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Warm Days: Renewing the Church, 1521-31

The ten years between Luther's defiant stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521, and the death of the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli at the battle of Kappel in 1531, were crucial for the future development of Western Christianity. On the one hand, these years witnessed the penetration of Lutheran and Zwinglian ideas into northern Europe and major parts of central Europe, a process which culminated in the creation of many new nationally based Protestant Churches. On the other hand, these same years also saw the great rebellion against Rome solidify into three distinct forms, hostile to each other as well as to pope: the Lutherans, the Reformed, and the Radicals.

1. The early years of the German Reformation

The Lutheran reform movement made very swift progress throughout Germany in the years just after the Diet of Worms, especially in the towns and cities. Luther's Germany had strong claims to be considered the most vibrant and progressive region of early 16th century Europe, in terms of trade, the mining industry, and the development of urban life and culture, which all contributed to great prosperity for a large and growing population. The affluent citizens of the German imperial cities proved especially enthusiastic in the "Luther movement": some fifty of the eighty-five cities embraced the Reformation.¹

1. The "imperial cities" were towns or cities within the Holy Roman Empire which were subject to no authority except that of the Emperor. They were

Luther's followers preached the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, and as people placed their religious confidence directly in Christ for salvation, the Virgin Mary and the saints soon ceased to have any place in worship as objects of religious invocation, or of veneration through images.² Crucially, Lutherans abandoned the exclusive use of Latin in worship, introducing services in German. One of the most basic thrusts of the Reformation was to make worship an act of the whole congregation, which it clearly could not be if Latin was the language in which worship was conducted – the vast mass of ordinary Christians could not understand Latin. It was therefore in the sphere of public worship that the Reformation produced its most revolutionary popular impact, as ancient ecclesiastical Latin was replaced, in one Protestant land after another, by the mother tongue of the people.³ The same concern for the congregational dimensions of worship inspired the Reformers to encourage *vocal* participation by the people. In this regard we probably think

therefore virtually self-contained states.

2. However, it took some time for the precise Evangelical position on Mary and the saints to become clear. Luther himself, for example, continued for some years after his break with Rome to believe in Mary's immaculate conception and that believers could ask her to intercede for them. To the end of his life, Luther seems to have believed that Mary was sinless, at least from the moment that Christ was conceived in her womb. Even after Protestants had rejected the later medieval belief in Mary's immaculate conception and the practice of invoking her in prayer, virtually all the Reformers still maintained what most modern evangelicals would regard as a "high" Mariology. For example, Mary's perpetual virginity was defended strongly by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, and they often referred to her with conspicuous reverence as "the blessed Virgin" or some such title. There is a book still to be written on the forgotten Mary of the Protestant Reformers.

3. This is not to say that Lutherans simply dropped the use of Latin. Lutheran worship-services in Latin continued on into the 17th century. What Luther and other German reformers did was introduce German services alongside Latin ones. Before his German Mass of 1526, Luther produced a new Latin Mass in 1523. Eventually, though, as Latin began losing its status as the international language of education in the latter part of the 17th century (it was replaced by French), Lutheran services in Latin fell into disuse.

immediately of the congregational singing of psalms and hymns, which was certainly an integral part of the new style of worship. However, it also included congregational singing (or chanting, or reciting) of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, the Ten Commandments, and perhaps a general confession of sin (the details varied from one Protestant region to another). "Prayer books" were a radical new Protestant invention, to enable the people to take part collectively in a form of worship that was both corporate and vocal.

Further, the Protestant insistence on congregational participation in worship often motivated the reintroduction of weekly celebrations of the Lord's Supper, as against the later medieval practice in which laypeople took communion only once a year. (The participatory dynamic was also the driving force behind the Protestant practice of giving the communion wine as well as the bread to the laity.) Theologically, this congregational model of Protestant worship was undergirded by the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers: the whole Christian congregation is a priestly body, and therefore its worship must be corporate and congregational in nature, rather than a performance by a professional worshipper (the "priest" in the medieval sense) watched by a passive people.

Those who embraced Luther's teaching called themselves "Evangelicals" (from the Greek *euaggelion*, "good news"); their enemies simply called them "Lutherans". Evangelicals themselves later adopted the name Lutheran, despite Luther's own protests:

Who is this Luther? My teaching is not my own, and I have not been crucified for anyone. Why should it happen to me, miserable stinking bag of maggots that I am, that the children of Christ should be called by my insignificant name? I am, and will be, no one's master. With the one Church I hold in common the teaching of Christ, who alone is our Master.

The break with the papacy also led to a reformation of Church government. Luther held that, in theory, a Christian congregation had the right to elect its own pastor (a view which, like congregational worship, flowed from the doctrine of the priesthood of

all believers). However, in the excited temper of the times, the attempt to put this theory into practice could lead to serious division and conflict, even among Evangelicals, as different factions emphasised different things – there was often a great variety of beliefs among those who had broken away from Rome. There were also immense legal and financial problems, and quarrels (sometimes violent), about who owned church funds and property, which included monasteries, nunneries, schools, hospitals, and land, as well as church buildings. So in practice, in the interests of peace and social harmony, Luther advocated that the secular rulers – the prince or the city council – should act as “emergency bishops”: they should use their position of political power to reform the church locally, by appointing suitable pastors, making sure they were properly housed and paid, and administering church funds and property. Any involvement of the papacy and its agents in the appointment of clergy thus completely disappeared; state control of the Church took its place. At the same time, Lutheran princes and city councils dismantled the medieval system of independent Church courts, made all clergy subject to the justice of the civil courts, and took control of legal matters in which laypeople had previously been subject to the Church (e.g. marriage and the validating of wills).⁴

It was a total reversal of the victory won by the Hildebrandine reformers in the investiture controversy.⁵ In the late Middle Ages, there had already been a growing tendency for the state to make inroads into the independence, power, and privileges of the Catholic Church; the Reformation brought this tendency to full strength and maturity, thus giving birth to the modern nation-state, exercising political and moral mastery over all its citizens. It must also be said that taking over the vast wealth, property, land, and legal authority of the Church appealed to the greed of many German princes, and to their thirst for power. Their motives in embracing Lutheranism were not always very pure.

