

**THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE**  
**MARTIN LUTHER AND THE GERMAN PRINCES**  
**1510 TO 1530**

**THESIS**

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Dedicated to my wife, Cyndi

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a period of incredible political, religious, and social ferment for the Western world.<sup>1</sup> It was a time when the solid world of Western man underwent turbulent expansion and alteration. "A single century--1425-1525--saw the maritime exploration of more than half the globe and the three greatest voyages in human history, those of Vasco da Gama, Columbus, and Magellan."<sup>2</sup> This was an era when ideas spread quickly because of the development of moveable-type printing which was in use by 1455.<sup>3</sup>

It was a time of turmoil, dispute and disruption, for men were seriously evaluating society's' role and place in each man's life.<sup>4</sup> They formed new relationships and tried new approaches to old ideas. In addition, new political arrangements formed, and as Walter von Loewenich states, "The political situation at the conclusion of the medieval period was characterized by two factors: the formation of

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559 (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 18ff.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard and Fawn M. Brodie, From Crossbow to H-Bomb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Luther Hess Waring, The Political Theories of Martin Luther (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1910), 46.

<sup>4</sup> Harold J. Grimm, The Reformation Era, 1500-1650 (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 5ff.

the nation-states of France, England, and Spain, with their centralization of power in the hands of the royalty, and the emergence of territorial states in Italy and Germany."<sup>5</sup>

This centralized authority made the exercise of power in those former countries easier to achieve, and hold, than in the decentralized Germany where powerful rivals constantly battled one another.<sup>6</sup> Among these rivals were the pope, the emperor, and the princes of the realm, including the seven powerful Imperial Electors. Those seven men chose the king of the Germans and the pope could also crown him as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The Golden Bull of 1356 assigned this role of elector to the Princes of Saxony and Brandenburg; the King of Bohemia, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, and the Archbishops of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne.<sup>7</sup>

To exercise political control in sixteenth-century Germany was an extremely difficult task for the emperor, much less anyone else.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Lindsay declares that power "in Germany had been for long coming into the hands of the great terrimagnates, and the cities were all armed and independent republics."<sup>9</sup> The empire comprised "a number of virtually sovereign states, principalities, and free cities-

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<sup>5</sup> Walter von Loewenich, Martin Luther: The Man and His Work, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Spitz, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas M. Lindsay, Luther and the German Reformation (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 119. Hereafter known as German Reformation.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times: The Reformation From A New Perspective (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 34ff.

<sup>9</sup> Lindsay, German Reformation, 120.

each with its own diet, representative assembly, senate, or council; each with its elector, prince or mayor."<sup>10</sup> Because of the continual conflict of interests between these various political elements, compliance to a centrally issued order was difficult to obtain and conflict between two elements opened the door for noncompliance by one or more sections of society. Into this category of door-opening conflict fell the continuous battle between pope and emperor.

For centuries the pope and emperor vied for dominance in the affairs of Germany. The central point of contention was from whence did the emperor receive his power: from his coronation as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire by the pope or from his election as king of the Germans.<sup>11</sup> Aleander, the papal nuncio, succinctly made this clear in a letter of February 14, 1521, when he wrote:

I reminded them [the Imperial Court] that the Empire was only maintained by the same policy by which it had been won, that the Empire and the College of Electors had only been granted to Charlemagne and Otto on account of their proved attachment to the Roman See.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly the pope believed his station was superior to the emperor's. In this continental contest for dominance conducted in noble courts and waged between the pope on one hand and various civil leaders on the other, the common man

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<sup>10</sup> Waring, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," trans. J.J. Schindel, rev. Walther I. Brandt, in vol. 45 of Luther's Works, American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 80. Hereafter known as Temporal Authority.

<sup>12</sup> Aleander to Vice-Chancellor De' Medici, February 14, 1521, Luther's Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters, 2 vols., eds., Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publishing Society, 1913-1918), 1:463. Hereafter known as Luther's Correspondence.



was the battleground and the prize.<sup>13</sup> To gain control over the common man was to win the battle.

In this contest between church and empire, each prized the ability to force his opponent to concede or accommodate, but there were few means of achieving this result. The pope used *Excommunication* as a method to force political leaders to bend to his will. To achieve the desired result, church officials went through a process called "posting the bans" that would identify the heretic and thereby deny him the benefits of church and society. For a commoner, this could include actual banishment from society; for a ruler, this could mean his subjects were released from obedience to him, as Pope Gregory VII used against Henry IV in 1077. Another papal tool was the *interdict* which prohibited a person from receiving the Sacraments and Christian burial. To reward secular leaders who supported the church, the pope presented the Golden Rose. The Golden Rose was a gem embellished gold ornamental branch with leaves and roses and a principal rose at the top on a long thin gold stem set on a square base with four feet. The meaning and symbolism of the Rose, linked to Lent, were: "the flower is the symbol of Christ the King, the gold of His kingship, the red of His passion, [and] its fragrance prefiguring His Resurrection and glory." The practice was to award this Rose to a Catholic sovereign "in recognition of some outstanding service to the Church."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Waring, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Catholic University of America, ed., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), 599.

The emperor, on the other hand, could ignore papal edicts and exert military or political pressure on the curia to alter its policies.<sup>15</sup> The emperor could also reward his adherents with visible and worldly trophies connected to wealth and political influence. In this seesaw battle, the emperor gained political leverage when he could manipulate a dispute within the church. John Manuel, the Imperial ambassador to Rome, suggested just such a possibility when he wrote to the Emperor Charles regarding the opportunity offered by Luther's intransigence, "I think he [Luther] would be a good means of forcing the Pope to conclude an alliance."<sup>16</sup>

The universities with their new teaching methods and changing ideas also became part of the political formula. In the late fifteenth century scholars introduced a new teaching method called "the *via Moderna*," based on the work of the English Franciscan William of Occam (1285-1347).<sup>17</sup> The central idea behind this teaching method was that nothing other than God was absolutely necessary for a person's life and the theory was founded on the total transcendence of God. An important aspect was that God chose to limit himself to activity that did not contradict the natural laws which he elected to establish. However, concurrent with this election came the power to intervene in

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<sup>15</sup> James M. Kittelson, Luther The Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 58.

<sup>16</sup> Imperial Ambassador at Rome John Manuel to Charles V, May 12, 1520, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:318.

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich Boehmer, Martin Luther: Road To Reformation (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 25.

the world if God so chose. This method established God as the core value and then derived man's value, and man could learn of God's will through the rational examination of individual ideas to acquire universal concepts. The *via Moderna* differed from the teaching method, influenced by Aristotle, which established man as the primary focus and built outward from there.<sup>18</sup> Those who followed this newer theory "differed from the Thomists and Scotists chiefly in their flat denial that human reason can attain certain knowledge of the supersensuous realities of faith." The cornerstone of this concept was that only the church possessed this infallible knowledge and only the church could impart it.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Renaissance humanism was flourishing as a cultural phenomenon. This humanism, founded on the glories of ancient Greece and Rome, used scientific study to gain knowledge. Humanism was man-centered with the approach to discovering God through self-examination in relation to the world. This humanistic process, according to Erasmus, did not exclude Christianity rather it could provide a direct approach to scripture and the roots of living a Christian life.<sup>20</sup> "Humanism," Harold Grimm states, "was

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<sup>18</sup> William J. Courtenay, "William of Occam," in the Dictionary of the Middle Ages, 13 vols., American Council of Learned Societies (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 209-214; Catholic Encyclopedia, 1145.

<sup>19</sup> Boehmer, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Denys Hay, "Schools and Universities," in The New Cambridge Modern History, volume II, The Reformation 1520-1559, ed. G. R. Elton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 420.

already a public force in Germany when the two preeminent stars appeared: Reuchlin and Erasmus."<sup>21</sup>

Humanist scholars in the universities often took the lead on examining and debating religious issues. John Eck was a prominent example of the humanist scholar.<sup>22</sup> Educated in Tübingen and Breisgau, Eck, who was a staunch defender of Rome and the Church, debated Luther at Leipzig in 1519. In 1520 while at Rome, Eck also was instrumental in drawing up the bull *Exsurge Domine* against Luther.<sup>23</sup>

Into this world of political turbulence, and the earnest search for man's place in God's kingdom, came Martin Luther. He was born to Hans and Margaret Luder in Eisleben, Germany on November 10, 1483, and he lived in a typical family of the times where religion strongly influenced daily actions. Also, because of Hans Luder's ambition that his children acquire a good education, Luther gained his future position of professor of theology.<sup>24</sup>

In October 1517, Professor Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the Wittenberg Church door, attacking the sale of indulgences and seeking a debate. This call for a debate irreversibly fragmented the Western world. The issue, at first strictly a religious dispute between theologians, quickly moved into the political arena. First, the pope tried to sway the Elector to abandon Luther, to protect the

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<sup>21</sup> Loewenich, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Kittelson, 111.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, Luther's Correspondence, footnote on 1:53.

<sup>24</sup> Kittelson, 36.

Elector's good Catholic reputation; then, Erasmus identified the issue as an attack on good learning that Frederick, he said, should resist. When the imperial knights entered the picture, political and military considerations became as important as religious or academic ones. Thereafter the Catholic princes, who supported the Roman Church, entered the fray, attempting to influence Charles to condemn all the evangelicals, i.e., those princes and people who wanted to break with the Church. Interspersed among all this activity were the maneuvers of pope and emperor, eager to use the situation to gain an advantage over the other.

Because Luther was a doctor of divinity, his pronouncements struck like thunderbolts when he challenged indulgence sales, authority of the pope, and then the infallibility of general councils. He issued pronouncements for the princes to take action that forced them to seriously consider those statements and their implementation. They could not ignore Luther's statements because he based them on the Word of God and everyone's eternal salvation was dependent on their actions in the here-and-now. If a ruler chose not to consider Luther's words, he might go against Scripture and lose his soul.

Luther's intransigence created a problem for the princes because so many people agreed with some or all of his positions. The rapid spread of ideas insured that Luther's words could be neither ignored nor avoided. Political and military considerations ultimately forced the

emperor to deal directly with the issues presented by the evangelicals. On occasion the emperor and the Catholic princes had to placate the evangelicals; however, ultimately they felt compelled to make war on the recalcitrant German noblemen. The pope, however, could not sanction blatant physical harm of Luther for fear of repercussions from the princes, the knights, or the general populace and that created an extremely difficult problem for him.

On the other hand, this religious problem presented an opportunity for the emperor, the princes, and other temporal leaders to attack the worldly power of Rome, especially its wealth. Here was a situation, if carefully used, to force the curia to retreat and moderate some of its financial demands on the empire. If the pope could not enforce his will then the emperor could gain an upper hand in their seesaw battle by solving that problem for him. What nobody realized was that the problem grew too fast and too large for either leader to resolve and it would create conflicts for years to come.

Martin Luther was at the center of all those conflicts for almost thirty years. Without help from many of his peers and compatriots, within the religious community as well as the general population, he could not have carried out the reformation of the church. Nevertheless, as Heiko Oberman points out, without the support and protection of men in power, Martin Luther could not have survived past the

summer of 1520.<sup>25</sup> Which leads to the questions: What was Luther's relationship with these men of power? How important were they to the success of the Reformation church?

During the years of conflict, Luther constantly sought the help of these men of power to achieve the church reformation he so strongly desired. At the same time, these princes sought Luther's support for their political goals. Although a number of these princes accepted the evangelical doctrine, they felt the need to achieve this church reformation through a practical secular approach and they would look for academic, political, and military solutions to the religious issues. Often the perspectives of Luther or the evangelical princes did not coincide and one or the other party felt alone in its journey. Ultimately, each party had to accommodate the needs of the other to achieve their common goal of freedom of religious practice.

But for Luther's single courageous stand at the Diet of Worms, the German Reformation would not have occurred as it did. With the help of peers, Luther developed his ideas, but they did not carry enough political power for Luther to do his work and for an infant church to begin, grow, and survive. Assistance from powerful politicians was the key to the German Reformation's creation, survival, and success.

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<sup>25</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, Luther, Man Between God and the Devil (Yale: Yale University Press, 1989), 24.

## CHAPTER 2

### ELECTOR, SCHOLARS, and POPE

Without the support of important political figures in Germany, Luther would never have succeeded as a reformer in the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Of three men at the Court of Saxony, two, Johann von Staupitz and Georg Spalatin, helped shape his life and formulate his ideas. They also provided a secure conduit for communication between Luther and the Saxon court. The third and by far most important supporter, Elector Prince Frederick III, provided critical protection that allowed Luther to initiate the Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

Elector Frederick was one of the most prominent, influential, and supportive political figures in Luther's early career, and he protected Luther from all attempts by pope and emperor to curtail his message and arrest him.<sup>3</sup> Luther came to the Elector's attention by way of Staupitz who persuaded Frederick to pay the ceremonial expenses associated with Luther's doctorate.<sup>4</sup> Luther received fifty gulden<sup>5</sup> from the Elector, and Luther's signed receipt became

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<sup>1</sup> Schwiebert, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Preserved Smith, The Life and Letters of Martin Luther (London: John Murray, 1911), 29. Hereafter known as Letters.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Letters, 21; Kittelson, 85.

