PART I

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LUTHER AND THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

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Martin Luther, reformer

SCOTT HENDRIX

Luther and reform

The catalyst of the Protestant Reformation was the German Augustinian monk and university professor, Martin Luther (1483–1546). In the late medieval church, calls for renewal were loud and persistent and some reforms were enacted in monastic orders, in church life, and in popular movements associated with the names of John Wyclif (1384–1443) and John Hus (1369–1415). Compared with those strident voices, Martin Luther's invitation to an academic debate on the power of indulgences in 1517 was a subdued summons. True, Luther had already been preaching against the indulgence practice and clerical negligence, but to call the young professor of biblical studies a church reformer prior to his circulation of the *Ninety-five Theses* would be an exaggeration. In the famous theses of 1517, the last thing on Luther's mind was reform of the entire church.

Yet Luther has gone down in history as the first Protestant *reformer* because of the conflict with the Roman curia that was ignited by those theses. It was a quarrel that Luther did not seek but also one that he did not shun once it had begun. During the three years prior to his excommunication (1521), Luther forged the identity and self-awareness of a reformer and gained the collegial and political support that would make him a leader of the evangelical movement in Germany. Even then, however, Luther was not a reformer in the sense of implementing a preconceived plan to reshape the church. Once Luther and his followers were excommunicated, a process of restructuring Christianity in Europe did ensue, but neither Luther nor his colleagues were able to envision the outcome of that process. Luther's reforming agenda had another goal altogether.

Once Luther became engaged in reform, he worked for the renewal of both theology and piety. The reform of theology was pursued at the University of Wittenberg, founded by the Saxon elector Frederick the Wise (1463–1525) and

only ten years old when Martin Luther joined the theological faculty in 1512. Nevertheless, the university had attracted capable scholars who represented the various schools of late medieval thought and the humanist critique of scholastic theology. Luther, called to the chair of biblical theology, sympathized with those colleagues who wanted to replace the study of Aristotle and the scholastics with concentration on the Bible and the church fathers.[1] At the same time, he launched a critique of scholastic theology in lectures and in academic debates. Less than two months prior to the *Ninety-five Theses*, in another set of theses prepared for debate in September 1517, Luther delivered a harsh critique of the Nominalist theology in which he himself had been trained.[2]

Luther envisioned the reform of piety as a process of Christianization that he advocated in sermons, the *Ninety-five Theses*, and in German pamphlets that began to appear with regularity in 1519. Late medieval practices, like the offering of indulgence letters that would guarantee the remission of sins without contrition, were called by him not just improper but unchristian. 'Those who teach that contrition is not necessary on the part of those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessional privileges preach unchristian doctrine.'[3] Defending the practice of giving both elements to the laity in the sacrament of communion, Luther demanded that people first become 'real Christians' through faith and love before they approached the altar: 'Heavens, if this idea were really put across, it would mean that where thousands come to the sacrament now, scarcely hundreds would come . . . and so we would at last become a group of real Christians, whereas at present we are almost completely pagan and only Christian in name.'[4] The renewal of theology went hand-in-hand with the reform of practice and piety, and both kinds of reform were shaped by Luther's perception that late medieval religion should become more Christian than it had been. That perception had its roots in the intense religiosity of Luther's upbringing.

The roots of reform

Childhood and family

Biographers now emphasize that Luther's childhood was unexceptional for the time in which he lived.[5] He was the subject of strict discipline from both

1 Martin Luther to John Lang, 18 May 1517, WABr 1:99.8–13.
2 *Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam* (1517), WA 1:221–8.
3 *Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum* (1517), StA 1:180.1–2; LW 31:28.
4 *Von beider Gestalt des Sakraments zu nehmen* (1522), WA 10,2:39.1–13; LW 36:264.
5 Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 1, pp. 6–9.

parents, but he was also the beneficiary of their desire to see him properly educated and religiously trained. We have few details about the relationship between Luther and his parents, but at the time of their deaths (Hans in 1530 and Margarete in 1531) Luther was deeply moved and expressed his appreciation for both of them. When he learned that his father had died, Luther confessed that seldom had he ever despised death as he did at that moment and acknowledged that through his father God had given to him all that he was and had.[6]

