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THE REFORMER

GREAT AGES OF MAN

A History of the World's Cultures

THE REFORMATION

by

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and

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THE WARTBURG, *a mountain fortress near the German city of Weimar, sheltered the outlawed monk Martin Luther for seven months while the Reformation he began swirled into a force that changed the Christian world.*

The Church in Luther's time had no determinate territory, but it was a state. It had its monarch in the pope, its princes in the prelates, its subjects in all of Western Christendom. It had legislative assemblies in ecumenical councils, a constitution in canon law, judicial courts and a fiscal agency in the Curia. It went to war, it negotiated treaties, it collected taxes.

This comprehensive authority of the Church was based on long tradition and an overlay of written law, but it did not go unchallenged. Kings opposed the hand of the Church in their domestic power and in their revenues. Scholars questioned interpretations of dogma. Men of all classes chafed under the tithes, the taxes levied on the laity.

The grievances against the Church were many, but none was more bitter than the grievance over its wealth. The Church took annual tribute from kings. It required fees of bishops on their appointment. It levied separate taxes for the building of churches, the fighting of wars and countless other undertakings.

A lucrative source of Church income, and one that was to become a cause célèbre, was the indulgence. Indulgences remitted the punishment due for sins, and in exchange the penitent made a cash contribution to the Church.

The forgiveness of God was contingent upon confession, penitence and satisfaction, or penance. During the Middle Ages penances had been severe indeed; they had consisted of such acts as seven years' fasting on bread and water, or long and arduous pilgrimages. Over the centuries the indulgence had developed as a substitute: the payment of money replaced the performance of the deed of penance. The idea was not so baldly mercenary as it appears at first glance; it arose out of the Germanic legal idea that corporal punishment for crimes was convertible to payments of money—in other words, to fines. As money and indulgences became intertwined, however, the idea became subject to abuse. Simple folk came to suppose that the payment of money would justify them in the eyes of God, as so often it did in the eyes of men.

Originally each indulgence was issued for a special case; by Luther's time indulgences were issued generally. The faithful would attend special serv-

ices, or visit sacred shrines, or venerate relics, as did Luther himself on his journey to Rome; they would make offerings of money for the privilege, and receive in return certificates of the indulgences they had acquired. Official Church doctrine did not specifically say so, but the masses believed they were taking out insurance on salvation.

The Church was not blind to its shortcomings; it clearly saw the gap between its ideals and its practice, and it often reviewed questions of papal power, institutional corruption and even of doctrine. But though it acknowledged the need for correction, it adamantly asserted the right to correct itself from within and recognized no authority outside of Rome to do the work.

Proponents of reform fell generally into three categories. There were spiritual reformers, who deplored worldly pursuits and advocated programs of piety and austerity. There were advocates of the conciliar theory, who wished to see an ecumenical council reform the Church institutionally. Finally, there were the humanists, who believed that knowledge of the Bible would restore the purity that had characterized the early Church.

The first of these groups, the spiritual reformers, were preachers who addressed themselves to the people. They believed that society was corrupt, that state measures would be of no avail, and that a return to piety was the only route to human salvation. The spiritual reformers won considerable popular acceptance, but received mixed recognition from the Church itself. Some, whose teachings were orthodox, were tolerated by Rome; but others who caused unrest and disobedience among the masses were condemned as heretics.

The conciliarists were primarily statesmen, secular and ecclesiastical, who addressed themselves to Rome. Some were kings and royal ministers for whom reform meant liberation from Roman interference in their national politics, freedom to appoint politically favorable bishops, and release from the drain of gold and silver to Rome. Some were men who were simply jealous of national identity and objected to the all-Italian composition of the Curia. Others were theologians who believed that a council, as a parliamentary body of the Church, would provide a check on the vagaries of an unscrupulous pope.