<sup>5</sup> More than \$2500.00 in today's purchasing power. See Schwiebert, 257ff, for details.



the first known official documented communication between the two.<sup>6</sup> Friar Martin Luther received his doctorate on October 19, 1512, and three days later became dean of the theological faculty of Wittenberg University and, thereby, an important religious advisor to the Elector. Luther provided his advice by means of letters either indirectly through Spalatin or directly to Frederick.

As dean of the theological faculty, and with the Elector's protection, Luther developed his ideas. The prince did not prevent Luther from posting the *95 Theses*, debating in Heidelberg and Leipzig, defying Rome and the emperor, publishing his theological works, or setting the ground work for an evangelical church.<sup>7</sup> Because of the protective role he played in those early years, Frederick acquired a fame throughout European academic, political, and religious circles where many individuals would otherwise have had only nominal interest in the internal affairs of one German principality.

Frederick was a member of the Wettin family line, that had been in control of Saxony since 1423.<sup>8</sup> The Frederick was one of the most influential and powerful men in the Holy Roman Empire, for he was one of the seven Imperial Electors. The Saxon Elector, as the president of the Council of Regents, and the Count Palatine ruled the empire during an

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, receipt, October 9, 1512, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1:22.

<sup>8</sup> R. F. Tapsell comp., Monarchs, Rulers, Dynasties and Kingdoms of the World (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1983), 216.

interregnum until the selection of a new emperor. As a prince of Saxony, according to Harold Grimm, Frederick was a member of the three-chamber Diet established by the German princes in the fifteenth century "to prevent the emperor from exercising any real authority over them."<sup>9</sup>

On this basis, the princes made sure that the emperor would be too weak to usurp their power which meant that Charles would have to gain the support of men like Frederick of Saxony to accomplish any imperial goal, especially if it required men or money. Every imperial decision would have to include an evaluation of its impact on, and acceptance by, the princes and other territorial leaders.<sup>10</sup> The emperor could not afford to alienate the Elector of Saxony who was at the center of this political power structure.

Frederick also was important to the Roman church for he held vast secular power that the pope, through this prince, could employ to papal benefit. This temporal leader was an Elector, the president of the Council of Regents, and a very devout Catholic. The pope did not want to offend Frederick but rather to gain his support for papal plans.

Frederick--very interested in the new learning, the *via Moderna*, sweeping Europe--established a University at Wittenberg in 1502.<sup>11</sup> The purposes behind founding this university in his town were threefold: first, to make it

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<sup>9</sup> Oberman, 24; Grimm, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Spitz, 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey R. Elton, ed. The New Cambridge Modern History: Volume II, The Reformation 1520-1559 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 536.

easier for the Elector to obtain expert opinions from the knowledgeable professors; second, to respond to Maximilian's appeal to the German princes at the Diet of Worms in 1495 to open more universities in the interest of higher education; and third, to increase the Elector's political stature as the university gained in reputation.<sup>12</sup> This university also became, unintentionally, the center of political activity and turmoil for much of Luther's life. The controversy centered on this university would shake the entire western world.

Theology played a major role in most sixteenth-century universities and Wittenberg was no exception for those theology faculties were very influential. As Schwiebert states, "The prestige of the Sorbonne was such that not even the Papacy could risk its negative decision."<sup>13</sup> Since the end of the medieval period, the theology faculty was the capstone of a university's reputation and wide-spread recognition. A university seeking recognition would strive to attract to its theological faculty persons of great reputation in biblical studies or the New Learning, i.e., humanism or the *via Moderna*.<sup>14</sup> To have a John Turenholt, dean of theology at Louvain, or to attract Desiderius Erasmus, a world famous humanist religious scholar, to a

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<sup>12</sup> Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1950), 99; Schwiebert, 254. Also, Albertine Saxony contained the universities of Leipzig and Erfurt, the Elector's Saxony none. See Schwiebert, 254ff, for more details.

<sup>13</sup> Schwiebert, 426.

<sup>14</sup> Oberman, 116ff.

faculty would draw other great minds and establish the university as a school of tremendous value and as a center of great learning.<sup>15</sup> Failure to acquire an important scholar reduced a school's academic stature. The theological faculty of Wittenberg garnered European recognition and renown because of Luther's activity. This university's prestige increased in a manner that could not have been predicted before 1517. Frederick gained immense political stature by having Luther on the faculty of his university.

Religion was important to Frederick for he was a very devout individual.<sup>16</sup> He established a special chapel in his castle to house the numerous religious relics he collected throughout much of his adult life. As was traditional, Frederick believed relics conveyed religious holiness and influence to his life, thereby improving his relationship with God and the saints and, ultimately, smoothing his entry into heaven.<sup>17</sup> He expended so much time, effort, and money procuring these relics that occasionally Luther, who frowned on this form of piety, made a point of complimenting the Elector in an acerbic tone on the acquisition of a new item.<sup>18</sup> By 1520 this private collection embraced 19,013 holy bones.<sup>19</sup> Inasmuch as Luther firmly believed that "no thing

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<sup>15</sup> Kittelson, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Bainton, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, Letters, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Luther to Frederick, end of February 1522, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:89.

<sup>19</sup> E.G. Rupp, "Luther and the German Reformation to 1529," in The New Cambridge Modern History: Volume II, The Reformation 1520-1559, ed., Geoffrey R. Elton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 2:76; Bainton, 71.

or person" could get someone into heaven, he must have felt frustration in being unable to convince the Elector of this. These activities, however, demonstrated that Frederick was still a faithfully practicing son of the Roman Church three years after Luther posted his *95 Theses*.

Within the Elector's extended family, his role in the Reformation became a hotly contested family issue and one that would follow the Ernestine line until the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League in 1547. Frederick's nephew, for instance, spent time in jail for accepting and supporting these 'new' beliefs.<sup>20</sup> Frederick found support from his brother, Duke John, and nephew, John Frederic, but he met with a hostile reaction from his cousin, Duke George of Albertine Saxony.<sup>21</sup> Frederick never outwardly manifested a change of personal religious conviction, however his brother and nephew became avowed Protestants while his cousin Duke George remained a vehement Catholic.<sup>22</sup> The spillover from this religious disagreement became political, for political boundaries were redrawn or new political alignments created when one side or the other gained power with the emperor.<sup>23</sup>

Within the immediate circle of advisors to the Elector, Johann von Staupitz was a key intermediary between the Elector and Luther.<sup>24</sup> In 1503, Staupitz became the dean of

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<sup>20</sup> Spitz, 121.

<sup>21</sup> Oberman, 191.

<sup>22</sup> The term Protestant was first used in 1529; Grimm, 212.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>24</sup> Kittelson, 117.

the theology faculty of Wittenberg University and advised the Elector on religious matters.<sup>25</sup> In 1508 Staupitz recommended Luther for a teaching position at Wittenberg, and later Luther replaced him as dean of the theological faculty, a post Luther held for life.<sup>26</sup> Staupitz, confidant and friend, served as Luther's confessor during the latter's early years of religious growth and maturation.<sup>27</sup>

When Luther first developed his ideas on penance and faith, he discussed with von Staupitz their Augustine doctrine and his view of Scripture in light of the gospel where Christ was central to his interpretations. As David Steinmetz establishes, Staupitz during those early years served as Luther's spiritual advisor and in this role he nurtured, corrected, and encouraged Luther in his theological search.<sup>28</sup> Staupitz provided the intellectual environment necessary for Luther's religious development. However Staupitz lacked significant political influence or power and only served as spiritual advisor. After posting his *95 Theses*, Luther needed protection from the temporal or ecclesiastical authorities and Prince Elector Frederick filled this requirement.

Staupitz persuaded Luther to teach at Wittenberg, to earn his doctorate, and finally, to take the theology dean's position. According to Steinmetz, "[A]mong the influences

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, Letters, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Spitz, 62.

<sup>27</sup> Grimm, 95.

<sup>28</sup> David C. Steinmetz, Luther and Staupitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980), 31-33.

on the young Luther, both real and imagined, Staupitz [was] clearly one of the most important." Luther's own testimony shows that the influence of von Staupitz on "his early theological and religious development was profound," even though later Luther criticized him for not continuing on the Reformation voyage.<sup>29</sup> Luther's relations with Staupitz declined when Staupitz refused to abandon the Roman Church.<sup>30</sup>

Georg Burkhardt, born in 1484 in Spalt, near Nuremberg, known in history as Georg Spalatin, also played a notable role in Luther's life.<sup>31</sup> He was ordained in 1508, and in 1509 Frederick appointed Spalatin tutor for his sons and nephews, including Prince John Frederic.<sup>32</sup> Spalatin was a member of Frederick's inner circle of advisors and assisted the Elector in all areas of running his principality.<sup>33</sup> He acted as the Elector's religious advisor in court and was his personal confessor, confidant, and secretary.<sup>34</sup> In the political aspect of this religious issue, Spalatin played a key role in Frederick's maneuvering with, and between, the pope and the emperor. Spalatin accompanied the Elector to the Diet of Augsburg in 1518 and to the Diet of Worms in 1521. Spalatin supported the Reformation, and in 1525 he advocated abolition of Catholicism in Saxony and its replacement with the new evangelical religion. He served

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<sup>29</sup> Steinmetz, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, Luther's Correspondence, footnote on 1:25.

<sup>31</sup> Elton, 1297.

<sup>32</sup> Grimm, 104.

<sup>33</sup> Oberman, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Schwiebert, 41; Smith, Luther's Correspondence, footnote on 1:27.

Prince Frederick until the Elector's death in 1525, when he became counselor to Frederick's brother, the new Elector, John "The Steadfast."<sup>35</sup> During the following seven years, Spalatin and the Elector John nursed the infant Reformation church of Saxony. Spalatin was also Luther's friend, confidant, and periodic advisor.<sup>36</sup>

Spalatin first met Luther in 1508 as a student at Wittenberg University when he attended Luther's moral philosophy class. In 1514 Luther and Spalatin, good friends and colleagues, began a regular correspondence that was to continue for the next thirty years. Spalatin was the conduit through which Luther maintained regular and indirect contact with the Elector.<sup>37</sup> This technique, using Spalatin as the pipeline to handle discussions of the issues, allowed Frederick to maintain a respectful distance from Luther.

Although we find some correspondence between the Elector and Luther, most of the information passed between Luther and the Court of Saxony during the early and mid-years of the Lutheran Reformation were through Spalatin. There can be no doubt Luther relied on Spalatin to convey his positions to the Elector.<sup>38</sup> Luther's relations with the Elector continued in that manner throughout the years of turmoil and controversy until the Elector's death in 1525.

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<sup>35</sup> Elton, 1297.

<sup>36</sup> Grimm, 104.

<sup>37</sup> Oberman, 259.

<sup>38</sup> Bainton, 90-91.



In fact, Luther and Frederick only met one time at the Diet of Worms and they never met in private.<sup>39</sup>

As dean of the theological faculty, Luther studied the Scriptures, met his classes, and provided opinions on issues such as the Reuchlin affair.<sup>40</sup> Luther's earliest letters dealt primarily with religious or academic matters. For instance, in the first letter to Spalatin, Luther opined that there was no religious basis for the heresy charge leveled against Reuchlin.<sup>41</sup> During the next few years, Luther corresponded with Spalatin on a wide variety of topics including the nature of academic work at the university, inspections of various monasteries located in Saxony, and an evaluation of Erasmus' scholarship. There are no extant letters between Luther and Frederick before Luther posted his *95 Theses* on October 31, 1517.<sup>42</sup>

Luther's relationship with Spalatin and Frederick changed with the posting of the *95 Theses*. The *Theses* highlighted Luther's concerns about the sale of indulgences by the Church and the activities of certain church officials in this regard. An indulgence was a document provided by the church in return for an item of value--usually money--

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<sup>39</sup> Smith, Luther's Correspondence, footnote on 1:45.

<sup>40</sup> Reuchlin, a converted Jew and famous biblical scholar, was asked for an opinion on the idea of destroying all Hebrew books except the Old Testament. He stated that this was not a good idea and was subsequently branded, especially by the theology department of the University of Paris, a heretic for this position. The issue was hotly debated in the universities as well as the churches of Europe. Luther found no basis for the charge - see Luther's letter of January 1514 next below.

<sup>41</sup> Luther to Spalatin, January or February 1514, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1:31ff.

which reduced punishment in purgatory for certain sins and therefore eased entry into heaven.

An indulgence became a way to satisfy the requirement of penance for sins which was a necessary precondition to receiving from Christ the atonement of guilt for those sins.<sup>43</sup> Atonement opened the door to heaven. Indulgences first appeared during the eleventh century in southern France and, according to historian Heinrich Boehmer, the Germans readily accepted the indulgence for it fit into "the Germanic legal idea that all corporal and capital punishments are commutable to money penalties."<sup>44</sup> The sale of indulgences were a key part of late-medieval religious practice and of tremendous monetary value to the Church.

When the Church needed funds, it would commission sellers to rove Europe and sell these indulgences. Often the local political leaders received part of the receipts for permitting the seller into their area. For everyone involved, except the poor sinner, this was a profitable enterprise. Many sellers exaggerated what the purchase of an indulgence could provide, including the promise of buying into heaven. Luther objected because he found no Scriptural basis for the promises of salvation promoted by these indulgence sellers.<sup>45</sup> What Luther did not foresee was the

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<sup>43</sup> Jonathan W. Zophy, A Short History of Renaissance and Reformation Europe: Dances over Fire and Water (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 158.

<sup>44</sup> Loewenich, 111; Boehmer, 167.

