

Martin Luther, the Prophet of the Reformation

Prophets of the Christian Faith Series—VI.¹

By Adolf Harnack



LUTHER AT SIXTY-THREE
An old Woodcut of the Cranach school

conditions of Europe, both through inner developments and through the discovery of distant lands, had become completely changed, and the method of administration of their estates by the Roman priests and monks was no longer tenable.

He came in the fullness of time—when mediæval churchly science had outlived its usefulness and when the tree of knowledge was producing young, fresh shoots.

He came in the fullness of time—when the classes and castes of the Middle Ages were disintegrating, and when everywhere the individual, supported by the new culture of the Renaissance, was striving to struggle up to independence. He came when the monastic idea of life had run through all phases of its development, and when man was beginning to esteem an active not less than an ascetic life.

He came in the fullness of time—when laymen were no longer satisfied with priest and sacrament, but were seeking God himself, and were feeling the personal responsibility of their own souls. He came as man was recognizing the precepts of the Church to be but arbitrary laws, and her traditions as only innovations and forgeries.

He was no universal genius, no Plato, no Leibnitz. He

¹ Previous articles in this series have been: "What is a Prophet?" by Lyman Abbott (The Outlook for December 14, 1895); "The Apostle Paul," by the Rev. George Matheson, D.D. (December 21, 1895); "Clement of Alexandria," by the Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D. (January 4, 1896); "St. Augustine," by the Rev. A. C. McGiffert, D.D. (February 8); and "Wycliffe," by Dean Fremantle (March 14). Following articles in the series will be by Dean Farrar, Principal Fairbairn, the Rev. A. V. G. Allen, D.D., and the Rev. T. T. Munger, D.D.

He came in the fullness of time—when the rule of the Roman Church, which had hitherto educated the peoples, had become a tyranny, when States and nations were beginning to throw off an ecclesiastical yoke and independently to organize themselves in accordance with their own laws.

He came in the fullness of time—when the economic con-



ARMS OF THE
LUTHER FAMILY

did not grasp all the conditions of his time; nay, he did not even know them all. His education was mediocre. He was no sharp and refined thinker, he was no humanist, he was no critic; his vocation was not to rectify theoretical errors just because they were errors. The sphere of science was not his sphere; indeed, he had an instinctive and never entirely conquered suspicion of "reason."

He was no saint, no Francis, who, through the glow of feeling, through the sweetness of his spirit or the power of his sacrifice, swept every one along with him. He was also no agitator, no orator, who, like Savonarola, could move and inflame the masses.

Luther was no cosmopolitan, but a German with the marked characteristics of his nation, a German as monk, as professor, and as reformer. His personality has never been understood by the Romanic races; it has never impressed them; his thoughts alone have been able to take root among them.

How was this man, then, able to become the reformer of the Western Church? How was it that this professor in a little German university, in the midst of an uncultivated environment, could unfetter the great movement by which the new epoch in

the history of the world began? How did it happen that, through him, "the time was fulfilled"?

He was in only one thing great and mighty, overwhelmingly and irresistibly the master of his time, victoriously overcoming the history of a thousand years in order to force his age into new channels.

He was great only in the rediscovered knowledge of God in the Gospels.

What it means to have a God, what this God is, how he grasps us, and how we can apprehend and hold him—all that he experienced and that he proclaimed. In the midst of the night of his conventual life, as he strove to work out his salvation in fear and trembling, it dawned upon him like the sun: "The just shall live by faith."



LUTHER WHEN A MONK
(Cranach, 1520)

In the midst of the complex system of what was called "religion," in the midst of unsatisfying consolations and of incomplete penances, he lived *religion itself*, and he led it out into freedom. The living God—not a philosophical or mystic abstraction—the manifest and gracious God, was a God to be reached by every Christian. Unchangeable reliance of the heart upon God, personal confidence of belief in Him who said, "I am thy salvation," that was to Luther the whole sum of religion. Beyond all care and trouble, beyond all arts of the ascetic, beyond all theological precepts, he dared to grasp God himself, and in this deed of faith his whole life won its independent sturdiness. "Mit unser Macht ist Nichts gethan"



WITTENBERG
(From an old Copperplate)

("With our might is nothing done"). He knew the might which gives to our lives both firmness and freedom; he knew that might, and he called it by its name, Belief. To him that meant no longer an obedient acceptance of ecclesiastical dogmas, it meant no knowledge, no deed, but simply the personal and continual giving of the heart to God, a daily regeneration of man. That was his confession of faith, a living, busy, active thing, a sure trust, making one joyful and eager in the sight of God and man, something which makes us always ready to serve or to suffer. Despite all evil, yes, despite our sin and guilt, our life is hid in God, when we trust him as children trust their father. That was the vital thought and the vital power of Luther's life.

