



MARTIN LUTHER

The Man Who Started the Reformation



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CHRISTIAN FOCUS





Thomas M. Lindsay was born in 1843 in Lanarkshire, Scotland. He was educated at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. In 1872 he became Professor of Church History in the Free Church College, Glasgow, where he was later to become Principal. Lindsay was highly regarded as an historian of the Reformation period and he wrote a two-volume *History of the Reformation in Europe*. He died in 1914. This volume was originally published in 1900 under the title *Luther and the German Reformation*. Only a small amount of editing has been done, and the reader should bear this in mind when the author refers to current events.

ISBN 1-85792-261-1

© Christian Focus Publications

This edition published in 1997,
reprinted in 2004

by

Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.
Geanies House, Fearn, Tain,
Ross-shire, IV20 ITW, Great Britain

www.christianfocus.com

Printed and bound by Norhaven, Denmark

Cover design by Alister MacInnes

ted and bound by ????

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PREFACE

Although Luther's life has been written scores of times, it has always seemed to me that there is room for another – for one which will be careful to set Luther in the environment of the common social life of his time. For it is often forgotten that the sixteenth century, in which he was the most outstanding figure, saw the beginnings of our present social life in almost everything, from our way of looking at politics and our modes of trade to our underclothing. To show what that life was, and to show Luther in it, would, it seems to me, bring him nearer us than has yet been done.

I do not for a moment pretend that this little book is even a sketch of the Reformer's life written in this way. That needed far more space than was permitted. Yet I have had the thought before me in writing, and for that reason have been careful to make as much use as possible of contemporary evidence.

The book has not been weighted with continual references to authorities. There is one set of authorities I have must acknowledge – the numerous letters, records of conversations, extracts from diaries, all belonging to the times of Luther, which have been printed during the last twenty-five years in such journals as the *Studien und Kritiken*, the *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie*, etc. The last edition of Köstlin's *Martin Luther: sein Leben und seine Schriften*, with its admirable notes and references, deserves a special mention. No one can write about Luther without acknowledging the debt he owes to it.

Thomas M. Lindsay
Glasgow
13th April 1900





INTRODUCTION



The epoch in European history which is called the Reformation may be looked at from many different points of view, but when Luther is taken as the central figure, one – *the religious* – must dominate all the others, and the various intricate intermingled movements must be regarded as the environment of this one central impulse. We are compelled to look on it as the time of a great revival of heart religion – perhaps the greatest which the world has ever seen: whether its magnitude be measured by intensity of religious conviction, by clearness of consecrated vision into those intellectual meanings of spiritual facts, and into those laws of spiritual events which we call dogmatic theology; or by its almost unique effects in fields remote from religious and ecclesiastical life, in the narrower meaning of these words. But this great revival was set in a picturesque framework of human impulses – political, intellectual, moral, social and economic – such as the world has seldom seen before or since. History, with its warp and woof of ‘When’ and ‘Where’, of Time and Place, so wove and interwove all these impulses together that it is both possible and legitimate to describe the Reformation from many different standpoints, all of which are true.

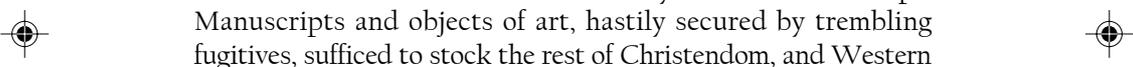
Professor Leopold von Ranke may be taken as the most illustrious example of historians who have taught us to regard the Reformation as a great political force working political transformations not yet ended. It overthrew completely medievalism, and started the modern conditions of political life on their career. It destroyed the medieval idea of a Christendom





MARTIN LUTHER

made visibly one by a supreme civil governor who ruled over the bodies of all men, by a supreme ecclesiastical chief who ruled their souls, and by a dominant scholastic which kept their minds in due submission, and 'red the marches' between sanctified wisdom and unholy lore. The two and a half centuries before the Reformation are full of revolts against this medievalism. They saw the birth of modern European nations with conflicting interests, and the strong feelings of independent national life overthrew the medieval ideas of government, both secular and ecclesiastical. The authority of emperor and pope had been defied by almost every European nation long before the times of our epoch; but the failure of Charles V to restore the medieval empire in Germany may be taken as the date at which the old ideas of government passed away for ever.