<sup>45</sup> Grimm, 106-109.

political fallout from his religious quest, nor the minefields of church and state united to end his activities.

In January 1518 Luther sent Spalatin a letter on how to study the Scriptures, which included a comparison between Erasmus and himself on the methodology each employed in biblical study.<sup>46</sup> He disagreed with Erasmus on some theological points, although Luther still held him in high regard. As he could clearly discuss not only methods of study but also the Scriptures themselves, Luther demonstrated to Spalatin, and presumably the Elector, that he was capable of analyzing the Scriptures on the same level of sophistication as one of the greatest scholars in Europe. Also, this was the first document tied to the coming turmoil for it showed that learned men could interpret the Scripture in good conscience and arrive at different meanings of the same passages.

Luther sent a copy of his *95 Theses*, with a letter of explanation, to the Archbishop of Mainz. In the letter Luther asked for the bishop's support to stop John Tetzel from telling lies about the power of the indulgences. In March 1518, Luther summarized his position on the issue when he told von Staupitz, "I teach that men should trust in nothing save in Jesus Christ only, not in their own prayers, or merits, or works, for we are not saved by our own exertions, but by the mercy of God."<sup>47</sup> Instead of getting

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<sup>46</sup> Luther to Spalatin, January 18, 1518, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:68.

<sup>47</sup> Luther to Staupitz, March 31, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:78.

support, he got papal enmity, for by early summer the controversy reached Rome and the papal lawyers demanded that Luther come there to recant.<sup>48</sup> Luther requested a hearing to determine the validity of his claims before he recanted.

In late August after the papal demand, Luther asked Spalatin to have the Elector use his influence to have his hearing convened in Germany, not Rome.<sup>49</sup> Luther wanted Spalatin to convince the Elector because "the honor of our whole university needs it."<sup>50</sup> The "honor of his university" would become Frederick's shield and trap. As a shield it would provide him an acceptable defense mechanism against maneuvers of pope and emperor. After all, there were many learned men in the universities who believed that Luther's teaching was not "unjust, unchristian, or heretical."<sup>51</sup> However, having taken that stand, Frederick could never abandon his professor without destroying his university, its reputation, or his own standing in European politics. Furthermore, if he yielded Luther to the authorities of the Church, he might violate the Word of God itself.<sup>52</sup>

Then in early August 1518, at the onset of the Augsburg Diet, Emperor Maximilian I wrote Pope Leo X, expressing concern over the controversy, and urging the pope to end it, for if the "authority of your Holiness . . . does

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, Letters, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Bainton, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Luther to Spalatin, August 8, 1518, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:100.

<sup>51</sup> Bainton, 101; Oberman, p. 23.

<sup>52</sup> Bainton, 99.

not put an end to such doctrines, soon their authors will not only impose on the unlearned multitude, but will win the favor of princes, to their mutual destruction."<sup>53</sup> The prospect of civil war must have seriously worried the emperor.

Before the Diet ended, Leo X sent two letters to Augsburg, one to Cardinal Cajetan and the other to Elector Frederick. In the first, the pope gave the Cardinal jurisdiction over the case, stating that if Luther "shall come to you of his own accord, craving pardon for his rashness, and showing signs of hearty repentance, we give you power of kindly receiving him into the communion of holy mother Church." On the other hand, if he would not recant, then Cajetan could post the bans and excommunicate Luther together with all his followers.<sup>54</sup> In the letter to the Elector, the pope tried to get Frederick to turn Luther over to the Church and used all his persuasive power to achieve this end:

[Luther] as though relying on your protection, fears the authority or rebuke of none. Although we know this is false . . . that for the name and fame of a good Catholic Prince such as you are, you should retain the splendor of your glory and race unsoiled by these calumnies. Not only that we wish you to avoid doing wrong, as you do, for as yet we judge that you have done none, but we desire you to escape the suspicion of doing wrong . . . for the sake of God's honor and ours and your own, please to give help that this Martin

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<sup>53</sup> The prince is probably the Elector Frederick; Emperor Maximilian to Pope Leo X, August 5, 1518, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:98.

<sup>54</sup> Pope Leo X to Cardinal Cajetan, August 23, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:101.

Luther may be delivered into the power and judgment of the Holy See . . . .<sup>55</sup>

Leo emphasized to Frederick that the Elector should take action to maintain his fame as a good Catholic prince. Meanwhile, the pope gave Cajetan instructions to squash the opposition by whatever means necessary. The Elector did not respond to this letter and within two months the pope sent him another on the same subject.

Learning of the Cardinal's instructions and authority, Luther reminded Spalatin in August "as I formerly offered myself, believe that I am still ready to be offered up" and he asked Spalatin to make this known.<sup>56</sup> In the same letter Luther also expressed his concern that the Elector not "incur odium for my sake." Two weeks later Staupitz, then at Salzburg, asked Luther to join him in Augsburg "that we may live and die together" as that would please both himself and the Archbishop of Augsburg.<sup>57</sup> Staupitz did not inform Luther that this was to involve a meeting with Cajetan.

Between October 12 and 14, Luther met with Cardinal Cajetan to discuss the issues concerning Luther's statements on indulgences. Luther sent a report on these meetings to Andrew Carlstadt, a colleague at Wittenberg, which revealed that Cajetan only wanted to hear Luther "recant, revoke, confess," not debate, discuss, nor prove by Scripture that Luther was in error.<sup>58</sup> Then on October 15 von Staupitz sent

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<sup>55</sup> Pope Leo X to Elector Frederick, August 23, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:105.

<sup>56</sup> Luther to Spalatin, August 28, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:108.

<sup>57</sup> Staupitz to Luther, September 14, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:113.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Carlstadt (born Bodenstein) received a doctorate of divinity from Wittenberg in 1510, in

the Elector a letter with his report on the Cajetan meetings and expressed his concern that "our professor [Luther] must appeal and expect force. God help him!" Staupitz went on to say that he was convinced Luther's enemies were now his judges and that he, Staupitz, was also under the ban.<sup>59</sup>

At this point the pope sent the Elector a letter with the enticement of the Golden Rose in return for Frederick's cooperation. The papal nuncio was to present the Rose when he felt the Elector had complied with the pope's wishes. As receipt of the Rose would be material recognition of great service to the Church, its ownership carried significant religious and political weight in the empire. To a son of the Church who collected thousands of religious relics as an outward demonstration of his devotion and belief, surely this gift would be desirable.

The letter included other details concerning the papal nuncio, Karl [Charles] von Miltitz, and his mission, "We have commanded the said Charles . . . to take cognizance of this affair and to act against the said Martin." The pope reminded Frederick "to act according to your reason and the virtue of a Christian prince, on which not a little depends, for the sake of your noble reputation."<sup>60</sup> Simultaneously Leo also sent Spalatin a similar letter, containing a request

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1516 he published 151 theses attacking Aristotle and the scholastics, debated Eck at Leipzig in 1519, was excommunicated with Luther under the 1520 bull *Exsurge Domine*, he was an active Protestant although he disagreed with Luther on a number of issues, and Luther broke with him later on; Smith, *ibid.*, footnote 1:41; Luther to Carlstadt, October 14, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:118; Bainton, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Staupitz to Elector Frederick, October 15, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:120.

<sup>60</sup> Pope Leo X to Elector Frederick, October 24, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:125.

for Spalatin's help to influence the Elector on the pope's behalf and included a promise of papal favor for this support.<sup>61</sup> Leo tried to use all possible means to persuade Frederick to cease protecting Luther.

On October 31, Luther notified Spalatin of his intent to appeal to a future General Council. To protect himself, Luther followed the lead of the University of Paris, ironically a center of his most adamant detractors, which submitted an appeal to a future council on March 27, 1518.<sup>62</sup> Then on November 23 a group of professors from the University of Wittenberg sent a letter to the Elector at Luther's request, asking Frederick to intervene with the papal legate or even the pope himself to have the case decided "by reason and authority . . . [and] not to condemn by mere assertion."<sup>63</sup> This letter, along with many others delivered to the University and to Spalatin, demonstrated that a large portion of the European academic community supported Luther, his theological positions, and his request for biblical correction of errors.<sup>64</sup>

The first major political step taken by the Elector came in mid December when he decided not to send Luther to Rome.<sup>65</sup> At the end of December the Elector sent a letter to

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<sup>61</sup> Pope Leo X to Spalatin, October 24, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:127.

<sup>62</sup> Luther to Spalatin, October 31, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:128.

<sup>63</sup> The Rector [John Frosch], Professors and Doctors of the University of Wittenberg to the Elector Frederick, November 23, 1518, *ibid.*, 1:131.

<sup>64</sup> Schwiebert, 370.

<sup>65</sup> Grimm, 115.



Duke George, his cousin, about the upcoming Miltitz mission.

In it Frederick stated,

I have with me a papal ambassador, Charles von Miltitz, who is not satisfied with Dr. Luther and has great power to proceed against him. And it might happen that he would refuse to give me the golden rose unless I banish the monk and said that he was a heretic. But I fancy I can do as Clauss Narr<sup>66</sup> says, go on drinking my wine and being a heretic all my days . . . .<sup>67</sup>

Clearly the Elector felt he was on safe ground and that his relations with the pope had not deteriorated much too far. He was correct in those assumptions as he received the Golden Rose on September 25, 1519.<sup>68</sup> Frederick's reference to "Clauss Narr" might have signaled the first internal break with his Catholic upbringing.

Miltitz offered Frederick the carrot while Cajetan held the stick, but, according to historian James Kittelson, the two papal ambassadors could not coordinate their missions. After Luther met with von Miltitz, the two could only agree that both sides in this war-of-words keep silent until the pope appointed a "learned bishop" to decide the issue. This meeting allowed Luther over the next few years to claim he was willing to do anything to end the strife but that apparently the curia was not. In the coming months Luther's contention that he tried to peacefully resolve the differences would gain him many adherents.<sup>69</sup> Luther again

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<sup>66</sup> "Clauss Narr" was the court fool and "to go on drinking wine" meant to not let anything bother you.

<sup>67</sup> Frederick to Duke George of Saxony, December 29, 1518, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:143.

<sup>68</sup> Luther to Staupitz, October 3, 1519, *ibid.*, 1:219.

<sup>69</sup> Kittelson, 132-133.

made this point on January 19 when he sent the Elector a letter to refute a misstatement made by von Miltitz and to restate that Luther only agreed to keep silent on the issues if his opponents would do likewise.<sup>70</sup>

It was during these weeks that another significant political event occurred. On January 12, 1519, Maximilian I died and the political environment of Europe became chaotic. This event generated tremendous political pressures as the two factions with serious contenders to the title, those of Charles I of Spain and Francis I of France, began maneuvering in favor of their candidate's selection.<sup>71</sup> There was even a move to consider the Elector Frederick for the throne but he declined and no other German prince was a realistic contender.<sup>72</sup> However, Frederick did become the focal point of the political pressure, for many recognized his influence in swaying the final vote.<sup>73</sup>

In the religious realm things quieted down as attention and interest now focused on the upcoming selection of a new German king. However quiet the religious environment the issues were not resolved, and in April Erasmus sent a letter requesting the Elector's continued protection of Luther and Christianity. Erasmus stressed that Frederick's actions would promote the cause of sound learning and that he should

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<sup>70</sup> Luther to Frederick, January 19, 1519, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:153.

<sup>71</sup> Grimm, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Pope Leo tried to bribe Frederick with his support for Frederick's election to the throne, or to appoint a favorite cleric of Frederick's to an archbishopric, if only Frederick would release Luther.

<sup>73</sup> Grimm, 116.

"favor the cultivation of good literature . . . to defend this part of your fame which, perhaps, will bring no less glory."<sup>74</sup> Erasmus had clearly identified the whole problem revolving around Luther as the differences between the current humanist and the old scholastic teachings. With this letter, Erasmus tied Frederick's reputation directly to the outcome and increased the pressure on the Elector to persevere even if he wanted to do otherwise.

The Elector replied to Erasmus on May 14, when he, too, identified the issue as an academic one:

There is, as you write, a strange conspiracy of the haters of sound learning who are fit for nothing but to injure the good, pious and well instructed . . . . That we have allowed him [Luther] to stay in our Saxony, is not so much on account of the man as of the cause, for we have no intention of allowing punishment to fall on those worthy of rewards. Nor, with the help of God Almighty, shall we ever suffer by our fault any innocent man to be given a prey to those who seek their own ends. Moreover, with God's help, we shall henceforth cherish good letters and right studies as well as their cultivators, no less than in the past.<sup>75</sup>

One of the remarkable features of this letter is the emphasis the Elector placed on "right studies" and "good letters" and cultivators of "sound learning." Even though he expressed concerns about prosecuting an innocent man, he seemed as heedful for the reputation of his university, his province, and his personal status.

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<sup>74</sup> Erasmus to Frederick, April 14, 1519, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:177.

<sup>75</sup> Elector Frederick to Erasmus, May 14, 1519, *ibid.*, 1:182.

Finally on June 28, 1519, the Electors met in Frankfurt and elected the Spaniard, Charles I, as Charles V, King of the Germans.<sup>76</sup> This decision settled the major political issue of the day and set the stage for dealing with the religious issues in Germany. German historian Ludwig Hausser relates that both sides of the religious controversy believed the new king would settle the problem to their satisfaction. Neither side correctly understood Charles' position in the empire nor his true strengths or weaknesses.<sup>77</sup> Both sides believed that Charles favored their position and would enforce a favorable decision for them. Both sides were wrong.