The conciliar movement in the Church had, of course, a parallel in the parliamentary movement in the secular governments. Yet it made much less headway than political parliamentarianism. The main reason was that Church councils, which had been convened periodically in the past, had proved to be ineffectual and subject to political pressure. The bishops and cardinals who sat on them often served in secular government as ministers to kings. They therefore had conflicting loyalties—and monarchs did not hesitate to take advantage of this fact and use the councils for their own ends. For this reason, the popes, understandably, discouraged the growth of the conciliar movement.

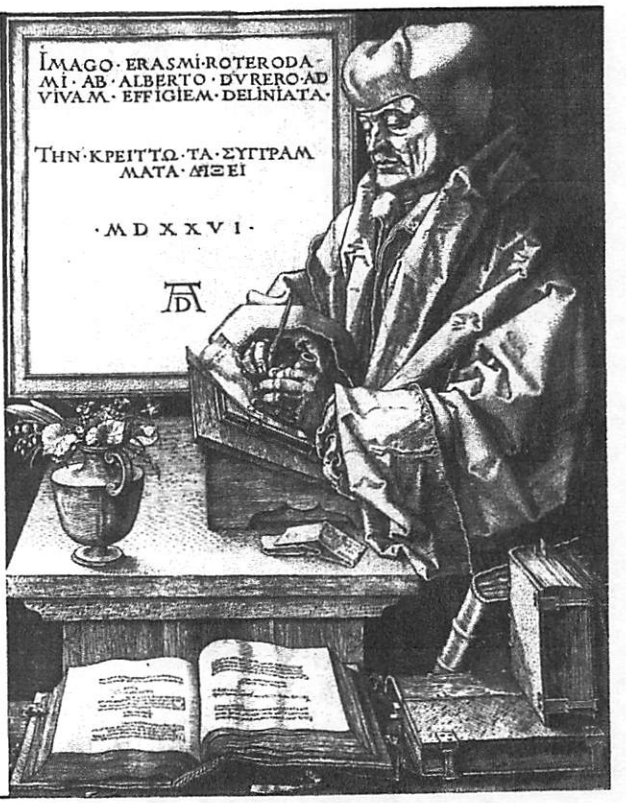
The humanists, the third group of reformers, differed from the conciliarists (though there were conciliarists among them) in having interests more cosmopolitan than national, and from the preachers of piety (though their concern was with morality) in laying emphasis on the intellect rather than on divine inspiration.

Above all else, the humanists deplored ignorance, and they exalted the power of the educated human mind. They interpreted dogma figuratively rather than literally, and thought wrangles over such matters as sacraments and grace were foolish and disruptive. They believed that man was essentially good, and they looked to education for his improvement. If men were educated, they believed, their standard of ethics would naturally rise—to the benefit of society and Church alike.

The humanist movement originated in Renais-

"Truly the yoke of Christ would be sweet, and His burdens light, if petty human institutions added nothing to what He Himself imposed. He commanded us nothing save love for one another."

Surrounded by books and flowers which suggest his erudition and love of beauty, Erasmus of Rotterdam is shown at the little writing desk where he framed such thoughts as those expressed in the quotation above, which values the teachings of Christ above the intercession of the Church. Behind the robed philosopher appear the elaborate title, date and signature of Albrecht Dürer, who made the engraving. Dürer paid homage to Erasmus with the inscription in Greek at the center: "His writings depict him even better."



sance Italy, and men drawn there by its luster carried it north. One such scholar was Lefèvre of Etaples, a theologian and classical scholar at the University of Paris. He was among the early translators to render the New Testament from Latin into a vernacular language (in his case, French), and he urged that the illiterate be taught to read it. He has been called the *doyen* of French reformers for his anticipation, by perhaps five years, of some of Luther's ideas—though, like most intellectuals and nearly all humanists, he was to repudiate Luther in the end.

The most renowned of the humanists was Erasmus, a peripatetic scholar who was born in Rotterdam about 1466. The bastard son of a parish priest, Erasmus grew up to be the most urbane of 16th Century men, and his counsel was sought by popes and reformers, kings and scholars all over Europe.