The Reformation may be regarded as an intellectual movement, and then Erasmus will be its central figure. The siege and pillage of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 had dispersed the scholars of that rich and cultured city over Western Europe. Manuscripts and objects of art, hastily secured by trembling fugitives, sufficed to stock the rest of Christendom, and Western nations again began to study the authors of a forgotten classical antiquity. A whole world of new thoughts in poetry, philosophy and statesmanship opened on the vision of the men of the dawn of the Reformation period. In the earlier days of the first Renaissance, the 'New Learning' had been confined to a few daring thinkers, but the invention of printing, almost contemporaneous with the second Renaissance, made the 'New Learning' common property, and the new thoughts acted on men in masses, and began to move the multitude. The old barriers raised by medieval scholasticism were broken down, and men were brought to see that there was more in religion than the medieval Church had taught, more in social life than the empire had promised, and that knowledge was a manifold unknown to the schoolmen. All this is true, and the Reformation may be studied, though scarcely explained, from this point of view.

Others again point out that the Reformation epoch was 'the modern birth-time of the individual soul' – the beginning of that assertion of the supreme right of individual revolt against every



INTRODUCTION

custom, law or theory which would subordinate the man to the caste or class – a revolt which finally flamed out in the French Revolution. The Swiss peasantry began it when they made pikes by tying their scythes on their alpen-stocks, and, standing shoulder to shoulder at Morgarten and Sempach, broke the fiercest charges of medieval knighthood. They proved that, man for man, the peasant was as good as the noble, and individual manhood, asserted in this rude and bodily fashion, soon began to express itself mentally and morally. The invention of gunpowder and firearms completed what the pike had begun, and medieval knighthood perished when the princes battered down with cannon the strong new fortifications of Landstuhl, and Francis von Sickingen, 'the last of the knights', was slain when in fancied security. This intense individuality was fed by the events of the time. The invention of the mariner's compass, the discovery of America by Columbus and of the sea route to the East by Vasco de Gama, not only revolutionised trade and commerce, they also fired the imaginations of men. The prevailing character of the thoughts and speech of the period show that men felt that they were on the eve of great events, that it was a time of universal expectation and of widespread individual assertion.

It is not the less true that the epoch was a time of economic revolution which bore heavily on the poorer classes, and scourged them into revolt. Below the whole medieval system lay the idea that land was the only economic basis of wealth; and in the earlier Middle Ages, where each little district produced almost all required for its own wants, and where the economic function of the towns was to be corporations of artisans, exchanging the fruits of their industry for the surplus of farm produce which the peasants brought to their market-places, this was undoubtedly the case. But the increasing commerce of the towns gradually introduced another source of wealth, and this commerce made great strides after the Crusades had opened up the East to European traders. The gradual result of this was to make the lesser nobles and the citizens implacable enemies. The nobles waylaid and pillaged the merchant trains, and the cities formed offensive and defensive



MARTIN LUTHER

leagues, and persuaded the larger territorial magnates to combine with them to secure the peace of the country and keep the roads safe. The combination of princes and cities against the lesser nobility drove the nobles into a position utterly repugnant to their pride. Already thrust from the position of defenders of society by the introduction of infantry and artillery as the most important factors in warfare, they saw themselves distanced by the burghers in the means of living ostentatiously; and while they despised the 'pepper-sacks', as they called the merchants, they felt themselves degraded unless they could vie with them in dress and adornment at the occasions of public display so dear to the medieval mind. Their only mode of direct revenge, to attack the merchant trains of goods or to make their 'horses bite off the purses of travellers', had been made somewhat dangerous by the combinations of princes and towns, and the only remaining thing for them to do was to squeeze their unfortunate peasants. For the peasant was the pariah of medieval society. He stood apart from the noble, burgher and ecclesiastical power. He was the unprotected class whom all might spoil and whom all did oppress. He had memories transmitted from generation to generation of common lands, of free village communities and of the inalienable rights of the tillers of the soil; but the introduction of Roman law, primarily and chiefly by ecclesiastical proprietors, which did not recognise these old rights, and looked upon the peasants as serfs, deprived them of the law's protection, and left them no power of resistance save revolt or flight to the towns, where they swelled the class of poorer citizens who remained outside the guild privileges.

