

The Continental Reformation.

BY THE REV. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

V.—THE REFORMATION IN GERMANY : LUTHER.

IF Erasmus is the great representative figure of the Renaissance, unquestionably the hero of the Reformation is Luther. Although it is quite true to say that the great reforming convulsion would have taken place if Luther had never lived, yet it is also true to say that it is impossible to understand the Reformation as it actually took place without understanding the life and character of Luther. The man and the work are so indissolubly united that we cannot have right judgments about either without considering the other.

This is not the case with all men who have attempted great things and achieved great results. We can sometimes judge, and judge rightly, of the work without knowing anything of the man who produced it, as in the case of many of the great poems and great pictures. And we can sometimes judge quite rightly about the man without taking into account his greatest achievements, as in the case of many of the great discoverers and inventors. Even with regard to those who took a leading part in the crisis of the Reformation, we can think of them as living at a different period, in quite different surroundings, and yet our estimate of them and of their influence on society would not be very different from what it is now. We can easily think of the gentle, peace-loving Melancthon living as the friend and helper of Basil or Anselm, of George Herbert or Fénelon, aiding them, in their troubled times, to live in piety and usefulness, as scholars and divines, in all sobriety and honesty. With any of these he would have been much the same man, and would have produced much the same kind of work, as he was and did in his position as the friend and helper of Luther. We feel that we should think of him then, as we think of him now, working earnestly for the well-being and peace of Christendom, sometimes willing

to make too great sacrifices for peace, but always yearning to be freed from "the wrath of the theologians."

Again, we can imagine Leo X. as living a century earlier or a century later, and being very much what he was in the sixteenth century: evading difficulties with his placable smile, as if nothing in this world were worth worrying about, so long as life (by any means whatever) could be made artistically enjoyable, and the Papacy be maintained without serious diminution of power. His "intellectual sensuality" would have been the same in any age, and Sarpi's sarcastic (is it sarcastic?) estimate of him would in any environment hold good. He was a Pope "absolutely complete, if with these sympathies he had joined some knowledge in things that concern religion, and some more propension unto piety, of both of which he seemed careless." Moreover, we can understand the sixteenth century without Leo X.

But we cannot do the same with Luther. Place Luther in any other age, and he is Luther no longer. Think of the sixteenth century without Luther, and the history of it becomes confusion. The man and his work come before us, not as more or less harmonious elements, but as a unity, and we cannot analyze either without constant reference to the other. And if this is true of the Reformation movement as a whole, it is specially true of the Reformation in Germany. Here Luther is the one great man of his age, and there is no second.

But let us remind ourselves what we mean by this. We have agreed to regard the Reformation as a *religious* movement, although it was several other things—some of them of the highest importance—as well. It is only with this limitation that Luther is the one great man. He is great only in the sphere of religion. He was no great scholar; he never learnt Hebrew, he never quite mastered Greek, and he was himself aware that his Latin was somewhat rough. It is impossible in this respect to place him on a level with Erasmus, or Reuchlin, or his own disciple and younger colleague, Melanchthon. Luther often admitted that he was not equal to Melanchthon in learning—

“If the Lord will, Philip will beat many Martins”—but in influence Luther was immeasurably superior.

Although the University of Erfurt, at which Luther took his degree in 1502, had been one of the earliest to welcome the New Learning, and although, when he entered the convent of the Augustinian Hermits, he took Plautus and Virgil with him, Luther was no Humanist. During his University career he avoided the Humanist lectures, and in the monastery he had very different subjects to occupy his thoughts. He had no sympathy with the culture and art of his age; and during his stay in Rome in 1511, it was not its buildings or its artistic treasures which greatly impressed him. He used often to speak of his humble birth; he said that he was a peasant and the son of peasants. Such origin, followed by the education of a monk, was not likely to result in any great enthusiasm for the Renaissance—at any rate on its non-religious side.

