

MARTIN LUTHER

- THE REFORMATION

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MARTIN LUTHER

Early Life

Martin Luther, a miner's son, was born at Eisleben, in Saxony, probably in 1483. Six months after his birth, the family removed to Mansfeld where the child, at the tender age of five, began attendance at the municipal Latin school. At thirteen, he was sent to the school of the Brothers of the Common Life in Magdeburg. Then we find him at St George's school in Eisenach, where he earned his board by singing in the streets. In 1501, he was enrolled in the University of Erfurt and became a Master of Arts there early in 1505. In July of the same year he applied for admission to the monastery of the Augustinians in Erfurt and made his profession there in September, 1506. Less than two years later, he was ordained priest, without so far having made any theological studies. In 1511, he was sent on the business of his Order to Rome, and behaved there like any normally devout Catholic pilgrim. In 1512, at Wittenberg, he claimed to have a revelation from the Holy Ghost about the true meaning of St Paul's text, " The just shall live by faith".

It is not as a mere denouncer of ordinary abuses that we must regard this Augustinian Friar who shook the world, but as the creator of a revolutionary theological doctrine in regard to the method of Salvation - the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone.

Justification by Faith Alone

The steps by which Luther, in his monastic years previous to the outbreak of the Indulgence Controversy in 1517, slowly evolved this belief, are now traceable in his early commentaries and lectures, which have fortuitously come to light in the course of the last fifty years, [since 1900,] and the discovery of which, together with Father Denifle's epoch-making book, published in 1904, (* *Luther und Luthertum*. Mainz, 1904.) revolutionized Luther-study. Luther lived his busy monastic life under the intermittent pressure of a gnawing doubt as to the possibility of his salvation. His mind craved for a subjective certainty that he had avoided damnation, yet he was so vividly conscious of sin and of the appalling gap between God's goodness and man's puny efforts, that he lost faith in man's power to help himself along the road to Salvation by any actions or works of his own. There is nothing Humanist in this, but rather the reverse ;

nothing akin to the religious scepticism and exaltation of humanity of the Italian Renaissance, but a problem of religious psychology posed in typically Teutonic terms. Nor did the helps to which Luther turned reflect contemporary Humanism, either German or Italian. He had only a moderate knowledge of the Latin classics and less of the Greek. He had recourse in turn to the Nominalist Theologians on whom he had been brought up, to the German mystics, and finally to St Augustine.

Gradually, not suddenly, he reached an answer that assuaged the pain of his questionings: Original Sin had totally vitiated man's nature and will, rendering them utterly powerless for good. Man could contribute nothing to his own Justification; to strive for merit was in vain. Salvation could be attained only through the recognition of God's power and willingness to effect redemption by the free imputation of His own goodness to those who put their complete trust in Him to do so.

Luther was aware that this view of the economy of Salvation was original, yet at the same time he also believed it to be Catholic. Indeed, Denifle showed that Luther's interpretation of Romans 1: 17, "Justus autem ex fide vivit" - "The just man lives by faith", the biblical text on which he chiefly relied, was a medieval commonplace, and that Luther could hardly have been unaware of the many passages in the Liturgy and the Breviary which stressed the place of Faith in Justification. But the revolution in Justification by Faith Alone lay in the *Alone*. In the complete denial of any independent power for good in fallen man was contained in germ all Protestantism - the Unfree Will; Predestination; the attack on Hierarchy and Sacramentalism; the Priesthood of All Believers [and the non-existence of any 'Ministerial Priesthood']; the Invisible Church.

The Indulgence Controversy

Luther did not, of course, immediately perceive all this. The remorseless drawing out of all the terrible implications of Justification by Faith Alone was the work of the Indulgence Controversy that broke out in October, 1517, and culminated in Luther's excommunication in 1521. In challenging a disputation upon Indulgences, Luther was not so much protesting against the methods by which the Great Indulgence of 1517 was being preached as expressing an uneasy feeling that the whole doctrine, involving as it did the idea of a transfer of merit to wipe out punishment, accorded ill with Justification - total Justification - by Faith Alone. He was denounced to Rome. The methods by which his opponents, Dr Eck especially, conducted the case against him, and the lengths to which, for various reasons, it was drawn out, were not calculated to confine it to the comparatively narrow ground on which it had arisen, but served to make clear all its implications. Luther had the dangerous courage to see his ideas through to the end. By the time of his excommunication he had abandoned the whole Catholic conception of Christianity, had denounced the Pope as anti-Christ, and had made his appeal from ecclesiastical authority to his own interpretation of the Scriptures. The year 1520 was the decisive period, and the three great Reformation Pamphlets of that date, embodying his final position, came as the climax of three years' incessant writing and preaching, and revealed Luther as a pamphleteer of genius.

