

The Continental Reformation.

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VI.—LUTHER'S WORK AND ITS MEANING.

IT is an instructive coincidence that the smiting of Luther with the ban of the Church and the ban of the Empire comes just between the death of the painter Raffaele and the death of Pope Leo X. Raffaele died on April 6, 1520. Luther was excommunicated in June, 1520, and outlawed in May, 1521. Leo X., the patron of the one and the persecutor of the other, died on December 1, 1521. Raffaele taught with pencil and brush, as Luther with voice and pen; they were magic teachers, and the spell of both is upon us still. Creighton has reminded us that the great painter was putting the last glowing touches to his glorification of the Papacy, just as the great preacher was beginning to depict, in lurid colours, its pestilential sores.¹ Does that mean that they were in opposite camps, and that Raffaele was anticipating the work of Loyola? A superficial observer might think so; and yet there was no real antagonism. These two mighty teachers, each in his own way, were showing how to make life worth living. Both pointed out the value of the individual as against the cramping demands of corporations. Raffaele showed the beauty of each man's body and mind, and the freedom which can be won by self-culture. Luther showed the preciousness of each human soul, and the freedom which can be won by trust in the grace of God. To some persons these two methods may seem to be opposed, and it is certainly possible to pursue the one without the other. But it is those that can follow both methods who produce the noblest results and find the deepest peace.

On his way home from Worms, through the wise policy of the excellent Elector Frederick, Luther was violently carried off and lodged in a place of safety; and the captors were

¹ "Popes," vi., p. 208.

expressly charged not to tell the Elector where they had hidden Luther. They took him to the Elector's fortress of the Wartburg, and here he remained, concealed from both friends and foes, for nearly a year, disguised in the dress and name of a young nobleman. The chief fruit of this seclusion, in what he called his "Patmos," was the translation of the New Testament.¹ There were already eighteen German Bibles, but all of them were translations from the Vulgate. Luther's was the first translation from the Greek, made by a master of German. And what happened in Germany happened in England also. The German language and the English language are what they are, because of Luther's and Tyndale's translations. No books have had more influence upon literature or the lives of men.

It was the extravagances of the Anabaptists which made Luther return from his "Patmos" to Wittenberg. The Elector Frederick advised him not to leave his safe retreat. Duke George of Saxony, who had presided in the disputation between Luther and Eck, was a dangerous enemy. Luther said, "If I had as pressing business at Leipzig as I have at Wittenberg, I would ride in *there*, if it *rained* Duke Georges for nine days!" The pressing business was caused by the arrival of Zwickau prophets at Wittenberg. They had converted Carlstadt, and their iconoclastic frenzy had caused monstrous destruction, not merely of Church ornaments, but of all decent discipline and ritual.² What was at stake was nothing less than the success of the religious movement. If these fanatical extremists got the control of it, the Reformation was doomed.

An interesting instance of thought-reading occurred. In an interview with the prophets, Luther warned them against being deluded by the devil. They said that, as a proof of their inspiration, they would tell him what he was thinking of at that moment, and Luther agreed to the test. "You have a secret inclination towards us," they said. "God rebuke thee, Satan!"

¹ Currie, "Letters of Martin Luther," pp. 94-110, 204, 211, etc.; Lea, "History of Indulgences," iii., p. 391; McGiffert, pp. 221-227.

² Kidd, "Documents," pp. 94 *et seq.*

he exclaimed. He admitted afterwards that he was conscious of some such leaning ; but he maintained that it was by the aid of Satan that they had read his thoughts.

