholic biographies. Discuss them.
3. Examine the interpretation and assessment of Luther's work in several secular and Marxist histories. Discuss them.
4. In what ways can contemporary Lutherans administer the heritage of the Reformation faithfully and meaningfully?

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- C. Melanchthon, Philip: *Loci Communes*, tr. by C. L. Hill, Boston, 1944. The first Lutheran systematic theology, highly praised by Luther (1521).
- D. Holborn, Hajo: *Ulrich von Hutten and the German Reformation*, New Haven, 1937. A study of the humanist, nationalist, leader of the Knights War, one-time friend of Erasmus and Luther and co-author of *Letters of Obscure Men*.

\*Available in paperback.



- E. In IV, I, 1, above there are articles on: Luther and Karlstadt, Luther and Zwingli and Luther and Thomas Munzer, one of the leaders of the Peasant Revolt of 1525. There is an article on Luther and Bucer in III, D, above, on Thomas Munzer by George W. Forell ("Thomas Munzer, Symbol and Reality") in the Winter, 1963, issue of *Dialog*. (This issue also contains articles on recent Roman Catholic interpretations of Luther, etc.)
- F. For the Anabaptist and others, see: George H. Williams: *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia, 1962, which presents the results of the new research in this area.
- G. Janelle, Pierre: *The Catholic Reformation*, Milwaukee, 1949.
- H. McNeill, John T., *The History and Character of Calvinism*, N.Y., 1954. The best work in English. For other developments in the Reformation period, consult the bibliography in Grimm, *The Reformation Era*.

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