

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION (I)

— THE GERMAN MOVEMENT —

“The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history. It marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. Starting from religion, it gave, directly or indirectly, a mighty impulse to every forward movement, and made Protestantism the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization.”¹

❖ PHILIP SCHAFF

October 31, 1517 is a pivotal date in church history, a signature day in which the course of human events dramatically turned. It was on that date almost five hundred years ago that an unknown Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the front door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. By so doing, this obscure professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg in rural Saxony registered his protest against the abuses of the papacy. In so doing, he called the church to repentance. Little did anyone realize at that time the firestorm that was being unleashing upon the world. This bold act proved to be “the shot heard around the world.” With this public posting, the Reformation was launched.

By virtually all estimates, the Protestant Reformation proved to be the single greatest religious movement since the days of the apostles. It was an event unparalleled in human history, an extraordinary epoch when God impacted not only individuals and churches, but entire nations and cultures as well. The Reformation was not a single act, nor was it led by a single person. This wide-ranging movement in the sixteenth century was played out on a far grander stage. The Reformation was a series of strategic events involving countless people in many different places. At its core, it was an attempt to bring the church, which had become grossly corrupt under Rome, back to the authority of Scripture

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of The Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1910, 1980), 1.

and back to the purity of its first century beginnings. As such, the Reformation was the most far-reaching, history-altering display of God's grace since the days of Pentecost and the early spread of the church.

THE STAGE WAS STRATEGICALLY SET

Under the guiding hand of God, the religious, political, economic, and social setting had been uniquely prepared for the Reformation. The sixteenth century was the best of times and the worse of times, a time ripe for change, a time ready for the Reformation:

- **Religiously.** The sixteenth century was a day of spiritual darkness in the established church. The Bible was a closed book. The gospel had been lost. Church tradition reigned, not the truth. The rottenness of the Catholic church was seen everywhere, from pope to priest, from dogma to practice.
- **Politically.** A political instability had settled into the world. There was a change from a feudal universal state to a territorial nation-state. Unrest was everywhere.
- **Economically.** This was a new day of expanding international trade. Christopher Columbus had just discovered America (1492) and the new world was opening up. There was a rising capitalistic middle class, and new markets were emerging.
- **Culturally.** Momentous opportunity in learning was emerging. Guttenberg's printing press started a major publishing boom (1454). The Renaissance was dawning.
- **Intellectually.** It was a time of renewed interest in education. The Renaissance was spreading a new passion for literature. New universities were dotting the landscape.

The beginning of the sixteenth century was a day ready for significant change. But the *greatest* change that would take place would be the *spiritual* change to be ushered in by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Reformation was ready to occur. In light of this, certain questions beg to be asked: *Where* was the Reformation born? *Where* did it spread? *What* were the issues driving it? *Who* were the key personalities? And *what* were its effects? Let us now trace the story that began with the following:

GERMAN REFORMATION

The Reformation began in the most *unlikely* place – Wittenberg, Germany. It was in that small university town that an *unknown* Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, posted his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church, listing his grievances toward the selling of

indulgences by the Catholic church. It was here the Reformation was launched. Thus, Wittenberg became known as “the cradle of the Reformation.” Truly, it was “the cradle that rocked the world.”

MARTIN LUTHER

As the catalyst of the Reformation, Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the *right man* born at the *right time* to be thrust into the *right cause*. As a Catholic priest and professor, he did not intend to start the revolution that he did. He merely desired to “protest” the abuses of Rome. But what Luther started could *not* be stopped. After nailing his protest document to the church door, it was immediately taken down by his students, printed with the newly-invented printing press, and distributed far and wide. Instantly, the Reformation was *on*. An overview of Luther’s life reveals the following:

1. Luther was born into a German home in which his father, Hans, achieved success in the mining industry (1483). He was able to provide an excellent education for his son, desiring him to become a lawyer.
2. Luther was well-educated, entering the University of Erfurt (1501) where he received his B.A. (1502), his M.A. (1505), and began his study for a law degree.
3. Unexpectedly, Luther experienced a near brush with death in a thunderstorm, prompting him to make a brash vow to become a monk (July, 1505).

Help me, St. Anna, and I will become a monk.²

4. He soon entered the Catholic priesthood at age 23 in an attempt to find acceptance with God through works of self-righteousness (1507).