A National Hero

We have come to our second problem. Why did this theological controversy become of such enormous significance? Why did this morbid and troubled Friar, hitherto no public figure outside his own order, attain within three years to the status of something like a national hero? Why, all over Germany, did preachers, inside and outside the Catholic Priesthood, rise up like mushrooms overnight, echoing his doctrines, flocking to his standard? Many considerations of different kinds go towards suggesting some explanation of these extraordinary phenomena.

In the first place there were, it would seem, theological centres in which academic opinion had slowly been drifting toward the anti-humanist doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone that Luther had painfully worked out as an anodyne for his own introspective despair. We may see in the works of our own John Colet, and in those of the Picard scholar, Lefevre d'Etapes, who survived until 1536 and never formally renounced Catholicism, an Augustinianism that placed increased emphasis upon the role of Faith in the economy of salvation. And among the German Augustinian Friars of Luther's own order, a revival of the

study of St Augustine himself seems to have produced the same effect. Thus there was already some academic backing being formed for the new principle of religion derived from Luther's personal experience, an experience moreover that was thoroughly typical of Germanic psychology and of the subjectivism which had recently found many encouragements. We may believe that there were serious-minded Germans to whom Justification by Faith Alone appealed as it had appealed to Luther. But there were doubtless far more who easily welcomed a doctrine that, by basing itself upon the radical impotence of human nature for good, removed both the possibility and the necessity of heroic achievement and put high moral idealism at a discount. Here Justification by Faith Alone arrived by a different route at the depreciation of asceticism characteristic of the Italian Renaissance. Though the already justified and converted man was expected to perform good works as a sign of his justification, it was a more easily understood teaching that these were not demanded of him in order that he might in the first instance be justified.

But Luther and his case made a far wider appeal than even this. For all kinds of quite extraneous issues became associated with his fight against Rome and the Catholic hierarchy. Every strand of contemporary discontent, swayed by the resounding catchwords of his widely-circulated pamphlets, thought that in the author of *The Liberty of a Christian Man* had arisen the champion of its own particular cause. Not yet aware that the Liberty preached by Luther was essentially an inward spiritual liberty calculated to render material unfreedom immaterial, men thought that he stood against concrete oppression in all its forms - economic, political, intellectual. And perhaps there was just a moment when he really did. However that may be, he was applauded by the humanists, as the Messiah who, without violent breach with the past, would reform the Church according to the principles of scholarship and the tastes of the classics. The growing urban and mining proletariat, illiterate, their knowledge of the great man derived only from excited gossip, saw in him a saviour from the oppression of their masters. The peasant serfs, for their part, welcomed a champion against feudal and legal injustices. All in time were to be disillusioned. But what gave some verisimilitude to the picture of Luther as every discontented man's champion was the prominent part played in his polemic by the attack upon the Papacy's financial policy. This won for him the support not only of the moneyed classes, resentful of papal taxation, but of all those of his countrymen who suffered from the disguised inferiority complex that the Germans often feel in regard to the Italians.

The Political Issue

To abuse the Papacy as an oppressive foreign institution by which crafty and easy-living Italians exploited virtuous and sensitive Teutons in questionable Italian interests, was a sure passport to popularity. Instinctively, Luther harped on this theme, with a coarse, passionate, but successful artistry. National feeling in Germany had as yet remained largely incoherent, owing to the lack of a national political framework. The craving for a Leader, satisfied in France by Francis I, and in England by Henry VIII, could in Germany find no satisfaction in either the eccentric Maximilian I or the cold, cautious figure of the young foreigner elected Emperor in 1517 - Charles V. But Martin Luther, the miner's son from Eisleben, personified the German character, its strengths and its failings. His behaviour at the Diet of Worms, though neither so firm nor so theatrical as later legend relates, was at any rate dramatic enough to clinch his success.