A quite different picture was painted by Erik Erikson in *Young man Luther*. According to Erikson, an unusually harsh upbringing alienated Luther from his father and provoked a crisis of identity which led to Luther's rebellion against the papacy and saddled him with pathological tendencies.[7] Historians have rejected Erikson's interpretation because the evidence on which it was based is unreliable, but Luther's relationship with his father did make a positive contribution to his development. The opposition of Hans Luther to Martin's decision to become a monk caused a rift between father and son, but that rift was healed by the year 1521 in a way that gave Luther entitlement to his new vocation as a reformer.[8] In the letter which dedicated the *Judgement on Monastic Vows* (1521) to his father, Luther described his separation from the cloister and the papacy not as rebellion but as liberation. Luther granted that his father had been right to oppose his monastic vocation, but he declared that Christ had now done what his father could not do – release him from scholastic theology, the cloister, and finally from the papacy. Once liberated, however, Luther felt obligated to lead a movement which, in his opinion, Christ had given into his hands. To his father Luther wrote: 'I hope that [Christ] has snatched one son from you in order that through me he might begin to help many other children of his; and I am convinced that you will not only willingly allow this, as you ought, but also rejoice at it with great joy!'[9]

Seeds of Luther's reforming vocation were also planted by his early schooling, especially during the years that he spent in Eisenach (1497–1501) around his mother's relatives.[10] Luther lived in the home of Heinz Schalbe, a prominent citizen of the town and patron of the Franciscan monastery. He attended the school of St George's parish and developed a friendship with Johannes Braun, the vicar at the foundation of St Mary, who reached out to students and with whom Luther later exchanged letters. Those contacts put Luther in touch

6 Martin Luther to Philip Melanchthon, 5 June 1530, WABr 5:351.20–7.
7 Erikson, *Young man Luther*, pp. 95–7, 146–50.
8 Hendrix, 'Luther's contribution to the disunity of the Reformation', pp. 51–8.
9 Martin Luther to Hans Luther, 21 November 1521, WA 8:576.18–20; LW 48:336.
10 Siggins, *Luther and his mother*, pp. 45–70; Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 1, pp. 17–21.

with the late medieval piety that permeated the town and included the popular veneration of St Anne. They also anticipated the academic and religious direction of Luther's life.

The cloister

After earning the degrees of Bachelor and Master of Arts at the University of Erfurt, Luther began the study of law in the summer of 1505. A few weeks later, however, he abruptly changed his mind, sold his books, and decided to become a monk. His decision may have been prompted by a severe thunderstorm that frightened Luther on the return to Erfurt from his parents' home in Mansfeld. He cried to St Anne for help and vowed to become a monk if she protected him. True to his word, Luther spent a last evening with his friends and on 17 July 1505, at the age of twenty-one, he entered the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt.

Luther would remain a monk for almost twenty years, the middle third of his life. He removed the cowl for the last time in 1524, less than a year before he married and more than three years after he had been excommunicated and declared an outlaw in the Holy Roman Empire. Although historians have recognized that Luther's vow was not unusual for a young man who had been imbued with late medieval religion, the full impact of Luther's monastic experience has only gradually been appreciated. Biographers have traditionally emphasized the scruples of conscience that afflicted Luther in the monastery. He later recalled that he had been the best monk a person could be, but while he was in the cloister he doubted that he was contrite enough to appease God's wrath and to gain forgiveness. Some relief was obtained from his monastic superior and mentor, Johannes von Staupitz (1468–1524), the vicar-general of the German Augustinians whom Luther succeeded at the University of Wittenberg in 1512. Staupitz eventually gave up the office of vicar-general and decided not to support the Protestant movement, but he left an indelible personal and pastoral mark on Luther.[11]

