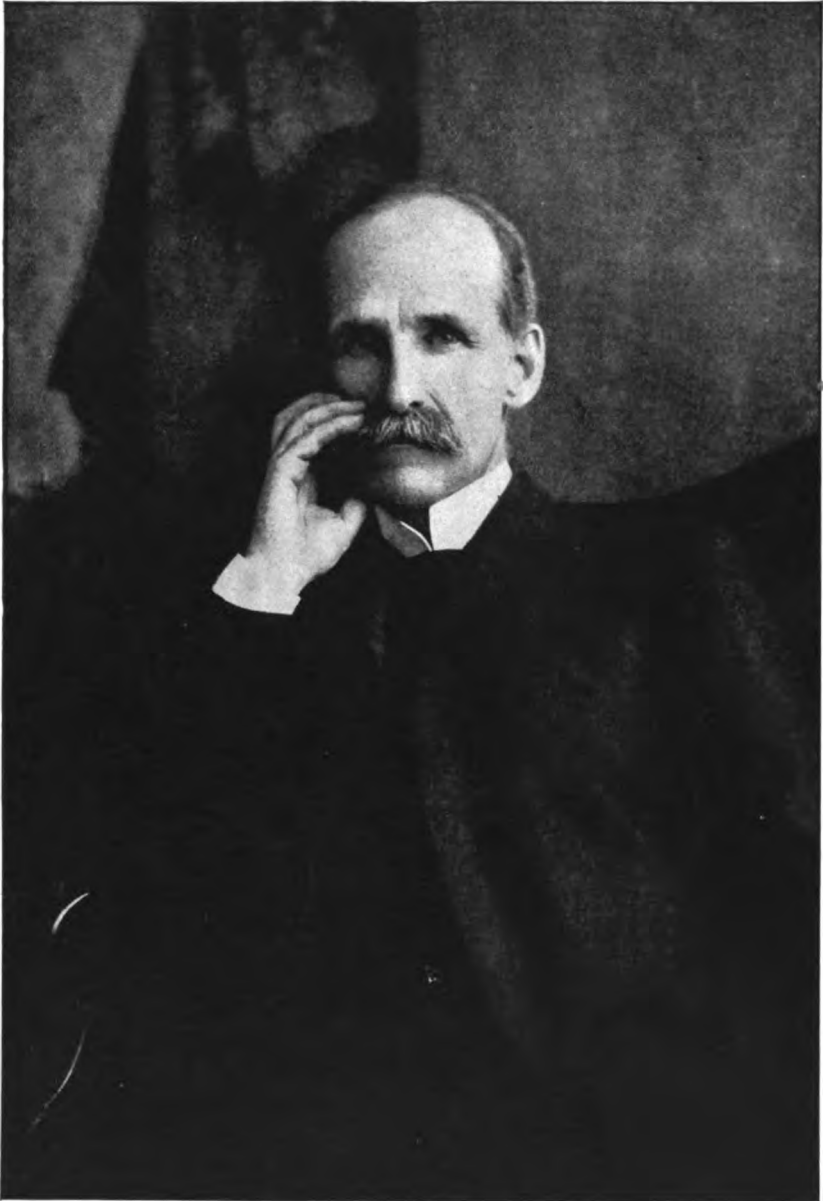


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THE PREPARATION FOR THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION¹

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THE Protestant Reformation broke upon Europe suddenly, like a bolt from a clear sky. Nevertheless, it was preceded by movements which prepared the way for its progress and by pre-sentiments which anticipated its coming as streaks on the morning sky in the East signify that some bright light is about to arise. During the period of one hundred and fifty years just preceding Luther's birth, there occurred a series of movements and a succession of doctrinal utterances looking toward a crisis in the Church's history such as are not to be found in all the compass of the twelve centuries intervening between the death of the last of the apostles and the close of the pontificate of Boniface VIII., 1303. This wide-spread feeling of expectation found expression, five years before Luther nailed up the Ninety-five Theses, in the words of Lefèvre d'Étaples, the teacher of Farel, who wrote that the signs of the time "announce that a reformation of the Church is near at hand; and, while God is opening new ways for the preaching of the gospel by the Spanish and Portuguese, we must hope that he will also visit his Church and raise her from the abasement into which she has fallen."