4. For Church courts, see Volume Two, Chapter 4, section 8.

5. For Hildebrand and the investiture controversy, see Volume Two, Chapter 4, sections 4, 5 and 6.

It is, however, important to realise that Luther himself did not think the political authorities had some automatic right to assume control of the Church. It was only because the state in Germany was represented by the *Christian* prince, and *Christian* city magistrates, that Luther made them into “emergency bishops”. The secular rulers, Luther argued, were acting as baptised members of the Christian community; they were taking the task of reformation into their own hands as prominent Christian laymen, only because the papacy and its bishops had failed. In Luther’s mind, this acceptance of “emergency bishop” status by the princes and city magistrates was to be a temporary measure, until the Reformation was secure against its enemies and in a settled condition.

In fact, largely due to the Peasants’ Revolt (see section 3), it developed into a full-scale, enduring system of state control of the Lutheran Churches. Luther had shattered the spiritual dominion of the papacy in Germany; but to escape the swelling tides of religious anarchy, the newly liberated German Church sought shelter in the strong arms of the state. Thus the local German prince or city council became the supreme Church authority in their own territory. Even so, for almost all practical purposes, the prince or council delegated the running of Church affairs to a special court known as a “consistory”, made up of lawyers and theologians appointed by the government. The rulers of the larger Lutheran territories also divided their land up into districts, and appointed a special pastor called a “superintendent” to exercise spiritual oversight over all the other pastors and churches in his district.

This reconstruction of Church government was far-reaching. But the Reformation in Germany, and elsewhere, caused an even more visible change in the ordinary life of Church and society: the marginalising of monasticism in some Protestant lands and its complete disappearance in others. Monasteries had now been an integral and central part of Christian social life for over 1,000 years. Under the impact of Evangelical teaching, however, most monks and nuns deserted their convents, married, and took up new positions in society. All of life’s normal vocations – farmer,

shopkeeper, teacher, housewife – were religious, Luther argued, when people lived them to the glory of God. Christians were to exist “in the world” as salt and light (Matt. 5:13-14), serving their neighbour sacrificially in Christlike love, not hide away from the world in the hope of keeping their own souls pure. Besides, the lifelong oath of celibacy which every monk and nun had to swear was, Luther now maintained, a dangerous violation of God’s will. Celibacy was a spiritual gift from God. If people had the gift, they did not need to swear an oath; and if they did not have the gift, their oath was sinful – they must marry to safeguard their chastity. (Monks and nuns were not famed for chastity at that period.)

However, we must take care not to exaggerate. The Lutheran Reformation did not, in fact, abolish all monasteries; many of them continued to exist in Lutheran lands well into the 17th century, and monasticism did not die out in Lutheranism until the age of Pietism and Rationalism in the 18th century.⁶ Despite his criticisms, Luther did believe that monasteries, as voluntary places of prayer, study, and meditation, could be a beneficial place for some people. In fact, Luther wrote in the Schmalkald Articles of 1537 (one of the official confessions of the Lutheran Church):

The chapters and monasteries which in former times had been founded with good intentions for the education of learned men and decent women should be restored to such purposes, in order that we may have pastors, preachers, and other ministers of the church, others who are necessary for secular government in cities and states, and also well trained girls to become mothers, housekeepers, etc.

A few things are worth noting in this statement. What Luther vociferously opposed was the common idea of his time that there was something intrinsically holier about monastic life than ordinary life in the world, or that through monastic life a person could become holier before God. In fact, Luther believed that ordinary life as a husband, wife, father or mother was holier than

6. See Volume Four for Pietism and Rationalism.

monastic life, since the former were directly instituted by God and had His blessing upon them, while the latter (monasticism) had no divine institution. Nevertheless, Luther believed monasteries could be permitted, even encouraged, when they served to educate people for the normal vocations of the world which God had instituted. Luther went on in the Schmalkald Articles to say that “if they [monasteries] are unwilling to serve this purpose, it would be better to abandon them or tear them down rather than preserve them ...”

Luther, himself a monk, abandoned the monastic life, and in 1525 married a young ex-nun of noble birth, Katherine von Bora (1499-1552); he was forty-two, Katherine was twenty-six. Roman Catholic enemies darkly prophesied that Antichrist was sure to be born of such an unholy union between a monk and a nun. Evangelicals mockingly replied that if sexual intercourse between a monk and nun would give birth to Antichrist, several thousand Antichrists must already have been born in the Middle Ages. In fact, Luther’s marriage to Katherine proved to be very happy and holy, full of playful humour – Luther referred to her as “my lord Katie”. Speaking from his own experience, Luther’s verdict on married life (and on Katie) was glowingly positive:

Next to God’s Word, there is no more precious treasure than the holy ordinance of marriage. God’s highest earthly gift is a spiritually-minded, cheerful, God-fearing, home-keeping wife, with whom you can live in peace, and whom you can trust with your property, body, and life.

Luther and Katherine went on to raise a family of six.⁷ Luther’s example held up a new form of religious and social life in the Western world for others to copy: the lawfully married Protestant clergyman and his family.⁸

The Reformation rejection of the superiority of the celibate life, and fresh appreciation of marriage, was the continuation of

7. None of them was Antichrist, as far as we know.

8. There was, of course, nothing new about this in the Eastern world, where the lawfully married Orthodox clergyman and his family were the norm.

a Renaissance current of thought. Renaissance humanism had already rediscovered marriage as the foundational pattern of all human relationships and the purest manifestation of love for one's neighbour: the ideal of "chaste marriage"⁹ began to displace ascetic celibacy as the supreme example of human virtue. This new positive view of marriage (and corresponding critique of celibacy) was propagated by a number of important 15th century humanists, most famously Lorenzo Valla. In the early 16th century it was taken up by Erasmus, notably in his *Praise of Marriage* (1497, reprinted 1518). For Erasmus, the purpose of marriage was love and companionship, the two things being "glued together by true affections among those equal in virtue". Celibacy, Erasmus argued, was a special and extraordinary calling from God, primarily in times of persecution. Chaste marriage, he insisted, deserved equality of honour with this special celibate calling. Luther and the other Reformers enacted these new ideals in the social and ecclesiastical sphere, undergirded by their biblical studies and backed by popular disgust with the then notorious immorality of priests, monks, and nuns.

