

is our constitution.”²⁶³

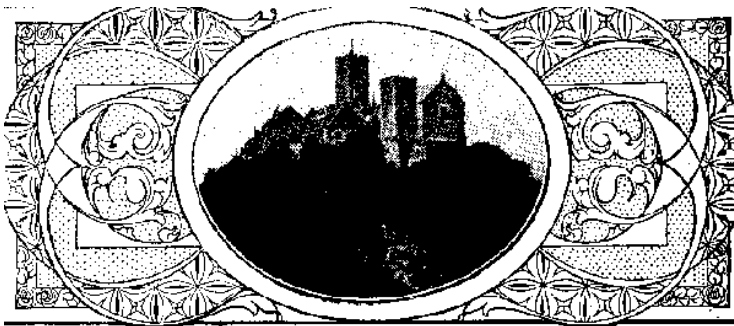
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The contrast between the two disputants was not without effect. The calm, clear reasoning of the Reformer, so gently and modestly presented, appealed to minds that turned in disgust from Eck's boastful and boisterous assumptions.

The discussion continued eighteen days. At its close, the papists with great confidence claimed the victory. Most of the deputies sided with Rome, and the Diet pronounced the Reformers vanquished, and declared that they, together with Zwingle, their leader, were cut off from the church. But the fruits of the conference revealed on which side the advantage lay. The contest resulted in a strong impetus to the Protestant cause, and it was not long afterward that the important cities of Bern and Basel declared for the Reformation.

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10. Progress Of Reform In Germany.



²⁶³ Ibid.

Luther's mysterious disappearance excited consternation throughout all Germany. Inquiries concerning him were heard everywhere. The wildest rumors were circulated, and many believed that he had been murdered. There was great lamentation, not only by his avowed friends, but by thousands who had not openly taken their stand with the Reformation. Many bound themselves by a solemn oath to avenge his death.

The Romish leaders saw with terror to what a pitch had risen the feeling against them. Though at first exultant at the supposed death of Luther, they soon desired to hide from the wrath of the people. His enemies had not been so troubled by his most daring acts while among them, as they were at his removal. Those who in their rage had sought to destroy the bold Reformer, were filled with fear now that he had become a helpless captive. "The only remaining way of saving ourselves," said one, "is to light torches, and hunt for Luther through the whole world, to restore him to the nation that is calling for him."²⁶⁴ The edict of the emperor seemed to fall powerless. The papal legates were filled with indignation as they saw that it commanded far less attention than did the fate of Luther.

²⁶⁴ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 1.



Luther at the Wartburg. "The tidings that he was safe, though a prisoner, calmed the fears of the people."

The tidings that he was safe, though a prisoner, calmed the fears of the people, while it still further aroused their enthusiasm in his favor. His writings were read with greater eagerness than ever before. Increasing numbers joined the cause of the heroic man who had, at such fearful odds, defended the word of God. The Reformation was constantly gaining in strength. The seed which Luther had sown sprung up everywhere. His absence accomplished a work which his presence would have failed to do. Other laborers felt a new responsibility, now that their great leader was removed. With new faith and earnestness they pressed forward to do all in their power, that the work so nobly begun might not be hindered. [186]

But Satan was not idle. He now attempted what he has attempted in every other reformatory movement,—to deceive and destroy the people by palming off upon them a counterfeit in

place of the true work. As there were false christs in the first century of the Christian church, so there arose false prophets in the sixteenth century.

A few men, deeply affected by the excitement in the religious world, imagined themselves to have received special revelations from Heaven, and claimed to have been divinely commissioned to carry forward to its completion the Reformation which, they declared, had been but feebly begun by Luther. In truth, they were undoing the very work which he had accomplished. They rejected the great principle which was the very foundation of the Reformation,—that the word of God is the all-sufficient rule of faith and practice; and for that unerring guide they substituted the changeable, uncertain standard of their own feelings and impressions. By this act of setting aside the great detector of error and falsehood, the way was opened for Satan to control minds as best pleased himself.