These movements, some of which were of the nature of premonition and some of the nature of actual preparation, may be summed up as follows:

I. The German mystics broke ground where the Reformation started, and by their schools, their devotional writings, and the personal piety which they encouraged, prepared the soil for the coming movement. German mysticism followed the period when Scholasticism was in its full bloom. The greater Schoolmen were dead—Anselm, Abelard, Peter the Lombard, Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventura, and Duns Scotus who died 1308. The systems of divinity which these theologians constructed presented the faith of the middle ages and fixed it as the final statement of the Latin Church. They made the pope the head of the Church on earth and submission to him essential to salvation. They completed the definition of the Christian priest as the necessary mediator between God and the soul. At unusual length they elaborated the sacramental theory—the theory that there are seven sacraments and that these sacraments, when dispensed properly, act like drugs. Baptism is essential to salvation; but the two sacraments upon which the unearthly power of the priesthood was built up are the sacrifice of the mass and penance. At the priest's words the elements are transubstantiated into the very body and blood of Christ, and only those who partake of these transubstantiated elements obey Christ's injunction

¹This is the first of a series of articles appropriate to the four-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, to appear this year in the REVIEW.

4 PREPARATION FOR THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

given on the night of his betrayal. In the sacrament of penance the priest exercises his authority to absolve from sin, and the condition of such absolution is the prior confession by the offender to the priest. The sacramental theory made the sacraments essential channels of the divine grace to man.

The teaching of the German mystics encouraged a different idea. They did not openly attack the sacramental theory. Their methods, however, were a silent protest against it. They pointed out another way of reaching God and appropriating his grace. They laid stress on the soul's immediate communion with God. They produced no closely concatenated systems of theology. They preached in the language of the people. For dialectics they substituted practical religious discourse adapted for the daily wants of men. Instead of fortifying a system, they started and taught schools for the young. Instead of exalting priestly offices, they held up the Scriptures as the book of life. In the Lowlands, they were busy in organizing charities. They wrote works on personal religion. The very names given to groups of these mystics indicated a new spirit—The Friends of God, the Brothers of the Common Life. Their evangelical freedom and their practical activities brought upon them the opposition and the anathema of strict ecclesiastics—the Franciscans and the pope.

The earliest of these mystics, Meister Eckart (d. 1327), with deep insight into the human heart and understanding of the New Testament, kept himself in his preaching to such themes as the blindness and deadness of the natural man, the love and the fatherhood of God, and the heritage of believers. Works, he insisted, do not sanctify. The righteous soul sanctifies the works. His simple, pungent, evangelical preaching, omitting the

usual sacerdotal and ritualistic elements, called forth the fulmination of John XXII., who charged Eckart with no less than twenty-six heresies. John Tauler of Strassburg (d. 1361), used no word in his sermons more frequently than the word *kehr*, conversion, the change through which the soul passes in becoming Christian. As for good works, he said, if done apart from Christ they are of no avail. Wisdom, he insisted, was not to be learned in Paris—that is, by intellectual processes—but in the sufferings of the Lord. Whittier well represented this new spirit of inward and practical religion as opposed to the sacramental observances enjoined by the Schoolmen when he put into Tauler's mouth the words:

My prayer is answered. God hath sent the
man
Long sought, to teach us by his simple trust
Wisdom the weary Schoolmen never knew.

This mysticism had its perfect fruitage in the two religious manuals written not many years before Luther was born, the *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, and the *German Theology* by an unknown author. The first, inculcating a passive type of piety, lays all stress upon the inward movements of the soul and outward purity. The *German Theology*, free from all sacramentalism, states the plain way of salvation through union with Christ.

