

# The Long Reformation: Lutheran

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1517	Luther's <i>Ninety-Five Theses</i>
1519	Charles V elected Emperor
1520	Luther's <i>Reformation Treatises</i>
1521	Charles V issues Edict of Worms
1524–26	German Peasants' War
1529	Protestation of Speyer
1531	Ferdinand I elected King of the Romans
1531	Protestant League of Schmalkalden
1545–63	Council of Trent
1546/47	War of the League of Schmalkalden
1547	Battle of Mühlberg
1548	Interim of Augsburg
1555	Religious Peace of Augsburg

## Germany - a special case?

In the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation' the Reformation took hold rapidly and with greater early popular support than in other European countries. This head start cannot be explained solely in terms of the charismatic personality of Martin Luther. (Figure III.3) In all eras outstanding leaders require favourable conditions to persuade large populations to change their outlook on the world.

In many respects the Church faced the same challenges in Germany as elsewhere: widespread dissatisfaction with the materialism which made it unable to fulfil the spiritual longings of the faithful; incipient nationalism directed against foreigners; and the threat to accepted ideas from Christian HUMANISM, notably through the writings of Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536). ('Renaissance' in Part IV) Yet certain circumstances in the Empire were exceptional. Its political structure gave opportunities less common in ordinary monarchies for the Reformers to receive local protection. The imperial estates – princes, free cities and nobles who stood between the Emperor and the ordinary nobles, townsfolk and peasants – enjoyed a partial autonomy which enabled them to introduce the Reformation although Emperor Charles V (1519–58) had condemned Luther's ideas at Worms (1521). During the previous century, and especially since 1500, the Empire experienced more serious peasant uprisings and urban social conflicts than elsewhere. When disturbances multiplied in the 1520s,



**Figure III.3.** In an imaginary encounter, Luther - dressed as an Augustinian monk - is seen debating with the Pope, a cardinal, a bishop and another monk during the Diet of Worms (woodcut, 1521) (Web resources).

the Reformation fed off them to gain support. Cultural distinctiveness also favoured the adoption of new ideas. From 1518 the printing press, a mid-fifteenth century German invention already used for religious books, classical literature and the spread of popular culture, provided pamphlets and broadsheets for disseminating Lutheran teachings. ('From Pen to Print' in Part IV) Another such instrument was the sermon: Germany had an especially strong tradition of preaching in the towns and by the mendicant orders. (Moeller 1972)

Hostile attitudes towards the Church remained singularly intense while outward signs of religious activity grew. Plentiful new religious endowments, pilgrimages and cults like that of the Virgin Mary were reinforced by thousands of religious guilds created by lay people for the care of the poor and sick. Increased reading of the Bible – not available in the vernacular, by contrast, in England – and devotion to private prayer were accompanied by greater belief in miracles and relics. Paradoxically, while ordinary Christians relieved their anxieties about personal salvation by the material means encouraged by the Church, such as paying for masses for the dead or buying INDULGENCES, they disliked the growing wealth of the clergy at their expense. Anticlericalism and anti-papalism were rife. The papacy was wrongly believed to be sucking large sums of money from the Empire. There was more substance behind the economic and religious complaints by laymen against the German clergy, whose behaviour was in many instances far from spiritual. The ecclesiastical princes and monasteries owned about a third of cultivated land in the countryside and an even greater share of urban property. The land-owning prelates were often the local rulers – a rare combination in Europe – and would bear the brunt of Luther's attack.