Also brewing early in that year was the idea of a debate between noted theologian and professor Dr. John Eck of Leipzig and Dr. Andrew Carlstadt of Wittenberg. Polemic papers each wrote against the other initially generated the debate focus. However, the antagonists quickly realized that the true opponents should be Eck and Luther as the issues in fact revolved around Luther's contentions over the sale of indulgences and the value of good works.<sup>78</sup> From July 4 to July 16, 1519, Luther debated with Eck at Leipzig and two key events occurred during those dates.<sup>79</sup> The first was that Luther denied the infallibility of both pope and

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<sup>76</sup> Oberman, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Ludwig Hausser, The Period of the Reformation, 1517 to 1648, ed., W. Oncken, trans., G. Sturge (New York: American Tract Society, 1873), 36-37.

<sup>78</sup> Bainton, 107-108.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 124.

General Church council.<sup>80</sup> These statements struck at the heart of Catholic doctrine and shifted focus of the attack from academic theology to the authority of the pope. For Luther, this became a turning point in his break with Rome. From this moment forward he would reject papal decrees as not binding in any fashion.<sup>81</sup>

The second event was that Luther met Duke George of Saxony face-to-face.<sup>82</sup> The Duke attended the debates and in several evenings held private meetings with Luther where they discussed Luther's writings and especially the meanings of the Lord's Prayer.<sup>83</sup> After the debates and private meetings, Duke George became one of Luther's dedicated, determined, life-long opponents.<sup>84</sup> Until his death, the Duke tried to use all the power of his office to bury Luther and his ideas or bring him repentant back to the Catholic Church.

On December 27, Duke George sent the Elector a letter in which he condemned, as heretical and scandalous, a recent sermon by Luther on communion that changed both the practice and the meaning behind this sacrament. The Duke stated that surely the Elector would not allow a famous man from his university to bring such notoriety to Frederick and the land of Saxony.<sup>85</sup> The Elector replied two days later, still

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<sup>80</sup> Hausser, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Grimm, 125-126.

<sup>82</sup> Schwiebert, 419.

<sup>83</sup> Luther to Spalatin, July 20, 1519, Smith, Letters, 67.

<sup>84</sup> Smith, Luther's Correspondence, introductory note 1:124.

<sup>85</sup> Duke George of Albertine Saxony to Elector Frederick of Ernestine Saxony, December 27, 1519,

distancing himself from religious issues. He reiterated that he did not defend Luther's positions and that it would grieve him to find "some error in the holy faith appear in the lands of my brother, your Grace and myself, or in any other place, and still more would it wound me to have it protected by me." However, Frederick did not see any "proven error" in these proceedings but certainly would not protect an error in the faith nor the heretic once his errors were proven.<sup>86</sup>

Then in January 1520, the situation became more complex. Philip Melanchthon received a letter from Ulrich von Hutten and Franz von Sickingen in which the latter offered armed protection to Luther.<sup>87</sup> These two knights had extensive reputations throughout Europe and the offer was no idle statement. Hutten was a well-known literary giant--also a German nationalist--and von Sickingen was a famous soldier. As the historian Preserved Smith states, these two, with von Sickingen's large military resources and the combined extensive political connections of both, "were leaders of the party of the knights whose programme was the restoration of German national prestige under the leadership of their order."<sup>88</sup>

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ibid., 1:266.

<sup>86</sup> Elector Frederick to Duke George, December 29, 1519, *ibid.*, 1:267.

<sup>87</sup> Ulrich von Hutten to Melanchthon, January 20, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:275.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, Letters, 73.

Imperial knights were a group of impoverished military men who hired out their services.<sup>89</sup> Hajo Holborn calls von Sickingen a condottiere.<sup>90</sup> For many years the general public held these knights in high esteem and they exercised considerable political influence based on their military value. By the sixteenth century, however, the knights were losing that military value to the English longbow and the progressive use of gunpowder.<sup>91</sup> This decline in influence, power, and financial success, drove the German Imperial knights to search for redress.

If Hutten and Sickingen believed the pope would use military force for resolution of the issue then many others might believe the same thing.<sup>92</sup> If Luther accepted their help, this situation could quickly lead to civil war. Although Luther declined their help, the prospect of defending "the faith" by force inserted a new element into the political equation.

Eventually on June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X signed the papal bull *EXSURGE DOMINE* that gave Luther sixty days to recant everything he had published, or be excommunicated as a heretic and branded as an outlaw.<sup>93</sup> Anyone could capture or put to death an excommunicated heretic and outlaw.<sup>94</sup> At

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<sup>89</sup> Spitz, 102.

<sup>90</sup> A condottiere was a mercenary soldier; Hajo Holborn, Ulrich von Hutten and the German Reformation, trans. R.H. Bainton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 152.

<sup>91</sup> Brodie, 37ff.

<sup>92</sup> Grimm, 130.

<sup>93</sup> Bainton, 147.

<sup>94</sup> F. Donald Logan, "Excommunication" in Dictionary of the Middle Ages, eds. American Council of Learned Societies, 13 vol. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 538.

the same time, the pope sent Frederick a letter which included a copy of the papal bull and, obviously perturbed with the Elector's conduct, wrote, "We cannot say whether we think you have acted more wisely or more piously in this affair . . . We send your Lordship a copy of this bull . . . if [Luther] persists . . . then you should . . . try to capture him and send him bound."<sup>95</sup> Up to now, all the pope's other efforts proved ineffective so this was a last chance to politely, and diplomatically, obtain Luther's arrest. The pope was still cautious of Frederick's political power, so a letter from the curia could not blatantly push the Elector to comply. However, the pope wanted to be absolutely certain the Elector could not claim he knew nothing of the bull so the pope sent him a personal copy.

Before receiving the pope's letter, on July 10 the Elector sent Cardinal Riario of the curia a letter:<sup>96</sup>

Moreover I hear that Dr. Luther has never shown himself unready obediently to appear, armed with a safe-conduct, before just, convenient, disinterested and prudent judges to defend his doctrine in person, and, when he has learned better and more holy doctrine from Scripture, submissively to obey.<sup>97</sup>

In this letter the Elector reaffirmed his neutral position and noted that, not only was he interested in a just hearing, but also that Luther was ready to meet with the Archbishop of Trier as one of his "just judges" who could

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<sup>95</sup> Pope Leo X to Elector Frederick, July 8, 1520, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:338.

<sup>96</sup> Cardinal Riario, one of the most powerful men in Rome, sent the Elector a letter about Luther's reluctance to resolve the issue.

<sup>97</sup> Elector Frederick to Cardinal Riario. Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:338.



decide the validity of Luther's assertions. Although this letter protected the Elector's position and kept Luther from Rome, it did nothing to resolve the true issues or produce a meeting with "just, convenient, disinterested and prudent judges." A just hearing did not interest the pope, only silence did. There was no decline in the atmosphere of distrust nor was the fear of force diminished.

At the onset of this complex conflict, Luther believed the whole issue only dealt with religious aspects of life so he approached everything from this perspective. When he spoke on subjects of the day the solutions he found were a simple matter of correcting errors in one's religious life and he believed the other problems would resolve themselves. "Only gradually did he come to realize that for many of his followers--though not all--the Reformation involved very earthly problems."<sup>98</sup> As this fact dawned on Luther, he determined that church reform was the core issue he must undertake. With that decision, Luther took the fateful step that was to radically alter his ministry, life, and the Protestant Reformation itself.

In August 1520 Luther published his pamphlet, To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate. In it the issues became national and fully political for this document dealt with ecclesiastical politics. Now each prince or local ruler had

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<sup>98</sup> Loewenich, 19.

to confront the issues and make a determination for himself on the role of ruler and church and on the need for church reform.<sup>99</sup> Many princes took steps to change the religious practices, beliefs, and activities of the churches in their territories with the expectation that the populace would follow. As it happened, not all populations followed their prince or ruler, for within a few years rulers of a number of these political domains exercised one religious belief while the populace practiced the other belief. Many political authorities chose not to fulfill the requirements of the bull and many leaders or councils sent letters to Luther, Spalatin, and the Elector, endorsing their position. The issue was now beyond the pope's capability to resolve and his only recourse was to gain support from Charles and have Luther handled by imperial secular authority.<sup>100</sup>

At the beginning of September Frederick sent his agent in Rome, Valentine von Teutleben, a letter in which the Elector reiterated the point that he had not defended Luther and his theology but if the pope chose force to gain his ends, there would be trouble.<sup>101</sup> Apparently, the Elector wanted to make sure the pope knew that force was not a viable solution to this problem. Meanwhile, on September 11, Hutten reminded Frederick that Luther's only hope lay in the Elector's protection while Hutten also condemned the

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<sup>99</sup> Grimm, 132; Kittelson, 151.

<sup>100</sup> Bainton, 157; Kittelson, 146; Grimm, 480..

<sup>101</sup> Elector Frederick to Teutleben, September 1, 1520, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:349.

bull and opposed the demand that Luther be sent to Rome.<sup>102</sup> On October 25, Frederick also received a letter from John Lantschad of Steinach, a Swabian knight, encouraging Frederick "as a Christian elector and as a member of the Holy Empire" to defend Luther. This letter was in response to Luther's address to the German nobility and reflected the idea that the Germans should resist all Roman efforts to control them.<sup>103</sup> It would appear that Luther's statements voiced ideas already being considered by many others. Now the Elector had support of some of the knights for his actions against Rome but unfortunately they viewed the issues as more temporal than spiritual.

By late fall the German princes began preparations for the Diet of Worms, scheduled to start in early January 1521. At the end of November 1520, two letters arrived asking Frederick to bring Luther to a hearing at Worms.<sup>104</sup> One was from two very powerful and influential men at the Imperial Court, William de Croy (Charles' chief advisor) and Henry of Nassau (a military advisor to Charles); the other was from Charles V himself. In a mid-December response to the two imperial officers, the Elector requested their help to ensure that the emperor would not condemn Luther without a trial.<sup>105</sup> Then in a dramatic reversal, the Charles pleaded

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<sup>102</sup> Ulrich von Hutten to Frederick, September 11, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:354.

<sup>103</sup> John Lantschad to Elector, October 25, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:380.

<sup>104</sup> William de Croy and Henry of Nassau to Frederick, November 27, and Charles V to the Elector, November 28, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:398.

<sup>105</sup> Frederick to William de Croy and Henry of Nassau, December 14, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:415.

with Frederick not to bring Luther to Worms until they had spoken personally about the papal ban. It concerned Charles that if he allowed Luther, who was under this severe papal ban, to openly journey to Worms, "foreign nations" might misinterpret this action, which the emperor must prevent. The emperor begged Frederick to have Luther recant before Luther left home and only allow him to travel as far as Frankfurt, or nearby, to await further instructions.<sup>106</sup>

In a response to the emperor, Frederick defended his actions and complained that "the Pope's nuncio and others have thought fit to act against me, forcing themselves into my business."<sup>107</sup> Here Frederick was referring to Aleander, who, after posting the bull in Cologne and Antwerp, gained an audience with the emperor-elect and "secured from him [Charles] the first decree against Luther."<sup>108</sup> All this occurred while Frederick was working with the court to get Luther a fair hearing. Frederick begged permission not to bring Luther, not having received the imperial letter of December 17, but he agreed to obey any imperial decision. Frederick received his instructions from de Croy in late December not to bring Luther to Worms.<sup>109</sup>

In mid-January Spalatin received a letter from von Hutten, written on behalf of von Sickingen, that passed on warnings "of ambushes which will be difficult for Luther to

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<sup>106</sup> Charles V to Frederick, December 17, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:424.

<sup>107</sup> Frederick to Charles V, December 20, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:429.

<sup>108</sup> Smith, *Letters*, 98.

<sup>109</sup> Chievres to Frederick, December 24, 1520, Smith, *Luther's Correspondence*, 1:433.

avoid."<sup>110</sup> However, Luther took a strong stand against defending the gospel by force or violence as that meant his protectors had no faith that God's will would prevail over temporal forces.<sup>111</sup> On January 3, 1521, the pope signed the "actual bull of excommunication, *Decet Romanum Pontificem*," which named Luther, Pirckheimer, Spengler, and von Hutten as heretics.<sup>112</sup> As the pope had now named the heretics, any person who associated with one of them also was ipso facto excommunicated.

The Diet officially opened on January 28, 1521, with Charles intent on impressing his will on this religious issue and settling it so he could turn to the more urgent problems of the French and Turks who were threatening his territory. The size of both foreign armies would require him to field large armies and have substantial financial backing.<sup>113</sup> To quickly solve the religious issue, he proposed an imperial edict against Luther written by the nuncio Aleander but, according to Kittelson, "The electors of Saxony and the Palatinate objected."<sup>114</sup> The Emperor found himself stymied.

Popular support for Luther was strong and, according to Grimm, "Charles could not ignore the aroused temper of the German people."<sup>115</sup> After hearing the proposed edict, the

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<sup>110</sup> Ulrich von Hutten to Spalatin, January 16, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:443.

<sup>111</sup> Luther to Spalatin, January 16, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:442.

<sup>112</sup> Kittelson, 158.

<sup>113</sup> Grimm, 140-142.

<sup>114</sup> Kittelson, 158.