With equal certainty he perceived and experienced the other idea, the idea of "the freedom of a Christian." This freedom was to him no empty emancipation or the license for every whim. Freedom meant to Luther the liberation from every external or human authority in matters of belief and conscience. Christian freedom was to him the feeling of surety that, united with God, he was raised above the world, sin, death, and the devil. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Every soul that has found God, and in him has recognized its refuge, is free—so proclaimed Luther.

Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott,
Ein' gute Wehr und waffen.

(A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing.)

Let it be here remarked that, in the same hymn, Luther asks:

Fragst du, wer er ist?
Er heisset Jesus Christ,
Der Herr Zebaoth,
Und ist kein and'rer Gott.

(Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he,
His name, Lord Sabaoth;
Nor is there other God.)

In Jesus Christ alone Luther recognized God. Outside of Christ he saw only a dark, frightful, and enigmatical Force. In Christ alone he saw the gracious God. Luther was no philosopher who would recognize God in the construction of the world; he was no mystic, who could raise God out of his own soul's secret depths. He was a faithful son of the Christian Church, convinced that she was in the right with her commission from Jesus Christ. He was a faithful disciple of Paul, and had learned from him that all knowledge of God lies locked up in the sentence, "God is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He was a faithful disciple of Christ himself, who said, "No man knoweth the Father save only the Son, and him to whom the Son will reveal Him."

Not only did Luther win God-knowledge in Jesus Christ, "the mirror of God's paternal heart," but also the fact that Jesus is the Redeemer, who through death has freed us from sin and blame. Paul's Gospel is also Luther's. Before the latter, no one in the Church really understood

the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians. Just because he was convinced that he was putting the old, dimmed Gospel again in the light, he was far from the thought of adding anything to it. Never had he another plan than that of *restoring the old belief*; never did he think to fight against

the Church, but always *for the Church* against a false and soul-dangerous practice; never did he dream that the Gospel had been really lost—no, but it was to be freed from a captivity into which the Pope, the priests, and the theologians had led it.

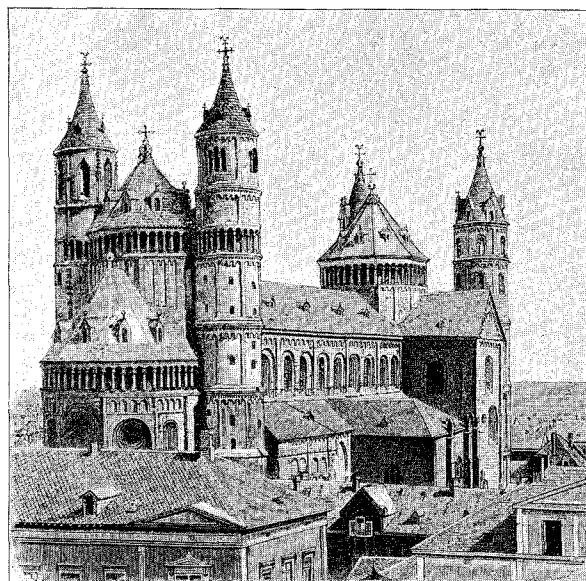
Great, lasting reformations are made only by conservative men; not those who "destroy," but those who "fulfill," bring about a new era. Luther—at the bottom of his heart the most conservative of men—has broken the mediæval Catholic system in pieces for millions of souls, and thus freed the history of progressive humanity from the shackles of that system. In that he vindicated the new and yet old Gospel, in that he freed the conscience of the individual from priest and statute, he struck deadly blows against the Church of the Middle Ages. For, (1) he overturned her teaching as to salvation—salvation not being a thing brought about by donations and merits, but the free grace of God, which gives us the con-

viction that we are his children. (2) He overturned the teaching as to Christian perfection—true Christian life does not consist in monasticism, but in an active life of fidelity to a calling, in humility, patience, and the service of love to our neighbor. (3) He overturned the teachings as regards the sacrament—God does not give us individual