I tortured myself with prayer, fasting, vigils and freezing; the frost alone might have killed me....What else did I seek by doing this but God, who was supposed to note my strict observance of the monastic order and my austere life? I constantly walked in a dream and lived in real idolatry, for I did not believe in Christ: I regarded Him only as a severe and terrible Judge portrayed as seated on a rainbow.³

5. Though still an unconverted man, Luther distinguished himself and began teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg (1508).

² E.G. Rupp and Benjamin Drewery, eds., *Martin Luther* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), 3.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, vol. 24 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986). [LW 24:24].

6. He made a trip to Rome and was shocked by the gross abuses and hypocrisies of the Catholic system, a discovery which greatly disturbed him (1510-11). “The relics included the rope with which Judas hanged himself, a piece of Moses’s burning bush, the chains of St. Paul, and one of the coins that was paid to Judas for betraying Christ. It was claimed that the steps in front of the Lateran were the very ones that had once stood in front of Pilate’s palace, and if one crawled up all twenty-eight steps on hands and knees repeating the Lord’s Prayer for each step, a soul would be released from purgatory.”⁴

At Rome I wished to liberate my grandfather from purgatory, and went up the staircase of Pilate, praying a *pater noster* on each step; for I was convinced that he who prayed thus could redeem his soul. But when I came to the top step, the thought kept coming to me, “Who knows whether this is true?”⁵

7. He received his Doctor of Theology (October, 1512) and became professor of Bible at Wittenberg, where he first taught Psalms (Summer 1513-October, 1515) and then Romans (1515-17), and then Galatians and Hebrews.
8. Still unconverted, Luther began preaching God’s Word, filling the pulpit at College Church in Wittenberg (1515).
9. Johann Tetzel (1469-1524) came to Germany selling indulgences to pad Rome’s coffers. “Tetzel was a superb salesman and knew how to arouse public interest. He started by entering town in a solemn procession with the papal coat of arms and the bull of indulgence borne aloft on a gold-embroidered velvet cushion. A cross was set up in the marketplace, and Tetzel gave sermons on hell, purgatory, and heaven. He especially appealed to the consciences of his audience when he pointed out how they could aid their deceased parents in purgatory.”⁶

Don’t you hear the voice of your wailing dead parents and others who say, “Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain. From this you could redeem us with a small alms and yet you do not want to do so.” Open your ears as the father says to the son and the mother to the daughter....We created you, fed you, cared for you and left you our temporal goods. Why are you so cruel and harsh that you do not

⁴ Rudolph W. Heinze, *Reform and Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 75.

⁵ S. M. Houghton, *Sketches From Church History* (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980, 2001), 83-84.

⁶ Heinze, *Reform and Conflict*, 82.

want to save us, though it only takes so little? You let us lie in flames so that only slowly do we come to the promised glory.⁷

10. This sale of indulgences by Tetzl provoked Luther to post his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door, which “were copied, translated, printed and spread as on angel’s wings throughout Germany and Europe in a few weeks”⁸ (Oct. 31, 1517).

#1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said repent, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.

#2. This word [repentance] cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.

#21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope’s indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved.

#27. They preach man who say that so soon as the penny jingles into the money-box, the soul flies out [of purgatory].

#32. They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.

#36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.

#62. The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.

11. In great soul-wrestling, Luther came to a dramatic breakthrough. He came to understand that “the just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17) and was “born again.” In the preface to the first volume of his collected Latin works, written in 1545, Luther stated that the experience occurred while he was giving his second lectures on the Psalms, which would place his conversion in 1519.

Meanwhile in that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university courses with St. Paul’s Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the

⁷ Heinze, *Reform and Conflict*, 82.

⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII, 156.

Hebrews. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: “The justice of God is revealed in it.” I hated that word, “justice of God,” which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which He punishes sinners and the unjust.

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, “Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?” This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans I and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: “The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’” I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.” All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which He makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which He makes us wise; the strength of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, “the justice of God,” with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.”⁹

⁹ Luther's Tower Experience: Martin Luther Discovers the True Meaning of Righteousness, An Excerpt from: Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545) by Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546.