<sup>115</sup> Grimm, 136.

princes persuaded Charles to offer Luther a hearing before the Diet so any action taken would not lead to a later riot.<sup>116</sup> With the Emperor's approval, on March 11, Frederick sent Luther three safe-conducts, one each from the Emperor, the Elector, and Duke George of Saxony.<sup>117</sup>

Luther first appeared before the assembled Diet late on April 17, but he requested a one-day delay before he would acknowledge a pile of tracts and books as his and recant what was in them. The next day, April 18, as a part of his refusal to recant, Luther made this statement, "I am bound by the texts of the Bible, my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither right nor safe to act against conscience. God help me. Amen."<sup>118</sup> For the next two weeks he remained quietly in Worms as imperial Catholic supporters tried to devise a compromise but Luther refused to budge from his published positions.<sup>119</sup> Trying to control a situation rapidly getting out of hand, the curia was forced to tread softly and weigh carefully the political impact of its actions. As Aleander wrote in a report to the curia, "I know, indeed, that Rome has held back in order not to make the matter appear too important, lest the imperialists should feel able to set their foot on our neck . . . ." <sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Kittelson, 158.

<sup>117</sup> Elector to Luther, March 11, 1521,-Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:492.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, Letters, 118.

<sup>119</sup> Kittelson, 162.

<sup>120</sup> Aleander to Cardinal Medici, February 8, 1521, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:457.

At the end of April Luther returned to Wittenberg and on May 4, 1521, near the castle of Altenstein, some masked riders captured Luther. They whisked him off to the Wartburg, the Elector's castle near Eisenach, where Luther remained hidden and disguised as a knight over the next ten months.<sup>121</sup> He remained hidden, but not out of contact. Luther's words continued to influence the course of events.

According to Walter von Loewenich, Frederick sustained his undertaking in the Lutheran Reformation up through the Diet of Worms primarily on an academic foundation with shrewd political considerations coloring most decisions.<sup>122</sup> Yet had it not been for this help Luther could not have survived the combined religious and social onslaughts of pope and emperor. The Elector opened the door for scholarly debate and then set himself in the spotlight of the new learning. Once Luther's stance generated its tremendous backlash, Frederick, faced with political condemnation and religious excommunication, could neither backtrack nor abandon Luther for the "honor of his university" as well as his own. Frederick may not have repudiated his Catholic beliefs when he protected Luther but the tremendous political, religious, and scholastic storms trapped him and necessity forced him to thread his way carefully between the explosiveness of each. In assuring his own survival, Frederick gave Luther a desperately needed shield.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., introduction on 2:21.

<sup>122</sup> Grimm, 131.

## CHAPTER 3

### PEOPLE, PRINCE, and LAW

Luther's defiance at Worms began a rebellion that would spread far from Worms, incorporate and involve all aspects of society, and take on great strength. To the theologians he denied the infallibility of pope or council and demanded the right to personally interpret Scripture. He resisted Rome's efforts to exercise political and financial control over the lives of the laity. Luther's pamphlet war against the pro-Roman Church theologians created a tide of popular and political unrest. He gained support from princes and the populace.

A critical issue for the evangelical princes was their right to resist the efforts of the Catholic princes, the emperor, and the pope, all of whom wanted to force them to relinquish their faith. The Catholics were willing to employ any means available to expunge the evangelical movement from Germany claiming their authority rested on the right to purge the church of heresy. When the pope issued his bull *Exsurge Domine* (Arise, Lord), the evangelicals found their moral and political authority weakened. Irrespective of the validity of the charges in that



document, Germans now faced the prospect that Luther was indeed a heretic. This placed the evangelical princes in a very precarious position.

For much of the laity the problem came to the fore when Luther published his tract To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate.<sup>1</sup> This treatise was one of the most important political documents of the Reformation. In it Luther stated his intent to expose the wiles of certain men, the princes of hell, who had thwarted the guidance of church councils. He described the "three walls of the Romanists" by which the Church prevented temporal leaders from reforming the church: 1) temporal authority could claim no jurisdiction over the clergy; 2) only the pope could interpret Scripture; and 3) only the pope could call a council.

Luther attacked the first wall by stating, "All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. . .[and] temporal Christian authority ought to exercise its office without hindrance, regardless of whether it is pope, bishop, or priest whom it affects." Luther dismissed papal authority by asserting that "all their boasting about an authority which dare not be opposed amounts to nothing at all. Nobody in Christendom has authority to do injury or to

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," in vol. 44 of Luther's Works, ed. by James Atkinson, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. James Atkinson, (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1966), 115. Hereafter referred to as Christian Nobility.

forbid the resisting of injury." Assaulting the second wall, Luther stated that all men had the power to test and judge what was right or wrong in matters of faith, and, if the pope acted contrary to Scripture, then it was a man's duty to stand by Scripture, reprove, and constrain him. To destroy the third wall, Luther cited four historical examples of emperors who convoked councils to resolve religious issues.

By late 1520, he associated many of the critical problems within Western society to numerous church practices and the negative societal effects of those practices. The Church would not reform itself because the pope and other bishops refused to acknowledge that it required change. To Luther, if churchmen would not institute the requisite transformation, then the laity should. At the end of the fifteenth century religious life deeply involved the laity so there was fertile ground in which to sow these ideas.<sup>2</sup> As Kittelson states, "[T]hey struggled to gain spiritual security," and that struggle included everyone in the community.<sup>3</sup> To advance his goal of change, in August 1520, Luther published his address to the German nobility. This tract became critical for the future of the Reformation since Luther now charged Charles V, the princes, and the general public, with a key role in bringing God's kingdom

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<sup>2</sup> Spitz, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Kittelson, 40-43.

into the world.<sup>4</sup> For all those temporal beings, the means to accomplish this goal became the crucial point.

To show clearly that the preaching of pure doctrine and Gospel was the responsibility of everyone, including the laity, Luther stated,

Every town, council or governing authority not only has the right, without the knowledge and consent of the pope or bishop, to abolish what is opposed to God and injurious to men's bodies and souls, but indeed is bound . . . to fight it even though popes and bishops . . . do not consent.<sup>5</sup>

Although this statement primarily addressed the requirement of "abolishing what is injurious to men's souls" it carried with it the statement of "injurious to men's bodies" and that was an earthly concern. The reality that men's souls could not be separated from their bodies became a critical point for the Protestant princes.

Luther opposed sending money to a corrupt Rome, and he stated, "Every prince, every noble, every city should henceforth forbid their subjects to pay annates to Rome . . . ."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Luther warned against the methods of collecting funds: "[W]atch carefully what they are after and what they say when they send out their legates to collect money to fight the Turks."<sup>7</sup> His opponents also understood the importance of money issues, for Aleander wrote to the Cardinal de Medici, "They [Luther's patrons] care less for

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, Christian Nobility, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the person of Luther, whom they only use as a tool to win the people, than for the confiscation of ecclesiastical property."<sup>8</sup> Money was a contentious issue between pope and emperor, as each wanted control of the many religious institutions and their associated economic treasure.

Other areas the princes could reform included ending warfare with the Bohemians, reforming the universities, rejecting Aristotle except for logic, rhetoric, and poetry, and revising Canon and secular law. Specifically, Luther commanded the nobility to take control of the Holy Roman Empire from the pope and rule it wisely. In one sweeping document Luther demolished the societal superstructure of centuries and replaced it with a new discipline.

Church reform was not a new issue for the princes of Germany. Many individuals over the preceding centuries, such as John Huss, had called for reform to return the church to its original purity of purpose and activity.<sup>9</sup> The most "active in the reform movement of the latter half of the fifteenth century were the Augustinian Eremites."<sup>10</sup> Luther received his theological training from these Augustinians. However, according to Oberman, Luther "never set himself up as a healer of the Church and never regarded

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<sup>8</sup> Aleander to vice-chancellor De' Medici, April 5, 1521, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:509.

<sup>9</sup> Marsilius of Padua had stated that the pope was subject to the emperor and that transgressions of divine law must await eternal punishment unless they were made part of secular law--this attacked the power of excommunication. Donald Kagan and Steven Ozment and Frank M. Turner, The Western Heritage: Vol. 1; To 1715 (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 333-334.

<sup>10</sup> Grimm, 53.

the renewal of the Church his task."<sup>11</sup> Luther saw himself as God's instrument for the renewal of religious life in men who "were to wake from the coma of sin and, once in peace with God, regain the original innocence."<sup>12</sup> As Loewenich states, "The word *reformation* originally meant the return to an earlier and better condition and norm."<sup>13</sup>

Many political leaders recognized the need to take hold of their faith and resist the evil they saw exercised by the Catholic princes, but the means of doing this in a Christian way was hard to determine. Any actions the evangelicals took generated conflicts with Catholics who controlled the empire and appeared to contravene the biblical directive against resisting temporal authority. However, if they did not resist, then the Catholics would crush them and the "true" faith would die in the rubble.

By the 1520's there were many individuals in Germany who considered armed force the only hope to save Luther from the pope and to keep the evangelical faith alive. This was not a totally unfounded fear as shown in a letter of John Giberti, Bishop of Verona and Datary under Clement VII, who wrote, "If simple remedies will not suffice, the Emperor should use fire and the sword."<sup>14</sup> Many of Luther's opponents held him responsible for the increasing turmoil and unrest.

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<sup>11</sup> Oberman, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>13</sup> Loewenich, 21

<sup>14</sup> John Giberti to Melchior Lang, end of April 1524, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:231.

For example, in a letter to Luther, Thomas Murnar, a popular writer for the Roman church and a Poet Laureate wrote:

[I]f only you did not use your learning and clear reason to hurt the fatherland and destroy the faith and laws of the Fathers . . . stabbing, murdering, hewing and smiting which show nothing but a squinting, near-sighted vision, which no one would follow unless he wanted to destroy land and people . . . You want to move us to a great rebellion . . . .<sup>15</sup>

Ulrich von Hutten, noted humanist and Imperial Poet Laureate, and Franz von Sickingen, influential member of the minor knights, allied themselves with Luther and expressed the thought that he now needed military assistance. Hutten, a one-time member of the Court of Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz, developed strong ideas of creating a new German nationalism by eliminating Roman secular and ecclesiastical control over the people of Germany.<sup>16</sup> Hutten thought that Luther, with his great fame and stature, could head such a movement. But such a break could only induce a military response from the papal and civil authorities, so the dissenting states needed a competent military force to bolster their position. Here Franz von Sickingen, a well-known military leader, fit the need. As acknowledged leader of the minor knights, von Sickingen controlled a military force that could exert considerable influence on political decisions. The princes and other authorities employed the knights as bands of military men to form the nucleus of

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Murnar to Luther, December 24, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:431.

<sup>16</sup> Bainton, 131.

their armies.<sup>17</sup> The knights were available for hire; when they were not in satisfactory employment, many frequently became highwaymen.<sup>18</sup>

Certainly for many, including the knights, the dispute with Rome, although primarily religious, carried the potential for political and economic change.<sup>19</sup> Hutten and Sickingen clearly understood this possibility. Hutten best summed up their aspirations in his work of September 1520, A Remonstrance and a Warning against the Presumptuous, Unchristian Power of the Bishop of Rome and the Unspiritual Spiritual Estate. Holborn states that this work, with "its passionate cry for the union of the land on behalf of spiritual freedom" might awaken another echo, a desire for the physical and political union of Germany and freedom from all foreign powers.<sup>20</sup>

Hutten, in particular, felt that Luther should take a definite stand and side with those who had 'national' aspirations as the solution to the political problems voiced by Luther. He saw Luther as a liberator, and many in Germany, when they read Luther's tracts, heard a call-to-arms for the creation of a unified German state without external Roman control.<sup>21</sup> To many Germans, the payment of any money to the Church amounted to extortion by a foreign

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<sup>17</sup> Holborn, 110.

<sup>18</sup> Spitz, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Schwiebert, 487.

<sup>20</sup> Holborn, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Schwiebert, 6; also 552.

government. This group believed that only military resistance could free them from Roman obligations. Many contemporaries saw Luther's statements in a similar light. For example, Wolfgang Capito said to Luther, "You have often blown the trumpet, and Hutten who will soon try arms, shouts war for us."<sup>22</sup>

Believing Luther to be in a vulnerable position, Hutten tried to relay, through Spalatin, von Sickingen's alarm over potential ambushes. Hutten earlier had written to Luther about his fears, plans, concerns and ideas, but he received no response, so Hutten complained to Spalatin, "Now what is the real reason, famous Spalatin, that Luther does not write even a word to me?" Hutten also asked Spalatin to "find out what he [Luther] would do if the papists resorted to arms."<sup>23</sup> Discussing Hutten's correspondence, Luther told Spalatin, "You see what Hutten wants. I would not fight for the gospel with force and slaughter."<sup>24</sup> Luther saw clearly that Hutten's approach would lead to revolution and warfare, and he wanted no part of it.<sup>25</sup> Luther responded to Hutten, but for some reason Hutten never received those letters.<sup>26</sup>

In a letter to Spalatin, Hutten also used the term 'revolution' for he clearly foresaw the strife to come. In

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<sup>22</sup> Capito was a theologian in the service of the Archbishop of Mainz who in 1523 would become a strong Reformation preacher in Strassburg, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:71; Wolfgang Capito to Luther, December 4, 1520, Smith, *ibid.*, 1:406.

<sup>23</sup> Hutten to Spalatin, January 16, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:443.

<sup>24</sup> Luther to Spalatin, January 16, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:378.