This German mysticism, which extended like a quiet rill of fresh and life-giving waters from Switzerland to Strassburg and through the Rhine regions down to Deventer, Zwolle, Herzogenbusch, and other centers in the Lowlands, was still a living force at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It insisted upon the spiritual life as the main part of religion. Out from its schools, which Luther praised, went Nicolas of Cusa, Erasmus, John of Goch, John of Wesel, and a long list of teachers who un-

consciously were preparing the soil for the seeds Luther was soon to sow. Moreover, Luther himself drank deep drafts from Tauler and the *German Theology*. In 1316 he read the Strassburg preacher's sermons and said of them: "Nowhere else have I found a purer or more wholesome theology or any that agrees so well with the gospel." The *German Theology* he sent forth in two editions, 1516, 1518, and in a preface by his own hand he said: "Next to the Bible and St. Augustine, no book had ever come into his hands from which he had learned or would wish to learn more of what God and man and all things are." A hundred years, later, 1621, this most evangelical volume was placed on the Index.

II. A class of men who anticipated the views of the Reformers in part by their literary attacks against the papacy and the medieval Church system we will call the anti-papal pamphleteers. They arose after the pontificate of Boniface VIII, and were in part called forth by the pope's monstrous pretensions. The boldest of these pamphleteers, Marsiglius of Padua, who died about 1340, has been called by Roman Catholic historians a Calvin before Calvin. He called in question the whole hierarchical organization. The reigning pope he denominated "the great dragon, the old serpent," the distinction of bishop and priest he pronounced a human invention. The power of the keys he took away from the priesthood and placed it in the body of the Christian people. He declared the Scriptures to be the final seat of authority, and demanded that laymen sit in Church councils. Such utterances showed that in certain circles the spirit of free inquiry, in spite of the Inquisition, was moving, and that there was opposition to the system which, deleting the rights of the individual believer, committed absolute authority in matters of re-

ligion to a self-perpetuating order and gave the pope supremacy over civil rulers.

III. The "Reformers before the Reformation" are justly given this title. Moved not by political considerations but concerned solely for religion, they opposed to the current theology doctrines which they drew directly from the Scriptures. They were pioneers in the department of evangelical teaching. No one part of Europe can claim all of them. Wyclif belonged to England, John Huss and Jerome of Prag to Bohemia, John of Goch, John of Wesel, and John Wesel to the region of the lower Rhine, Savonarola to Italy. From these different geographical standpoints they spoke to all parts of Western Europe. To be sure, Savonarola was, strictly speaking, a political and moral reformer. However, he has a place in this group for withstanding the pope of his day, the infamous Alexander VI., for appealing from the pope to a general council, and for exalting in the pulpit the Scriptures. Works which he wrote in prison Luther edited prefixing a preface and the sculptor has properly given the Dominican preacher a place on the monument of the Reformation erected at Worms.

John Wyclif, called the "Morning-Star of the Reformation," announced in tracts and sermons, as well as in elaborate treatises, nearly every distinctive doctrine which Luther and the other Protestant Reformers taught. He insisted that the Bible should be in the hands of the people and in the language they understood, pronounced transubstantiation a doctrine "grounded neither in holy writt ne wit but only taught by newe hypocritis and cursed heretikis that magnyfen their own fantasies and dremes." From the theory that the papacy is of divine appointment he took away the foundation by in-

6 PREPARATION FOR THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

terpreting the "rock" to apply not only to Peter but to every true Christian; and at the priestly power he made a deadly thrust when he declared that "the keys" are committed "to alle men that comen to hevене."

Wyclif's views were still in the memory of Englishmen when the Reformation broke out one hundred and thirty years after his death. But, so far as I know, Luther never read any of his writings. Wyclif's influence passed over to him through John Huss, Wyclif's faithful disciple, whom the Bohemians called the fifth evangelist. In this very important respect the influence of the two men differed: Wyclif's preaching became a memory: Huss's burning at Constance in 1415 was followed by an organized Church movement which perpetuated his views. The Hussites were called to endure bloody war in the five crusades which popes stirred up against them. When Luther arose they were still an organized dissenting body and sent a delegation to Luther as to a true successor of Huss. When a student at Erfurt, Luther furtively read a copy of the Bohemian's sermons and wondered how it could be that the man who preached such discourses was condemned by a council as heretic. Later, he became the ardent defender of Huss's memory. In 1519 he denied the infallibility of general councils on the ground that, in putting Huss to death, the council of Constance erred. A few months later he wrote, "We have all been Hussites without knowing it." Not that Luther learned his Protestant views from Huss. He did not. But he was confirmed in them by what he came to know of Huss's treatise on the Church and of the martyr's life and his steadfastness at the stake.