Luther the reformer finally rejected monasticism, but his time as a monk left its mark. The intense spirituality that was nurtured in the Augustinian Order and its zeal for reform probably influenced Luther more than a specific tradition of Augustinian theology.[12] He adapted the tools of monastic spirituality for the study of scripture and recommended them in place of his own writings. *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* – praying and meditating on the text with regularity would enable people to make the Bible a comforting resource in times of testing

11 Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz*, pp. 30–4. 12 Saak, *High way to heaven*, pp. 618–73.

and controversy.[13] Alongside his affirmation of secular life, Luther retained from the monastic ideal an element of detachment from the world that was urged on all believers. In the lectures on Genesis from the last decade of his life, Luther presented the pilgrim Abraham as a true monk and model for Christians who needed to remember that their lasting home was not on earth.[14] Historians now include Luther in their assessment of the Reformation as a 'new monasticism'[15] insofar as it sought to inspire all clergy and laity to lead an intentionally religious life in the world.

The schools

With tongue in cheek, Luther claimed in 1521 that God had taught him the sanctity of the monasteries and the wisdom of the schools so that his detractors could not later claim that he was condemning something about which he knew nothing.[16] Luther rejected much of scholastic theology, to be sure, but he was also well trained by his Nominalist teachers and steeped in the works of Augustine (354–430) whom he consulted as he prepared his early lectures. Apart from what he explicitly rejected, however, scholars have not been able to determine exactly how the theology that undergirded Luther's reforms was shaped by Nominalism, Augustine, medieval Augustinian theologians, or even by medieval mysticism. The search for the roots of Luther's theology has failed to produce a consensus.

In fact, the reformer's theology drew on all these traditions. Nominalism, whose soteriology Luther rejected, may be the source of his emphasis on the authority of scripture, and the covenantal structure of Nominalist thought may underlie Luther's correlation of promise and faith. A distinct medieval Augustinian school has yet to be discovered; most scholars have not been convinced by Oberman's detection of a *via Gregorii* (theology in the tradition of the Augustinian Gregory of Rimini [1300–58]) at the University of Wittenberg.[17] Nevertheless, anti-Pelagian themes like the primacy of grace gave Luther's thought an Augustinian cast that he was quite willing to acknowledge, but not without qualification. During his lectures on Romans (1515–16) Luther read Paul through the eyes of Augustine, whom he praised in 1518 as the apostle's 'most trustworthy interpreter'.[18] That same year Luther published

13 *Vorrede zum 1. Band der Wittenberger Ausgabe der deutschen Schriften* (1539), WA 50:659.3–660.16; LW 34:283–8.
14 *In primum librum Mose enarrationes* (1535–45), WA 42:548.21–32; LW 2:398.
15 Moeller, 'Die frühe Reformation in Deutschland als neues Mönchtum', p. 155.
16 Martin Luther to Hans Luther, 21 November 1521, WA 8:574.26–8.
17 Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz*, pp. 16–30, Saak, *High way to heaven*, pp. 691–8.
18 *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita* (1518), StA 1:213.26–30; LW 31:39.

for the second time a classic of German mysticism, the *Theologia Deutsch*, with a preface in which he asserted: 'No book except the Bible and St Augustine has come to my attention from which I have learned more about God, Christ, humanity, and all things'.[19] Luther's famous statement, 'the cross alone is our theology',[20] was made as he criticized the scholastic definition of hope and rejected the negative theology of medieval mysticism. At the same time, Luther embraced the experiential wisdom of the mystics and valued the sermons of John Tauler (1300–61) that he annotated around 1516. Even Aristotle, whom Luther blamed for the faults of scholasticism, was still able to make positive contributions to Luther's thought and under the guidance of Melanchthon continued to be studied at Wittenberg.[21]

No one is likely to discover a single irrefutable key to the formation of Luther's theology. It grew out of the academic responsibility that required Luther to bring all the resources of his education and experience to bear on the interpretation of scripture. His theology also profited from interaction and debate with his colleagues. Neither Luther's reform nor his theology originated in isolation and, if that had still been possible prior to 1517, from that point on Luther became part of a religious and political reforming movement.

