

History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century

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BOOK 6
CHAPTER 12

If the legates of Rome failed with the mighty ones of this world, the inferior agents of the papacy succeeded in spreading trouble among the lower ranks. The army of Rome had heard the commands of its chief. Fanatical priests made use of the bull to alarm timid consciences, and wellmeaning but unenlightened ecclesiastics considered it a sacred duty to act in conformity with the instructions of the pope. It was in the confessional that Luther had commenced his struggle against Rome;¹ it was in the confessional that Rome contended against the reformer's adherents. Scouted in the face of the world, the bull became powerful in these solitary tribunals. "Have you read Luther's works?" asked the confessors; "do you possess any of them? do you regard them as true or heretical?" And if the penitent hesitated to pronounce the anathema, the priest refused absolution. Many consciences were troubled. Great agitation prevailed among the people. This skillful manoeuvre bid fair to restore to the papal yoke the people already won over to the Gospel. Rome congratulated herself on having in the thirteenth century erected this tribunal, so skillfully adapted to render the free consciences of Christians the slaves of the priests.² So long as this remains standing, her reign is not over.

Luther was informed of these proceedings. What can he do, unaided, to baffle this manoeuvre? The Word, the Word proclaimed loudly and courageously, shall be his weapon. The Word will find access to those alarmed consciences, those terrified souls, and give them strength. A powerful impulse was necessary, and Luther's voice made itself heard. He addressed the penitents with fearless dignity, with a noble disdain of all secondary considerations. "When you are asked whether you approve of my books or not," said he, "reply: 'You are a confessor, and not an inquisitor or a gaoler. My duty is to confess what my conscience leads me to say: yours is not to sound and extort the secrets of my heart. Give me absolution, and then dispute with Luther, with the pope, with whomsoever you please; but do not convert the sacrament of penance into a quarrel and a combat.' — And if the confessor will not give way, then (continues Luther) I would rather go without absolution. Do not be uneasy: if man does not absolve you, God will. Rejoice that you are absolved by God himself, and appear at the altar without fear. At the last judgment the priest will have to give an account of the absolution he has refused you. They may deprive us of the sacrament, but they cannot deprive us of the strength and grace that God has connected with it. It is not in their will or in their power, but in our own faith, that God has placed salvation. Dispense with the sacrament, altar, priest, and church; the Word of God, condemned by the bull, is more than all these things. The soul can do without the sacrament, but it cannot live without the Word. Christ, the true bishop, will undertake to give you spiritual food."³

Thus did Luther's voice sink into every alarmed conscience, and make its way into every troubled family, imparting courage and faith. But he was not content simply with defending himself; he felt that he ought to become the assailant, and return blow for blow. A Romish theologian, Ambrose Catharinus, had written against him. "I will stir up the bile of this Italian beast," said Luther.⁴ He kept his word. In his reply, he proved, by the revelations of Daniel and St. John, by the epistles of St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. Jude, that the reign of Antichrist, predicted and described in the Bible, was the Papacy. "I know for certain," said he in conclusion, "that our Lord Jesus Christ lives and reigns. Strong in this assurance, I should not fear many thousands of popes. May God visit us at last according to his infinite power, and show forth the day of the glorious advent of his Son, in which he will destroy the wicked one."⁵ And let all the people say, Amen!"

And all the people did say, Amen! A holy terror seized upon their souls. It was Antichrist whom they beheld seated on the pontifical throne. This new idea, which derived greater strength from the prophetic descriptions launched forth by Luther into the midst of his contemporaries, inflicted the most terrible blow on Rome. Faith in the Word of God took the place of that faith which the Church alone had hitherto enjoyed; and the power of the pope, long the object of adoration among nations, had now become a source of terror and detestation.

Germany replied to the papal bull by overwhelming Luther with its acclamations. Although the plague was raging at Wittenberg, new students arrived every day, and from four to six hundred disciples habitually sat at the feet of Luther and Melancthon in the halls of the academy. The two churches belonging to the convent and the city were not large enough for the crowd that hung listening to the reformer's words. The prior of the Augustines was fearful that these temples would fall under the weight of the hearers.⁶ But this spiritual movement was not confined within the walls of Wittenberg; it spread through Germany. Princes, nobles, and learned men from every quarter, addressed Luther in letters breathing consolation and faith. The doctor showed the chaplain more than thirty such.⁷

The Margrave of Brandenburg came one day to Wittenberg, with several other princes, to visit Luther. "They desired to see the man," said the latter.⁸ In truth, all were desirous of seeing the man whose words had moved the people, and made the pontiff of the West totter upon his throne.