No 16th Century man was more convinced of the need for reform than Erasmus; yet he was to remain within the fold of the Church. Well ahead of Luther, he took issue with the secular pursuits of the papacy, and he challenged the practices of fasting, relic-worshiping, celibacy, indulgence-selling, pilgrimages, confession, the burning of heretics, and prayers to the saints. He went beyond Luther in urging the reduction of dogmas to as "few as possible, leaving opinion free on the rest."

Erasmus believed that education would change the world, and he expressed the wish that every plowboy might whistle the Psalms as he furrowed the soil. But education is a slow process. Erasmus addressed an intellectual elite; he himself judged the upheaval of revolution to be worse than the yoke of tyrants, and so he preferred not to upset the beliefs of the masses. Although he had a revolutionary mind, he was not a revolutionary at heart, and so he did not shake the world as Luther was to do.

As for Luther himself, for years all this talk of reform scarcely touched him, for he was preoccupied with his own salvation. But as a priest in Wittenberg, listening to the confessions of the people of the parish, he noticed with dismay how little remorse they had for their sins and how eagerly they sought to escape punishment. In addition, his

acquaintance in the academic world was growing, and as it did his vista broadened. Gradually his personal quest for salvation and the talk of his contemporaries merged within him to foment a revolution.

The answer to the personal worries that plagued him came to Luther spectacularly. Studying the Scriptures in preparation for his lectures at the University of Wittenberg, he suddenly found in the Book of Romans the key he was looking for. It lay in a single word—the very word that had been his despair: *iustitia*, "justice," or "righteousness." Luther had associated the righteousness of God with His eternal condemnation of the damned. But studying at Wittenberg he fell upon a sentence of St. Paul, "The just shall live by faith," and in a flash the words took on a new meaning.

"Finally," Luther wrote, "God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith."

In other words, he concluded that the righteousness of God was not based on a disposition to condemn; it was based on mercy. The despair of Luther's life had been that he saw himself as undeserving of salvation. Now he was convinced that God gave, He did not buy and sell, and therefore grace was not purchasable.

Luther discerned support for his theory in the writings of St. Augustine, who 11 centuries before had written that the saved "are singled out not by their own merits, but by the grace of the Mediator; that is, they are justified . . . as by a free favor." These words cast light into the darkness of Luther's soul, giving him hope and courage.

Another word came into bold relief as Luther read still further. This was the word that the Latin Vulgate Bible rendered *poenitentia*, from the Greek *metanoia*. All the daunting associations of sin, guilt and penalty hung over the concept of "penitence," but *metanoia* could as legitimately be translated as "change of heart." To Luther that signified a state of mind in which man would turn to God in spontaneous good will. Regeneration of the soul, not retribution by a vengeful God, was the intention of the sacrament of Penance, he decided. And regeneration of the soul could not be earned; it had to come about through faith in God.

That was the start of Luther's theology, and when it crept into his lectures, nobody thought of it as new. But Luther had in fact brought about a revolutionary, practical approach to the abstruse discipline of theology. Luther was not himself a humanist, but he was influenced indirectly by humanistic ideas as they flowed into the mainstream of academic life; and his subjective view of man, though it was pious and northern, had a parallel in the views of the Renaissance humanists.

As energetically as he had previously tormented himself, now he labored to convey his ideas to others. His audiences grew, and the provincial University of Wittenberg grew, too. Luther slowly developed a modest fame.

Having questioned the concepts of righteousness and penance, Luther inevitably began to venture further afield. Soon he was speaking on other subjects. He began to criticize the worship of the saints, and then the trafficking in indulgences.

The subject of indulgences was already causing concern to others besides Luther, and this concern rose to a ground swell with the so-called St. Peter's indulgence of the early 1500s. Pope Julius II had ordered, long before his death, the erection of a new basilica over the tomb of St. Peter in the Vatican. To finance the undertaking he had issued a bull granting an indulgence to any who contributed toward its construction. His successor, Pope Leo X, reissued the indulgence bull for the continuation of the work.