But in the history of the religious life of the Continent in the first half of the sixteenth century Luther has the first place. And he never sank to the second place. The closing years of his life were comparatively tranquil, there being no great controversy for which a leader was required. But Luther never became a subordinate in the movement which he had himself started. He was influenced by others, and he was influenced still more by the results of his own actions; and in the end these results carried him much farther than he had originally intended to go. But so long as a controlling mind was needed, he retained the control; and, in spite of his own doctrine, he retained his freewill. He never became a mere swimmer, carried along by the flood which he himself let loose.

And we must remember that, in considering the religious movement of which Luther was the leader and the life, we have decided to adopt the religious point of view. In the marvellous success which he won we recognize results which are not adequately explained either by his force and ability or by his opportunities. They are results “which historians, the least prone to credulity, ascribe to Divine Providence. Though none

of the Reformers possessed, or professed to possess, supernatural gifts, yet that wonderful preparation of circumstances which disposed the minds of men for receiving their doctrines, that singular combination of causes which enabled men destitute of power and policy to triumph over those who employed against them extraordinary efforts of both, may be considered as no slight proof that the same Hand which planted the Christian religion protected the reformed faith, and reared it to an amazing degree of vigour and maturity."¹

Probably there is no class of writers that deals more habitually in misrepresentation than religious controversialists; and among religious controversialists there is perhaps no one more easy to misrepresent, or more frequently misrepresented by his opponents, than Luther.² He was a man of intense convictions, and his convictions were always in a state of development. He went on from strength to strength; but his way of stating one strong position was not always in harmony with his way of stating the other strong positions which had preceded it. His heart burned within him, and he could not keep silence, and when he did speak with tongue or pen he did not stop to weigh his words. What he had got to say in attacking what he believed to be false and mischievous, or in teaching what he believed to be Scriptural truth, was blurted out, sometimes in exaggerated or paradoxical statements, from which an adroit opponent can easily extract absurdities and contradictions. And yet there are cases in which a teacher may find paradoxes and inconsistencies to be useful and even necessary. Some of us have heard Ruskin declare that in lecturing on Art he was never satisfied until he had contradicted himself several times; there were so many sides to be considered. In this respect, Luther is as simple, both in mind and method, as the writers of Scripture; and it is not difficult to find inconsistencies in some of them. In both cases we may quote the very words used, and draw a perfectly logical conclusion from them; and yet the conclusion is not what

¹ Robertson, "Life of Charles V.," ii., pp. 104 *et seq.*

² J. B. Mozley, "Essays," i., pp. 321 *et seq.*, 375 *et seq.*

the writer taught, and perhaps our interpretation of the words is not what he meant. No doubt Luther was incautious and vehement, and sometimes flung about strong words very wildly: but an enthusiast is not to be judged by his extreme utterances, any more than the character of a nation is to be inferred from the frenzy of its mobs.

Romanists and others who abominate the substance of Luther's teaching sometimes dwell upon the violence and coarseness of his language, and it is easy to cite examples. It was a violent and coarse age, and in this matter Luther is not so great a transgressor, according to our standards, as some of his contemporaries. Moreover, he was not the first to use such weapons. As Erasmus points out in a letter to the Elector of Mainz (November 1, 1519), "Luther has ventured to raise doubts about indulgences, but other people had previously made shameless assertions about them; he has ventured to speak rather strongly about the power of the Pope, but those others had written a great deal too strongly in support of it;" and so forth. His enemies flung fierce words at him, and he flung fierce words back. He could not, he said, go softly, as Melanchthon did. "That I am vehement is not to be wondered at. If you were in my place, you too would be vehement." He was dealing with evils which did not admit of either gentle remedies or compromise—*Mein handel ist nicht ein Mittel handel*—and concessions only encouraged the enemy. Christ and His Apostles had used strong language in dealing with similar evils, and their condemnations are remembered. If one wants to make an impression one must call things by their right names. As Heine said, "The polish of Erasmus, the benignity of Melanchthon, would never have brought us so far as the divine brutality of Brother Martin." There is no reason to believe that the men of his own generation were often shocked by either his vehemence or his scurrility. Some of the Humanists became disgusted, but most people liked invective, and they felt that in this case it had been provoked and was often just. Twenty or more years after he had written it, Luther says of one of his fiercest attacks: "I