MARTIN LUTHER

After Cranach's Portrait (1532) in the Dresden Gallery



WORMS CATHEDRAL

and different fragments of grace, but he gives us the forgiveness of sins and with it all grace, yes, he gives us himself as the Bread of our lives. (4) He overturned the priestly Church-system—God wills that all his children shall be priests, and he has instituted but one office, the office of proclaiming the Gospel and of



THE WARTBURG CASTLE

distributing forgiveness. (5) Luther overturned the mediæval church services—God will not be honored by means of ceremonies, masses, oblations, etc., but only through praise and thanksgiving, pleading and prayer. Every church service must be spiritual, and at the same time innately bound with service to one's neighbor. (6) He overturned the false authorities of Roman Catholicism. Not the Pope, nor the Councils, not even the letter of the Bible (yet here, in regard to the Bible, Luther was himself not completely clear), has unerring authority, but only the Gospel, the power and truth of which the soul inwardly knows.

All these points have to do with religion alone. Luther determined to purify religion and to free it from every strange thing which does not belong to it. Besides this he never had another independent interest; he did not care about bettering the world, or the State, or science, for themselves alone. Yet right here is revealed the truth of the saying: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." In that Luther thought out the Gospel in all its parts, proclaimed and applied it, all else fell into his lap; in that he liberated religion from mixture with that which is foreign to it, *he also liberated the natural life and the natural order of things*. He put everything in its right place, and gave everything freedom and room for development. Everywhere he broke apart unnatural ties, he loosed old chains, he gave air and light.

Theology through him is henceforth to be nothing else than the exposition of the Gospel, of how it has founded the Christian community and still keeps it together. The proof of theology is no longer derived from external authority or strange philosophical speculations, but by the simple fact of Christ's appearance, and by our inward experience.

Philosophy is no longer a feared servant or a seductive mistress of theology, but her independent sister. Languages and history are studied conscientiously and faithfully, in order to ascertain the right meaning of every word.

The State is no longer regarded as a half-sinful product of compulsion and need, and the creature of the Church, but as the God-willed, independent order of public social life.

Law does not longer pass as a dangerous middle course, something between the might of the stronger and the virtue of the Christian, but as the independent, God-given rule of intercourse, always maintained by the "powers that be."

Marriage is no longer thought of as a divine concession towards the weak, but as a free bond between the sexes, a bond instituted by God, and free from tutelage on the part of the Church, and as the school of the highest morality.

General benefactions, such as the care of the poor, are not now so much pursued because of any desire to assure one's own salvation; they have become a free service to one's neighbor, the final scope and only reward of which is effective relief.

Above all things, however, in civil (as opposed to ecclesiastical) callings, activity in house and farm, in trade and official position, is no longer looked upon suspiciously as if it led away from our spiritual vocation. Men now know that the one who guides a household well, educates children patiently and faithfully, fulfills the duties of a calling—even though that one be but a poor boy or a lowly maid—stands in the rightful spiritual place and is higher than all monks and nuns.

Over the great period which we call the Middle Ages, over the chaos of non-independent and intricate forms, there soared the spirit of belief, which had recognized its own nature and therefore had also recognized its limits. Under its sway, all things that had a right to free existence now strove towards independent development. Before Luther, no one had ever separated so clearly and distinguishingly the great departments of life, and given to each its own right. Wonderful! this man would not teach the world other than what the being, the power, and the comfort of the Christian religion is; but in that he recognized this most important department in its own individuality, all other departments came to their own. Luther preached that the just man lives by faith, and that a child of God is a free master over all things. In that he so taught he indeed freed men and things, and thus showed that "the time was fulfilled," for he was called that the time should be fulfilled.

He became the reformer. Beside him Zwingli and Calvin can claim but second places; they are dependent on him. Yes, we can even say: *He was the Reformation*. He had experienced the Reformation in his own soul, when he struggled in the cloister with the creed of his Church. Everything which he afterwards said, wrote, and did, in Wittenberg, in Worms, and in Coburg, was only the natural consequence of that experience. Out of his breast, from the bottom of his heart, the Reformation streamed as a brook out of hidden springs in the rock. In one sense he did not give power and endurance to the Reformation: he did not set its bounds and aim, but the Reformation gushed from his spirit like a fruitful stream.