Preachers campaigned throughout Europe, urging

the people to contribute to the project and making much of the benefits to be derived from the indulgences they would gain. Some of the preachers took license with Church doctrine; what they said was tantamount to promising that the mere purchase of this indulgence would assure the entrance into heaven not only of the donors, but also of their dead relatives who were suffering in purgatory.

There were many indulgence preachers all over Europe, but the most notable was one John Tetzel, a Dominican friar. He was a consummate salesman and a master showman, and his coming to town was something like the arrival of a circus. He was a great money-raiser for Rome, but an abomination to all serious men. In April of 1517 he set up a gaudy pulpit on the outskirts of Wittenberg.

On this occasion Tetzel was serving not only the Pope, but also the princely family of Hohenzollern, one of whose scions was Bishop of Halberstadt and Archbishop of Magdeburg and Mainz.

When the archbishopric of Mainz had recently become vacant, several wealthy men had sought the post, and Albert of Hohenzollern had won it by making the highest bid to Rome. To raise the fee, he and his family borrowed from the Fugger banking house of Augsburg, which arranged most of the financial transactions between the Curia and Germany. Albert therefore assumed the archbishopric of Mainz under a heavy debt.

When Leo X announced the renewal of the St. Peter's indulgence, rulers all over Europe protested that their national economies could not stand the outflow of gold to Rome. The Holy See, however, like all political powers, had ways of maneuvering to overcome such objections as this. Leo allowed Henry VIII to keep for the Royal Exchequer a fourth of the proceeds of the St. Peter's indulgence raised in England, and Francis I to retain a percentage of those raised in France. Against the receipts in Spain he lent a sum to King Charles I (the future Emperor Charles V). And, in effect borrowing from Germany to ensure the payment of Albert of Hohenzollern's fee, Leo extended to the princely youth the royal privilege of taking one half the proceeds of his territory to put toward the payment of his debt to the Fugger bankers.

One ruler, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, was given no such concession as Albert and the monarchs of Europe. His recourse was to deny Tetzel admittance to Saxony. Tetzel got around the prohibition by establishing himself just outside the border, and the Wittenbergers streamed across to buy their indulgences.

Luther had no concern with Frederick's objections to Tetzel, but he deplored the Wittenbergers' gullible seeking after indulgences. In that era, when there were no journals in which to express opinions, it was customary practice for a scholar to post his ideas in some public place, and the door of the Castle Church served for such statements in Wittenberg. Aroused to indignation over Tetzel's circuslike performance, Luther summarized his ideas on the subject of indulgences in the form of 95 theses for debate, which he posted on a placard nailed to the north door of Frederick's Castle Church. The date was October 31, 1517.

Some of the theses were statements of definition; others posed questions. Anyone truly penitent, said Luther, would not whine to have punishment for his sins lifted, but rather would welcome it, as had Christ. Neither the Pope nor any man, he said, had jurisdiction over purgatory, and consequently the indulgence vendors who proclaimed indiscriminate release from purgatory were deceiving the people.

Furthermore, Luther asked, supposing the Pope possessed such powers as were imputed to him by the preachers of pardon; why then did he not in Christian charity empty purgatory forthwith? Why, since he was as rich as Croesus, did not the