The chief part of Luther's work was now accomplished. His most glorious years are those which lie between the nailing up of the ninety-five Theses in 1517 and the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt in 1524. The excesses of the Anabaptists in 1521 had somewhat reduced the effect of the three great Reformation treatises in 1520; the address "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (June); "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (October); and "The Freedom of the Christian Man" (November). The Peasants' War in 1524-25 caused still greater discredit to the Lutheran cause. Both of these outbursts seemed to be due to the preaching of Luther; and in a certain sense they were so. He had claimed a holy liberty for Christians: and these men had taken a most unholy licence, which was a very different thing. But it was easy to say to Luther, "See what comes of your teaching!" Then his turning against the peasants, and calling on the princes to put down with a strong hand these destroyers of life and property, seemed to the lower orders the act of a traitor. He had shown that they were oppressed by the exactions of Rome; and, when they rebelled against all exactions, he hounded their oppressors on to cut them down. The result was a worse state of slavery than that which they had endured before the war. The reproach was not just. He had encouraged the peasants to press their claims, but had charged them to do so with moderation; it was when they took to plundering monasteries and murdering nobles that he turned against them. But there was enough semblance of justice in the reproach to make Luther feel it keenly.¹ No act in Luther's life has been more severely criticized, and it had a bad effect on Luther himself and on his work. It destroyed his confidence in the people and in his own power over them. He ceased to be their

¹ Harnack, "The Social Gospel," p. 51 *et seq.*; Hobhouse, "Bampton Lectures," pp. 222 *et seq.*; McGiffert, pp. 257 *et seq.*, 283.

champion, and to many he seemed to have betrayed them. But, much as he lamented the results, Luther never repented of having acted as he did.

It was during the war, on June 13, 1525, that Luther married the nun, Katharine von Bora. Melancthon was greatly disturbed, but begged common friends to make the best of it. Even those who approved of the marriage thought that the time was ill chosen. Not only was the Peasants' War raging, but the good Elector Frederick had died only a month before. But Luther did not regret this step any more than his action about the peasants. He had long taught that marriage was better than celibacy, and he said that he ought to prove that he believed his own teaching. The end of all things seemed to be at hand; at any rate, his own end might be near, and therefore no time was to be lost. Neither advice nor abuse moved him. The ex-friar married the ex-nun, and the marriage seems to have been a happy one. In the same fateful year, 1525, Luther finally parted company with Erasmus and the Humanists, in the controversy about free-will.

Luther's translation of the New Testament stands first as a means of improving the moral and spiritual condition of the people. We may place next to it the collection of hymns, which he published first in 1524, and in making which he got many people to help him. It quickly became a national possession. But this first collection did not contain the grandest hymn of all, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. That was not written earlier than 1527, and was first published in 1529, after the famous Protest at the Diet of Spires, on April 20, 1529. It may be called the National Anthem of the German Reformation. Luther's third great instrument for the building up of the religious life of his country was his Catechism, both forms of which—the longer and the shorter—were issued in 1529. They still hold their ground as the basis of religious education among German Protestants. From 1531 to 1534, Luther was constantly engaged with others in translating the Old Testament. The whole Bible was published in 1534, and was printed eighty-

five times in eleven years. A revision of it was begun in 1539, and the extant text is the result of revisions by various friends.

Then, in 1540, came the bigamy of Philip, Landgrave of Hesse, who had joined the Lutherans about 1524, and was one of their chief supporters. Luther defended the bigamy, and so did Melancthon. Luther had always held that bigamy was better than divorce; and, like Clement VII., he had thought that bigamy might be possible for Henry VIII. But the majority of Lutherans regarded Philip's bigamy as a grievous stain on the cause. It certainly weakened the Protestant position, not merely by causing division among the Reformers, but by involving them in inconsistency. How was it possible to make an effective protest against Papal dispensations respecting the prohibited degrees, when the Reformers themselves sanctioned bigamy?

The last six years of Luther's life, 1540 to 1546, are not marked by any great incident, but we know a great deal about them from his "Table Talk" and his correspondence; and if these do not teach us much more about the great leader and Reformer, they tell us a great deal about the man. Luther is intensely human, and his human characteristics, as revealed in his conversation and in his letters, are all of them of great interest, and some of them are charming. Among these is his keen sense of humour. He is far less witty than Erasmus, but in his raillery there is far more sympathy and feeling. Luther can both poke fun and give hard knocks with the riotous good-nature of an Irishman. He is very human also in his occasional fits of despondency, when he fears that he has made grievous mistakes, and even that his whole career may have been a mistake. He has used strong language, and it may have been too strong. He has written a great deal, and he may have written too much. The Bible was being buried under mountains of comment. He could "wish that all his writings were buried nine ells underground, by reason of the evil example they will give."¹ And then there is that pathetic confession of