The swift growth of the Reformation throughout Germany soon made it clear that not everyone who had originally supported Luther's defiance of the papacy agreed with his programme of reform for the Church. In the early 1520s, there was a parting of the ways between Luther and a number of groups – the Radical Reformers, the older generation of humanists, the lower classes, and the princes and cities of southern Germany – which reduced Luther's stature from religious leader of the whole German nation, to the leader of a religious party within Germany. The first of these separations was with the Radicals.

9. Not to be confused with "celibate marriage" where husband and wife agree to live without sexual relations: fairly common in the patristic and medieval period, and still sometimes practised thereafter within the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. "Chaste marriage" simply means marriage in which husband and wife are faithful to each other.

2. The dawn of the Radical Reformation

In Wittenberg, Luther's home town, his followers undertook the task of reforming the church locally while Luther was still in hiding in the Wartburg castle. The Wittenberg Reformers included Luther's university colleagues whom we met in the previous chapter, Philip Melanchthon, Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt, and Nicholas von Amsdorf. Two other lecturers who had recently joined the university, **Justas Jonas** (1493-1555) and **Johannes Bugenhagen** (1485-1558), also played their part as leading Reformers. Jonas became well known as a Lutheran hymn-writer and translator of Luther's and Melanchthon's writings from Latin into German for the home market, and from German into Latin for the international market. Bugenhagen is sometimes known as "Pomeranus" from his birthplace in Pomerania (then the north-eastern coastland of Germany on the Baltic Sea, now in Poland). A humanist monk deeply influenced by Erasmus, Bugenhagen had in 1520 read Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in order to write a response against it. Instead, it converted him! "The whole world may be wrong, but Luther is right," Bugenhagen concluded. He arrived in Wittenberg in 1521, and made his mark as a preacher, famous for his agonisingly long sermons,¹⁰ and also (later) as the organiser of the Lutheran Church in Denmark and in the north German cities of Brunswick, Hamburg, and Lubeck. Another prominent Wittenberg Reformer was the flashy and adventurous **Gabriel Zwilling** (1487-1558), not a university lecturer but an Augustinian friar with a gift for rabble-rousing sermons.

Carlstadt and Zwilling spearheaded the Wittenberg Reformation, attacking images of Christ and the saints, condemning instrumental music in worship, offering the wine as well as the bread to the laity in communion, and trying to force laypeople to touch and handle the bread because Christ had

10. Luther once said after listening to a long-winded sermon by Bugenhagen, "Every high priest should have his private sacrifices. Accordingly, Bugenhagen sacrifices his hearers with long sermons, for we are his victims. And today he sacrificed us in an exceptional manner."

said “Take, eat”. (In the medieval Catholic mass, the laity did not touch the wafer; the priest inserted it into their mouths.) They exhorted priests and monks to abandon their vows of celibacy and get married; Carlstadt took a wife and wanted to compel all the clergy to follow his example, denouncing celibacy as a positive evil. Events spun completely out of control when three preachers from Zwickau (south of Wittenberg) arrived in the city in December 1521 – Nicholas Storch, Marcus Stubner, and Thomas Dreschel. They claimed to be in direct contact with God who, they said, spoke to them in private revelations. Luther called them the “Zwickau prophets”. They opposed infant baptism (and perhaps all water baptism), and proclaimed that the end of the world would shortly take place. Carlstadt and Zwilling sided with them.

Carlstadt, Zwilling, and the Zwickau prophets were the first of the *Radical Reformers*. Historians call them “Radicals” because they departed from the Catholicism of the Middle Ages much more “radically” (in a more thoroughgoing way) than the other Reformers did, especially in rejecting infant baptism and the Church–state alliance. The more traditionally minded Reformers like Luther, who upheld infant baptism and the connection between Church and state, are often called the *Magisterial Reformers*, because they looked to the Christian *magistrate* (the secular government – king, prince, parliament, city council) to reform the Church, or at least to help the Protestant clergy reform it.¹¹ This twofold distinction, however, between Magisterial and Radical Reformers, although widely accepted by historians, does an injustice to the nature of the so-called Magisterial Reformation. In terms of Church–state relations, there were in fact *three* distinct streams of Reformation in the 16th century:

- (i) The nationalist Reformers, who transferred the powers of the papacy to the state (king, prince, parliament, city

11. In modern Britain, “magistrate” means a judges in a local court. In Reformation usage, it refers to any political authority, from the Holy Roman Emperor downwards.

council), in order to secure protection for Protestants against the papacy and to uphold the medieval ideal of a Christian society. This approach produced what we might call a “Protestant statism”, often loosely termed “Erastianism”, after the Swiss theologian Erastus (1524-83), an exponent of this view. The Lutheran and Anglican Churches would fit into this statist or Erastian pattern.

(ii) Those Reformers who remained committed to the ideal of Christianising society and culture, and therefore believed in the rightness of a Christian state, but insisted that the institutional Church must be independent of state control. This stream of Reformation life has been called the “Reformed Catholic” outlook; it was exemplified in Martin Bucer, John Calvin, and the Reformed Churches (see Chapter 4).

(iii) Those Reformers who abandoned the ideal of Christianising society and culture, rejected the notion of a Christian state, and saw the Church as an alternative society living in an irredeemably wicked and hostile world. These were the Radical Reformers.

In their own day, opponents usually called the Radicals *Anabaptists*, owing to their rejection of infant baptism; “Anabaptist” means “re-baptiser” (a term invented by the Swiss Reformer Zwingli – most Radicals were what we today would call Baptists). The Radicals did not refer to themselves as Anabaptists, because they did not accept that they were rebaptising; they held that they were baptising for the first time, since infant baptism was not valid baptism. In modern historical studies, the term Anabaptist is now usually restricted to one group within the wider Radical Reformation. (A fuller account will be found in Chapter 5.)