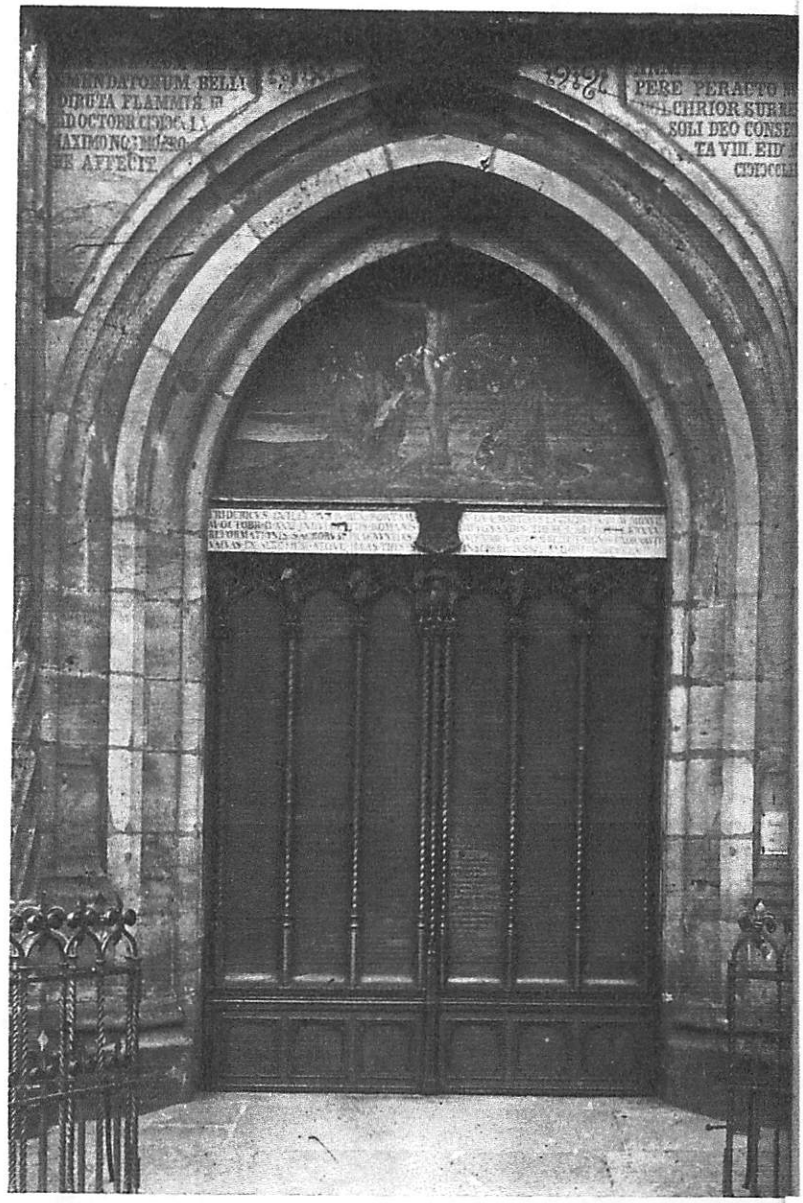
Pope build St. Peter's basilica out of his own pocket instead of wringing those of the poor?

The public, which generally paid little heed to the academic debates of theologians, was electrified. Luther had touched on a tender subject, and the pent-up emotions of thousands resounded to his words. He had sent copies of the placard to a few friends; the friends circulated it among their friends, who passed it to printers, who sent it to Leipzig and Magdeburg almost overnight. By December the theses had reached Nuremberg, and in a few months they were all over Europe.

When Tetzel read Luther's theses he crowed: "Within three weeks I shall have the heretic thrown into the fire." Some of the Augustinians took alarm at the rising furor and begged Luther to desist. Luther, unwavering, decided instead to make certain that everyone knew exactly what he meant. He submitted a written treatise to his bishop, and to clear up any misunderstanding among the people he wrote a simplified version of his views in German. All over Germany men read these statements. The clamor rose, and he found himself hailed on the one side and slandered on the other.

The Archbishop Albert, seeing controversy brewing, called on Rome for advice and Tetzel urged the Curia to condemn Luther. But Pope Leo, who was a humanist and undisturbed by theological nitpicking, preferred not to make too much of what he regarded as a "monkish squabble." The Curia therefore took no immediate action.