"Here I stand; I can do no other," said he, before Emperor and Empire. When the lonely man thus spoke, it was decided that he, through his faith, like Abraham, should become the father of many thousands; it was decided that a great epoch in the history of mankind had finished its course, and a new was advancing.

But we must not forget that it was four hundred years ago that Luther taught. The convenient belief that he thought

LUTHER AND KATHARINE BORA
(Cranach, 1525)

Und alle die from Leiden mit
Lust und Lust
Amen.

Martin Luther

1 5 4 2

FACSIMILE OF LUTHER'S WRITING (1542)

out everything for us, and that we can rest on his teaching, is a foolish one. The greatest hero is always only a *finisher* for the past; as regards the future he is but a *beginner*. He who does not understand Luther so that he learns from him the spirit with which to solve new problems and lessons, and so that he endeavors to continue the Reformer's work, understands him falsely. The prophets have been given to us, not that we should build their graves, but that we should inflame our hearts through their faith and their courage.

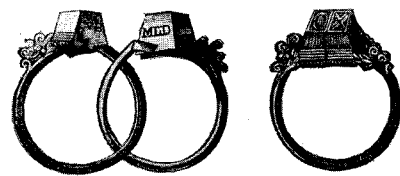
Martin Luther's Life

By the Rev. James M. Whiton, Ph.D.

Martin Luther, the Saxon miner's son, the charity scholar, Bible student, monk, preacher, reformer, church father, theologian, the Elijah of Germany, the Achilles of Protestantism, accomplished far less than he hoped, yet all that was then possible for any one man. His life of sixty-three years moved through three stadia. In the first we see the devout and conscientious son of the Church; in the second, the high-spirited leader and fearless reformer of the Church; in the third, the strenuous but saddened struggler toward a deferred and failing hope.