These two reformers, as well as the others mentioned, exalted the Scriptures, attacked the sale of indulgences, and denied the current definition of

the Church as the body of the baptized who remain in submission to the pope. John Wessel defined the Church to be the "communion of the saints to which all true believers belong who are bound by one faith, one hope, one love to Christ." To that definition no good Protestant can take exception.

IV. Immediate preparation was furnished for the Reformation by the Renaissance. Starting in Italy, this movement signified a rebound from the monkish and medieval conception of the world and man. Its scholars and men of letters turned away from theological tomes to antiquity and pored with admiration over the pages of the Greek and Latin classics, and went into ecstasy over ancient works of art. In the North, the Renaissance took on a serious tone such as it did not assume in Italy. Reuchlin became the father of Hebrew learning in the modern Christian Church and Erasmus of the study of Greek. In 1514 Erasmus issued the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament and followed it by editions of many of the same Greek and Latin Fathers. These pioneers in the study of the text and languages of the Bible were just in time for Luther, and from the second edition of Erasmus's Greek Testament he made his German translation, the first translation from the original Greek in a thousand years.

The Renaissance meant more than a revival of learning. It meant a new spirit of free investigation, a spirit also encouraged by the discoveries of Columbus and other navigators. And to this spirit, without doubt, Luther was unconsciously indebted tho he was never a child of the Renaissance culture as Zwingli and Calvin at one period of their lives were.

To the invention of the printing-press about 1450 Luther and the Reformation also owed an unspeakable debt. It came just in time for

the wide and swift distribution of their writings, so that Myconius could say of the Ninety-five Theses that they went through Europe as tho carried on the wings of angels.

V. A negative preparation for the Reformation was furnished by the low condition into which the papacy had fallen in the last half of the fifteenth century. Such a scandalous inconsistency the page of human history scarcely shows as the self-indulgence, worldly aims, and wantonness which reigned in the Vatican during the first thirty-five years of Luther's life. What should have been the place of godliness and spiritual purpose was the seat of a corruption and depravity not exceeded by any civil court in Europe. The popes of the period, called the papal pornography or the rule of the harlots, were equally shameless; but they lived in the tenth century, not at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The pages of the eminent Roman Catholic historian, Pastor,¹ as well as the volumes of Gregorovius,² give the description of this dissolute period in the history of the papacy. The conception which these successors of St. Peter had of their office may be summed up in the words of Leo X., in a letter written upon his election as pope, "God has given us the papacy. Let us enjoy it." But in Germany it was not the dissoluteness of these contemporary popes which aroused indignation. It was the papal arrogance of

centuries shown in the treatment of Germans and Germany that rankled in the heart of many a patriotic German; and this feeling made it easier for Luther's first attacks to find a response, and later for his mission of reproclaiming the gospel to find acknowledgment.

After the student has studied all these precursive movements, he will conclude that they have the aspect of being more or less premonitory of the Reformation or preparatory to it. However, when he then turns to the study of Luther's life, he is forced to the conclusion that by none of them was Luther moved to enter upon his reformatory career. He began as a true child of the middle ages. By the study of the Scriptures in his study and, as we assume, by the work of God's Spirit in his soul, he was brought, unconsciously at first, to break with the views he had inherited. When he spoke he leaned upon no human authority. By the new testimony furnished in the manuscript copies of his lectures on the Psalms and other books of the Bible prepared before 1517 and recently discovered in the Vatican and other libraries, he quietly underwent that intellectual and spiritual change which found expression in the Ninety-five Theses and the announcements of the years that followed 1517. Far less, as the leader of the new religious movement, did he owe to the religious teachers who had gone before him than Columbus owed to D'Ailly and other geographers as the discoverer of the New World. Before 1517 Luther had sat at the feet of St. Paul, and as he was impelled by what he had learned from that apostle, so he spoke.

¹ *History of the Popes from the close of the Middle Ages*, London, 1899 ff.

² *Geschichte der Stadt Rom im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, 1886 ff., English translation, *History of the City of Rome in the Middle Ages*, 8 vols. (especially volumes vii. and viii.), London and New York, 1895 ff.