## Martin Luther - the message and its dissemination

By 1517 Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a monk of 12 years' standing and a renowned theologian and university professor at Wittenberg in Saxony. His mixed social background helped him to gain wide appeal. Son of a farmer who became a miner and a mother from the upper ranks of small-town society, in 1525 he married Katherine von Bora, a renegade nun of the lower nobility. While studying the Bible, the Church Fathers, the medieval scholastics and late medieval mysticism, he wrestled for years with the fundamental teachings of the Church until matters came to a head in 1517. In the *Ninety-Five Theses* his first public dispute with the Church was over indulgences, the sale by the Papacy of remission of penalties imposed by God on souls in PURGATORY. Luther attacked not just papal venality, but the theory behind indulgences that the Pope could make grants to the faithful from the treasury of merits accumulated by Christ and the saints over and above what they had needed for their own salvation. As indulgences were part of the 'works' which, alongside faith, the Church considered essential for salvation, the conflict grew into a fundamental one over the nature of salvation, which Luther insisted was achieved through 'JUSTIFICATION by faith alone'. For him justification was God's gift alone, an act of grace making righteous an unrighteous sinner who has faith in Christ. Sinners cannot assist by their own efforts, but may hope that the sacrifice of Christ through His suffering on the cross will earn them pardon. In this 'theology of the cross', Luther now saw God as more merciful than judgemental.

Luther grounded these views in the Bible. Now the most deep-seated disagreement followed, [delete: namely that] over the nature of authority in the Church. During debates with emissaries from Pope Leo X between 1517 and 1519, Luther successively rejected the authority of the popes, the general councils of the Church and canon law as interpreters of Scripture in favour of the pure Gospel, the Word of God alone. Yet Luther's interpretation of the Bible was selective, in that he and his closest associate, Philipp Melanchthon (in *Loci Communes*, 1521), played down the significance of passages which contradicted their view of justification.

With justification by faith alone were linked other essential beliefs. The PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS expressed Luther's view that all were in direct communication with God, enjoying 'Christian freedom'; priests were not intermediaries but ministers appointed to perform certain functions for the community. Catholic commentators on Luther's *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520) saw this demotion of the priesthood and rejection of the whole apparatus of the Church as Luther's most revolutionary tenet. In the Lutheran SACRAMENT of the Eucharist, the faith of the recipient was essential, so that the rite was not a sacrifice but a thanksgiving; lay people were now allowed to receive both bread and wine. Luther decried the doctrine of TRANSUBSTANTIATION, although he did believe in a REAL PRESENCE of Christ. The seven sacraments were reduced to just baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both monasticism, as another form of works, and clerical celibacy were rejected.

Over the next decades these teachings were elaborated in Latin treatises for the benefit of Luther's clerical supporters and to rebut his opponents, as well as for a few educated members of the laity, but his main appeal for ordinary people lay in his parallel programme to Christianize the whole of Europe, to return Christians to the true piety and right living which he contended the medieval church had obscured. (Hendrix 2004) He wrote popular pamphlets and published sermons in German, using both the humanist arts of persuasion and earthy language, folk tales and proverbs. (Box 1)

### Box 1

'a good and attentive barber keeps his thought, attention and eyes on the razor and hair and does not forget how far he has got with his shaving or cutting. If he wants to engage in too much conversation or let his mind wander or look somewhere else he is likely to cut his customer's mouth, nose or even his throat. Thus if anything is to be done well, it requires the full attention of all one's senses. ... How much more does prayer call for concentration and singleness of heart if it is to be a good prayer!'

*(Extract from Martin Luther, A Practical Way to Pray, 1535; Lull and Russell 2012, 36)*

Luther's advice for his barber is one example of his guidance on everyday problems of religious and social life: the Ten Commandments, the liturgy and music of services or the proper use of Church property, but also marriage, usury, the education of children and the organization of poor relief. He encouraged neighbourly good deeds, but as the natural outcome of Christian faith and love, no longer as a means to salvation.

Other Wittenberg university theologians and many clerical and lay preachers helped to disseminate Luther's teachings. The sermon was the prime means of reaching the 90 per cent of the population who were illiterate, alongside other forms of aural and visual communication, such as hymns, ballads, school plays, informal discussions in taverns, and processions. Robert Scribner's brilliant interpretations of woodcut illustrations in single-leaf broadsheets, books and pamphlets illuminate early Reformation mentalities. (Scribner 1994; Figures III.4–5) Yet he only claimed that they were the first point of attraction, especially by means of a simplified anticlericalism and anti-papalism, but not the principal medium for conveying new doctrine.