Luther himself now poured forth treatises and pamphlets in great profusion, and he rapidly became a best-selling author. As excitement spread, the Curia began to take an interest. At last Luther was summoned to Rome. A political windfall saved him from going. The Elector Frederick, jealous of his territorial authority, was loath to have a Saxon subject leave German soil to be judged by Italians. The Pope had reasons for making concessions to



PORTALS OF PROTEST, *the doors of the Castle Church to which Luther nailed his famous 95 theses, were often used as a bulletin board by the townspeople of Wittenberg. The original wooden doors, damaged by fire, were replaced in 1858 by metal ones on which the theses are inscribed. The Crucifixion scene above the doors shows Luther and his disciple Melanchthon at the foot of the cross.*

Frederick, so he agreed to have his emissary in Germany examine Luther there.

In the fall of 1518, therefore, Luther journeyed to Augsburg to meet Cardinal Cajetan, General of the Dominican Order and an eminent theologian of the Curia. The Cardinal asked that Luther recant; Luther quoted Scripture in support of his belief that men were redeemed by faith and not by the purchase of indulgences. When Cajetan asserted that the theory on which indulgences rested was a matter of doctrine, Luther denied it. Cajetan finally lost patience and broke off the discussion.

The only result of the meeting was to push Luther into further heresy. Until Augsburg he had been willing to grant that the abuses in the Church existed without the Pope's knowledge, or at least without his connivance. From Augsburg he moved on to the conviction that the pontificate was a man-made fabrication, and that this lay at the root of a vicious perversion of the Christian faith.

In the summer of 1519 he went to debate his theology at Leipzig with John Eck, a champion of orthodoxy and a formidable speaker. Before a large audience, Eck accused Luther of holding a view similar to that of Jan Hus, a Bohemian scholar who had been burned at the stake 100 years before for urging men to cease depending on the sacraments and miracles and to seek God instead in Scripture. Luther stoutly replied that the Council of Constance had been wrong to condemn Hus; some of his ideas were thoroughly Christian. The assembly gasped in astonishment, for Luther was assaulting the theory that whatever power did not reside in the pope lay instead in a general council. If even a council could err, what authority was there left?

The growing storm might have prompted the Pope to act, but in the midst of it the Emperor Maximilian died. The Pope immersed himself in the politics of the Empire and found little time to spare for matters of heresy, so Luther was left alone for a time.

In August of 1520 he published an *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,* in which he declared that since the Church would not reform itself, it had therefore to be reformed by the secular authorities. Church and state had been intimately associated throughout the Christian era; they were considered to be the spiritual and temporal arms of divinely appointed rule—but the Church was considered to be the superior of the two. To suggest that the Church was remiss in its duty and should be taken in hand by the state was a revolutionary idea. It was to exert a decisive influence on the Reformation.

In October, Luther moved onto even more controversial ground. He published *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,* a treatise that dealt mainly with the sacraments, or the religious rites, such as Baptism and Communion, through which, the Church taught, grace was conferred on the faithful by God. There were seven sacraments in all. They commemorated events recorded in the New Testament. Luther argued that in 1,000 years of captivity under Rome, the religion of Christ had been corrupted in faith, morals and ritual. Basing his judgment on his reading of the New Testament, Luther discarded the five sacraments that he could not find explicitly described there and retained only two—Baptism, which signified the washing away of original sin (the sin transmitted to man by the fall of Adam and Eve), and Communion, which commemorated Christ's sharing of bread and wine at the Last Supper with the 12 Apostles. In his earlier quarrels with the Church, Luther had been condemning practice; now he was attacking dogma. He was moving closer than he realized to an irreparable break with Rome.

In November came still another blow at the Church. In the *Treatise on Christian Liberty,* Lu-

ther declared that man was bound only to the law of the Word of God, and the Word of God was Scripture. From this it followed, in his view, that the clergy, though it had legitimate functions in administration and teaching, was not to be elevated above the rest of mankind, for all believers were priests. Luther prefaced this work with a conciliatory letter to Pope Leo X, making his last attempt to avoid a break with the Church, hoping instead that it would reform itself.