Under the influence of Carlstadt, Zwilling, and the Zwickau prophets, the religious life of Wittenberg became chaotic. Violence erupted. Mobs went round smashing altars, shrines, and images – chiefly statues and stained-glass windows depicting

Christ and the saints, which often adorned the tombs of the upper classes. Evangelicals insulted and intimidated those who stayed loyal to Rome. The town magistrates, incapable of controlling the situation themselves, and fearing a descent into anarchy, could think of only one thing to do: they appealed to Luther to return from his secret refuge in the Wartburg castle and re-establish order. Despite the fact that he was under the ban of the Empire and his life was in danger, Luther heeded their plea and boldly journeyed back to Wittenberg, arriving on 6 March 1522, thus ending his eleven months of hiding. Then, in a series of potent sermons preached over eight days, he managed to restore peace and calm to the disturbed city.

Crucial for Luther in these sermons were two things. First, faith must always be accompanied by love; and secondly, all true reform must be truly evangelical, growing from the freedom of the gospel, rather than from the compulsion of the law. Luther profoundly believed that no reformation could take place unless the gospel was thoroughly preached and kept central; further, the gospel must be recognised by the people in everything that was done in the name of reform. He felt that a forced law-motivated reform, such as Carlstadt and Zwilling had (in Luther's view) been promoting, would only change people's behaviour, but not their hearts. For Luther, inner spiritual reformation in the heart of the individual, setting him in a right relationship with God through personal faith in Christ, was always the great priority. Any outward religious reformation, he argued, must flow from this inner conversion, as the free and willing act of the believer. Otherwise it was worthless.

Based on this law-gospel framework, then, Luther's main message in the Wittenberg sermons was that the citizens of Wittenberg had become disastrously obsessed with mere outward matters (images, celibacy, the bread and wine of communion), and had allowed their hearts to drift away from the all-important spiritual truth of the gospel: the eternal salvation of the soul through personal faith in Jesus Christ. It deeply troubled Luther that many ordinary people, instead of finding peace with God through the gospel, were just becoming inflamed

with a hate-filled hostility towards the Roman Catholic Church. This, he told the Wittenbergers bluntly, was not the fruit of the Spirit. He counselled patience to the reforming hot-heads:

Give people time! It took me three years of constant study, reflection, and discussion to arrive where I am now. Can the ordinary man, who has no education in such matters, be expected to move the same distance in three months? You are wrong to think that you get rid of an abuse by destroying the object which is misused. Men can go astray with wine and women. Shall we outlaw wine and abolish women? Sun, moon, and stars have been worshipped. Shall we pluck them out of the sky? Your haste and violence reveal a lack of trust in God. See how much He has accomplished through me. I did nothing more than pray and preach. The Word did it all. If I had wished, I could have started a riot at Worms. But while I sat still and drank beer with Melanchthon and Amsdorf, God dealt the papacy a mighty blow!

Luther also condemned the way that the anti-Roman Catholic violence was forcing people to accept the evangelical faith without really believing in it:

If I rush in and abolish the mass by force, there are many who would be compelled to agree with it, and yet not know where they stood, whether it was right or wrong, and they would say: "I do not know if this is right or wrong, I do not know where I stand, I was compelled by force to bow to the majority." This forcing and commanding produces a sheer mockery, a mere external show, a fool's game, man-made decrees, sham saints, and hypocrites.

Luther's sermons quietened people's tempers and destroyed the influence of Carlstadt and Zwilling, who had to leave town. Suitably chastened, Carlstadt became pastor at Orlamunde, and Zwilling at Altenburg. Carlstadt eventually ended up being absorbed into the Swiss Reformation and teaching Old Testament in the University of Basel. Meanwhile, Luther restored many of the old customs of worship in Wittenberg, e.g. kneeling to receive

the bread in communion. He was determined not to alter anything in traditional Catholic worship unless Scripture explicitly demanded it. Even then, he still would not change it until he had persuaded his congregation, by preaching and teaching, that Scripture required it. Luther felt that an evangelical form of worship would be glorifying to God only if people embraced it freely as an act of sincere faith in His Word, not if it was forced on them by autocratic preachers or majority opinion.

Luther had defeated Carlstadt and Zwingli in Wittenberg, but the Radical element of the Reformation lived on. It found its most revolutionary spokesman in *Thomas Müntzer* (1488-1525), a young Catholic priest from Stolberg (northern Germany), trained in Christian humanism, who had initially supported Luther. Müntzer preached mighty sermons in Zwickau in 1521-22, and adopted views similar to those of the Zwickau prophets, e.g. rejecting infant baptism and claiming guidance from dreams and visions. He then became pastor of the church in Allstedt (central Germany), where he created the first complete worship-service in German: a fine achievement which attracted hundreds from near and far.

In his theology, Müntzer made the Bible secondary to spiritual experience, the “direct speaking” of the Holy Spirit to the heart. A church, he believed, should be made up only of those to whom God had spoken in this way. Müntzer also had an overflowing sympathy for the poor and oppressed, which made him burn with a constant, smouldering sense of outrage against the ruling classes. In Müntzer’s concept of reformation, the true churches of the Spirit-filled would be God’s instruments for establishing a new society of justice and love, in which there would be no priests, nobles, princes, or private property, but perfect equality and democracy. If necessary, Müntzer taught, the elect would have to take up arms and impose this perfect society by force, slaughtering all the ungodly.

Müntzer condemned Luther as an enemy of the Holy Spirit, a mere academic who worshipped the “dead letter” of the Bible, ignored the poor, and flattered the Lutheran princes to gain their worldly favour. A genius at inventing insults, Müntzer

referred to Luther as “Doctor Liar”, “the pope of the Lutheran Scripture-twisters”, and “brother Fattened Pig”. Luther for his part was horrified by Müntzer, and was just as good at inventing insults; he referred to Müntzer as “the Satan of Allstedt”, and said, “Müntzer thinks he’s swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all.” More than any other Radical Reformer, Müntzer and his activities hardened Luther against all Radicals. This was unfortunate; in the long term, most Radicals turned out not to be violent social revolutionaries like Thomas Müntzer. But Müntzer gave them all a fatally bad name, especially when he took a leading part in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1524-25.