More sceptical historians have argued that most woodcuts were too expensive and complex for the illiterate, requiring an ability to read captions, while evidence is slight for reading aloud and explanations by the literate. (Pettegree 2005, 104–20) The main purpose of illustrations was to make the messages of the printed word more effective; similarly, Reformation paintings like those of the Cranachs, father and son, were chiefly accessible to the elites. All forms of communication were interconnected, but



**Figures III.4 and III.5.** 'Christ Drives out the Money Changers' and 'The Pope Receives Revenues from Indulgences'. Examples from a series of woodcuts by Lucas Cranach the Elder, contrasting scenes from Christ's passion with activities of the ANTICHRIST. Cranach and Melanchthon 1521.

printed materials were the essential conduit to those who could read and convey ideas to others.

## Peasant and urban Reformations

While peasants admired the heroic figure of Luther standing up to Pope and Emperor, and while some may have grasped his evangelical teachings, the majority were initially attracted by the social messages read into Luther's writings by Thomas Müntzer and other local religious leaders who mistook Luther's intentions. Slogans like 'the Word of God', 'the LIBERTY OF A CHRISTIAN' and 'brotherly love' were used as ideological justification for throwing off serfdom and securing relief from long-standing economic and social burdens. Peasant actions in their revolt of 1524–26 were justified by recourse to 'divine law', the idea – derived from the Zurich Reformer Huldrych Zwingli, not Luther – that social disputes should be resolved by the Bible, not ancient custom. ('Rebels and Revolutionaries' in Part V) After their defeat many peasants returned to the practices of Catholicism, from which they had hardly deviated, or, in relatively small numbers, became Anabaptists. ('Religious Culture' in Part III) The task of truly converting peasants devolved on state churches for the rest of the century and beyond.

The Empire had many large, prosperous towns, especially the imperial cities in the South. The Reformation's advance in Augsburg, Frankfurt, Nuremberg,

Strasbourg and the majority of cities was furthered by preachers, humanists, town clerks and lawyers. Geoffrey Dickens credited the cities with saving the Reformation in the 1520s, when few princes supported it and once the peasant uprisings had been suppressed. (Dickens 1974) Following the German historian Bernd Moeller, he argued that the Reformation was introduced into the cities as a result of popular pressure inspired by preachers, whereas the ruling councils were a brake on the movement. Moreover, where the urban constitution was more 'democratic', with guild participation alongside the hereditary patricians, a more Zwinglian rather than Lutheran Reformation was adopted. Only after the Reformation had been introduced did city councils establish a fully-fledged new Church and mould it to reinforce their rule.

Recent research suggests considerable modifications to this pattern. By the 1520s most ruling councillors were sympathetic to reform but cautious about abandoning the Catholic Church for fear of antagonizing the Emperor and neighbouring Catholic princes and out of concern for their trade and the preservation of public order. Popular pressure pushed them further and faster on the road to Reformation, but it was a path they would anyway probably have taken. Whether Zwinglian or Lutheran teachings were adopted depended more on proximity to Switzerland and the theological leanings of the urban Reformers than on a city's constitution. Strasbourg, which inclined towards the Swiss position, had earlier admitted guild representatives to its council, but was by now as oligarchically governed as staunchly Lutheran Nuremberg, which had no guilds. Peter Blickle has postulated a 'communal Reformation', a parallel and combined movement of peasants under lordly rule and townsmen under the oligarchs, both seeking control over their own religious institutions until defeated in 1525/6. (Blickle 1992) Although similar tendencies were evident, however, cooperation between the two groups was negligible and based on expediency.

The caution of city magistrates meant that urban Reformations were often long-drawn-out. Wimpfen adopted eight different forms of religious allegiance between 1523 and 1635. The chequered course of the Reformation in Strasbourg only concluded in 1598, when it had become purely Lutheran. (Abrey 1985) Zwinglian influences declined everywhere in the 1540s, partly because urban rule was becoming more autocratic, but more important were Zwingli's death (1531) and the cities' alliance with Lutheran principalities in the SCHMALKALDIC LEAGUE. Charles V believed that guild participation in government encouraged a rebellious and extreme Protestant outlook. After defeating the Protestants (1547) he introduced the Interim of Augsburg (1548), a compromise between the faiths weighted towards Catholicism. To encourage the southern cities to accept the Interim and resume loyalty to him and to Catholicism, Charles changed the constitutions of half of them to concentrate power on an inner ring of patricians. He had miscalculated, since by now the majority of patricians were Lutheran and few cities returned, as did Augsburg, to Catholicism. Urban 'South German Reformed' influences disappeared, albeit to re-emerge in several principalities after 1555.