But in June the papacy had already acted. From his hunting lodge in the countryside near Rome, the Pope issued a bull condemning Luther's works and ordering them to be burned. Luther was given 60 days to recant or be excommunicated.

Rome had delayed too long. Luther's ideas had inflamed a nation, and the order met with obstruction all along the route to Wittenberg. Students rioted, burned anti-Lutheran publications instead of Luther's works, and threatened physical violence to the bearers of the bull.

Luther was no more daunted than the people. He responded with a blast headed *Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist,* in which he declaimed: "[This] bull . . . is the sum of all impiety, blasphemy, ignorance, impudence, hypocrisy, lying—in a word, it is Satan and his Antichrist. . . . You, then, Leo X, you cardinals and the rest of you at Rome . . . I call upon you to renounce your diabolical blasphemy and audacious impiety, and, if you will not, we shall all hold your seat as possessed and oppressed by Satan, and the damned seat of Antichrist."

In the few cities where officials succeeded in burning Luther's books, they did it over the objections of solemn Germans. On December 10, 1520, Luther and the students at Wittenberg responded in kind. At a great bonfire before the city gate, Luther burned the *Canon Law,* the hallowed document that recorded the laws of the church.

Luther's excommunication followed. The only step that remained to be taken was the secular ban making Luther an outlaw of the land. In June of 1520 Charles V had succeeded Maximilian as Emperor. He called a diet, the assembly of the princes, prelates and representatives of the free cities. It convened at Worms in April 1521, and Luther was summoned before it.

The Diet of Worms was held against a backdrop of complex political forces—forces of which Luther was probably unaware, but over which he would not have troubled himself had he known of them. Rome, hoping that the Emperor would summarily condemn Luther, had sent two nuncios to the Diet. But the German constitution—which Charles had sworn in his coronation oath to uphold—declared that no German might be condemned for any crime without a trial. Charles, who was part Netherlander and part Spaniard, was a faithful son of the Church and might have liked to oblige the papacy, but he was advised that it would be unwise to go against the will of the German people.

As the members of the Diet assembled, Frederick the Wise and his chancellor tried to outmaneuver the papal nuncios and win the judges over to Luther's cause. Frederick had founded the University of Wittenberg, and he was proud of the eminence Luther had given it. Erasmus, who had no political aims but who applauded Luther's courage, worked to persuade other scholars and theologians to treat him fairly. Knights pledged their support, and threats circulated that the *Bundschuh*—the peasants, so named for the bound shoes they wore—would rise in rebellion if Luther was condemned.

When the Emperor and his retinue—which included the papal nuncios—arrived in Worms they found the city overwhelmingly on Luther's side. Poems, placards, pictures of him and stacks of his books appeared in the shops. One of the nuncios wrote to the Pope, "Nine tenths of the people are

DRESSED AS A KNIGHT, *Martin Luther towers symbolically over the city of Worms, where he was tried and condemned by the Church in 1521. He was then taken for his own safety to the fortress of Wartburg; while there he signed many of his letters "From the Isle of Patmos," after the Aegean island on which St. John is said to have written the Book of Revelations (hence the Latin words "In Pathmo" at the top of the woodcut). At right is the title page of the pope's "Bull against Martin Luther and Followers," which ordered his works to be burned.*

shouting 'Luther!' and the other tenth shouts 'Down with Rome!' "

Luther was given a trial, though it was not what he had anticipated. He had expected to be asked specific questions and to be given the chance to explain his views; instead he was shown 20 of his books piled on a bench and asked if he would recant the heresies they contained. He asked for time, was given a day, and returned the following evening to deliver a stirring statement that concluded: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture or by right reason . . . I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither right nor safe to act against conscience. God help me. Amen." He descended from the stand a hero to his champions.