<sup>25</sup> Luther was a strong believer in established authority and did not believe any good would come from insurrection.

<sup>26</sup> Luther to Spalatin, February 17, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:465.



an open letter to the general public Hutten wrote, ". . . nor is the sword drawn against one only, but we are all threatened."<sup>27</sup> Many responded to Hutten's call, and in a letter to Cardinal de Medici, Aleander stated, "All the humanists of the Rhine are coming to Hutten on the Ebernberg, to give him, with great diligence and emulation, what help they can . . . ." <sup>28</sup>

Hutten was positive Luther would not face the political reality that the Germans would have to resist if Luther's opponents captured, imprisoned, or killed him. Hutten could not persuade Luther to accept the necessity of resistance. This failure to gain Luther's support for a national movement and the increasingly detrimental effects of serious illness separated von Hutten from his friends; he wandered as a pariah--a lost, forsaken, embittered man--until his death in late 1523.

For the princes, the timing of these exchanges was also critical as civil unrest, riot, and revolt were spreading throughout the land. These leaders faced very difficult decisions as civil fighting was in the land.<sup>29</sup> What proper Christian response a prince should give to these events was a question that especially plagued the Protestant princes.

By late 1522 civil disorder was spreading throughout Germany: there were student riots in Wittenberg and Erfurt,

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<sup>27</sup> Hutten to all Germans, August 1520, *ibid.*, 1:349.

<sup>28</sup> Aleander to Cardinal de Medici, April 5, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:500.

<sup>29</sup> Grimm, 200.

and students physically abused some clergy. In addition, some churches and monasteries were plundered.<sup>30</sup> Because of all this turmoil, Luther was compelled to publish his work A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion. In this work Luther clearly urged Christians to avoid violence and rebellion. He stated that God would avenge himself, with a more appropriate method for any wrongs committed against Christians, and that insurrection usurped temporal authority which God established. He supported the authorities with "I leave matters to the temporal authorities and nobility."<sup>31</sup>

Luther, in his tract Temporal Authority, To What Extent It Should Be obeyed published in 1523, stressed that there were two authorities which operated in this world: the Word and the hand.<sup>32</sup> To Luther, the Word could and would accomplish all that God desired, for this was God's law in action. The hand represented temporal authority which God established and which Scripture justified.<sup>33</sup> However, Luther recognized that unrest was growing for he directed leaders to calm the minds, words, and passions of the common man so their actions would not lead to insurrection against the

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, "Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion," in vol. 45 of Luther's Works, ed. by Walther I. Brandt, trans. W.A. Lambert, rev. Walther I. Brandt. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), xiii. Hereafter known as Admonition.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>32</sup> Luther eventually developed these ideas into his two-kingdom doctrine: one temporal (the body) and one spiritual (the soul) with no overlap of jurisdiction. Steven Ozment, Protestants: The Birth of A Revolution (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 122.

<sup>33</sup> Luther, Temporal Authority, 85.

secular authorities.<sup>34</sup> Insurrection would produce no positive benefits for it "generally harms the innocent more than the guilty."<sup>35</sup>

Luther believed there are two governments: one that resided in the heart of a Christian, which needs no external force to control it, and the other that exists for the non-Christian, who requires temporal control to bridle his passions and actions. This world required both governments, since one was insufficient without the other.<sup>36</sup> Even though a Christian does not need the temporal law to guide him, Luther admonished his readers that God "does not, however, forbid one to serve and be subject to those who do have the secular sword and law."<sup>37</sup>

In a passage which caused confusion for prince and populace, Luther stated

No Christian shall wield or invoke the sword for himself and his cause. In behalf of another, however, he may and should wield it and invoke it to restrain wickedness and to defend godliness.<sup>38</sup>

He also told the princes that he who "would be a Christian prince must certainly lay aside any intent to exercise lordship or to proceed with force."<sup>39</sup> The next two directives that followed this caused the princes great anguish for they found it difficult to weave their way

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<sup>34</sup> Luther, Admonition, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>36</sup> Luther, Temporal Authority, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 118.

between all of these seemingly contradictory instructions.

The first was:

To act here as a Christian, I say, a prince should not go to war against his overlord--king, emperor, or other liege lord . . . .<sup>40</sup>

The second was:

If, however, the antagonist is your equal, your inferior, or of a foreign government, you should first offer him justice and peace . . . . If he refuses, then--mindful of what is best for you--defend yourself against force by force . . . .<sup>41</sup>

The problem for the Protestant princes was that they believed Charles supported the Catholic princes who wanted to overthrow the evangelicals and reestablish the Catholic faith by force of arms. If they resisted a Catholic prince, were they not resisting their overlord? How could the evangelical princes establish rule-of-law in their territories if outsiders were dictating rules that went against the evangelical beliefs?

Consistent rule-of-law throughout all of Germany was very important to Luther, yet he strongly believed that each territory was best ruled when those laws respected local customs and precedents. Luther stated, "Would to God that every land were ruled by its own brief laws suitable to its gifts and peculiar character."<sup>42</sup> To support his idea of rule-of-law, Luther addressed the need for Christian princes to govern Germany. He said, "It does not matter to him [God] where an empire comes from; his will is that it be

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>42</sup> Luther, Christian Nobility, 204.

governed." He continued, "[I]t is God's will that this empire should be ruled by the Christian princes of Germany . . . ." <sup>43</sup> However, this still left the princes in doubt because of his admonition to "lay aside lordship."

A Protestant prince or other political leader could interpret Luther's work as sanctioning efforts to resist Catholic leaders who no longer ruled as Christian princes, but there was still doubt if this resistance included revolt against the king. Luther tried to make his position clear when he told his readers, "Now may God who tossed this empire into our lap . . . help us to live up to the name, title, and insignia . . . ." <sup>44</sup> To live up to that charge, the princes had to use all means at their disposal.

Luther intended that his address to the German nobility would identify, and suggest corrections to, the abuses of the church, but those magistrates inclined to make changes could not do so. <sup>45</sup> Turmoil and unrest were spreading throughout Germany and the solutions were neither simple nor easy to effect. In an early December 1520 letter, Wolfgang Capito recognized the prospect of civil war and wrote, "[E]verything is tending towards a tremendous revolution, of which the outcome is uncertain." <sup>46</sup>

Luther strongly believed that the religious conflict was behind the unrest and that various Catholic leaders were

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 209-210

<sup>44</sup> Luther, Temporal Authority, 84; Luther, Christian Nobility, 210.

<sup>45</sup> Bainton, 152.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Capito to Luther, December 4, 1520, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:406.

contributing to the environment in which bloodshed was bound to follow. In 1522 he stated, "Those who ought to quiet this uprising are helping it along, for they are beginning to quench the light by force. . . ." The uprising Luther feared was just beginning in 1522. He saw the common man pleased with the Gospel as the evangelical theologians presented it, but others were "embittering men's hearts and compelling them to revolt," which would ultimately lead to the terrible destruction of everything and "their children shall be destroyed."<sup>47</sup>

To make his point more strongly, in early 1522 he also stated, "I greatly fear that if the princes continue to listen to that dull-witted Duke George there will be an uprising which will destroy the princes and rulers of all Germany and will involve all of the clergy . . . ."<sup>48</sup> The leaders did not resolve the issues and did not quiet the situation. Force seemed to be the only recourse and the destruction began. The first conflict however did not come from the peasants; rather it came from the slowly disappearing imperial knights.<sup>49</sup>

These knights, under von Sickingen their elected leader, staged a revolt as circumstances appeared favorable to regain some of their lost power, prestige, and influence.<sup>50</sup> The clash caused great concern among many

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<sup>47</sup> Luther to Elector Frederick, March 12, 1520, *ibid.*, 2:100.

<sup>48</sup> Luther to Wenzel Link, March 19, 1522, *ibid.*, 2:113.

<sup>49</sup> Holborn, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Grimm, 200.

leaders of Western Europe, for the knights represented a potential military force that might take control of their territories. Sickingen attacked Richard von Greiffenklau, the Archbishop of Trier, on August 29, 1522, to settle an old score. Sickingen also hoped a victory would force the emperor to make him a Reich prince and to restore his fortunes and influence.<sup>51</sup> A number of the princes united to end the rebellion. After first defeating the attack at Trier, they attacked von Sickingen in his own castle Landstuhl. When von Sickingen fell, the vitality of the rebellion collapsed and the forces of the rebel knights melted away as the princes destroyed them piecemeal.<sup>52</sup>

The princes regained control of their territories and populations, but unrest was still in the air, for now there surfaced a building swell from the peasants. The peasants had a history of rebellion against their lords and landlords over taxes and the numerous collections levied.<sup>53</sup> In the early 1520's the peasants began to form in small groups to articulate their complaints.<sup>54</sup> The disturbances were local and mild until the Knights War; society calmed down from that disturbance and then the peasants rose up. By mid 1523 the unrest was so strong that, in a few scattered areas, masses of peasants began killing some individuals above their station and looting or burning property. Luther, who

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<sup>51</sup> Holborn, 180.

<sup>52</sup> Schwiebert, 554.

<sup>53</sup> Spitz, 103.

<sup>54</sup> Bainton, 275.

foresaw this potential early in 1522, had written Elector Frederick that "there will be a great uprising in Germany, with which God will punish the German nation . . . ." <sup>55</sup> The princes now faced a second political and social problem that required very delicate handling.

The princes responded to the Peasant Rebellion with force. This violence caused the general public to distance themselves from the rebelling peasant forces. To gain a measure of respect and support from people not directly in the line of destruction, in March 1525, a group of peasants published the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants, listing reasons for their revolt and clarifying their aims.

Luther felt compelled to respond to those claims, and he did so on April 19, 1525, with his paper, Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia. The *Twelve Articles* listed three religious and nine economic or legal complaints the peasants held against the authorities. Luther responded to the three religious issues, being especially acerbic with the peasants for using the Word to promote physical freedom which Luther stated, contradicted the gospel. <sup>56</sup> He castigated the peasants for claiming to be Christians while using force to carry out their demands. Luther also blamed the princes for the rebellion, arguing that the complaints of the peasants were

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<sup>55</sup> Luther to Elector Frederick, March 12, 1522, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:100.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Luther, "Admonition to Peace, A reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia," in vol. 46 of Luther's Works, ed. by Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. Robert C. Schultz. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 37ff.



somewhat justified. However, he remained strongly opposed to the use of force to solve grievances: "No one should oppose authority save Him who ordained it, otherwise it is rebellion and displeasing to God."<sup>57</sup> He used Romans 13 and I Peter 2 to support his thesis that God ordained temporal authority which everyone should submit to on that basis.

With the return of German soldiers from the Battle of Pavia, that took place on February 24, 1525, the princes united forces to defeat the peasant bands. Some of the princes showed moderation in dealing with the peasants but many did not.<sup>58</sup> No doubt some princes used Luther's tract, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants, to justify their harsh actions. However in a letter of May 1525, Luther berated the princes for their handling of the peasants and their complaints, as well as some of the methods used to put down the rebellion.<sup>59</sup> Luther believed the princes could have gained their objectives without all the bloodshed.<sup>60</sup>

As it was, the fate of this revolt paralleled that of the knights, and a calm finally returned to Germany shortly after the last major battle at Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525. Although the princes--evangelicals united with Catholics--successfully put down these two rebellions, the

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<sup>57</sup> Luther to Elector Frederick, March 5, 1522, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:95.

<sup>58</sup> Elector John of Saxony, prince Philip of Hesse, Duke Henry of Brunswick, according to Grimm, 174.

<sup>59</sup> Martin Luther, "Letters: II," in vol. 49 of Luther's Works, ed. and trans. Gottfried G. Krobel. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 154.

<sup>60</sup> Some claim over 100,000 peasants killed. See Bainton, 280ff.

issues of political viability, military strength and religious freedom were still intertwined and unresolved.<sup>61</sup> Although the Catholic and Protestant princes could unite to face a common foe, the Protestant princes still faced their previous religious foes: pope, emperor, and Catholic princes. How could the evangelicals practice their religious convictions if the Catholic princes continually agitated for physical suppression and conquest?

To counter the swelling tide of evangelical change coursing throughout Germany, the Catholic princes tried to use the Diets called by Charles to force resolution of the issue. Their plan was to create a concrete position with the issuance of an imperial edict that the evangelical princes could not avoid, defuse, dissemble, deflect, or disobey. With such a move, the dissenting princes (and other principalities) would have a choice: (1) obey, recant, and return to the church; or, (2) refuse, disobey an imperial command, and openly revolt against the emperor. If they refused to obey an edict, then the issue would become a civil matter and the Catholics could employ military force legitimately and with public support.

The first Catholic attempt to force a choice at the Diet of Worms in 1521 with Luther himself had failed. The Catholics could not make the religious break a significant issue for the emperor during the Diets of Nuremberg in 1522,

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<sup>61</sup> Spitz, 105.

1523, and 1524; Augsburg in 1525; and Speyer in 1526.