The enthusiasm of Luther's friends increased every day. "What unheard-of foolishness in Emser," exclaimed Melancthon, "who has ventured to measure himself with our Hercules, not perceiving the finger of God in every one of Luther's actions,⁹ as Pharaoh would not see it in those of Moses." The gentle Melancthon found words of power to arouse those who seemed to be retrograding or even remaining stationary. "Luther has stood up for the truth," wrote he to John Hess, "and yet you keep silence!.....He is alive and prospering still, although the lion (Leo) is chafing and roaring. Bear in mind that it is impossible for Roman impiety to approve of the Gospel.¹⁰ How can this age be wanting in men like Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate, or Herod? Arm yourself, therefore, with the weapons of God's Word against such adversaries."

All Luther's writings, his Lord's Prayer, and particularly his new edition of the German Theology,¹¹ were perused with avidity. Reading clubs were formed for the circulation of his works among their members. His friends reprinted them, and got them distributed by hawkers. They were recommended from the pulpit. There was a general wish for a German Church; and the people demanded that no one should

henceforth be invested with any ecclesiastical dignity, unless he could preach to the people in the vulgar tongue, and that in every quarter the bishops of Germany should resist the papal power.

Nor was this all: biting satires against the principal ultra-montanists were circulated throughout the provinces of the empire. The opposition rallied all its forces around this new doctrine, which gave it precisely what it stood in need of..... a justification in the eyes of religion. Most of the lawyers, wearied by the encroachments of the ecclesiastical tribunals, attached themselves to the reform, but the humanists, in particular, eagerly embraced this party. Ulrich Hutten was indefatigable. He addressed letters to Luther, to the legates, and to the most considerable men in Germany. "I tell you, and repeat it, Marino," said he to the legate Caraccioli, in one of his works, "the darkness with which you had covered our eyes is dispersed; the Gospel is preached; the truth is proclaimed; the absurdities of Rome are overwhelmed with contempt; your decrees languish and die; liberty is beginning to dawn upon us!"¹²

Not content with employing prose, Hutten had recourse to verse also. He published his Outcry on the Lutheran Conflagration,¹³ in which, appealing to Jesus Christ, he beseeches him to consume with the brightness of his countenance all who dared deny his authority. Above all, he set about writing in German. "Hitherto," said he, "I have written in Latin, a tongue not intelligible to every one; but now I address all my fellow-countrymen!" His German rhymes unveiled to the people the long and disgraceful catalogue of the sins of the Roman court. But Hutten did not wish to confine himself to mere words; he was eager to interfere in the struggle with the sword; and he thought that the vengeance of God should be wrought by the swords and halberds of those valiant warriors of whom Germany was so proud. Luther opposed this mad project: "I desire not," said he, "to fight for the Gospel with violence and bloodshed. I have written to Hutten to this effect."¹⁴

The celebrated painter Lucas Cranach published, under the title of the Passion of Christ and Antichrist, a set of engravings which represented on one side the glory and magnificence of the pope, and on the other the humiliation and sufferings of the Redeemer. The inscriptions were written by Luther. These engravings, designed with considerable skill, produced an effect beyond all previous example. The people withdrew from a church that appeared in every respect so opposed to the spirit of its Founder. "This is a very good work for the laity," said Luther.¹⁵

Many persons wielded weapons against the papacy, that had but little connection with the holiness of a christian life. Emser had replied to Luther's book (To the Goat of Leipsic) by another whose title was To the Bull of Wittenberg. The name was not badly selected. But at Magdeburg Emser's work was suspended to the common gibbet, with this inscription: "The book is worthy of the place," and a scourge was hung at its side, to indicate the punishment the author merited.¹⁶ At Doebelin some persons wrote under the papal bull, in ridicule of its ineffectual thunders, "The nest is here, but the birds have flown."¹⁷