The young Emperor, however, was tied by faith and by politics to Roman interests. After a day of reflection he summoned his counselors and told them, "A single friar who goes counter to all Christianity for 1,000 years must be wrong. . . . Therefore, I am resolved to stake my lands, my friends, my body, my life and my soul [to defend the Church of Rome]." A month later he issued the Edict of Worms, declaring Luther an outlaw. The Elector Frederick, fearing for Luther's safety, thereupon arranged to have him taken to a mountain fortress, the Wartburg, where he remained in hiding for the better part of a year.

But neither the Edict of Worms nor Luther's seclusion could stem the tide that now swept over Germany. The Reformation was underway, and neither prelates nor statesmen could halt it. Luther had brought into open debate all manner of issues against the Church; he had for four years now been writing steadily on the nature of faith and the sacraments; the function and performance of the Mass; on marriage, holidays, and fasting. Other men took up these ideas while he was in the Wartburg and put some of them into practice. Bodenstein von Carlstadt, a priest and professor at

Wittenberg—the man who had conferred the doctorate on Luther some 10 years before—began to make changes in worship and teaching. On Christmas Day of 1521 he celebrated the Mass for the first time without clerical vestments and spoke throughout in German.

Other changes were instituted. Fast days and confession were abolished. Priests began to marry, and so did monks. "Good heavens," said Luther, hearing that monks were taking wives. "Monks too? They'll never give me one." (Some four years later he changed his mind and married a former nun.)

While he remained in hiding, Luther translated the New Testament, a monumental undertaking. As literature his translation bears comparison with the King James version in English. More than any other single work, Luther's Bible was to establish modern vernacular German.

He approved the orderly changes that took place in his absence, but soon the situation took a turn toward violence, and that caused him consternation. Students rioted and desecrated churches and their altars. Luther himself, for all his cocky invective, could not countenance violence, and he returned to Wittenberg at the request of the town council to help restore order.

A transformation had taken place in him during his stay in the Wartburg. He had grown a beard and a full head of hair (he had formerly been tonsured). He had taken on flesh and poise. He took charge of Wittenberg and in a few days had returned the town to peace. The power of his personality was to dominate Wittenberg for another 25 years, as long as he lived.

His battles were not yet over, for he did not anticipate that the Scripture he read so unequivocally would be read in other ways by other men. But Luther had precipitated reform where other men had tried and failed for more than a century.

Why Martin Luther? Few of his ideas were new; most had been raised or suggested by a host of earlier theologians—John Wycliffe in 14th Century England; Jan Hus in 14th Century Bohemia; a Dominican friar, Savonarola, in Florence only a generation before Luther; Lefèvre in France and Erasmus internationally in Luther's own time. Elements of all their ideas were to be found in the doctrine at which Luther eventually arrived, though Luther did not consciously take them as his models.

Some of his forerunners had failed because they looked back, not forward, and tried to restore a view of life that was outdated. Some were ahead of their times, and cried out in vain because people were not ready to listen. Others appeared in nations in which either the Church was so much in control (as in Italy) that it could overrule the wishes of a few, or the state was so strong (as in England) that it offset interference from Rome.

Luther, on the other hand, appeared at a decisive moment of history, in a propitious time and place. Instead of going against the current, he rode an epochal tidal wave. He addressed a nation that more than any other in Europe wished to detach itself from Rome; and he spoke not to the intellectual elite, as Erasmus did, but to the people, and in language they could understand. Thanks to the fortune of Luther's timing and to his remarkable facility with language, Germany became the theater of a religious conflict that was to sweep through all of Europe in less than half a century.

Though the Emperor Charles V remained true to his faith, he did not subdue the rebellious princes of the Empire. In 1556 he abdicated his throne and went to Spain to die in a monastery. Behind him in Germany the princes assumed the right to regulate the Church in their territories—and they made the Church Lutheran. Not all the princes went over to the Reformation, but the universal character of medieval religion was broken, never to be restored.