have read my book over again, and I wonder how it was that I was so moderate.”¹

The greatness of Luther is more clearly seen when one compares him with other leaders in the same field on one side or the other. We must defer till another paper any comparison between him and Zwingli, or between him and Calvin. Let us look at him once more side by side with Erasmus. Both of them had begun their career with an experience of monastic life, but in very different ways. Erasmus had tried the life because he could not help himself. Those who had charge of him had made him enter a monastery, and he escaped from it as soon as he could conveniently do so. Luther had adopted the monastic life of his own freewill, very deliberately, and against the wishes of his father, who for years could not get over this act of his very promising son.² He adopted it in a spirit of earnest self-consecration, believing that it was for him the best means, if not the only means, of saving his soul. And no one reading his account of his experiences in the convent can doubt that he gave the system a full trial. If anyone could have been saved by such a system, he would have been, he says. The other friars thought him a saint, on account of his rigorous asceticism in fastings, watchings, and frequent devotions, both public and private. That he submitted to the strictest rules is less than the truth : he welcomed and augmented any strictness that his Superiors suggested to him ; indeed, his scrupulosity was more exacting than their rigour. And he found it all utterly unsatisfying : he could not by any such methods quiet his conscience and attain peace of mind. This is how he writes about it to George Spanheim, another Augustinian, April 7, 1516, about eighteen months before he nailed up his ninety-five Theses at Wittenberg : “ The temptation to rest in one’s own works is very strong, especially with those who wish to be good and pious. They are ignorant of God’s righteousness, which has been so richly bestowed on us in Christ without money and

¹ McGiffert, “ Martin Luther, the Man and his Work,” p. 154.

² See Luther’s letter to his father, November 21, 1521. Stories about his having been frightened into taking this step, or having taken it impulsively in a fit of strong emotion, are not very credible.

price, and they try to do good of themselves, till they fancy that they can appear before God adorned with every grace ; but they never get thus far. You yourself, when you were with us in Erfurt, suffered from this illusion, or rather delusion ; and I also was a martyr to it, and even yet have not overcome it. Therefore, dear brother, learn Christ and Him crucified.”¹

There is no such training for the work of a strenuous reformer in the monastic experiences of Erasmus. His guardians forced him to “renounce the world,” and he also entered an Augustinian house. A schoolfellow who was in it described it as an angelic home, with plenty of books and plenty of time for reading them. Erasmus comforted himself that it would be two years before he need take life vows, and he might escape in the meantime. But he failed, and the vows were taken. The home was anything but angelic. The books were there, but the study of them was discouraged. Erasmus says that he might get drunk openly, without fear of consequences, but he had to read at night in secret. He hints at grievous vices among the friars, and at his yielding to them himself. But instead of the terrible penances by which Luther attempted to conquer temptations and atone for transgressions, Erasmus took refuge in study. He excuses himself with the remark that “if there had been over him a Superior of a truly Christian character, and not one full of Jewish superstition, he might have been brought to yield excellent fruit.” The amusing story of his robbing the Prior’s pear-tree, and causing the blame to be laid on another friar, illustrates the monastic life of Erasmus. He was not being braced by it for higher things. It was some years before he escaped from the convent, and some years more before he was dispensed from his vows. All this is in complete contrast with the monastic experiences of Luther.

It was about five and a half years before the death of Luther that Paul III. at last recognized the possible value of the society founded by Ignatius Loyola, and the Company of the

¹ M. A. Currie, “Letters of Martin Luther,” p. 5. This was written about two months after Erasmus published his Greek Testament.