That these things could be, says much for the decline which the Church's hold over clergy and laity in Germany had suffered. Yet we must not exaggerate. At no time, even in the full flood of Luther's earliest popularity - and less and less so as time went on - was opinion undivided. Modern research by German Catholic scholars has revealed the fight carried on against Luther by the German Dominicans, and has shown the extent of early German anti-Luther literature. But it remains true that this literary activity, lacking the leadership of a great personality and suffering all the propagandist disadvantages of the defensive side, prevailed but little. In 1521 the "New Preaching," or "New Learning," was finding support all over Germany. Its future, however, was far from clear. Much - perhaps all - would depend upon the attitude adopted by the secular authorities - the Emperor and the German Territorial Princes.

An intensification of lay control over ecclesiastical affairs marked the century which preceded the Reformation, and the independence of the Church constituted the last formidable obstacle in the path of

those forces which were moving, through the centralized Renaissance governments, towards the creation of the Modern State. At the same time, the permanent betrayal of orthodoxy by any secular power was regarded as a thing unthinkable. That the secular power in Germany would take cognizance, and unfavourable cognizance, of the " New Preaching " was thus generally regarded as a foregone conclusion. But though the Emperor Charles V, at the Diet at Worms in 1521, forced through a decree putting Luther to the Imperial ban and prohibiting his works and teaching, so low had Imperial authority dwindled that he was unable to enforce the execution of the sentence by the separate principalities. The German Princes were one and all determined that no religious controversy should be used by the Emperor to recover his power over them. At the same time they were not necessarily prepared to crush a new movement which, provided it were not politically or socially disruptive, might conceivably help them both to bring under control the great autonomous ecclesiastical body and to strengthen their independence against Imperial overlordship.

The Political Issue (The Peasants' Revolt)

Luther's own Prince, the Elector of Saxony, at once a friend of humanists and an exploiter of relics and indulgences, chose to protect the heresiarch's person without formally accepting his doctrine or breaking with the Pope. A period of honourable captivity for Luther in the Wartburg was followed by a virtual freedom of action when he returned to Wittenberg in 1522. But at this point the innate conservatism of his temperament began to show itself, and to contradict those of his earlier and wilder utterances which had awoken responses far more profound than were really consonant with his ideas when shorn of their pamphleteering rhetoric. His feeling for ceremonial and for a Real Presence in the Eucharist drew him into a bitter, but successful, struggle with his more radically-minded follower, Carlstadt. The fanatical revolutionary preaching by which such men as Heinrich Pfeiffer, Thomas Munzer, and the so-called "Zwickau Prophets" were inciting the peasantry and urban workers into insurrection was totally repellent to him. He had perhaps never seriously connected social revolution with the spread of "The Gospel." The Peasants' Revolt of 1524-5 filled him with horror and he came down heavily upon the side of authority, both in speech and writing. This action, while it revealed Luther as a supporter of the established order, and thus as a potential ally of the Princes, deprived him at once of the goodwill of all those elements of social and economic discontent that had at first looked to him and that now turned towards the Anabaptist and Apocalyptic sects, who promised the establishment of God's Justice here on Earth, as well as in the Hereafter.

Considerations of another kind were also preparing the way for the eventual capture of Lutheranism by political forces. The doctrines of the Invisibility of the true Church and the Priesthood of All Believers [to the exclusion of a Hierarchical Priesthood] destroyed the Catholic conception of the Church on earth as a formal institutional Unity with inherent independent juridical powers vested in Pope and hierarchy. There remained instead the idea of local communities representing the projection on to the earthly plane of the Real Invisible Church - the Company of the Elect. In the communities each individual Christian had equal spiritual power; what arrangements might be come to for the organization and ordered exercise of these powers was a matter of local convenience, not of any divine ordinance. As time went on the problem of organization was increasingly forced upon Luther. All was not going as he had hoped. Contrary to his naive expectations his teaching had not swept the board, had not appeared self-evident in the Scriptures to all reasonable men of good-will. His Gospel had not established itself peacefully and uniformly throughout the length and breadth of Germany. Confusion and disorder were increasing.

