

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## Reformation In Germany

“For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”

2 Corinthians 10:3 – 4

The Holy Roman Empire was not a single state with a central monarchy. It was a loose federation of several hundred German states. Some like Luther's Saxony, were large, others like Strasbourg, were imperial cities which although theoretically ruled by the Emperor were virtually self-governing, many were small territories controlled by minor nobles. If local authorities chose to support the Lutheran reform movement there was little the Emperor, Charles V, could do to stop them.

The reform movement progressed rapidly in the years just after Worms. The affluent citizens of the imperial cities were particularly enthusiastic. Fifty of the eighty-five cities embraced the Reformation and Lutheran churches were established all across Germany.<sup>1</sup> But it was not all plain sailing. Rapid change brought problems.

### Keeping Control

Luther feared serious division and conflict among his followers. This was, after all, a time of rapid change and there was great variety in beliefs among those who had broken away from Rome. There were also legal and financial problems to be sorted out. Who, for example, owned church property, monasteries, schools, hospitals and land?

Separation from Rome had created a leadership vacuum. In theory, Luther believed that each congregation should choose its own pastor but in the interests of harmony he advocated that the secular rulers should act as “emergency bishops” using their position to appoint pastors and administer church funds and property. As Luther saw it, this was a temporary measure to last only until a more settled condition was achieved. He never advocated state control of the church. However, the motives of some of the German princes who embraced Lutheranism were not always pure: many saw an opportunity to increase their wealth and power.

### What To Do With The Old

Departure from Rome also left institutions without a purpose and people without a role. There were the monasteries, for example. Luther did not abolish them. He saw them as voluntary places of prayer, meditation and study that could benefit for some. He believed they should be encouraged as training places for pastors, preachers and those who would enter secular government and where girls could be well trained to become mothers and housekeepers. Luther encouraged those who left the monasteries to marry and find employment.

In 1552 Luther himself married a young ex-nun, Katherine von Bora. Together they raised six children and set a fine example of family life for others to copy.

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

Martin Luther

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<sup>1</sup> Those who embraced Luther's teaching called themselves evangelicals; their enemies called them Lutherans and the name stuck despite Luther's protests.

## **Restraining Radicals**

While Luther was still in hiding in the Wartburg castle his university colleagues in Wittenberg undertook the task of reforming the church locally. They were joined by Gabriel Zwilling, an Augustinian friar with a gift for rabble-rousing sermons.

Carlstadt and Zwilling spearheaded the work and with great zeal set about destroying images in the churches, condemning instrumental music in worship, offering the wine to everyone in communion forcing laypeople to handle the bread and denouncing celibacy as evil. Carlstadt even wanted to compel all the clergy to marry.

In December 1521 three preachers from Zwickau — Luther called them the Zwickau prophets — came to Wittenberg. They claimed to be in direct touch with God, hearing His voice in dreams and visions. They opposed infant baptism<sup>2</sup> and proclaimed that the end of the world would shortly take place. Carlstadt and Zwilling sided with them.

Wittenberg descended into chaos. Violence erupted. Mobs went round smashing altars and images and destroying church property. The town magistrates, who seemed powerless to restore law and order, appealed to Luther to come out of hiding. Despite the fact that he was still under the ban of the Empire he did so in March 1522 and, in a series of powerful sermons preached over eight days, restored calm to the city.

Two things stood out in those sermons. First, his conviction that faith must always be accompanied by love. Secondly, his belief that all true reform must begin with hearts being changed rather than with the compulsion of the law. Reform enforced by law, he taught, can only change outward behaviour. Inner reformation of the heart is necessary and only comes through personal faith in Christ in response to the proclamation of God's Word.

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

Martin Luther

Carlstadt and Zwilling were forced to leave town but the Radical Reformation lived on.

Thomas Muntzer, whose views were similar to those of the Zwickau prophets, became pastor of the church in Allstedt. His services, the first services of worship to be conducted completely in German, attracted large crowds.

In his teaching Muntzer made the Bible secondary to spiritual experience — the Holy Spirit speaking directly to the heart. He also had strong sympathy for the poor and oppressed and a deep sense of outrage against the ruling classes and taught that true churches of the Spirit-filled should, by force of arms, establish a new and just society with perfect equality and democracy.

## **Subduing Revolting Peasants**

Since 1496 there had been five peasant uprisings in southern Germany. Each time they had been put down by the nobility. The Reformation, with its emphasis on Christian freedom and the spiritual equality of all believers stirred discontent once more and again the calls for

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<sup>2</sup> In their own day opponents called the Radicals Anabaptists (rebaptisers). Most Radicals were what we would call Baptists. The name Anabaptist is now usually restricted to one group within the wider Radical Reformation movement that we will hear about later.

political freedom and social equality grew loud. In June 1524 a local peasant uprising was the spark that ignited a fire that blazed right across Germany. It has come to be known as the "Peasants Revolt".

Several Radicals, including Muntzer, played a prominent role. Many of the rebels covenanted together as "the Evangelical Brotherhood" and often they appealed to Luther's teaching to justify their demands.

At first Luther blamed both sides in the uprising but believing that armed rebellion against any government, however tyrannical, was sinful he turned against the peasants when they turned to violence. In April 1525 he went on a preaching tour of Saxony to try to persuade the peasants to refrain from violence, but to no avail. In May 1525 he wrote a tract entitled "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants" in which he exhorted the German princes to slay the peasants without mercy.

The princes obeyed his call only too well. By November the revolt had been crushed. More than 100,000 peasants lost their lives: their widows and children left destitute. Perhaps the most tragic single episode involved Muntzer who led 8,000 men against the professional army of the Protestant prince, Philip of Hesse. Inspired by Muntzer's promises of divine protection and victory they refused to surrender and were annihilated. Muntzer was captured, tortured and executed but before he died he recanted his Radical beliefs and received the Roman Catholic mass.