One of these prophets claimed to have been instructed by the angel Gabriel. A student who united with him forsook his studies, declaring that he had been endowed by God Himself with wisdom to expound His word. Others who were naturally inclined to fanaticism united with them. The proceedings of these enthusiasts created no little excitement. The preaching of Luther had aroused the people everywhere to feel the necessity of reform, and now some really honest persons were misled by the pretensions of the new prophets.

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The leaders of the movement proceeded to Wittenberg, and urged their claims upon Melanchthon and his co-laborers. Said they: “We are sent by God to instruct the people. We have held familiar conversations with the Lord; we know what will happen; in a word, we are apostles and prophets, and appeal to Doctor Luther.”²⁶⁵

The Reformers were astonished and perplexed. This was such

²⁶⁵ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 7.

an element as they had never before encountered, and they knew not what course to pursue. Said Melanchthon: "There are indeed extraordinary spirits in these men; but what spirits?... On the one hand, let us beware of quenching the Spirit of God, and on the other, of being led astray by the spirit of Satan."²⁶⁶

The fruit of the new teaching soon became apparent. The people were led to neglect the Bible, or to cast it wholly aside. The schools were thrown into confusion. Students, spurning all restraint, abandoned their studies, and withdrew from the university. The men who thought themselves competent to revive and control the work of the Reformation, succeeded only in bringing it to the verge of ruin. The Romanists now regained their confidence, and exclaimed exultingly, "One last struggle, and all will be ours."²⁶⁷

Luther at the Wartburg, hearing of what had occurred, said with deep concern, "I always expected that Satan would send us this plague."²⁶⁸ He perceived the true character of those pretended prophets, and saw the danger that threatened the cause of truth. The opposition of the pope and the emperor had not caused him so great perplexity and distress as he now experienced. From the professed friends of the Reformation had risen its worst enemies. The very truths which had brought him so great joy and consolation were being employed to stir up strife and create confusion in the church. [188]

In the work of reform, Luther had been urged forward by the Spirit of God, and had been carried beyond himself. He had not purposed to take such positions as he did, or to make so radical changes. He had been but the instrument in the hand of Infinite Power. Yet he often trembled for the result of his work. He had once said, "If I knew that my doctrine injured one man, one single man, however lowly and obscure,—which it cannot, for it

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

is the gospel itself,—I would rather die ten times than not retract it.”²⁶⁹

And now Wittenberg itself, the very center of the Reformation, was fast falling under the power of fanaticism and lawlessness. This terrible condition had not resulted from the teachings of Luther; but throughout Germany his enemies were charging it upon him. In bitterness of soul he sometimes asked, “Can such then be the end of this great work of the Reformation?”²⁷⁰ Again, as he wrestled with God in prayer, peace flowed into his heart. “The work is not mine, but Thine own,” he said; “Thou wilt not suffer it to be corrupted by superstition or fanaticism.” But the thought of remaining longer from the conflict in such a crisis, became insupportable. He determined to return to Wittenberg.

Without delay he set out on his perilous journey. He was under the ban of the empire. Enemies were at liberty to take his life; friends were forbidden to aid or shelter him. The imperial government was adopting the most stringent measures against his adherents. But he saw that the work of the gospel was imperiled, and in the name of the Lord he went out fearlessly to battle for the truth.

In a letter to the elector, after stating his purpose to leave the Wartburg, Luther said: “Be it known to your highness that I am going to Wittenberg under a protection far higher than that of princes and electors. I think not of soliciting your highness' support, and far from desiring your protection, I would rather protect you myself. If I knew that your highness could or would protect me, I would not go to Wittenberg at all. There is no sword that can further this cause. God alone must do everything, without the help or concurrence of man. He who has the greatest faith is he who is most able to protect.”²⁷¹

In a second letter, written on the way to Wittenberg, Luther

²⁶⁹ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 7.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 8.

added: "I am ready to incur the displeasure of your highness and the anger of the whole world. Are not the Wittenbergers my sheep? Has not God entrusted them to me? And ought I not, if necessary, to expose myself to death for their sakes? Besides, I fear to see a terrible outbreak in Germany, by which God will punish our nation."²⁷²

