9 Reformation, Counter Reformation and Religious War 1500–1650AD

By the middle of the fifteenth century Germany was seething with dissatisfaction with the Church. Because of the weakness of German central political power the Papacy had a much stronger position than in England, France and Spain where the Church was much more ‘national’. Thus the Papacy was still able to appoint French and Italians to German bishoprics and, since less money was coming from the countries with ‘national’ churches, it was demanding increased contributions from Germany.

A second source of resentment was the behaviour of the senior clergy, who considered their bishoprics as feudal fiefs and a means of maintaining standards of living commensurate with their social status rather than paying attention to their spiritual functions. These were left to the parish clergy, who were in many cases theologically ignorant or illiterate, and poorly paid.¹

Third, at a time of intensification rather than decline in religious belief, there was resentment at the deterioration of ecclesiastical means of salvation into substitutes such as confessions and the sale of indulgences.

Martin Luther, a Saxon (1483–46) had studied law at Leipzig University, joined the Augustinian Order of Hermits in 1505 and was ordained in 1507. His Order sent him to Wittenberg University to teach moral philosophy, where by 1511 he was a Doctor of Theology and Professor of Biblical Studies.

And it was in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517 that Luther posted on the door of the castle church his ninety-five theses attacking the sale of indulgences, the Church’s preoccupation with material possessions, and contrasting those material possessions with its true wealth, namely, the Gospel.

Crucial to an understanding of Lutheranism and its significance are Luther’s interpretation of the relations between God and Man, and, linked to it, his views on politics and society, particularly the place of labour.
Luther accused the Church of lapsing into Pelagianism, that the individual was able to get into contact with God by his achievements and be accepted by Him on that account. But, following St. Augustine, who had argued that sinful persons could not reach God by their own resources, Luther believed that it was up to God, through His Grace, to reach out and find the individual. God’s Grace was available to the penitent believer, but God’s only communication with the individual was through His Word, as given in the Scriptures. God, through the Bible, spoke only to those who had Faith. Faith in God was the answer, not personal achievements such as good works. Thus a direct relationship with God was the only source of Grace.2

There were three consequences of these views:

First, because of the need for a direct relationship between God and the individual there was no need for intermediaries such as the Blessed Virgin Mary as mediator, the Saints as intercessors and the clergy as priests.

Second, the Bible was the only source of Faith, in contrast to the belief of the Church that not only the Bible but also tradition were sources (tradition being interpreted as the decrees of Popes and Councils, the infallible authorities on the scriptures).

Third, salvation was entirely in the hands of God. The individual could only know God, and be accepted by Him, if He so chose.

Accused, inevitably, of heresy, Luther defended himself in a public debate in 1519 in Leipzig with Johann Eck, Professor of Theology at Ingolstadt. And it was during this debate that Luther broke with Rome – denying the primacy of the Pope, the infallibility of Pope and Councils, and Church tradition.

The following year Luther called on the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, to take the lead in introducing reforms, and arguing that only two of the seven sacraments of the Church, baptism and communion, could be justified on a scriptural basis (the other five were confirmation, marriage, confession, ordination and extreme unction). When the Pope sent a Bull threatening excommunication, Luther publicly burnt it in Wittenberg. Nor did Luther get any help from Charles V, who placed him under the Ban of the Empire.

Nevertheless, Luther lived for another twenty-six years, developing the basis for Protestant forms of worship, catechisms,