## Princely Reformations

The motives of princely rulers are often misrepresented. They did not adopt the Reformation principally to seize church lands or to oppose the Emperor. Most were reluctant to cross the Emperor unless for strong political reasons, and many delayed to join the evangelical minority for fear of being outlawed. At the Protestation of Speyer (1529), which gave the movement its name, only six princes and 14 cities signed a declaration rejecting reimposition of the Edict of Worms against Luther's works.

Religious changes sometimes did serve princely political interests, as in Hesse or Württemberg, but political weapons were also used to serve the genuine religious convictions of princes no less than of town authorities. Like Philip of Hesse, some rulers engaged in theological study. Often it took a change of generation in the dynasty and the influence of women relatives or evangelical advisers before the Reformation was introduced. Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony moved towards the Lutheran standpoint before his death, but his earlier protection of Luther was of his own subject against the Pope, and any reforming measures from above had to wait until the succession of his brother John (1525). John's son, John Frederick, was even prepared to sacrifice all to his religious principles. Captured by Charles V at Mühlberg in 1547, he rejected an offer of freedom and restoration to his lands if he converted. Few princes were prepared to be martyrs, but the majority should not be branded as land grabbers. Moreover, the Wittelsbach dukes of Bavaria showed that it was possible to tax the clergy heavily with papal consent, to take control of church administration and to resist the authority of the Emperor while remaining staunchly Catholic.

From the 1530s the fate of the Reformation lay with the princes, who governed the majority of the German population and began to accept the Reformation in larger numbers, if only, as in Pomerania, because most of their nobles and towns had already converted. In 1520 Luther had not wanted the princes to control a new Church, merely to initiate reform. By 1525, however, in Saxony as elsewhere the old institutions were collapsing, the income of the Church was draining away and firm control was needed to restore order and provide for the education of clergy, the redirected use of church property and the visitation of the parishes. Only the princes had the authority and bureaucratic means to replace the inactive bishops. These were Luther's prime reasons for turning to the ruler as an 'emergency bishop', not his undoubted concern at the damage wreaked by the Peasants' War. However, rulers had no intention of abandoning their newly-found power. Luther became the partly reluctant supporter of state churches, occasionally protesting when rulers instructed the clergy on what they should preach. Rulers used their power to consolidate the Church, but also the Church to consolidate their power. With Luther's blessing bishoprics and monastic lands were incorporated (especially in northern Germany), universities reformed (or newly founded under princely control) and school education, poor relief and the regulation of marriage all became part of the state portfolio.

## Reformation politics

Although until 1530 Charles V was distracted by his wars with France and the Ottomans from devoting sufficient attention to the Reformation in Germany, the complex politics of the Empire contributed as much as foreign wars to his eventual failure to regain the allegiance of the Protestants. For long Charles remained undecided between a policy of repression and one of conciliation, the latter inspired by the ideas of Erasmus. In the 1530s the new problem emerged of an armed Protestant League against the Emperor. In addition many Protestant rulers no longer accepted the decisions of the imperial court on such politico-religious issues as the possession of church lands. Imperial authority was under threat, not just religious unity. Charles had to defeat the League if the title of Emperor was to have significance, but he still did not rely solely on force to achieve a religious settlement. A major aim of the war (1546/47) was to compel the Protestants to attend the Council of Trent, but Charles, unlike the Pope, envisaged genuine discussions with them at the Council, not a mere *Diktat*. Even after defeating them he reverted to attempting a compromise in the Interim, although neither religious party would accept it.

Political factors inclined Charles V towards a peaceful solution between 1530 and 1545. There was no strong Catholic party among the princes to support him. Most bishops feared for their own privileges and would not undertake the Church reforms Charles considered necessary before imposing religious uniformity. Bavaria, the main secular Catholic principality, resisted both any increase in Habsburg power and concessions to the Protestants. For over a decade, a large neutral group of Protestant and Catholic princes, including the majority of the seven electors, 12 bishops and several lay principalities and imperial cities negotiated to bring the extremists to a compromise. They helped to avert war until 1546 and later worked towards a religious peace.