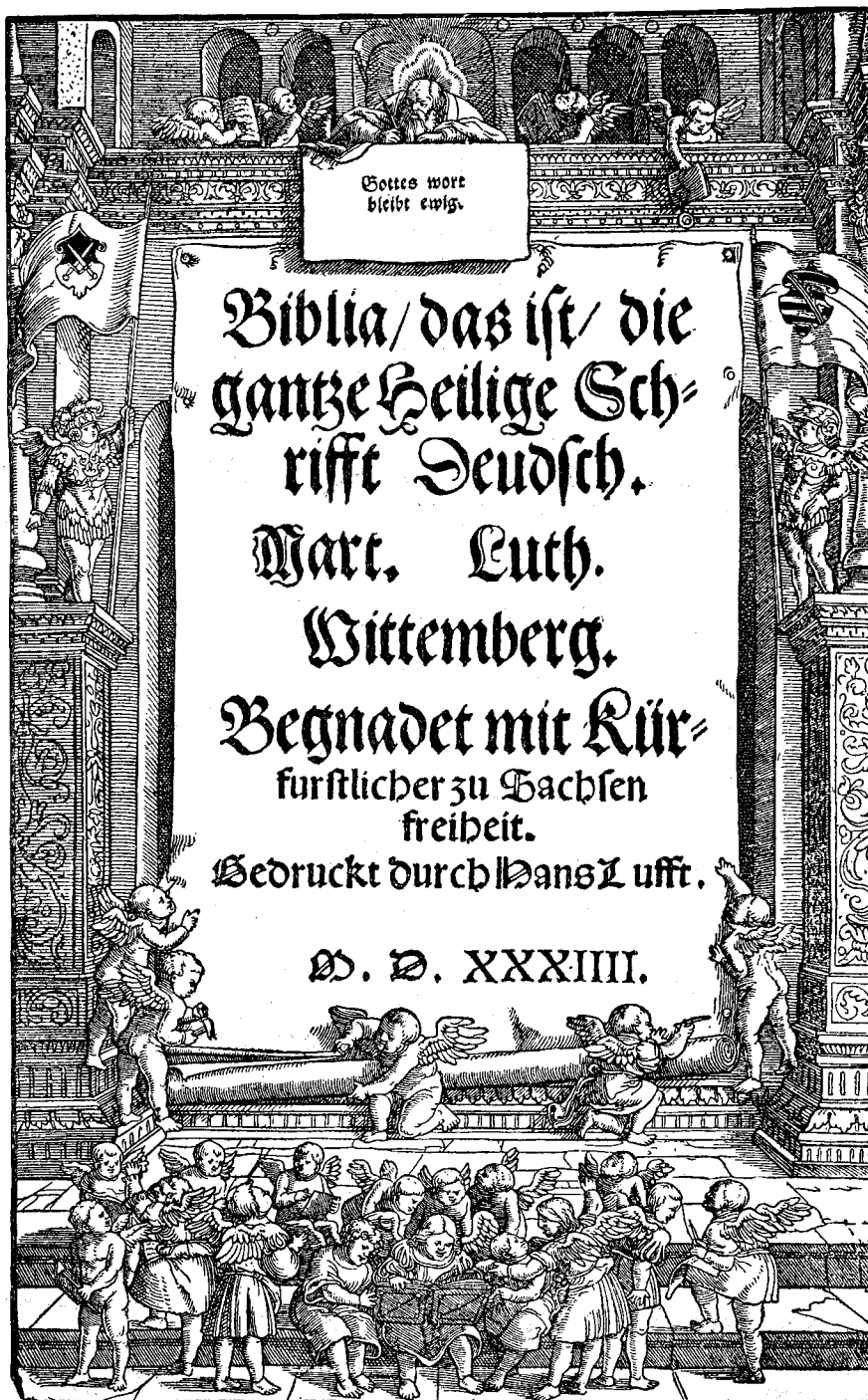
1. A century before Luther's birth, in 1483, Wyclif had died, "the morning star of the Reformation." In 1415, Hus, Wyclif's disciple, had been burned. Luther early became "a Hussite without knowing it," while supposing himself an obedient son of the Roman Church. Destined by his father for the law, an inward religious crisis determined him to become a monk in the year when he took his master's degree, at the age of twenty-two. In the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt he subjected himself to austere discipline, choosing in humility to take upon him the most menial services. His teachers were the Bible and St. Augustine, and his resort in perplexity was to Tauler and the theology of the fourteenth-century mystics, whose cardinal doctrine was the personal relation of the soul to Christ. Made a university professor in Wittenberg at the age of twenty-five, his lectures on the Bible drew his colleagues to be his hearers, and crowds attended his preaching. His favorite subjects were in the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians, the latter of which he humorously styled his "wife." Three years later, while as yet his conscience had not found unclouded peace in God, he visited

Rome. Shocked by the contrast between the profligacy of the papal court and the purity of the evangelical ideal, he came to a clear intuition of the truth which thenceforward inspired his



LUTHER'S DOUBLE RING

life and embodied itself in the Reformation: "The just shall live by faith." The next year he took his degree as Doctor of Divinity. Presently made district-vicar of his order, when the plague fell upon the city he flinched not from his work; he published editions of the "Theologia Germanica," the mystics' text-book; he was at one with their teaching, that repentance begins in the love of God and his righteousness.



FACSIMILE OF THE TITLE OF LUTHER'S COMPLETE BIBLE
(Wittenberg, 1534)

2. Into this well-seeded field came the enemy sowing tares. The Dominican monk Tetzl, seller of papal indulgences, went flagrantly beyond the Catholic canonists in making the buying of indulgence equivalent to the remission of sin. Luther confronted him with the famous Ninety-five Theses, which he nailed on his church door October 31, 1517, and read from the pulpit next day. The gist of them was that God only can pardon sin, and his pardon depends on the sinner's change of heart. Thus the Reformation began in interest for an ethical theology.

The printing-press, then recently invented, became its serviceable and indispensable handmaid. The theses spread everywhere, awakening discussion and attracting support. There was a general meeting of the Augustinian Order next year at Heidelberg, with a public disputation. Germany was in a ferment. A loud call arose for a general council for the reformation of the Church. Pope Leo X., who at first had belittled the trouble as a quarrel of two monks, now bestirred himself. Luther was cited to Rome, but Augsburg was substituted for Rome at the solicitation of his protector, Frederic, Elector of Saxony. There the Papal representatives effected nothing, except that Luther was induced to write apologetically to the Pope, acknowl-