The politics of reform

Wittenberg

Luther lived in the small university town of Wittenberg from 1512 until his death in 1546, all of that time in the same complex of buildings that formed the cloister of the Augustinian Hermits. When Luther and Katharina von Bora (1499–1552) married in 1525, Elector John of Saxony awarded them the cloister as their home. Wittenberg became the cradle of the Reformation only because Luther and his colleagues taught at the university and because the town was a residence of the Saxon electors. Wittenberg was also used as a political and ecclesiastical testing ground for the earliest reforms. During Luther's exile at the Wartburg Castle (1521–2), the first demonstrations of popular support took place and the first concrete changes were made by Luther's colleagues Andrew Karlstadt (1486–1540), Gabriel Zwilling (1487–1558), and Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560). Although Luther disapproved of the rapid changes and tumult that ensued, Karlstadt proposed a church order that was opposed by Elector

19 *Vorrede zu der vollständigen Ausgabe der deutschen Theologie* (1518), WA 1:378.21–3; LW 31:75.
20 *Operationes in psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:176.29–33.
21 Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles*, pp. 257–377; Frank, *Die theologische Philosophie Philipp Melanchthons*, pp. 16–23.

Frederick but eventually adopted by the town council. Luther returned to take over leadership of the Wittenberg movement and Karlstadt was ousted, but the Reformation was under way. Without advocating the reforms Elector Frederick allowed them to proceed, and he continued to protect Luther and the reputation of his university.

Electoral Saxony and the Holy Roman Empire

Reformation scholarship has long emphasized the significance of Saxon and imperial politics for the German Reformation. As an elector of the emperor, Frederick was able to exercise leverage with the papacy and the imperial court. That influence allowed Frederick to gain a hearing for Luther at the imperial diet in Worms (1521) and to shield Luther from the papal excommunication and the imperial ban that were pronounced in 1521. For the rest of his life Luther was confined to Electoral Saxony, except for the occasional safe excursion to Mansfeld, his native county, or to the Marburg Colloquy (1529) in Hesse, where Landgrave Philip ardently supported the Reformation. As a consequence, Luther participated in the work of reform mainly through his writings and correspondence and through representatives like Melanchthon, who attended the religious colloquies of the 1540s, and John Bugenhagen (1485–1558), who helped to organize the Reformation in north Germany and Denmark. At home Luther preached and lectured on a regular basis, published tract after tract, and together with his colleagues advised the Saxon court on the tactics of reform. Supported over his career by three Saxon electors, Frederick, his brother John (1468–1532), and John's son John Frederick I (1503–54), Luther's writings also served their strategies to protect and advance Protestantism.[22]

Luther thought of himself as a German reformer, even though he was ambivalent about the epithet of German prophet. After Emperor Charles V refused to accept the Confession of the evangelical territories at Augsburg in 1530, Luther issued a *Warning to His Dear German People* (1531) not to obey an imperial command to take up arms against the Protestants. The reformer had earlier sanctioned obedience to the emperor and supported a defensive war against the Turks, but after 1530 Luther reversed himself and argued that preservation of the gospel overrode civil duty to a ruler who would threaten it. He claimed: 'I am not seeking my own benefit in this, but the salvation of you Germans'.[23] By the time Emperor Charles V did attack the German Protestants and captured Wittenberg (1547), Luther was dead.

22 Edwards, *Luther's last battles*, pp. 38–67.
23 *Warnung an seine lieben Deutschen* (1531), WA 30,3:291.7–9, 20–9; LW 47:29.