During those years international politics were a greater concern to the emperor, so the Catholic princes tried to have a general council settle the religious issue.<sup>62</sup> At each Diet the Catholics were unsuccessful for they were unable to garner sufficient political support to sway the emperor. Finally, at the Diet of Speyer in 1526 the Catholic and Protestant princes agreed, in the *Recess of Speyer*, to allow each territory to follow and practice its own form of worship until a council could resolve the issue.<sup>63</sup>

The attempts failed each time as external threats required the immediate and complete attention of the emperor and forced him to seek support from the evangelical princes and, therefore, not force the religious issue. However, the Catholic princes remained determined and politically strong as they continued to urge the emperor to take the necessary stand to end the heresy in his lands. All four popes of this period, Leo X, Adrian VI, Clement VII, and Paul III tried in his own fashion to also move the emperor to resolution. The political, religious, and social pressure on the evangelicals to recant of their errors did not abate.

Luther had first addressed his thoughts concerning secular resistance to the Romanists in a letter to his close friend, Nicholas Hausmann, in March 1522, "What our friends attempt by force and violence," he wrote, "must be resisted

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<sup>62</sup> Grimm, 199.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 200.

by word only, overcome by word and destroyed by word."<sup>64</sup>

Luther was not blind to the problems faced by many who found conflict between their religious practices and religious fulfillment, but for him Church reform was the key to resolving these problems. As late as January 1521, Luther told his colleague and friend Wenzel Link, "I [have] never written anything against the civil power . . . ."<sup>65</sup>

By late 1522, however, he opened the door to more secular and political efforts in this fight over the salvation of Christians. In an open letter to Christian readers he wrote, "So some diseases which cannot be cured by emollients must be cured by the knife."<sup>66</sup> Luther, at this point, still intended using the Word to counter the impious scholastic theology abounding in Germany and Catholic Christendom. However, with unrest from the peasants and knights in Germany, the princes faced a worldly problem of using a secular knife to solve a delicate temporal problem. Still, for the evangelical rulers, the application of the knife was a very delicate operation and one fraught with tremendous religious and political peril. Luther's position on the use of force was still not totally clear.

After he published his address to the German nobility, a number of rulers queried Luther about the meaning of his statements and their application to conflict among subjects

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<sup>64</sup> Luther to Nicholas Hausmann, March 17, 1522, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:110.

<sup>65</sup> Luther to Wenzel Link, January 14, 1521, *ibid.*, 1:441.

<sup>66</sup> Luther to the Christian Reader, August 1522, *ibid.*, 2:135.

of the empire. As early as January 1521, Luther stated his position in a letter to von Hutten, later repeated by Spalatin to the Elector Frederick, "Dr. Martin has written to Hutten, that he does not want men to fight for the gospel with force and murder."<sup>67</sup> However, the issue for the princes was not that simple, and for years they continually bombarded Luther with letters for further clarification on situations that were clearly thorny.

At the center of this force among the evangelicals was Philip of Hesse, the Landgrave in northwestern Germany. Although Hesse had been a strong domain of the Catholic Church for centuries, humanist ideas including Luther's revolt, took hold and, by the mid 1520's, many towns within the territory made the evangelical change. Philip also converted to Lutheranism in 1524. As Oberman states, "Philip does not seem to have chosen the side of the Reformation for selfish or political motives."<sup>68</sup> However, after his conversion he tied political consequences and needs to this new faith.

Philip strongly believed that the Protestants should unite to protect themselves and safeguard their religious convictions as evangelicals.<sup>69</sup> His first attempt at unity was to set standards in religious ceremony. Initially

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<sup>67</sup> Spalatin to Elector Frederick, January 1521, *ibid.*, 1:450.

<sup>68</sup> Oberman, 236.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Luther did not support this and when questioned he responded:

I do not think it well to hold a council of our party for the purpose of establishing unity in ceremonies. It would set a bad example . . . as all the councils of the Church, from the very beginning, prove.<sup>70</sup>

In 1528 Luther's explanations still caused concern and Prince Philip again wrote Luther for clarification. Philip could not see how it was possible to meet both the demand to fulfill his duties as a temporal prince, and yet live as a Christian. He wrote to Luther in 1528 and explained that "I am moved thereto by God's Word, which I would not willingly see quenched . . . ." He explained that it was the Catholics who were determined to exercise war, not peace, and he asked Luther to clarify for a prince charged with responsibility for his subjects, "[W]hether I am to protect my subjects living or dead, in exile or before they are driven away."<sup>71</sup>

Luther responded to Landgrave Philip with the advice that it was Philip's duty,

to protect his subjects against such other princes and so conduct his administration that, as St. Paul teaches in Romans xiii, the temporal power may be God's servant to punish the evil and protect the good. For if it is his duty to protect them against one murderer or murderers of low rank, it is also his duty to protect them against many and great murders. For there is no difference among murderers, whether they are princes or tramps.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Luther to Nicholas Hausmann, November 17, 1524, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:259.

<sup>71</sup> Philip of Hesse to Luther, April 11, 1528, *ibid.*, 2:439-40.

<sup>72</sup> Luther to Gregory Bruck, March 28, 1528, *ibid.*, 2:436.

Luther went on to say, "O noble princes and lords, how long will you leave your lands and your people naked and exposed to such ravening wolves?"<sup>73</sup> To Luther, the "ravening wolves" were the Roman Church and its clerical hierarchy, but to the princes they could also be the emperor and the Catholic princes. Here, apparently, Luther supported defensive war, especially against peer or subordinate.

In the meantime, the Protestant princes were dealing with an internal problem that would have external repercussions. In 1528 Dr. Otto von Pack, ex-counselor of Duke George, provided documents to Philip of Hesse that purported to show a Catholic alliance calculated to overthrow the evangelical princes. Philip furnished copies to Luther. Luther, who believed the conspiracy really existed, advised the evangelicals to take no action against the conspirators but to publicize their knowledge of the alliance. Luther also advised Elector John to exercise caution in agreeing to an evangelical alliance as this arrangement would become known and would be used by the Catholics to prove that the evangelicals were intent on armed insurrection against the innocent [the Catholics].<sup>74</sup>

Philip reluctantly agreed to notify Ferdinand and his allies that someone exposed these plans.<sup>75</sup> Philip recommended that the Protestants ask for a meeting with the

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<sup>73</sup> Luther, Christian Nobility, 148.

<sup>74</sup> Luther to Gregory Bruck, March 28, 1528, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:438.

<sup>75</sup> Ferdinand was the archduke of Austria, later king of Germany and finally emperor, also the brother of Charles V, Grimm, 120.

other side to reach a peaceful accord backed by pledges of good faith. If this were not done, then the Protestants should defend their subjects with arms.<sup>76</sup> With the documents exposed as forgeries and the initial positive responses of the evangelical princes toward an evangelical alliance, the Catholic princes did, indeed, raise a hue and cry to Emperor Charles about the evangelicals intended armed march against the Catholic princes and the Emperor.

With both the French and Turks a military menace during these years and with the pope obdurate, Charles found that he needed the support of the Protestant princes to counter the military threats. Consequently, at the Diet of Speyer in 1526, he accepted the plan that each German principality could choose its own religious course. However, he did not negate, revoke, or override the Edict of Worms. With this small measure of support and peace within his territories, Charles began three years of warfare against his external enemies. He conquered the French at Pavia; subdued Rome in May 1527; and finally defeated the Turks at Vienna in October 1529. With peace on his borders Charles, again, returned to the main issue within his empire, namely religious differences. He used the Catholic cry of insurrection by the evangelicals to call his next Diet, held at Speyer in 1529.

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<sup>76</sup> Philip of Hesse's reply to Luther's Opinion, April 11, 1528, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:441.



At this Diet, Charles V, although not present, tried to repeal the *Recess of 1526* and enforce the Edict of 1521 which branded Luther as an outlaw. A number of the estates complied with the emperor's wishes; however, the Lutheran territories and fourteen free cities drew up a protest that stated that the *Recess of 1526* was a valid contract between the Catholics and the evangelicals which required the consent of both parties to break. When Charles directed the evangelicals to recant and return to the "true church," they lodged a formal protest with him and from that protest came the term 'Protestant' which would henceforth denote the evangelicals in contrast to their Catholic brethren.<sup>77</sup> As Charles could not obtain unified action on this issue from a long distance, he decided to come to Germany for the Diet of Augsburg, 1530.<sup>78</sup> Here he would take the stand demanded by his Catholic princes.

Meanwhile, Philip of Hesse continued his efforts to protect his subjects from political domination and religious subjugation. A secret alliance continued to be the subject of discussion between various Protestant leaders, and Luther on May 22, 1529, advised Elector John to reject this secret alliance. Luther claimed the alliance was "not of God and does not come of trust in Him." He feared the Elector would be in league with "willful enemies of God" (this represented the evangelical princes and laity who followed Zwingli and

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<sup>77</sup> Melancthon to Joachim, April 21, 1529, *ibid.*, 2:472.

<sup>78</sup> Grimm, 203.

Oecolampadius), and the Old Testament condemned such leagues of men.<sup>79</sup> As Luther claimed, if God wanted the evangelicals to have a league, he would send it to them.<sup>80</sup>

Faced with this stiff resistance, Philip called for a meeting of the evangelical religious leaders to resolve their differences so the princes could openly present a united front against the emperor and the Catholic princes. Also, a religious agreement would be the basis for a political alliance, so Philip began an active correspondence with the different religious leaders and the evangelical princes.<sup>81</sup> He wanted to produce an agreement between the Protestant factions to counter the actions of the papists.<sup>82</sup> To achieve this, they had to hold a colloquy.

Luther initially believed that for a colloquy to be effective the theologians would have to completely agree on every issue. In a letter to Philip of Hesse concerning the colloquy, he stated the meeting would be a waste of time if the other party was not willing to yield on the thorny issues (obviously Luther was not!). Luther went on to state that he feared others were using the Landgrave for their own ends and that also would lead to no good.<sup>83</sup> Luther was not the only evangelical theologian to see potential problems

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<sup>79</sup> Zwingli and Oecolampadius were evangelical theologians from Switzerland who believed that the presence of Christ in the Sacrament of Communion was strictly symbolic, to Luther it was real and this made them 'enemies,' Oberman, 232-36.

<sup>80</sup> Luther to Elector John, May 22, 1529, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:478.

<sup>81</sup> Oberman, 237.

<sup>82</sup> Philip of Hesse to Zwingli, April 22, 1529, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:473.

<sup>83</sup> Luther to Philip of Hesse, June 23, 1529, *ibid.*, 2:483.

with holding a colloquy. In a letter, Philip Melanchthon stated that he opposed the colloquy for fear it would resolve nothing, but the Catholics could make political hay of "a conspiracy" among the Protestants. He was also concerned about an association with Zwingli, for many people might take that as complete acceptance of Zwingli's religious convictions, some of which Melanchthon opposed.<sup>84</sup>

Despite these concerns, the political leaders saw a need for an agreement between the theologians. Philip decided that he must persuade Luther, for without him the colloquy would be meaningless, so he again wrote to Luther and Melanchthon about the colloquy and stated he believed it could take place without harm. Philip pleaded with the two theologians, "[I]t is therefore our gracious desire that you will yourselves consider the ways and means by which harmony and unity may be reached . . . ." <sup>85</sup>

Finally on the first four days of October 1529, Luther, by order of his prince, attended the Marburg Colloquy. Luther drafted various position papers for the meeting, and ultimately--to his own surprise--he agreed with the other key leaders on fourteen Articles of common dogma. Although in agreement on many issues, Luther could not accept their position on the corporeal presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Communion. This was the main contention at the Colloquy. According to von Loewenich,

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<sup>84</sup> Melanchthon to Duke John Frederick, May 14, 1529, *ibid.*, 2:477.

<sup>85</sup> Philip of Hesse to Luther and Melanchthon, July 1, 1529, *ibid.*, 2:486.

"For Luther it was the spirit of Scripture and not the letter that counted. Yet at the Marburg Colloquy he adamantly maintained the literal wording of the text, underscoring the 'is' of the words of institution three times."<sup>86</sup> He believed the actual body of Christ was present in the Sacrament, whereas the others believed it had symbolic meaning only. On this point Luther would accommodate no deviations. Although the Protestant princes had a common religious ground, at this point they still could not formalize a stand for armed resistance.

The need for security increased as now some of the evangelical princes believed the emperor was behind the Catholic oppression and they would have to openly oppose him. Searching for vindication in the use of any means available, many rulers, such as Philip of Hesse, asked Luther to validate their use of military force to preserve and protect their evangelical territories and residents.<sup>87</sup> Luther's earliest answer to this request came as a shock for he had told the princes in his 1523 treatise, Temporal Authority, "no prince should wage war against his overlords . . . ."<sup>88</sup> When questioned about this, Luther stated that the emperor received his authority from God and any resistance by the princes toward their sovereign was defiance of God.<sup>89</sup> Resistance to the emperor would be in

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<sup>86</sup> Loewenich, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Philip of Hesse to Luther, April 11, 1528, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:439.

<sup>88</sup> Waring, 142

<sup>89</sup> Smith, Letters, 216.

direct contravention to the Word and, regardless of their reasons, they would feel God's wrath. A true Christian should suffer all manner of evil to avoid disobeying God's commands.