Jesuits was formally established on September 27, 1540. Let us compare Luther with the great leader who from that day onwards devoted his immense energy and enthusiasm to the task of undoing the work of Luther. The conversion of Loyola, after being wounded at Pampluna in 1521, was very different from the conversion of Luther in his convent. In Luther's case a soul overwhelmed by the consciousness of a heavy burden of sin at last found peace in the conviction of having obtained mercy from God in Christ. In Loyola, it was the old craving for active service finding satisfaction in a new object. Loyola's chivalrous spirit and genius for organization were turned in a new direction. His capacity for seeing the key to a position, and for producing the machinery for defending it, was henceforth devoted to the defence of the Roman Church and of the Papacy, especially against Protestant assailants. If Luther's "Liberty of the Christian Man" contains the essence of the Reformation, the "Spiritual Exercises" of Loyola may be called the engine of the Counter-Reformation. Prompt military obedience was the keynote of Loyola's life and system. His "Exercises" were inspired with the idea of military drill. There was no need to examine Luther's teaching. Lutheranism was mutiny against constituted authority. What was to become of the army of the Church if the rank and file might rebel against their commanders? The three or four weeks of absolute solitude required for the use of the "Exercises" produced what we should now call a hypnotic condition of experiences, the influence of which was to last for life.¹

Loyola is as clearly the hero of the Counter-Reformation as Luther is of the Reformation. Both desired to remedy the evils of the Church as each understood them, but each wished to retain just those features which were abhorrent to the other. The one was all for submission, as the other was for liberty. The thoroughly German Luther was an enigma and an abomination to so thorough a Spaniard as Loyola; and Loyola

¹ Schiele and Zscharneck, "Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart," Art. "Jesuiten."

remains an enigma to most German Protestants. As a mighty influence in his own and subsequent times, Loyola may be placed side by side with Luther ; but as a creative force Luther is far the greater man of the two.¹

Two things which greatly contributed to Luther's success may be regarded as in a special sense providential, for neither of them was in any way due to his own foresight or ability. One of these was his beginning with very moderate demands, and being gradually, and sometimes unwillingly, led on to demand much more. He himself said in later years that, if he had seen at the outset the position which he at last reached, wild horses would not have dragged him into action. The other thing which contributed to his success was the fatuous way in which the Pope dealt with him. As Döllinger has said, "Luther had one very powerful ally besides the national sympathy, and that was the Court of Rome itself. Had the Curia been advised by an astute disciple of the German Reformer, he could hardly have given counsel more efficient or more profitable to his master than what was actually followed."

At Leipzig, Eck had got Luther to admit that in some things he agreed with John Huss, and that the Council of Constance had done wrongly in condemning Huss. At Worms, Aleander extracted a similar admission. Luther said: "I believe neither the Pope nor the Council alone, since it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted one another." It was this which made Charles V. exclaim that he had heard enough. How could either the Church or the Empire be ruled if every individual might judge for himself? Luther, already excommunicated by Leo X., left Worms on April 26, and in May Aleander induced Charles V. to sign the document which placed Luther under the ban of the Empire—*i.e.*, made him an outlaw.

Thus Luther was smitten by both the spiritual and the temporal sword. What was the result? In July the Archbishop of Mainz wrote to the Pope: "Since the Bull of your Holiness and the Edict of the Emperor, the number of Lutherans has

¹ W. Walker, "The Reformation," pp. 368 *et seq.*

been daily increasing, and now very few laymen are found who honestly and simply favour the clergy. But a great part of the priests side with Luther, and very many are ashamed to stand by the Roman Church, so hateful is the name of the Curia and of the decrees of your Beatitude, which others also follow the Wittenbergers in treating with utter contempt."¹ The nuncio said that nine-tenths of Germany cried, "Long life to Luther!" and the other tenth shouted, "Death to the Church!" Napoleon said that, if Charles V. had sided with Luther, he could have conquered Europe with a united Germany. But Charles V. was far more of a Spaniard than a German. It surprises us at first that all this should have been the result, when both the sword of the Church and the sword of the Empire had aimed their deadliest blows at the head of a peasant-born friar. Leo X. can hardly have received the report of the Archbishop of Mainz with his habitual smile, but he was content to leave the matter as it was. Neither he nor any of his successors ever realized what the Latin races lost when the Germanic element was expelled from the Church by the condemnation of Luther.

¹ J. B. Kidd, "Documents illustrative of the Continental Reformation," pp. 87-89.