3. The Peasants’ Revolt

Germany’s vast peasant population had suffered increasing social and economic hardship in the late Middle Ages. They staged violent uprisings in southern Germany in 1493, 1501, 1512, 1514, and 1517, but were overpowered each time by the princes and nobles. Their discontent was stirred up yet again by the Reformation, with its emphasis on Christian freedom and the spiritual equality of all believers, and its attack on the religious authorities for robbing Christians of their scriptural rights. Many peasants took this one step further: they demanded political freedom and social equality, and denounced the secular authorities for robbing Christians of their human rights. In June 1524 another armed peasant uprising broke out at Stuhlingen, near the Swiss city of Schaffhausen. It was a spark which soon lit a fire of revolt that blazed across all Germany. Although historians call it the “Peasants’ Revolt”, it also included the working classes of the towns and cities.

The difference between this Peasants’ Revolt of 1524-25 and the previous peasant rebellions was twofold: (i) the Peasants’ Revolt was more widespread, engulfing the whole of Germany, north as well as south; (ii) it derived a fresh and dynamic degree of religious inspiration from the Reformation. The peasants often appealed to Luther’s teaching to justify their actions, and when asked whom they would accept as a mediator in their dispute with the nobles, they responded with a single name – “Luther!” There

was also a significant Radical influence on the Peasants' Revolt; several Radicals played a prominent role in it, especially Thomas Müntzer. To underline their religious commitment, many of the rebels covenanted together as "the Evangelical Brotherhood" at a mass meeting in Memmingen (southern Germany) in March 1525. Some of their demands were religious rather than political, e.g. they called for the right of congregations to elect their own pastors. Their social and political demands included things like returning to common ownership the forests and meadows which had been taken over by nobles, an end to being forced to work for the nobility without pay, and the creation of a better welfare service to take care of the poor. They proposed that all their demands should be tested against the Word of God, and if any were found to be unscriptural, they promised to withdraw them.

Luther at first blamed both sides in the uprising: both the nobility, whose oppressive rule had provoked the peasants into rebellion, and the peasants for taking up arms. Luther believed strongly that all armed rebellion against secular government was sinful: no matter how tyrannical a government might be, civil war was worse. He was appalled when the peasant armies began falling into excesses of violence, notably in attacking and wrecking monasteries and castles; in the central German region of Franconia alone, they destroyed 52 monasteries and 270 castles. Luther went on a preaching tour throughout Saxony in April 1525, trying to persuade the peasants to refrain from violence, but to no avail. As the rebellion grew, threatening to sweep everything before it, Luther came down conclusively on the side of the princes and nobility. In May 1525 he wrote a tract entitled *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, in which he exhorted the German princes to slay the peasants without mercy.

The princes obeyed Luther's call only too effectively. They had at first been powerless to respond to the uprising, because almost all their fighting men were away in Italy with Emperor Charles V. However, by May 1525, the princes had managed to raise an army of professional German troops, and the slaughter began. Perhaps the most tragic episode involved Thomas Müntzer, who had put himself at the head of a peasant army of 8,000 men

in Frankenhausen (central Germany). They faced an opposing army of professional soldiers, led by the great Protestant prince, Philip of Hesse.¹² Philip offered to let the peasants disperse unharmed, if they would only turn Müntzer over to him. Inspired by Müntzer's wild promises of divine protection and victory, the peasants refused. On 15 May, Philip's army attacked and annihilated the peasants. Müntzer was taken prisoner, tortured, and executed. Before he died, he recanted his Radical beliefs; one of Müntzer's last acts was to receive the Roman Catholic mass.

By November 1525 the German princes had utterly crushed all resistance to their rule, in a storm of bloodshed which must have seemed like a foretaste of hell. The troops massacred the poorly armed peasant armies; some 100,000 peasants lost their lives, leaving their wives and children completely destitute.

The Peasants' Revolt had deep and lasting effects on the Reformation:

(i) It marked the end of the rapid spread of Lutheranism in Germany.¹³ Luther's brutal attitude in the Revolt alienated many of the lower classes. A significant number of them turned from Lutheranism to the various forms of the Radical Reformation; others simply lost any real interest in any kind of Reformation. Meanwhile, secular rulers who had not yet committed themselves to the Reformation began to think twice. If Lutheranism led to peasant uprisings, it could hardly be a good thing. Roman Catholics used this argument from now on as one of their standard weapons against the Reformation; it persuaded the princes and cities of the western territories along the borders with France and the Netherlands, and those of southern Germany (especially in Austria and Bavaria), to stay loyal to Rome. It also led to fierce persecution of

12. For more about Philip, see section 7.

13. I emphasise the *rapid* spread. It by no means ended the territorial advance of Lutheranism. See Chapter 6, section 1.

Lutherans by the Roman Catholic authorities in these areas. Lutheran preachers in particular were hunted down and martyred.

(ii) The Lutheran princes became determined that they must strictly control the Reformation, as the only way to stop it turning into a popular social movement which could challenge their authority. So their status as “emergency bishops” became permanent; from now on, the princes would be the absolute rulers of the Lutheran Churches in their domains.

Luther himself encouraged the princes in this policy. The Peasants’ Revolt had destroyed his trust in the ordinary German people; he felt that too many of them had diabolically perverted his gospel message of spiritual freedom through Christ into a worldly message of political freedom through armed revolution. Luther chiefly blamed Thomas Müntzer and the Radicals for this. In the period 1517-21, when Luther had stood up against the papacy at the peril of his own life, he had defended religious liberty and toleration, arguing that the state should not execute people for heresy (this was one of the things Pope Leo X had condemned Luther for in the bull *Exsurge domine* in 1520). However, after the Peasants’ Revolt, Luther accepted that the state should silence and banish Radicals. He still opposed the death penalty for *heresy*, but he did come to believe that *blasphemy* should be punished by death; and since there was often a very thin line between what was deemed “heresy” and what was deemed “blasphemy”, Luther did not protest too much when Evangelical governments executed Radicals for religious dissent.