With great caution and humility, yet with decision and firmness, he entered upon his work. "By the Word," said he, "must we overthrow and destroy what has been set up by violence. I will not make use of force against the superstitious and unbelieving.... No one must be constrained. Liberty is the very essence of faith."²⁷³

It was soon noised through Wittenberg that Luther had returned, and that he was to preach. The people flocked from all directions, and the church was filled to overflowing. Ascending the pulpit, he with great wisdom and gentleness instructed, exhorted, and reprovved. Touching the course of some who had resorted to violent measures in abolishing the mass, he said:

"The mass is a bad thing; God is opposed to it; it ought to be abolished; and I would that throughout the whole world it were replaced by the supper of the gospel. But let no one be torn from it by force. We must leave the matter in God's hands. His word must act, and not we. And why so? you will ask. Because I do not hold men's hearts in my hand, as the potter holds the clay. We have a right to speak: we have *not* the right to act. Let us preach; the rest belongs unto God. Were I to employ force, what should I gain? Grimace, formality, apings, human ordinances, and hypocrisy.... But there would be no sincerity of heart, nor faith, nor charity. Where these three are wanting, all is wanting, and I would not give a pear-stalk for such a result.... God does more by His word alone than you and I and all the world by our

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²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

united strength. God lays hold upon the heart; and when the heart is taken, all is won....

“I will preach, discuss, and write; but I will constrain none, for faith is a voluntary act. See what I have done. I stood up against the pope, indulgences, and papists, but without violence or tumult. I put forward God's word; I preached and wrote—this was all I did. And yet while I was asleep, ... the word that I had preached overthrew popery, so that neither prince nor emperor has done it so much harm. And yet I did nothing; the Word alone did all. If I had wished to appeal to force, the whole of Germany would perhaps have been deluged with blood. But what would have been the result? Ruin and desolation both to body and soul. I therefore kept quiet, and left the Word to run through the world alone.”²⁷⁴

Day after day, for a whole week, Luther continued to preach to eager crowds. The word of God broke the spell of fanatical excitement. The power of the gospel brought back the misguided people into the way of truth.

Luther had no desire to encounter the fanatics whose course had been productive of so great evil. He knew them to be men of unsound judgment and undisciplined passions, who, while claiming to be especially illuminated from heaven, would not endure the slightest contradiction, or even the kindest reproof or counsel. Arrogating to themselves supreme authority, they required every one, without a question, to acknowledge their claims. But as they demanded an interview with him, he consented to meet them; and so successfully did he expose their pretensions, that the impostors at once departed from Wittenberg.

The fanaticism was checked for a time; but several years later it broke out with greater violence and more terrible results. Said Luther, concerning the leaders in this movement: “To them the Holy Scriptures were but a dead letter, and they all began to cry,

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²⁷⁴ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 8.

'The Spirit! the Spirit!' But most assuredly I will not follow where their spirit leads them. May God of His mercy preserve me from a church in which there are none but saints. I desire to dwell with the humble, the feeble, the sick, who know and feel their sins, and who groan and cry continually to God from the bottom of their hearts to obtain His consolation and support."²⁷⁵

Thomas Münzer, the most active of the fanatics, was a man of considerable ability, which, rightly directed, would have enabled him to do good; but he had not learned the first principles of true religion. "He was possessed with a desire of reforming the world, and forgot, as all enthusiasts do, that the reformation should begin with himself."²⁷⁶ He was ambitious to obtain position and influence, and was unwilling to be second, even to Luther. He declared that the Reformers, in substituting the authority of Scripture for that of the pope, were only establishing a different form of popery. He himself, he claimed, had been divinely commissioned to introduce the true reform. "He who possesses this spirit," said Münzer, "possesses the true faith, although he should never see the Scriptures in his life."²⁷⁷

The fanatical teachers gave themselves up to be governed by impressions, regarding every thought and impulse as the voice of God; consequently they went to great extremes. Some even burned their Bibles, exclaiming, "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." Münzer's teaching appealed to men's desire for the marvelous, while it gratified their pride by virtually placing human ideas and opinions above the word of God. His doctrines were received by thousands. He soon denounced all order in public worship, and declared that to obey princes was to attempt to serve both God and Belial.