Luther never deviated from his position that a Christian, with God's law in his heart, would not rebel against the emperor.<sup>90</sup> However, during the next seven years he clarified his ideas in supporting temporal law to accommodate resistance for both internal and external threats to the state. Eventually, he defined a situation, allowed in secular law, in which resistance to an emperor would be acceptable. In a letter to the chancellor of the Nuremberg city council, Lazarus Spengler, dated February 15, 1531, Luther responded to a presentation by Saxon jurists which implied that Luther now supported armed resistance against the emperor. These jurists told Luther in October 1530 that imperial law permitted armed resistance to the emperor in the case of flagrant injustice, and Luther responded to that scenario.<sup>91</sup> In his letter to Spengler, Luther stated, "If the emperor has bound himself in such a way, then let him be bound . . . ."<sup>92</sup> With this statement, Luther took the position that if temporal law permitted

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<sup>90</sup> Luther to Lazarus Spengler, February 15, 1531, Martin Luther, "Letters: III," in vol. 50 of Luther's Works, ed. and trans. by Gottfried G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1966), 9.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

resistance to the emperor, then that secular law would have overriding authority in secular matters.

Luther had previously established one other condition under which resistance to the emperor could occur, when he wrote to the Elector John in March 1530:

Therefore the word of Christ must stand, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and the saying of I Peter ii, "Honor the king" also, for we should be subject with all fear not only to good and pious masters but also to wicked and uncouth ones, In a word, not sin but punishment puts an end to government and obedience, *i.e., if the empire and the electors agree to depose the emperor, so that he ceases to be emperor.*<sup>93</sup>

In this case then, resistance would be not to the emperor but to a prince of the realm, a peer. Luther made the point a number of times that the evangelical princes had a duty to resist evil activities from foreign governments or from their equals within the realm.

Finally, in April 1531 Luther published his treatise Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People where he supported military resistance to defend the gospel. He began by stating that the Protestants tried to be champions for peace and "that we, who are called 'Lutherans,' neither counseled it [war] or consented to it, nor, indeed, gave any cause for it; rather we constantly and ceaselessly pleaded and called for Peace."<sup>94</sup> He went on to detail the actions of

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<sup>93</sup> Luther to Elector John, March 6, 1530, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:518. Italics in original.

<sup>94</sup> Martin Luther, "Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People," in vol. 47 of Luther's Works, ed. by Franklin Sherman, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1971), 13.

the Catholics who, he believed, continually sought and urged war as the method for solving the differences. Luther directed his attack especially against the clergy, priests, and bishops as men of God who wanted war not peace.<sup>95</sup> He affirmed that it was not fitting for him, a preacher, to counsel war but that if war should come then he would "surely hold my pen in check and keep silent . . . ." <sup>96</sup>

Then Luther established a new standard for his followers when he stated:

Furthermore, if war breaks out--which God forbid--I will not reprove those who defend themselves against the murderous and bloodthirsty papists, nor let anyone else rebuke them as being seditious, but I will accept their action and let it pass as self-defense. I will direct them in this matter to the law and to the jurists.<sup>97</sup>

Luther still maintained that, in this case, a legal right and not a religious right granted the authority to resist the emperor in self-defense. However, he would not condemn before God those who took up arms in defense of their faith.

Although this change for Luther related to the internal threat of the Catholic faction within Germany, he had previously recognized the need for defense from external threat to the very existence of the empire. In 1528, he dedicated to Landgrave Philip his work On War Against the Turks and clearly stated that a Christian could, and should, take up the sword in justified causes.<sup>98</sup> Those justified

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>98</sup> Luther to Philip of Hesse, October 9, 1528, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:456.

causes were clearly when the emperor called for armed resistance to an invasion and the Christian obeyed his liege which conformed to the Word.<sup>99</sup> At that time Luther could only envision an external threat the emperor should repulse and he supported that action. It was not until later that he could make the shift to resisting the emperor.

To bolster their political position, the Protestant princes required a firm religious basis for their stances against the emperor and the pope. As the evangelical movement grew, Aleander, the papal nuncio, pointed out to Rome, "If we delay longer it is to be feared that the Lutherans will gain such strength that the imperialists will fear to pass any edict against them . . . ."<sup>100</sup> These fears proved valid as the Imperial Diets of the next few years would not, or could not, enforce the Edict of Worms. Every time Charles V prepared to move against the heretics, external events drove him into their camp for military support.

However, even though these princes experienced continued pressure from the Catholics they were reluctant to formalize an agreement based on religious commonalty. Ultimately one individual was able bring this agreement to fruition, and Loewenich states, "The spirit behind the coalition [Torgau] was the young, energetic Landgrave Philip

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<sup>99</sup> Martin Luther, "On War Against the Turk," in vol. 46 of Luther's Works, ed. by Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1967), 185.

<sup>100</sup> Aleander to Cardinal de Medici, February 8, 1521, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 1:455.



of Hesse."<sup>101</sup> In October 1530 the evangelical leaders signed the Torgau Agreement where they agreed to resist the Catholic princes, even with military means if necessary.

Their fears were not unfounded, for the *Recess of Augsburg*, the Imperial edict of November 19, 1530, gave Protestants until April 15, 1531, to submit or the emperor would force the issue.<sup>102</sup> This threat drove Philip and the other princes to hold another series of meetings throughout December 1530 in the city of Schmalkalden to form a military alliance for united religious and military action.<sup>103</sup> Although they agreed in principal, they did not formalize the alliance until February 1537 with the signing of the Schmalkaldic Articles that created the Schmalkaldic League.

Meanwhile, the Turks resurfaced as a threat to the empire and Charles found himself, again, at the mercy of the Protestant princes. This threat compelled the emperor to hold a meeting where on July 23, 1532, he and the princes reached an agreement. Within the empire each prince could determine the religious activities for his own territory, free of imperial pressure, and the princes would provide military forces to resist the Turks. The *Religious Peace of Nuremberg*, signed on August 2, 1532, formalized this agreement.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Loewenich, 319.

<sup>102</sup> Bainton, 325.

<sup>103</sup> Spitz, 117.

<sup>104</sup> Oberman, 238.

For a few years there was peace between Catholics and Protestants, but then that peace evaporated. The war between evangelicals and Romanists emerged again with white heat and the Protestant princes again faced a powerfully threatening military foe. Luther had wanted to solve differences peacefully and without the use of force. Secular authority could not accept this and bloodshed was the only answer for them. The Protestant princes made their decisions as best they could and bought the evangelical movement time to establish itself. Nevertheless, in the end, the Protestant forces could not militarily overcome the Catholics or the emperor. But it was only the spread of the Word to so many parts of the empire that made expurgation of the evangelical faith impossible. Luther was correct, for the Word was more powerful than the sword.

Initially, Luther was reluctant to join or endorse strictly political or military undertakings since he believed that God did not support resistance to the established authorities. Luther believed that God's word operated only in the kingdom of faith, that worldly actions operated in the temporal sphere, and the two should not overlap. However reluctant he was, events ultimately drove him to address the issues and interpret Scripture to protect the lives of those who followed the evangelical movement.

Philip of Hesse, representative of the evangelical princes, believed that the Catholics cunningly used

Scripture and the pope to shore up their cause and provide moral justification for their methods and political objectives. For Philip, his responsibility to protect his people, his lands, and his faith required temporal action against those in power. He needed the religious moral support of the Bible to bolster his cause. To gain the support of the common man, each side required religious justification for its goals, methods, and intentions. Without it, one side might win the battle but lose the war.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

When the Elector Frederick of Saxony died May 5, 1525, Luther reported to his brother-in-law, John Ruhel, "He [Frederick] died in a gentle spirit, with mind and reason clear, after receiving the sacrament in both kinds, but no unction."<sup>1</sup> Luther went on to report that the burial was with fitting ceremony but not in the Catholic tradition. Frederick demonstrated that the debate and revolution reached him at last.

The Elector Prince Frederick was caught in an explosive debate between his university and a key professor on one side and the emperor and pope on the other, although it did not begin that way. In December 1522, Pope Adrian VI wrote to Frederick, "At the beginning you seemed to take Luther's part for the honor of your own university against the professors of neighboring universities (perhaps not wrongly) . . . ."<sup>2</sup> In his next letter the pope demanded Frederick send his subject to Rome for a formal examination of heresy. Erasmus stated the whole issue was from "hatred of good

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<sup>1</sup> Luther to John Ruhel, May 23, 1525, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:318.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Adrian VI to Elector Frederick, December 1, 1522, *ibid.*, 2:150.

learning," but he also judged Luther wrong, not in ideas, but in technique.<sup>3</sup> Ernest Schwiebert wrote, "The German Reformation was, then, an educational movement centered in the University of Wittenberg."<sup>4</sup>

In the end the Elector, his university and its professor, overcame the political power and conventional wisdom of the established Church. As Roland Bainton writes, "Was the prince [Frederick] to believe that his doctor of Holy Scripture was in error?"<sup>5</sup> Obviously not. Frederick never condemned Luther, sent him to Rome, never banished him; and at the very end the Elector took "the sacrament in both kinds" in the Lutheran manner.

The issue for Landgrave Philip was that he found himself torn between actively defending his faith, his people and territory before his Catholic foes overcame them, or passively acquiescing in whatever happened, even if that meant their defeat and destruction. Luther's early inclination--although not his ultimate position--was to let God's will be fulfilled, even if that meant subjugation of the evangelical populace. For Philip, the need to take an active role in his life overcame the call to passively acquiesce; however, that was not necessarily better for him in the long run.

The Schmalkaldic League functioned well until 1547 when Emperor Charles V deployed his military might against the

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<sup>3</sup> Erasmus to Conrad Peutinger, Imperial Councilor, November 9, 1520, *ibid.*, 1:391.

<sup>4</sup> Schwiebert, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Bainton, 99.

Protestants. In the battle of Muhlberg, Charles soundly defeated the Protestant military forces and captured Elector John Frederick. The Emperor imprisoned the Elector, took away his electoral privilege, and transferred much of his Saxon lands to the Albertine line.<sup>6</sup> Luther's prediction that force-of-arms could not defend the movement proved correct, as he told Elector Frederick in 1522: "The sword ought not and cannot decide a matter of this kind."<sup>7</sup>

However, it was the military might of the Protestants which had influenced the emperor to postpone enforcement of his edicts until the evangelical movement was too strong for him to stamp it out militarily or politically. Ultimately, the Catholic emperor soundly beat the Protestant military force, yet neither the emperor nor the pope could quash the Reformation movement and it took on a permanent life in both religion and politics. Providentially, "the sword" helped decide matters in favor of the evangelicals.

After his military victory of 1547, Charles V imprisoned various Protestant rulers or took their political power from them. The emperor clearly proved he would not tolerate armed resistance within his domain. He exercised military power and issued many decrees but could not stop the evangelical movement. The words of Martin Luther, who died February 18, 1546, echoed on, for "the Word" overcame the world just as he prophesied.

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<sup>6</sup> Grimm, 255.

<sup>7</sup> Luther to Elector Frederick, March 5, 1522, Smith, Luther's Correspondence, 2:95.

Martin Luther, man of prolific letters and unbending opinions, staunchly refused to take a political position based solely on the ideas of man alone, yet he did not hesitate to express his opinion on any political issue of the day. In addition, he was not above drawing in the politicians of the world and embroiling them in vicious conflicts. Luther bent the ear of those who listened and blasted the ear of those who would not hear him. He employed Scriptural interpretations to back up his position on every issue, and made faith in God's Word the crux of every decision in his life.

Luther was a man of his times who refused to bend to the conventional religious opinions of the day. He demanded the right to interpret Scripture in a new (old) light, even though much of the religious establishment considered him wrong. Considering the importance of religion in the lives of many people, this conflict was bound to erupt into the secular world. What followed that eruption, according to Luther, was the will of God. To his friends, his life and words proved true and right; to his enemies, they did not, or could not.

With his religious ideals ever in the fore, Luther strove to make the world a better place for God's children. With his statements he became the voice of those striving for change, a change that would ultimately entail religious and political change, death, and destruction. Yet, he believed in the authority of the princes; in the value of

each life and the rights of the property owner; in the resolution of conflict by peaceful means based on Scriptural interpretation. However, as James Mackinnon, historian and teacher, states, "[Luther] was or became, willingly or unwillingly, wittingly or unwittingly, the instrument, not merely of a religious reformation but of a many-sided revolution."<sup>8</sup> For a man of God intent on peace and harmony Luther and his teachings became the focal point for political and military battles of his age and the following centuries.

Luther could not and would not resolve issues solely in secular terms but rather sought guidance from Scripture and, thus, he could not give direct answers to questions about the use of military force, as the princes so strongly desired. He believed living in the gospel meant freedom but with that freedom came responsibility. A Christian, when faced with difficult ethical issues, was to ask responsible questions and then determine what the Bible, in light of the gospel, indicated was God's will. For his followers, especially the princes, those answers were neither simple, clear, nor easy to implement. They struggled with the thorny process of treading carefully between the conflicting dictates of God's word to live as a Christian, exercise their offices, and remain in power.

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<sup>8</sup> James S. Mackinnon, 2 vols., A History of Modern Liberty (New York: Putnam & Sons, 1906), quoted in Waring, 267.



Martin Luther, for his personal salvation, needed to determine what God wanted, or expected, from him and then fulfill that obligation. In the process of discovering that meaning to his life, he opened the world to a whole new interpretation of the gospel and to conflicts, verbal and physical, which the world still experiences. He caused men to reevaluate the value of the Bible in their lives, but that process forced these men also to take political stands they could never have imagined. Luther never admitted that he needed Frederick or the other princes to safeguard his reform movement but without their support the pope or emperor would have buried Luther's words and ended the Reformation before it ever took hold. Ultimately, Martin Luther needed men to help him fulfill what he felt to be God's will in his own life and in that process those men created what was to become the Reformation church.

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