The students at Wittenberg, taking advantage of the license of the carnival, dressed up one of their number in a costume similar to the pope's, and paraded him with great pomp through the streets of the city, but in a manner somewhat too ludicrous, as Luther observes.¹⁸ When they reached the great square, they approached the river, and some, pretending a sudden attack, appeared desirous of throwing the pope into the water. But the pontiff, having little inclination for such a bath, took to his heels; his cardinals, bishops, and familiars imitated his example, dispersing into every quarter of the city. The students pursued them through the streets; and there was hardly a corner in Wittenberg where some Roman dignitary had not taken refuge from the shouts and laughter of the excited populace.¹⁹ "The enemy of Christ," says Luther, "who makes a mockery of kings, and even of Christ, richly deserves to be thus mocked himself." In our opinion he is wrong; truth is too beautiful to be thus polluted. She should combat without the aid of ballads, caricatures, and the masquerades of a carnival. Perhaps, without these popular demonstrations, her success would be less apparent; but it would be purer, and consequently more lasting. However that may be, the imprudent and prejudiced conduct of the Roman court had excited universal antipathy; and this very bull, by which the papacy thought to crush the whole reformation, was precisely that which made the revolt burst out in every quarter.

Yet the reformer did not find intoxication and triumph in everything. Behind that chariot in which he was dragged by a people excited and transported with admiration, there was not wanting the slave to remind him of his miserable state. Some of his friends seemed inclined to retrace their steps. Staupitz, whom he designated his father, appeared shaken. The pope had accused him, and Staupitz had declared his willingness to submit to the decision of his holiness. "I fear," wrote Luther to him, "that by accepting the pope for judge, you seem to reject me and the doctrines I have maintained. If Christ loves you, he will constrain you to recall your letter. Christ is condemned, stripped, and blasphemed; this is a time not to fear, but to raise the voice."²⁰ For this reason, while you exhort me to be humble, I exhort you to be proud; for you have too much humility, as I have too much pride. The world may call me proud, covetous, an adulterer, a murderer, antipope, one who is guilty of every crime.....What matters it! provided I am not reproached with having wickedly kept silence at the moment our Lord said with sorrow: I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me. (Psalm cxlii.) The Word of Jesus Christ is a Word not of peace, but of the sword. If you will not follow Jesus Christ, I will walk alone, will advance alone, and alone will I carry the fortress."²¹

Thus Luther, like a general at the head of an army, surveyed the whole field of battle; and while his voice inspired new soldiers to the conflict, he discovered those of his troops who appeared weak, and recalled them to the line of duty. His exhortations were heard everywhere. His letters rapidly followed each other. Three presses were constantly occupied in multiplying his writings.²² His words ran through the people, strengthening the alarmed consciences in the confessionals, upholding in the convents timid souls that were ready to faint, and maintaining the rights of truth in the palaces of princes.

"In the midst of the storms that assail me," wrote Luther to the elector, "I hoped to find peace at last. But now I see that this was the vain thought of a man. From day to day the waters rise, and already I am entirely surrounded by the waves. The tempest is bursting upon me with frightful tumult."²³ In one hand I grasp the sword, with the other I build up the walls of Zion."²⁴ His ancient ties are broken: the hand that had hurled against him the thunders of excommunication had snapped them asunder. "Excommunicated by the bull," said he, "I am absolved from the authority of the pope and of the monastic laws. Joyfully do I welcome this deliverance. But I shall neither quit the habit of my order nor the convent."²⁵

And yet, amid this agitation, he does not lose sight of the dangers to which his soul is exposed in the struggle. He perceives the necessity of keeping a strict watch over himself. "You do well to pray for me," wrote he to Pellican, who resided at Basle. "I cannot devote sufficient time to holy exercises; life is a cross to me. You do well to exhort me to modesty: I feel its necessity; but I am not master of myself; I am carried away by mysterious impulses. I wish no one ill;²⁶ but my enemies press on me with such fury, that I do not sufficiently guard against the temptations of Satan. Pray, then, for me!"