The higher commercial opportunities offered by the opening of a sea passage to the East Indies by the discoveries of Vasco de Gama led to a disintegration of the Medieval Town Corporations; for the wealthier merchants formed themselves into trading companies outside the old guilds, and amassed great wealth. A war of classes ensued: the trading companies and capitalists against the guilds, the poorer classes against the wealthier, the peasants against the nobles, and the nobles against the towns and the princes.



INTRODUCTION

This seething discontent was stirred to its depths by sudden and mysterious rises in prices, affecting first the articles of foreign produce, to which all the wealthier classes were greatly addicted, and at last the ordinary necessities of life. The cause, it is now believed, was not the debasing of the coinage, for that affected a narrow circle only, nor was it the importation of the precious metals from America, for that came later, but the larger output of the mines at home. Whatever the cause, the thing was an irritating mystery, and each class in society was disposed to blame the others for the evil.

We have thus, at the beginning of the epoch, a restless and disturbed state of society, caused by mysterious economic causes which no one understood, but which drove wedges into the old social structure, bereaving it of all power of cohesion.

It was into this mass of seething social discontent that the spark of religious protest fell – the one thing wanted to fire the train and kindle the social conflagration.

With all these sides of the Reformation epoch we have to do only casually. They are the environment of the religious movement of which we must speak when we take Luther as the central figure of the time. Still, we must remember that they are all there; and we should greatly mistake the period to be studied if we thought that the religious protest was everything. All these various movements combine to make the period what it was; and if the religious impulse gave life to the political agitation, moral depth to the intellectual and social impulses, and gave to the economic protests a character that is more medieval than modern, we must remember that these various currents lent their strength to the religious movement and gave it an impetus and an importance which it would not otherwise have had. The Peasants' War as it is called, was the parting of the ways; up to 1525 the Lutheran Reformation absorbed all the various streams of dissatisfaction; after that the revolution and the Reformation pursue separate paths, and the revolution gathered round it the more radical elements of the religious revolt, which are summed up under the word *Anabaptism* – a name which included a great variety of conflicting opinions. Luther had some real connection with all these sides of the great movement of his days.



MARTIN LUTHER

He had the fullest sympathy with the patriotic aspiration of Germany for the Germans – it is the central thought in his *Address to the Nobility of the German Nation*; but although disclaiming any place as a politician, he soon came to see that the times were not ripe for a national centralisation, and that centralisation under the rule of the great territorial magnates gave the only hope of the fulfilment of national aspirations.

He never classed himself among the Humanists, but he had very great sympathy with many sides of the Humanist movement; he made full use of the learned labours of Erasmus, and was recognised as a leader by most of the German Humanists; but his absorbing aim was the reformation of the ecclesiastical and religious life, and that to an extent deprecated by some of the more distinguished Humanist leaders.

No man was a more distinguished exponent of the rights of the individual human soul; he stood at Worms another ‘Athanasius contra mundum’; but this inalienable right was for him the incapacity to believe incredibilities, to adopt solemn shams or to live under the rule of religious falsehoods.

He was a peasant’s son, and voiced over and over again the wrongs of the class from which he had sprung; but he was ‘modern’ enough to see that there are two ways by which wrongs can be set right – the way of war and the way of peace – and that the way of peace is the only sure path in the long run. He held by this firmly, and risked his life among the infuriated peasants as readily as when he stood before the Emperor and the Diet at Worms.

He was a religious reformer first and foremost, and was content to be that and nothing else, and yet his large spiritual personality shared in all the movements and aspirations of his time. Hence it is that among his contemporaries men of such different circles of thought as the Elector Frederic and Franz von Sickingen, Ulric von Hutten and Philip Melancthon, Hans Sachs and Reuchlin, Albert Durer and Lucas Cranach, believed him to be the greatest man in Germany, and that we, living so many centuries later, may fitly take him as the representative man of his epoch.