The minds of the people, already beginning to throw off the yoke of the papacy, were also becoming impatient under the

²⁷⁵ D'Aubigné, b. 10, ch. 10.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

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restraints of civil authority. Münzer's revolutionary teachings, claiming divine sanction, led them to break away from all control, and give the rein to their prejudices and passions. The most terrible scenes of sedition and strife followed, and the fields of Germany were drenched with blood.

The agony of soul which Luther had so long before experienced at Erfurt, now pressed upon him with redoubled power as he saw the results of fanaticism charged upon the Reformation. The papist princes declared—and many were ready to credit the statement—that the rebellion was the legitimate fruit of Luther's doctrines. Although this charge was without the slightest foundation, it could not but cause the Reformer great distress. That the cause of truth should be thus disgraced by being ranked with the basest fanaticism, seemed more than he could endure. On the other hand, the leaders in the revolt hated Luther because he had not only opposed their doctrines and denied their claims to divine inspiration, but had pronounced them rebels against the civil authority. In retaliation they denounced him as a base pretender. He seemed to have brought upon himself the enmity of both princes and people.

The Romanists exulted, expecting to witness the speedy downfall of the Reformation; and they blamed Luther, even for the errors which he had been most earnestly endeavoring to correct. The fanatical party, by falsely claiming to have been treated with great injustice, succeeded in gaining the sympathies of a large class of the people, and, as is often the case with those who take the wrong side, they came to be regarded as martyrs. Thus the ones who were exerting every energy in opposition to the Reformation, were pitied and lauded as the victims of cruelty and oppression. This was the work of Satan, prompted by the same spirit of rebellion which was first manifested in heaven.

Satan is constantly seeking to deceive men, and lead them to call sin righteousness, and righteousness sin. How successful has been his work! How often censure and reproach are cast

upon God's faithful servants because they will stand fearlessly in defense of the truth! Men who are but agents of Satan are praised and flattered, and even looked upon as martyrs, while those who should be respected and sustained for their fidelity to God, are left to stand alone, under suspicion and distrust. [193]

Counterfeit holiness, spurious sanctification, is still doing its work of deception. Under various forms it exhibits the same spirit as in the days of Luther, diverting minds from the Scriptures, and leading men to follow their own feelings and impressions rather than to yield obedience to the law of God. This is one of Satan's most successful devices to cast reproach upon purity and truth.

Fearlessly did Luther defend the gospel from the attacks which came from every quarter. The word of God proved itself a weapon mighty in every conflict. With that Word he warred against the usurped authority of the pope, and the rationalistic philosophy of the schoolmen, while he stood firm as a rock against the fanaticism that sought to ally itself with the Reformation.

Each of these opposing elements was in its own way setting aside the Holy Scriptures, and exalting human wisdom as the source of religious truth and knowledge. Rationalism idolizes reason, and makes this the criterion for religion. Romanism, claiming for her sovereign pontiff an inspiration descended in unbroken line from the apostles, and unchangeable through all time, gives ample opportunity for every species of extravagance and corruption to be concealed under the sanctity of the apostolic commission. The inspiration claimed by Münzer and his associates proceeded from no higher source than the vagaries of the imagination, and its influence was subversive of all authority, human or divine. True Christianity receives the word of God as the great treasure-house of inspired truth, and the test of all inspiration.

Upon his return from the Wartburg, Luther completed his translation of the New Testament, and the gospel was soon after given to the people of Germany in their own language. This [194]

translation was received with great joy by all who loved the truth; but it was scornfully rejected by those who chose human traditions and the commandments of men.

The priests were alarmed at the thought that the common people would now be able to discuss with them the precepts of God's word, and that their own ignorance would thus be exposed. The weapons of their carnal reasoning were powerless against the sword of the Spirit. Rome summoned all her authority to prevent the circulation of the Scriptures; but decrees, anathemas, and tortures were alike in vain. The more she condemned and prohibited the Bible, the greater was the anxiety of the people to know what it really taught. All who could read were eager to study the word of God for themselves. They carried it about with them, and read and re-read, and could not be satisfied until they had committed large portions to memory. Seeing the favor with which the New Testament was received, Luther immediately began the translation of the Old, and published it in parts as fast as completed.