Thus the reformer and the Reformation were hastening towards the goal whither God called them. The agitation was gaining ground. The men who seemed likely to be most faithful to the hierarchy began to be moved. "Those very persons," says Eck ingenuously enough, "who hold the best livings and the richest prebends from the pope, remain as mute as fishes. Many of them even extol Luther as a man filled with the Divine spirit, and style the defenders of the pope mere sophists and flatterers."²⁷ The Church, apparently full of vigor, supported by treasures, governments, and armies, but in reality exhausted and feeble, having no love for God, no christian life, no enthusiasm for the truth, found itself face to face with men who were simple but courageous, and who, knowing that God is with those who contend in behalf of his Word, had no doubt of victory. In every age it has been seen how great is the strength of an idea to penetrate the masses, to stir up nations, and to hurry them, if required, by thousands to the battle-field and to death. But if so great be the strength of a human idea, what power must not a heaven-descended idea possess, when God opens to it the gates of the heart! The world has not often seen so much power at work; it was seen, however, in the early days of Christianity, and in the time of the Reformation; and it will be seen in future ages. Men who despised the riches and grandeur of the world, who were contented with a life of sorrow and poverty, began to be moved in favor of all that was holiest upon earth, — the doctrine of faith and of grace. All the religious elements were fermenting beneath the agitated surface of society; and the fire of enthusiasm urged souls to spring forward with courage into this new life, this epoch of renovation, which was so grandly opening before them, and whither Providence was hurrying the nations.

Endnotes:

1. See vol. 1. P. 94.
2. In 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council, under Innocent III.
3. Und wird dich der rechte Bischoff Christus selber speisen..L. Opp. (L.) 17:565.
4. Italicae bestiae bilem movebo. L. Epp. 1:570.
5. Ostendat illum diem adventus gloriae Filii sui, quo destruat iniquus iste. L. Opp. Lat. 2:162.
6. Es mochte noch gar die Kirche und Capelle um der Menge willen einfallen. Spalatin in Seckend. P. 295.
7. Mehr als dreyssig Briefe von Fursten..Ibid.
8. Vilere enim hominem voluerunt. L. Epp. 1:544, dated 16th January 1521.
9. Dei digitum esse quae a Martino fiant. Corp. Ref. 1:282.
10. Non posse Evangelium omanae impietati probari. Ibid. 280.
11. See vol. 1. P. 75.
12. Ablata illa est a vobis inducta olim nostris oculis caligo, praedicatur Evangelium..spes est libertatis. Ulrich ab Hutten Eques, Mar. Carrac. L. Opp. Lat. 2:176.
13. Quo tu oculos, pie Christe, tuos frontisque severae. Tende supercilium, teque esse ostende neganti. Qui te contemnunt igitur, mediumque tonanti. Ostendunt digitum, tandem iis te ostende potentem. Te videat ferox ille Leo, te tota malorum. Sentiat illuvies, scelerataque Roma tremiscat, Ultorem scelerum discant te vivere saltem, Qui regnare negant. In incedium Lutheranum Exclamatio Ulrichi Hutteni Equitis, Mar. Carac. L. Opp. Lat. 2:176.
14. Nollem vi et caede pro Evangelio certari; ita ut scripsi ad hominem. L. Epp. 1:543.
15. Bonus est pro laicis liber. L. Epp. 1:571. This book which deserves reprinting, I found in the library of Zurich.
16. In publico infamae loco affixus. Ibid. 560.
17. Das Nest iste hie, die Vogel sind ausgeflogen. Ibid. 570.
18. Nimis ludicre Papam personatum circumvenerunt sublimem et pompaticum. Ibid. 561.
19. Fugitivum cum cardinalibus, episcopis, familisque suis, in diversas partes oppidi disperserunt et insecti sunt. L. Epp. 1. 17th Feb. 1521.
20. Non enim hoc tempus timendi sed clamandi. Ibid. 557.
21. Quod si tu non vis sequi, sine me ire et rapi. Ibid. 558.
22. Cum tria prela solus ego occupare cogar. L. Epp. 1:558.
23. Videns rem tumultuosissimo tumultu tumultuantem Ibid. 546.
24. Una manu gladium apprehendens et altera murum aedificaturus. Ibid. 565.
25. Ab ordinis et Papae legibus solutus..quod gaudeo et amplector. Ibid. 558.
26. Compos mei non sum, raptor nescio quo spiritu, cum nemini me male velle conscius sim. Ibid. 555.
27. Reynald Epist. J. Eckii ad Cardinalem Contarenum.