The Peace of Augsburg (1555) was a political solution to the religious problem. (Gotthard 2004) The Catholics were the underdogs after Charles V's military defeat in 1552 by the revived Protestants, who frittered away their advantage to benefit selfish territorial interests. It was an archbishop who proposed the main principle of the peace: that each ruler determine the religion of his lands (summarized later as *cuius regio, eius religio*). The treaty did not grant the Lutherans parity with the Catholics, but grudging acceptance. The concessions were limited by the ecclesiastical reservation forbidding conversion of any ecclesiastical principality to Protestantism. The treaty also denied imperial cities the right to introduce the Reformation where not already established. Another imperfection, the omission of Calvinism, was understandable since it had not yet gained hold in any principality. These loopholes left room for the later creation of rival politico-religious parties and eventually the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War. (See 'Dynastic Politics c. 1500–1650' in Part V)

Political factors likewise put a brake on the advances of Lutheranism in Bohemia, Hungary and Poland, but accelerated it in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries.

Originally alongside Norway under the rule of the king of Denmark, Sweden/Finland secured independence in 1523 after a revolt under the leadership of Gustavus Vasa, who introduced the Reformation in 1536.

## The Reformation - success or failure?

How successful the Reformation proved in changing popular religious attitudes is disputed. Around 1530 Luther and his fellow clergy were optimistic about their mission's success with the next generation influenced by their schooling and catechisms, but 30 years later the Reformers were despondent. Inspections made in the countryside by Protestant rulers confirmed that the clergy's competence had not risen much above the pre-Reformation level, attendance at church was poor and knowledge by the laity of the catechism was rote learning without understanding and quickly forgotten after childhood. (Box 2) The towns had preachers and schools of better quality, but the Reformers complained also about the lack of true religion there. Critics have argued that the often anecdotal evidence should not be accepted at face value, and that where visitations were regular they gradually raised the standard of religious observance, as in the villages subject to the city of Strasbourg. (Kittelson 1982) On a wider canvass, improvements did occur, as in parts of the duchy of Württemberg, but the task took most of the sixteenth century.

### Box 2

'Those who come to service are usually drunk. As soon as they sit down they lean their heads on their hands and sleep through the whole sermon, except that they fall off the benches, making a great clatter, or women drop their babies on the floor.'

*(Extract from a visitation report from the county of Nassau-Wiesbaden in 1594;  
Strauss 1978, 284)*

Although the Reformers swept away the Catholic practices they considered harmful, peasants were selective in which Lutheran teachings they adopted. The slow winning of hearts and minds was patchy. Explanations can easily be found. By the later sixteenth century Lutheranism was taken over by Orthodox rigidity with a less human face than in Luther's day. The Lutherans dissipated their energies in doctrinal quarrels and in combatting other Protestant denominations and the Anabaptists, failing to concentrate their energies on improving the quality of education and ministers. The Lutheran clergy became a hereditary caste, an academically trained elite with allegiances divided between their employer (the state) and their communities, so that anticlericalism re-emerged. In many regions the territorial nobles, towns and village elites resisted interference by the state and did not fully encourage the new churches. Religious apathy grew wherever the official religion changed several times. An Upper Palatinate peasant complained of having to 'bend like a reed in the

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wind'. By mid-century the earlier adversity which had spurred Protestant minorities to enthusiasm yielded to indifference under state-controlled religion, with the significant exception of Bavaria and southern German bishoprics where they remained a disadvantaged minority. In the countryside popular belief in SACRAMENTALS, magic and recourse to cunning men and wise women remained stronger than religious doctrine. The Reformation had radically altered the institutions of Church and State, but human nature hardly at all.

*Discussion themes*

1. How much did the Reformation in Germany owe to Luther's personality and ideas?
2. Did political circumstances help or hinder the advance of Lutheranism?
3. How popular was the Reformation in the Empire?

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