¹ Tulloch, "Luther and other Leaders of the Reformation," pp. 91 *et seq.*

the possibility of radical error. "How often, in the bitterness of my soul, have I pressed myself with the Papist's argument, art thou the only wise person? are all others in error? have they been mistaken, all these hundreds of years? What if you yourself are mistaken, and are dragging many souls with you into eternal condemnation?" But most pathetic of all is that conversation with his wife one bright moonlight night. They were walking in the garden together, and Luther exclaimed: "What a brilliant light! but it shines not for us." "Why not for us?" asked Katharine. "Why are we shut out from the Kingdom of Heaven?" "Perhaps because we left our convents," he replied. "Then, shall we return to them?" she asked. "No," said Luther, "it is too late for that."

It must have been a grievous disappointment to him that so many of the Humanists grew cold towards him, and that so few of the people took a serious interest in the movement, after the novelty of it had passed away. The Humanists, who could have done so much for him, cared less and less for the man whom they had at first heartily supported, but who was found to have so little interest in letters, and who seemed to be insisting on dogmas almost as fanatically as did the Church of Rome. They did not see that the Reformation, although for a time it withdrew men's attention from most of the subjects which constitute a liberal education, yet did a great deal for education by developing the intellectual faculties.¹ It took several generations to see the truth of this. The good effects of Luther's translation of the Bible could be perceived somewhat more quickly, but Luther did not live long enough to receive much encouragement from that source. And there were times when he would not have cared to live long enough for any such purpose. "Forty more years of life! I would not purchase Paradise at such cost!"

Luther has been rightly called a German of Germans. He said; "I was born for the good of my dear Germans, and I will never cease to serve them." He thought that the German language was better than all others, and that German people

¹ Hardwick, "History of the Reformation," pp. 355 *et seq.*, ed. Stubbs.

were more honest and true than all others. He worked to found a German Church, furnished with all the means of grace, and capable of producing stronger characters than those which were produced by the Church of Rome. It is perhaps a mere accident, but his German name was never Grecized, like Erasmus and Melanchthon, nor Latinized; like Calvin. The fact may help us to remember that the Humanist element, which was so strong in them, was wanting in him.

It is also worth noting that the "Storm and Stress" period of Luther's life lies between the closing of one Roman Council and the opening of another. Leo X. dismissed the Lateran Council, with promises of peace and his habitual smile, on March 16, 1517; and seven months later Luther was preparing his protest against the sale of Indulgences. "There are not many years in the world's history where two eventful pages come so close together as on the 16th of March and on the 31st of October in 1517."¹ The Council of Trent met for the transaction of business on January 7, 1546; and six weeks later Luther died. He preached his last sermon on February 14, and his last words in the pulpit were: "This and much more is to be said about the Gospel; but I am too weak, and we will close here." Four days later he passed away, in the sixty-fourth year of his age, at his native town of Eisleben.

In his combativeness, his humour, his sympathy, and his simplicity, as in his fits of deep dejection, Luther is the most human of all the Reformers. He was neither a great scholar, nor a great philosopher, nor even a great theologian: the repetitions and want of precision and arrangement in his ninety-five theses may suffice as evidence of that. But he was a great leader, and a great man. And he was a great religious leader because he was so real. Luther's religion may have been defective or erroneous, but he had one. He was full of it, and it made him what he was.² Moreover, it made him what he seemed to be in the eyes of his own generation. He was an

¹ Döllinger, "The Reunion of the Churches," iv.