4. Erasmus and the older humanists

It was also in the period 1524-25 that the older generation of Christian humanists deserted Luther. They wanted reform, but not at the cost of breaking the unity of the Catholic Church. Among those who at first supported Luther but finally refused to break with Rome were Crotus Rubeanus, Willibald Pirckheimer,

and Erasmus himself.¹⁴ Erasmus had given cautious support and encouragement to Luther when Luther had only been attacking indulgences. However, Luther's break with Rome, his violent language (e.g. denouncing the pope as Antichrist), and the popular disturbances that accompanied the Reformation, repelled Erasmus. He wanted to reform the Catholic Church peacefully from within, not tear it apart.

In September 1524, urged on by Roman Catholic friends, Erasmus published a book against Luther called *The Freedom of the Will*. The point at which Erasmus chose to attack the German Reformer was his Augustinian theology of sin and grace. Luther taught that the fallen human will was in helpless bondage to sin; only God by His sovereign grace could set the will free to embrace and follow Christ. Those whom God liberated, Luther maintained, had been eternally predestined to receive this salvation by God's sheer mercy, not as a result of anything in them. Erasmus rejected these views in favour of a more Semi-Pelagian theology. In *The Freedom of the Will*, he argued that conversion and salvation were a shared work of human free will and divine grace; grace was essential, but free will must cooperate with it and could always at any point reject it. Luther replied to Erasmus in December 1525 with his *The Bondage of the Will*, in which he thanked Erasmus for going to the heart of the matter and criticising Luther's views of sin, grace, and predestination, instead of trivial things like indulgences and the papacy. Luther then restated his own Augustinian doctrines with vibrant energy and clarity, sometimes going well beyond Augustine.¹⁵

The break between Erasmus and Luther was total. The generation of humanist reformers whom Erasmus represented mostly remained within the Roman Church. Luther said of Erasmus:

14. For Rubeanus and Pirckheimer, see Chapter 1, section 3.

15. For instance, when Luther said that God's sovereignty in itself excluded human free will, he went beyond Augustine. All Augustine ever said was that the *fall* of Adam had excluded free will in spiritual matters. Luther's view would mean that not even *before* he sinned could Adam have had free will, since God's sovereignty operated before as well as after the fall.

He has done what he was destined to do; he has introduced the ancient languages in place of harmful scholastic studies. He will probably die like Moses in the land of Moab. He has done enough to uncover the evil; but to reveal the good, and lead people into the promised land, is in my opinion not his business.

Erasmus, for his part, expressed great scepticism about the spiritual fruit of the Reformation:

Where is your dove-like spirit? Did the apostles spread the gospel in the way you do? You lash out against the lavish lifestyle of priests, the political ambition of bishops, the tyranny of the pope, the jabbering of scholastics, against prayers and fasts and masses. But your objective is to destroy, much more than to reform. You will rip up the wheat along with the tares! Look at these so-called 'Evangelicals' of yours. Are they any less enslaved to lavish lifestyles, immorality, and money? The gospel is supposed to make the drunkard sober and the cruel person kind. But I can show you people whom your preaching has made worse than ever! You throw images out of the churches, but what good is that if people continue to bow down to sins in their hearts?

Erasmus died in the Swiss Protestant city of Basel in 1536, a rather sad and lonely figure, shunned by Roman Catholics for "hatching" the Reformation and by Protestants for not joining it. Despite Erasmus's break with Luther, however, many of his younger disciples like Melanchthon and Bugenhagen in Germany, and Zwingli and Oecolampadius in Switzerland (see section 6), were more daring than their master, and became leading Protestant Reformers.

5. The German Lutheran Churches

The crushing of the Peasants' Revolt in 1525 left the princes (and, to a much lesser degree, the great imperial cities) as the unchallenged rulers of Germany. They formed political alliances, for and against the Reformation. However, two factors prevented the Roman Catholic champion, Emperor Charles V, from organising effective action against the German Lutherans:

(i) Constant wars with the French king, Francis I, distracted Charles.

(ii) The Ottoman Turks under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-66), greatest of the Ottoman sultans, had invaded the Danube valley in Eastern Europe. Suleiman's was the greatest empire in the world at that time, and constantly threatened central Europe from its territories in Eastern Europe (Greece and the Balkans). Suleiman conquered Egypt, Syria, Iraq, North Africa, and penetrated into Eastern Europe as far as Hungary; Charles needed German Lutheran troops to fight off the Muslim advance.

The uncertain situation prompted the imperial Diet of Speyer in 1526 to pass a famous edict of religious toleration: each local German ruler should decide for himself which faith people would practise in his domain. However, the tide of battles had turned in Charles V's favour, at least temporarily, by 1529. In February that year at another diet in Speyer, the Roman Catholic delegates (including many bishops and abbots) were able to attend in great numbers under the Emperor's protection, forming the majority. They outlawed any further spread of the Reformation in the Empire, and decreed that Roman Catholics must be tolerated in Lutheran lands, but Lutherans were not to be tolerated in Roman Catholic lands. The Lutheran delegates were outraged, and published a document objecting to this decree. The document was called the *Protestation*; six princes and fourteen imperial cities signed it. From the *Protestation*, the name *Protestant* came to be applied to all adherents of the Reformation.¹⁶

The term "Protestant" has often been completely misunderstood as meaning simply a negative protest against Rome. Originally, however, it had a far more positive meaning; to "protest" was a transitive verb which meant to declare, to affirm, to set forth a position. (It survives in this meaning when a person

16. Strictly speaking, the protestors at Speyer were not all Lutherans. A good number of the cities followed a more Swiss "Zwinglian" style of reform.

“protests his innocence”, or a lover “protests his love” for his beloved.) The first Protestants were not only protesting *against* medieval Catholic errors; they were also “protesting the gospel”, declaring the positive truths of Scripture which medieval Rome had neglected, obscured, distorted, or denied. It is therefore incorrect that the term “Protestant” would lose its meaning if Roman Catholicism either reformed itself or ceased to exist. As long as there is a gospel, there is something to protest – to declare, affirm, and set forth to the world.