Luther's writings were welcomed alike in city and in hamlet. "What Luther and his friends composed, others circulated. Monks, convinced of the unlawfulness of monastic obligations, desirous of exchanging a long life of slothfulness for one of active exertion, but too ignorant to proclaim the word of God, traveled through the provinces, visiting hamlets and cottages, where they sold the books of Luther and his friends. Germany soon swarmed with these bold colporteurs."²⁷⁸

These writings were studied with deep interest by rich and poor, the learned and the ignorant. At night the teachers of the village schools read them aloud to little groups gathered at the fireside. With every effort, some souls would be convicted of the truth, and, receiving the word with gladness, would in their turn tell the good news to others.

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²⁷⁸ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 11.

The words of inspiration were verified: "The entrance of Thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple."²⁷⁹ The study of the Scriptures was working a mighty change in the minds and hearts of the people. The papal rule had placed upon its subjects an iron yoke which held them in ignorance and degradation. A superstitious observance of forms had been scrupulously maintained; but in all their service the heart and intellect had had little part. The preaching of Luther, setting forth the plain truths of God's word, and then the word itself, placed in the hands of the common people, had aroused their dormant powers, not only purifying and ennobling the spiritual nature, but imparting new strength and vigor to the intellect.

Persons of all ranks were to be seen with the Bible in their hands, defending the doctrines of the Reformation. The papists who had left the study of the Scriptures to the priests and monks, now called upon them to come forward and refute the new teachings. But, ignorant alike of the Scriptures and of the power of God, priests and friars were totally defeated by those whom they had denounced as unlearned and heretical. "Unhappily," said a Catholic writer, "Luther had persuaded his followers to put no faith in any other oracle than the Holy Scriptures."²⁸⁰ Crowds would gather to hear the truth advocated by men of little education, and even discussed by them with learned and eloquent theologians. The shameful ignorance of these great men was made apparent as their arguments were met by the simple teachings of God's word. Laborers, soldiers, women, and even children, were better acquainted with the Bible teachings than were the priests and learned doctors.

The contrast between the disciples of the gospel and the upholders of popish superstition was no less manifest in the ranks of scholars than among the common people. "Opposed to the old champions of the hierarchy, who had neglected the study of lan-

²⁷⁹ Ps. 119:130.

²⁸⁰ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 11.

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guages and the cultivation of literature, ... were generous-minded youths, devoted to study, investigating Scripture, and familiarizing themselves with the masterpieces of antiquity. Possessing an active mind, an elevated soul, and intrepid heart, these young men soon acquired such knowledge that for a long period none could compete with them.... Accordingly, when these youthful defenders of the Reformation met the Romish doctors in any assembly, they attacked them with such ease and confidence that these ignorant men hesitated, became embarrassed, and fell into a contempt merited in the eyes of all.”²⁸¹

As the Romish clergy saw their congregations diminishing, they invoked the aid of the magistrates, and by every means in their power endeavored to bring back their hearers. But the people had found in the new teachings that which supplied the wants of their souls, and they turned away from those who had so long fed them with the worthless husks of superstitious rites and human traditions.

When persecution was kindled against the teachers of the truth, they gave heed to the words of Christ, “When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another.”²⁸² The light penetrated everywhere. The fugitives would find somewhere a hospitable door opened to them, and there abiding, they would preach Christ, sometimes in the church, or if denied that privilege, in private houses or in the open air. Wherever they could obtain a hearing was a consecrated temple. The truth, proclaimed with such energy and assurance, spread with irresistible power.

In vain both ecclesiastical and civil authorities were invoked to crush the heresy. In vain they resorted to imprisonment, torture, fire, and sword. Thousands of believers sealed their faith with their blood, and yet the work went on. Persecution served only to extend the truth; and the fanaticism which Satan endeavored to

²⁸¹ D'Aubigné, b. 9, ch. 11.

²⁸² Matt. 10:23.