Already the fissiparous results of the appeal to Scripture alone were becoming evident. The conflict between Luther and Carlstadt was paralleled in every place where the New Preaching appeared. Worst of all, the economic position of the preachers was insecure. They could seldom make good their claim to the Catholic endowments and ecclesiastical machine, even when they themselves had been the local Catholic priests. Luther decided to make his appeal to the secular power, asking it to declare openly for his cause and to take over its organization, in order to give stability and order to the communities. It is a disputed question whether Luther originally held that the Prince, or chief magistrate, was always *ipso facto* the rightful ruler of the Church and wielder of spiritual jurisdiction ; or whether he merely held that in the

existing circumstances the Prince was the most suitable person to whom the Christian community should entrust the exercise of those powers of Church government which all possessed severally. The point does not affect the upshot. The Elector of Saxony and the Landgrave of Hesse, reassured by Luther's attitude during the Peasants' Revolt, and perceiving their opportunity of abolishing the autonomy of the Church and seizing its wealth, accepted his invitation. In 1526 and 1527 the Catholic Church in their territories was destroyed. State-controlled Lutheran establishments were set up by means of Princely commissions; and the models thus created were followed by the many other German States which, in the course of the next twenty-five years, embraced Lutheranism.

The Political Issue (The Lutheran Princes)

This virtual handing-over of a religious movement to political authority marks the end of what may be called Luther's prophetic period. Henceforward much power, even of doctrinal control, was exercised by the Lutheran Princes. The theory was that doctrine was self-evident from the Bible, and was authoritatively promulgated in such works as Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*. But in practice the complete State control of worship and ceremonial implied a certain doctrinal initiative, while the choice between the many conflicting prophets with their varying brands of Lutheranism lay entirely with the Prince.

Its adoption by the State complicated the nature of Lutheranism. Originally a mere system of belief it became in addition a great complex of vested political interests, and any attempt at reconciliation which ignored this fact and took account only of pure theology, was doomed to failure from the first. None the less, many such attempts were made by eirenicly-minded theologians from the fifteen-thirties to the fifteen-fifties, of which the famous Ratisbon Conference of 1541, associated with the name of Cardinal Contarini, came nearest to success. Only six years after the ineffectual ban of Worms, a pronouncement of the Diet of Speyer, in 1526, declared that each Prince should consult his own conscience in religious policy, and this was interpreted as conceding a freedom of initiative of which advantage was quickly taken. After Charles V's failure to bring about reunion at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, even in face of the Turkish invasions, the Lutheran Princes formed among themselves the League of Schmalkald. Those Princes who remained loyal to Catholicism would undertake no crusade against the innovators for fear of lending themselves to an Imperial revival which all equally dreaded. More conscious of common political aims than of religious diversities, which they assumed to be but temporary, they were prepared to co-operate with each other only against common enemies who seemed to threaten society far more profoundly than did Luther - that is to say, the Turks and the Anabaptists.

Luther's Marriage and Death

Martin Luther went through a form of marriage with the ex-nun, Katharine von Bora, in 1525, when he was forty-two. Melanchthon deplored the marriage, but hoped that the refining influence of his young consort would cure Luther of his habit of making coarse jokes. It had no such result, for his speech and writings grew coarser with the years, and towards the end of his life passed all bounds of decency.

Luther gave his formal written sanction to the second bigamous marriage of the Landgrave Philip of Hesse in 1540. This act of the Doctor has been regarded by some of his warmest admirers, Kostlin for instance, as "the greatest blot on the history of the Reformation."

In 1545, the year before he died, Luther issued two broadsides, entitled *Donkey-Pope* and *Swine-Pope*, embellished with wood-cuts by Lucas Cranach and quatrains by the Doctor himself, which he called his "last will and testament." Both verses and pictures were gross obscenities, which no publisher of our time, not even the lowest, would dare to re-issue. Luther's last sermon was a fierce, unbridled attack on the Jews, whose expulsion from Eisleben he vociferously demanded. He died at Eisleben four days after that expression of hatred, on February 18th, 1546.

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