The Diet of Speyer solved nothing, because Lutherans would not obey its decrees and Charles V still lacked the means to enforce them effectively. At the Diet of Augsburg in June 1530, therefore, Charles changed his strategy and invited the Lutherans to set out their beliefs in writing, as a basis for discussing and resolving the religious divisions of Germany. They responded with a doctrinal statement known as the *Augsburg Confession*. Written in Latin, chiefly by Melancthon, the Augsburg Confession was the first official Protestant confession of faith. Its doctrine, in contrast to Roman Catholicism and Radicalism, was Lutheran, but it was not specifically opposed to the outlook of Zwingli and the Swiss Reformers (see section 6). Translated into German in 1532 by Justus Jonas, the Augsburg Confession became the great doctrinal basis of all the Lutheran Churches.

However, despite the calm and moderate language of the Confession, it did nothing to reconcile Roman Catholic opinion or turn Charles V aside from his ultimate purpose of forcing German Protestants back into the Roman Church. To defend their citizens against this threat of religious persecution, the Protestant princes and cities of Germany formed themselves into the “Schmalkaldic League” in December 1531 (named after the town of Schmalkalden in Saxony, where the League was constituted). The League embraced eight princes and eleven cities, including Strasbourg and other southern cities that leaned to a more Swiss Reformed outlook.¹⁷ The Roman Catholic princes

17. If one wonders how Lutherans and Reformed could enter into this political union, despite their quarrel over the Lord’s Supper, an answer may

and cities of southern Germany were already bound together by the powerful “Swabian League”, which dated back to 1488 but now took on a new anti-Protestant motivation. Clearly a religious civil war was brewing in Germany; it would break out soon after Luther’s death.¹⁸

The Augsburg Confession gave the Lutheran Churches a firm theological identity, distinguishing them from Roman Catholics and Radicals. But of course, there were other factors that went into the making of the German Lutheran Churches. The most important were:

(i) **The Lutheran form of public worship.** As we have seen, Luther took a very conservative attitude to forms of worship, keeping to traditional Catholic practice except where it clearly contradicted Scripture. He therefore translated the medieval Catholic liturgy into German, but did not change it very much; the main alteration was in the liturgy for the mass, where Luther did write a new order of worship which expressed a Protestant understanding of the Lord’s Supper. He retained the system of the Church “lectionary” – an ordered series of readings from the Bible which took the congregation through all the chief parts of Old and New Testaments.¹⁹ Luther also gave a high place to holy communion in worship, building it into the normal Sunday morning service of German Lutheran congregations.

In 1526 Luther’s new complete worship-book was finally published for use in Lutheran congregations. The normal Sunday morning service was set out as follows:

be found in the Augsburg Confession. As noted above, although a Lutheran confession, it is not polemically anti-Reformed; for example, it is rather vague on the disputed issue of how Christ is present in the Supper (article 10). As a result, Reformed Protestants at that period routinely subscribed to the Augsburg Confession. John Calvin said, “There is nothing in the Augsburg Confession which is not in full accord with our teaching.”

18. See Chapter 6, section 1.

19. For lectionaries, see Volume One, Chapter 3, section 2, under *Church worship*.

Hymn or psalm

*Kyrie eleison*²⁰

Set prayer (written down in the liturgy)

Scripture reading chanted from the set passage for the day,
from Acts–Revelation

Hymn sung by choir

Scripture reading chanted from the set passage for the day,
from the Gospels

The Apostles' Creed, sung by the whole congregation

Sermon

The Lord's Prayer in a long paraphrase

Exhortation (leading into holy communion)

The words of institution, chanted by the minister

Consecration and distribution of the bread, while a hymn is
sung

Blessing and distribution of the cup, while a hymn is sung

Set prayer (written down in the liturgy)

The benediction: the Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:24-26)

This pattern of worship was basically the same as in medieval Catholicism, except in three areas: (i) the Lutheran service was in German, not Latin; (ii) Luther's new communion liturgy replaced the medieval Catholic liturgy of the mass; and (iii) Luther exalted preaching to a central position in worship. On other matters such as altars, candles, priestly robes, *etc.*, Luther did not really care whether they were kept or abolished; they were *adiaphora*, things indifferent. The Lutheran Churches of northern Germany and Scandinavia retained them;²¹ the Lutheran Churches of southern Germany did away with them.

(ii) The Lutheran hymns, some of them (words and tunes) written by Luther himself. These had the greatest impact of all in

20. The *Kyrie eleison* is a Greek prayer from the early Church, "Lord, have mercy." In the West, it took this form: "Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy."

21. For the Lutheran Reformation in Scandinavia, see Chapter 6, section 1.

nourishing Lutheran belief and spirituality. The first Lutheran hymn-book was published in 1524. Luther replaced the medieval Catholic practice of a choir singing in Latin, by what became the normal Protestant practice of the whole congregation singing in its native tongue. Popular melodies were used to make the singing easier, and the hymns were full of strong Lutheran doctrinal content. More than any other Protestant Church, the Lutherans were marked out by their love of church music and hymn-singing. Apart from Luther, important Lutheran hymn-writers included Melancthon, Lazarus Spengler (1479-1534), Paul Speratus (1484-1551), Johann Walther (1496-1570) who also composed music, and Elizabeth Cruciger, wife of the Wittenberg theologian Caspar Cruciger.

(iii) **The Lutheran catechisms**, especially Luther's *Little Catechism* of 1529. These were for instructing church members in the basics of Lutheran belief. They revolved around the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments, and were drawn up according to a question-and-answer method: the instructor asked the questions, the learner gave the set answers which he had committed to memory. This question-and-answer pattern for catechisms was not Luther's invention; the first such catechism had been drawn up by Alcuin in the 8th century,²² and was followed in the next 100 years by many others. However, Luther's catechisms, designed for use in both church and home, set a new standard, and blazed a trail for Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox alike to follow.

(iv) **Luther's Postils** (1527). These were sermons written by Luther on the set Scripture passages in the lectionary, to be read out from the pulpit by Lutheran pastors. Many of these men were ex-priests, not very well educated, and perhaps ignorant of all but the simplest outline of Lutheran belief. It took a very long time for the benefits of proper theological and pastoral training

22. For Alcuin, see Volume Two, Chapter Two, section 2.

to reach the more remote rural areas of Lutheran lands. In this situation, Luther's *Postils* were of great value in helping pastors communicate the new faith from their pulpits.