² Mozley, "Essays," p. 374.

amazing phenomenon, a "sign," one of those impressive experiences which to many persons are far more convincing than any reasoning. Thousands who could not follow Luther's logic were carried captive by his character. This man, they felt, knows what he is talking about, and he is the real thing. In short, he had overwhelming religious convictions, and he could communicate them to others. He had a whole cause to champion, and more than half a world to challenge and attempt to defeat. The odds against him were enormous; but he came out of the conflict unhurt and with a large measure of success, because of the intensity of his conviction that he was fighting God's battle, and that, whatever became of the fighter, his cause must win. "I do not doubt," he said; "that if we are unworthy to bring this work to its conclusion, God will raise up others, worthier than we, who will accomplish it."¹

Luther's great work was that of freeing men from the terrifying and perplexing thought that, bad as the Roman Church unquestionably was, separation from it meant perdition; for its clergy were supposed to be the sole possessors of the means of salvation. Luther destroyed this crushing conviction in thousands of minds, and substituted for it a belief that it was quite possible to win salvation without having recourse to a corrupt hierarchy. He offered them a Church, or Churches, in which a man could be saved apart from Rome. To most of those in whom he planted this belief it came as a revelation, and was received with enthusiasm. It is quite true that, while Luther set men free in one direction he tried to impose bondage in another. But the bondage, even where he succeeded in imposing it, was only temporary, and he had already supplied principles of liberty by means of which the bonds which he imposed were broken.

Another delusion which he did much to destroy was the belief that "the religious life"—that is, life in a monastery, is a much higher life than life in the world. For centuries men and

¹ See his letter, written to cheer Melanchthon, June 27, 1530 (Currie, p. 224).

women had been taught that the surest way of saving one's soul is to enter a convent, and that to go about begging on behalf of one's convent is specially meritorious. Luther was never weary of teaching that all lawful modes of life may be consecrated to God, and that the true end of religion is not to save one's own soul, but to do as much good as one can to others.

It is difficult to estimate the service which Luther has done to society by opening men's minds to the truth, that it is not only possible to enter the Kingdom of God without either submitting to Rome or entering a monastery, but that Romanism and monasticism may be hindrances rather than helps towards leading a truly Christian life. This truth Protestantism has never forgotten; indeed, its fundamental principle may be said to be the religious freedom of the individual from the power of any particular Church. "The legally-constituted Church can never enforce its own ordinances as ordinances of the Church of Christ. In this conviction Luther shattered the power of ecclesiastical law over the Church of Christ. Until his time the opposition between the Church of Christ and the legally constituted Church had no existence for the life of Christians."¹

Luther is commonly regarded as one of the most conservative of reformers. Unlike Zwingli and Calvin, he has a reverence for the past, and parts regretfully from what has been long established, provided that it is not a long-established abuse. In 1528 he wrote: "I condemn no ceremonies but those which are opposed to the Gospel: all others I retain intact. I leave even images intact, excepting those which were destroyed by the rioters before my return. We celebrate Mass in the customary vestments and forms, only adding certain German songs, and substituting the vernacular in the words of consecration. I hate nobody worse than the man who upsets harmless ceremonies and turns liberty into necessity." As late as 1541 he wrote to Chancellor Brück that a layman from Italy or Spain, if he attended the Lutheran Mass, would find it very little different from what he was accustomed to have at home.

¹ Harnack, "The Constitution and Law of the Church," p. 180.

But his address "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (June, 1520), is a marked exception to this general conservatism. In it he seems to be willing to throw cargo and rigging overboard, and to retain scarcely so much as a jury-mast to help the ship to sail on over the troubled waters. The existing organization of the Church had worked badly, and had produced or admitted many evils, and Luther sacrificed even the most venerable portions of it without an expression of regret. As Ranke once said to the present writer: "Luther would have kept bishops if he had had them; but he hadn't got them, and he did without." But Luther's earnestness and fervour, his simplicity and common sense, left his readers no time to think about the value of what he sacrificed. As Voltaire said of Beaumarchais: "One is carried away by his simplicity, and one overlooks his indiscretions."

Luther's influence on religious and political ideas, on literature, on social life, and on the map of Europe, has been enormous; and this influence has been won—largely without effort on his part—through his massive character; through his sincerity, earnestness, unselfishness; and, above all these, through his splendid courage. We may differ widely from some of his opinions, but we live in a world which is a wiser and a better world because of Luther's work.