### **A Major Set-back**

The Peasants Revolt marked the end of the rapid spread of Lutheranism in Germany. Luther's own response to it alienated many of the lower classes and the ruling classes too began to think again. If Reformation led to this kind of uprising could it be good?

In those states which remained loyal to Roman Catholicism Lutherans began to be persecuted. Preachers in particular were hunted down and martyred.

Those princes who were committed to Lutheranism determined that they must strictly control the Reformation if they were to prevent any further revolt. They made their status as "emergency bishops" permanent. From now on they would be the absolute rulers of the Lutheran Churches in their domains.

Luther now encouraged this policy. The Peasant's Revolt had destroyed his trust in the ordinary German people. The man who stood against the papacy, at risk of his own life, to defend liberty and toleration now advocated that the state should silence and banish Radicals. He still opposed the death penalty for heresy but came to believe that blasphemy should be punished by death and, as there is often a thin line between the two, did not protest too much when, in years to come, Radicals were executed for religious dissent.

### **Some Turn Back**

It was also in the aftermath of the peasant's Revolt that Erasmus and many of his followers deserted Luther. Erasmus had wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church peacefully from within.

In September 1524 he published a book against Luther called "The Freedom of the Will" in which he attacked Luther's Augustinian theology. Luther, following the teaching of Augustine, taught that fallen man is in helpless bondage to sin and only God's sovereign grace can set his will free to follow Christ. Those whose will God does set free have been predestined to be saved by His mercy; not as a result of anything in them. Erasmus argued that salvation is a shared work of human will and divine grace.

The break between Luther and Erasmus was total. Luther said of Erasmus:

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

Erasmus, for his part, said of Luther:

“Where is your dovelike spirit? Did the apostles spread the gospel in the way you do? You cry out against the luxury of priests, the ambition of bishops, and the tyranny of the pope, the prattling of scholastics, against prayers and fasts and masses. But your purpose is not so much to reform as to destroy. You will uproot the wheat along with the tares! Look at these Evangelicals of yours. Are they any less enslaved to luxury, immorality and money? The gospel is supposed to make the drunkard sober and the cruel person kind. But I can show you people whom your preaching has made worse than ever! You throw images out of the churches, but what good is that if people continue to bow down to sins in their hearts?”

Erasmus died in 1536, a sad and lonely figure, shunned by Roman Catholics for “hatching” the Reformation and by Protestants for not joining it.

## **Opposition From The Empire**

Charles V could not give much attention to the Reformation in Germany. He was preoccupied by constant wars with the French king Francis I and threats to his borders from the Ottoman Turks. Indeed he needed to have the Lutheran states on his side just to survive.

It was this that prompted the imperial diet of Speyer to pass an edict of religious toleration in 1526. Under it, each local ruler could decide which religion the people of his domain would follow.

By 1529 the pressure on Charles had reduced and a second diet outlawed any further spread of the Reformation and decreed that Roman Catholics must be tolerated in Lutheran lands though Lutherans were not to have the same privilege in Roman Catholic lands. The Lutheran delegates were outraged and published a document called the Protestation — this is where the name Protestant came from.<sup>3</sup>

In 1530 Charles changed his strategy again. He invited the Lutherans to set out their beliefs in writing. They responded with the Augsburg Confession, the first official Protestant confession of faith. Written chiefly by Melanchthon, it became and remains the doctrinal basis of all the Lutheran churches.

However, the Augsburg Confession did not allay Charles' fears. He continued in his purpose to force German Protestants back into the Roman Catholic Church. In December 1531, to defend their citizens against persecution the Protestant princes united as the Schmalkaldic League. It embraced eight princes and eleven imperial cities. The Roman Catholic princes had already formed their own league — the Swabian League. It dated back to 1488 but now it had a new anti-Protestant purpose. Religious civil war was brewing.

## **Lutheran Worship**

Luther's followers preached the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, and as people placed their confidence directly in Christ for salvation the Virgin Mary and the saints ceased to have a place in worship.

The exclusive use of Latin was abandoned and worship came to be seen as an act of the whole congregation. Vocal participation in the singing of hymns and psalms and recitation of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Ten Commandments was

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<sup>3</sup> To protest, as the word was used in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, is to declare, affirm or set forth a position (as when a man protests his innocence). The first Protestants were not merely protesting against Roman Catholic errors they were “protesting the gospel”, declaring positive truth.

encouraged. Prayer Books — a new invention — enabled the people to take part collectively in worship.

Luther took a conservative attitude to forms of worship, keeping to Catholic practice except where it clearly contradicted Scripture. He translated the liturgy into German but did not change it much. His main changes were in the liturgy of the mass where a new order of worship expressed a Protestant understanding of the Lord's Supper. He exalted preaching to a central position but he retained the system of the Church lectionary and wrote sermons (Postils) based on the set passages to be read from the pulpit. Bearing in mind that most of the pastors were ex-priests with little or no theological training, Luther's Postils were of great value in helping them communicate the new faith from their pulpits.

Hymns full of strong doctrinal content, some of them written by Luther himself, had the greatest impact of all in nourishing Lutheran belief. The first Lutheran hymnbook was published in 1524. Congregational singing in German replaced the Catholic practice of a choir singing in Latin and popular melodies were used to make the singing easier. Catechisms too played an important role in instructing church members in their faith.

### **Questions For Discussion**

- In what ways do you think the Radicals were wrong in the way they proposed to take the Reformation forward?
- Do you think Luther made mistakes? What would you have done differently in his position?

### **For Further Study**

Consider the following question: How would you convince someone from Scripture that the proclamation of His Word is God's ordinary way of changing people *and* that violence, coercion or the imposition of law is not effective?