6. *Ulrich Zwingli*²³ and the Swiss Reformation

At the same time that the Reformation was taking root in Germany, a similar movement had started in Switzerland. Switzerland was a federal union (the "Swiss Confederacy") made up of thirteen states or "cantons", which were in theory part of the Holy Roman Empire, but in practice had enjoyed independence for 200 years.²⁴ The majority of these cantons spoke a Swiss dialect of German, although French was the dominant language in those that bordered France. Nowhere in Europe did people prize political liberty so highly as in the Swiss Confederacy: each canton was a free, self-governing republic. Together the thirteen cantons formed a small country, and although their soldiers were famously brave and tough as mercenaries, the Swiss had so far played no significant part on the stage of world history. The dawn of the Reformation, however, lifted tiny Switzerland to towering heights of influence in the destiny of Western Europe and ultimately the world.

The Swiss Reformation began in Zurich, strongest of the Swiss cantons. The leading Reformer was *Ulrich Zwingli* (1484-1531). Born in Wildhaus (in north-eastern Switzerland), Zwingli was the son of a successful farmer and magistrate. In his youth he developed into a devoted Christian humanist, a disciple of Erasmus, and an eager student of the Bible in Greek and Hebrew and of the early Church fathers. From 1502 to 1506 he studied theology at the University of Basel, a centre of humanist learning; among its lecturers were Sebastian Brant and Johannes Reuchlin.²⁵ However, the teacher who had the greatest influence on the young Zwingli was *Thomas Wytttenbach* (1472-1526), a Christian humanist who was already moving towards

23. Also known as "Huldrych" Zwingli.

24. The thirteen cantons were Zurich, Berne, Basel, Schaffhaussen, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug, Lucerne, Solothurn, Fribourg, Glarus, and Appenzel.

25. See Chapter 1, section 3, under *Germany*, for Brant and Reuchlin.

a Protestant position. Wytttenbach publicly attacked indulgences some years before Luther did, exalted the authority of Scripture, and taught that salvation was by faith alone in the crucified Christ. Zwingli later testified what a deep impact Wytttenbach's views had on him. (In 1523, the elderly Wytttenbach himself introduced the Reformation into Biel in western Switzerland.)



Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

After graduating from Basel University, Zwingli served as priest in two Swiss villages, Glarus (1506-16) and Einsiedeln (1516-18). While pastor at Glarus, Zwingli accompanied a Swiss mercenary

army as chaplain, fighting in Italy for Pope Leo X and Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian against King Francis I of France. The campaign ended with a shattering defeat for the Swiss by the French at Marignano on 13-14 September 1515 – over 10,000 Swiss lay dead on the battle field. This effectively signalled the end of Switzerland as a major military power, and the beginning of its move towards strict neutrality in the wars of Europe. The event turned Zwingli himself decisively against the whole mercenary system.

Shortly afterwards, towards the end of his time at Glarus, Zwingli came to a clear religious conviction that the human soul should place its faith in Christ alone for salvation, not in the Virgin Mary or the saints. This revelation came to him through Erasmus:

In 1514 or 1515, I read a poem about the Lord Jesus, written by the profoundly learned Erasmus of Rotterdam, in which with many very beautiful words Jesus complains that people do not seek all blessing in Him, so that He might be to them a fountain of every blessing, a Saviour, a comfort, a treasure of the soul. So I thought, "Well, if this is true, why then should we seek help from any created being?"

Unlike Luther, then, Zwingli felt a real spiritual indebtedness to Erasmus.

Zwingli's years at Glarus and Einsiedeln were also memorable for his lapse from his priestly vow of chastity. Despite heroic efforts to subdue the flesh, and extra vows on top of his priestly one, he gave in to sexual temptation (but he never slept with a married woman, a virgin, or a nun, he insisted). This was afterwards to be a matter of deep shame to him, and no doubt helped to convince him that the enforced celibacy of the clergy was an impractical ideal. In his reforming sixty-seven theses of 1523, thesis 29 states: "All who are called clergy commit sin when they do not protect themselves by marriage, after they have become conscious that God has not enabled them to remain chaste."

In December 1518, Zwingli was appointed preacher in the Great Cathedral of Zurich, the canton's main church. There was

some opposition owing to his sexual lapse, publicised by one of the women in Einsiedeln, but this was dismissed after Zwingli made a frank confession of his fault. (He was probably helped by the fact that his only rival for the post was a clergyman who had broken his vow of chastity at least six times, and had six children to prove it).

As the new cathedral preacher, Zwingli set tradition aside by preaching his way verse-by-verse through Matthew's Gospel, rather than following the set readings for each day in the Church lectionary. His sermons offered a grammatico-historical interpretation of Matthew, free from the methods and teachings of scholasticism. Zwingli's preaching was electrifying; one hearer said that while listening to Zwingli's sermons, he felt as if he had been lifted up by the hair and suspended in space! After he had finished expounding Matthew, Zwingli preached through Acts, 1 and 2 Timothy, Galatians, and so on, until he had covered the whole of the New Testament except Revelation (which he rejected from the New Testament canon). He also preached through the Psalms every Friday in the market place. In Zurich more than anywhere else in Europe, it was biblical preaching that gave birth to the Reformation and nourished it into strength and victory.

In September 1519, illness brought Zwingli very close to death when plague broke out in Zurich. His brother Andrew, who lived with him, did die. We have a fascinating personal record of Zwingli's own "near death" experience in a poem he wrote at the time, his so-called "plague hymn" (see end of chapter). His full recovery animated Zwingli with the conviction that God had spared him to carry out some special mission. So he resumed his biblical preaching, and grew steadily in popularity and influence. Zwingli's personality made his gospel attractive; he radiated happiness and confidence, sure that reason was on his side. He was certainly not as lively a writer or as profound a theologian as Luther; Zwingli's soul had neither scaled the loftiest heights nor plumbed the darkest depths of spiritual experience as Luther's had, and Zurich's Reformer did not have so wide and creative an influence on others. However, Zwingli was just as honest and forthright as Luther in speaking out against