The church

Luther the reformer never intended to start a new church, but that statement is misleading if it implies that his agenda was simply to reform the medieval church. As he pursued the goal of Christianization, Luther did not think in terms of medieval and modern, or Catholic and Protestant, churches, but in terms of Germany before and after the rule of the papacy: 'All I seek to do', he wrote, 'is to arouse and set to thinking those who have the ability and inclination to help the German nation to be free and Christian again after the wretched, heathenish, and unchristian rule of the pope'.[24] Luther's agenda was more radical than church reform. In order to Christianize Germany, he believed the church had to be liberated from 'the papacy at Rome'. As a result, Luther expanded the notion of church so that it would be equivalent to the Christian estate, or Christendom, which consisted of all believers, clergy and laity. That Christendom was not tied to Rome but included all those who lived in faith, hope, and love wherever they were found throughout the world.[25] The church was not therefore invisible, only indiscernible until each assembly of believers gathered for worship. These visible assemblies could organize themselves, but they did not form a permanent institution, because genuine Christendom could never be defined by its allegiance to a specific hierarchy like the Roman curia.

In alignment with that ecclesiology, evangelical or Protestant churches were established in the cities and territories that adopted the Reformation, and Luther played a significant role in their construction. For Saxony and other areas he recommended pastors for parishes that were making the sudden transition to evangelical status and provided those parishes with biblical arguments for their authority to judge the teaching of their leaders and to call and dismiss preachers accordingly.[26] With Roman bishops no longer exercising supervision and parishes in disarray after the Revolution of 1525, Luther petitioned Elector John of Saxony, 'out of Christian love . . . and by God's will for the benefit of the gospel and the welfare of the wretched Christians in his territory', to form a commission of visitors who would inspect the parishes and supervise their rehabilitation.[27] For the visitation Melanchthon composed guidelines for teaching, organization, and pastoral practice, and

24 *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (1520), StA 2:125.18–21; LW 44:161.
25 *Von dem Papsttum zu Rom*, WA 6:293.1–5; LW 39:65.
26 *Dass eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeine Recht und Macht habe, alle Lehre zu urteilen und Lehrer zu berufen, ein- und abzusetzen, Grund und Ursach aus der Schrift* (1523), WA 11:408–16; LW 39:301–14.
27 *Unterricht der Visitatoren an die Pfarrherrn in Kurfürstentum Sachsen* (1528), StA 3:409.3–21; LW 40:271.

Luther produced catechisms, orders of worship, and hymns that were widely used outside Saxony even though he urged pastors and officials to write their own catechisms and church orders for local use.

Luther's support of the princes against the rebellious peasants and his appeal to Elector John to supervise the reordering of parish life have led to the accusation that Luther sold out the popular reformation for a reformation from above. Although he agreed with some demands of the commoners and blamed rulers for their unjust treatment, Luther did oppose the use of violence in the name of Christian justice. He was convinced that the gospel would not lead to revolt but to a Christendom in which the increase of faith and love would alleviate injustice. Nor did Luther mean to support only local religious communities when in 1523 he defended the right of parishes to resist the appointments of clergy made by Roman bishops and other patrons traditionally invested with such authority. In his eyes, evangelical teaching had to be defended at every level against authorities who did not respect it. After 1525, when many parishes were in no position to find and evaluate pastors on their own, Luther wished that evangelical bishops were available for the job, but failing that he argued that rulers like Elector John who did support the gospel could act in the stead of bishops to provide the necessary parochial supervision. The result of both decisions was the formation of territorial and confessional churches that Luther had not foreseen but also did not condemn, because they seemed to be the only stable structures through which evangelical teaching and practice could renew Christendom.

The trajectory of reform (1512–1546)

The Reformation discovery (1515–1518)

In 1545, Luther looked back at the beginning of the Reformation and described a theological insight that was crucial to his development as a reformer. That insight, often called his Reformation discovery, has been debated for decades, but no consensus on its exact nature or date has been reached.[28] As Luther framed it, the dilemma was how to understand the declaration of Romans 1:17 that the righteousness of God, taught to him as a demand of the law, was revealed in the gospel. After meditating day and night, claimed Luther, he studied its context and realized that divine righteousness could only be good news if it was a gift received through faith. 'I felt that I was altogether

28 Lohse (ed.), *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther*; Bayer, *Promissio*; Härle, 'Luther's reformatorische Entdeckung'.