12. Luther first expressed his new belief clearly in his sermon on *Two Kinds of Righteousness* in 1519, which provides an essential key to understanding his Reformation breakthrough. In this sermon he stated:

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, He Himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle calls it "the righteousness of God" in Rom. 1: For in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed....as it is written 'the righteous shall live by his faith.'" Finally in the same epistle, chapter 3, such a faith is called "the righteousness of God"....This is the righteousness given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam.¹⁰

13. Luther and Andreas von Carlstadt were challenged to Leipzig by Johann Eck, a distinguished Catholic scholar and professor of theology (June 27-July 16, 1519). Eck and Carlstadt began the debate by discussing the questions of grace and free will. When Luther arrived, the subject changed to the question of papal authority. Luther stated that papal authority was of recent origin, and contradicted Scripture, the Council of Nicaea, and church history. Luther said:

I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. A council cannot make divine right out of that which by nature is not divine right. Councils have contradicted each other....A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without....Neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and council.¹¹

14. Now a regenerate man, Luther wrote three provocative polemics (1520). The first was *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, which called upon the German nobility to reform the church, since the papacy and church councils had failed to do so. He argued that the pope and the priesthood built walls around themselves to protect from any reform, namely, that only the pope and priest had superior power and could alone interpret Scripture. Luther demolished these artificial walls, establishing the priesthood of *all* believers:

Translated by Bro. Andrew Thornton, OSB from the "Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe, 1545" in vol. 4 of *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, ed. Otto Clemen, 6th ed., (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967). Pp. 421-428.

¹⁰ John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 87-88.

¹¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), 89. [Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 116-117.]

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate....all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is among them no difference except that of office....[the] “claim that only the pope may interpret Scripture is an outrageous fancied fable.”¹²

15. Two months later, Luther wrote *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, which attacked the entire sacramental system of the Catholic church, denying the sacrificial efficacy of the mass. Further, he insisted that both the bread and wine be given to the laity. At this time, the cup was withheld from the laity.
16. The third tract was written for the pope, entitled *Freedom of the Christian Man*, teaching the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Even Antichrist himself, if he should come, could think of nothing to add to its [the papacy's] wickedness....A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all....he needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone abundantly confers all those things....and all sin is swallowed up by the righteousness of Christ.¹³

17. Luther was issued a Papal Bull (a papal edict sealed with a bulla or red seal), threatening his excommunication from the Catholic church within sixty days if he did not repent. Forty one of his beliefs were judged as “heretical, or scandalous, or false, or offensive to pious ears, or seductive of simple minds, or repugnant to Catholic truth.” Luther publicly burned the bull (June 15, 1520). The papal bull began:

Arise, O Lord, and judge Thy cause. A wild boar has invaded Thy vineyard.¹⁴

18. Luther was summoned to the imperial Diet of Worms and told to recant of his books. He courageously refused (April 18, 1521). Before Charles V, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, he addressed the council and issued his now-famous declaration:

¹² Denis R. Janz, *A Reformation Reader* (Minneapolis:Augsburg Fortress, 1999). [Janz, *Reformation Reader*, 91] [Ibid, 91] [Ibid, 93].

¹³ Janz, *A Reformation Reader*, 100, 104.

¹⁴ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982, 1995), 237.

I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

19. Luther was placed under imperial ban and ordered that all his books be burned. On the way home, his friends kidnapped him and hid him in the Wartburg castle for nearly a year, where he began his translation of the Bible into German (1521-2).

I shall remain here in seclusion till Easter, and write postils, and translate the New Testament into German, which so many people are anxious to have....Would to God that every town had its interpreter, and that this book could be had in every language and dwell in the hearts and hands of all.¹⁵

20. In response to a damaging book written by Erasmus, the Dutch humanist, on the freedom of the will, Luther responded with his defining work, *Bondage of the Will* (1524).

- Luther thanked Erasmus for going to “the root of the controversy” instead of troubling him “about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and other fooleries.” “I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account—that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue.”¹⁶
- He affirmed the total depravity of man’s nature, and the absolute sovereignty of God’s grace. Unconverted man cannot believe unless sovereign grace enables him to do so. Luther wrote:

[A] man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief....being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily. And this willingness of volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter. He goes on willing and desiring to do evil; and if external pressure forces him to act otherwise, nevertheless his will within remains averse to so doing and chafes under such constraint and opposition.¹⁷

¹⁵Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 24 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955-1986), 98. [LW 48:356.]

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans J.I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 319.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 102.

- He represents the human will as a horse or donkey which goes just as the rider directs it. The Devil is that rider of the unconverted man, controlling his will. God is the Rider of the will of the one in the state of grace.
 - He stated that he had many “generals” at his disposal, whom he could call into this battle. But only two such valiant warriors were needed to defeat the vain notion of free will—the apostles John and Paul. These two “generals” alone would rout the enemies of the bondage of man’s will to sin, and uphold the freedom of God’s will to save whom it pleases Him.
21. Luther, age forty-two, married Katherine von Bora, twenty-six years old, a former nun (1525), who bore him six children. He stated that he married so to upset the pope, and “make the angels laugh and the devils weep.”¹⁸ He had an extremely happy and rich family life, though often disrupted by the demands of his ministry.
 22. Luther’s influence expanded throughout Germany and many of the surrounding countries through this and his other writings. Students came from far and wide throughout Europe to learn from this great Reformer, including Scotland and England.
 23. From 1527, Luther’s health began to degenerate quickly. He was stricken by tightness in the chest, dizziness, and fainting spells (April, 1527). He experienced periods of weakness so severe that he feared he was about to die (July, 1527). In a letter to Philip Melanchthon, he wrote:

I spent more than a week in death and in hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below.¹⁹

24. That very year (1527), the Black Plague swept through Germany and Luther chose to remain in Wittenberg, rather than flee as so many did, to minister to the needs of the people. He opened his home to become a hospital and in the process, he almost lost his young son to death. In this soul-crushing experience, he wrote his most famous hymn, a work based on Psalm 46. We know it as *A Mighty Fortress*.

¹⁸ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985-1993), Vol. 1, 230.

¹⁹ Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, 211.

A might fortress is our God
A bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe
His craft and pow'r are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

25. By 1528, the Reformation under Luther's influence had swept across Germany. The major cities had embraced the new cause: Erfurt, Magdeburg, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, and Bremen. Other German principalities followed suite: Hesse, Brandenburg, Brunswick-Luneburg, Schleswig-Holstein, Mansfeld, and Silesia.²⁰
26. Luther wrote the *Small Catechism*, a concise doctrinal statement, for the laity, due to "the deplorable, miserable condition of the German people doctrinally (1529). This was followed by the *Large Catechism* for the clergy.

The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! Many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach....Nevertheless, all maintain they are Christians, have been baptized and receive the [common] holy Sacraments. Yet they....cannot....recite the Lord's Prayer, or the Creed, or the Ten Commandments: they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts.²¹

27. Luther lived with his wife Katie and their six children, three boys and three girls. Due to the demands of their large family, Elector John the Steadfast gave Luther the monastery in which to live (1532), a three-story building with forty rooms on just the first floor. There he lived and hosted his students and many visitors. It was here that his dinner dialogues with guests were compiled into his *Table Talks*.
28. Toward the end of his life, Luther was asked to explain the Reformation. How had such a powerful, history-altering work come about? Luther responded:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept....the Word so greatly weakened

²⁰ Heinze, *Reform and Conflict*, 106.

²¹ *Luther's Works*, 54:50.

the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.²²

29. Before Luther died, he wrote his last will and testament, which began with the words: “I am well known in heaven, on earth, and in hell.”²³ In his last moments, Luther was asked by his friend Justus Jonas, “Do you want to die standing firm on Christ and the doctrine you have taught?” The answer was “Ja!” He died in Eisleben (February 18, 1546). Luther’s last words were:

We are beggars. This is true.²⁴

THE CALL FOR A NEW REFORMATION

This first study of the Reformation should ignite a blazing passion within the hearts of God’s people for a new Reformation in this hour. Here we see the heroic examples of brave men and women who have gone before us. As we consider their steady faith, we should be inspired to carry the torch of God’s truth in this dark hour of human history today. In every generation, there must be new reformers who will step to the forefront and champion the cause of God’s Word. History has always hinged upon the few, who are willing to stand for the truth, no matter what others choose to believe or do.

A right study of history is always inspiring and encouraging. Such a survey allows us to trace the invisible hand of God at work in this dark world. May we stand strong in this present hour, knowing that we stand in a long line of godly men that reaches back to past centuries. We are not disconnected from those who have gone before us. Rather, we follow gallant men who have shed “blood, sweat, toil, and tears” to advance the gospel to this point. God forbid that we be unfaithful after so many have invested so much to put the torch of truth into our hands. Let us hold it high for all to see.

This is *our* hour on the stage of human history. This is *our* leg to run in the race set before us by God. The baton has been faithfully passed into our hands. Now, we must run with endurance while we have life and breath, not dropping the baton, until with our last dying breath, we place it securely into the hands of the next generation.

Soli Deo Gloria.

²² Ernest Gordon Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms 1521* (London; SCM, 1951), 99.

²³ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII, 821.

²⁴ As quoted by John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 111. [Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 324.]