The German Peasants' War

The Intersection of Theology and Society

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2014

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the
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Abstract

This paper examines the way that Reformation theology, particularly that espoused by

Martin Luther, impacted German society. Sixteenth-century German society was very

hierarchical in nature, with the Roman Catholic Church at the top, followed by the

nobility, and finally the peasants, who suffered economic and political plight. Luther's

break from the Church in 1517 and the subsequent years brought tension to society.

Developments extending from that break challenged the social hierarchy. One of the

major social consequences of the Protestant Reformation, which was rooted in Luther's

theology, was the Peasants' War. Luther criticized the peasants for the uprising, based on

his understand of the Two Kingdoms theology. Luther's theology, then, created some

unintentional social tension, which his historical context may help to explain.

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Introduction

"We bid God the Lord to grant it to us to live and practice every Christian

teaching," concluded the "Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants."[1] The

peasants in revolt against the German establishment of nobles and lords concluded their

chief manifesto of the German Peasants' War in 1525. The quote accurately draws

attention to the chief issues involved in German society at that time. Martin Luther,

beginning in 1517 with the posting of the Ninety-five Theses, had provoked theological

discussions based on Scripture. The discussions and Luther's further study eventually

resulted in a theology counter to the generally accepted teachings of the Roman Catholic

Church. The peasants, whose lives were mired in economic and political subservience

largely resulting from the hierarchical social structure in place at that time, latched onto

Luther's ideas and sought to apply them to every aspect of their lives. What resulted was

the largest popular uprising to that time, the German Peasants' War, from 1524-1526.

Luther, in light of his political theology, strongly repudiated the revolt, appealing to both

sides to peacefully reach an agreement.[2] By separating life into two distinct spheres,

Luther was able to call for the equality of all persons in the spiritual realm without calling

for their complete equality in the temporal realm. Therefore, Luther, by his Reformation

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1. Sebastian Lotzer and Christoph Schappeler, "The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants," March 1525, as quoted in Michael G. Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 77.

2. Michael G. Baylor, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 1. Throughout the paper, the term "political theology" is meant to describe Luther's theology as it related to government and as it related to society in interaction with the government. Luther would have rejected any notion that he was political.

theology, unintentionally created a great level of tension in sixteenth-century German society.

Historiography

Historians have written a considerable amount about the German Peasants' War. Understanding the causes of the conflict and how they fit into the larger historical context of the Reformation is important for several reasons. First, because the revolt in Germany was the largest in Europe to that time and one of the first large uprisings of many to come, historians are curious how it came about and what course it ran. Also, because economic systems contributed significantly to the Peasants' War, economic historians of both socialist and capitalist outlooks have been interested to see if the Peasants' War can serve as an insight to similar occurrences later in history. Finally, historians are interested in this event because of its close connection with the Reformation.[3]

The majority of recent historical scholarship dealing with the German Peasants' War has been along the same vein. Among these modern-day historians, there is little disagreement on what caused the revolt: economic, social, and political problems, in addition to Reformation theology. . Michael Baylor, in his work, *The German Reformation and the Peasants' War: A Brief History with Documents*, which is the most recent offering in the field, notes that "German commoners confronted deteriorating economic and social condition."[4] Peter Blickle, in *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective,* adds that "the immediate goal of the Twelve Articles was to overcome the crisis of the late medieval agriculture and the agrarian

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3. Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, trans. and eds., *The German Peasants' War: A History in Documents* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1991), 1-3.

4. Baylor, 5.

order."[5] In their edited work, *The German Peasants' War*, Tom Scott and Bob Scribner

contend that "there was undoubtedly a close connection between the preaching of the

gospel [as a result of the Reformation] and social unrest."[6] Historians also agree that

Luther opposed the revolution, with the basic understanding that "Luther's profound fear

of political disorder meant that where he stood was never in question."[7] Luther's political

theology was diametrically opposed to rebellion against established authority.

Although historians cite the Reformation as a major cause of the Peasants' War,

there has been a lack of ability to synthesize what the peasants heard and acted upon from

Luther, what Luther articulated in his political theology of the Two Kingdoms, and how

Luther's historical context impacted what he said.[8] This work will seek to contribute to

this area, drawing together each of those three aspects to note the tension that Luther's

theology created in society and, in addition, to set forth a potential explanation for

Luther's actions and theology.

Social Hierarchy

Around the turn of the sixteenth century, German society was divided into strict

hierarchical orders based on a perception that God ordained it to be so. This system was

based on the idea of the great chain of being. The concept of the great chain of being was

that each person, creature, and thing had a particular place in society as determined by

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5. Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective*, trans. Thomas A. Brady, Jr. and H.C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 25.

6. Scott, 96.

7. Baylor, 29.

8. The Two Kingdoms will be discussed in much more detail below. It is the main reason why Luther denied that his priesthood of all believers theology carried social and political ramifications in addition to the clear spiritual consequences

God. Thomas Aquinas held that "all things in a certain manner pre-exist in God by their

types" and that "the perfection of the universe…requires…diverse kinds…and diverse

grades of things."[9] The higher levels of the chain belonged to "church and religious

values," while "state and secular values" belonged to the lower order.[10] The Church

sought to impress upon people the idea of the great chain of being because of the order it

purported to bring to society and the preeminent position in which it placed the Church.

While some nobles and lords adhered to the system because of the order and protection it

helped secure, by the early 1500s, many of them began to assert their place alongside and

separate from the Church rather than under its authority. Within the lower order, the

nobles and lords held authority over the peasants, who suffered at the bottom of this

chain.[11]

Peasants

The peasants suffered at the bottom of the social hierarchy. While different levels

of the lower class can be identified within this grouping, peasants on the whole possessed

few, if any, rights. The main problems that the peasants faced in the early sixteenth

century were economic and political. Economically speaking, they suffered under the

toils of the subsistence agrarian system, which basically entailed their dependence upon

the lords. The operating principle behind late Medieval society was that peasants lived

and worked on a lord's or a noble's estate. In exchange for protection against invasion or

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9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1: 75, 2: 45, as quoted in Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 73, 76. Lovejoy contends that the idea of the great chain of being pervaded medieval society and that it "passed over into that complex of preconceptions which shaped the theology and cosmology of medieval Christendom" (67).

10. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550, An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 181.

11. Ibid.

enemy attacks and other legal and medical protections by the lords, the peasants lived and worked on the lords' lands.[12] The vast majority of peasants relied mainly on subsistence farming on a lord's land to survive. In exchange for the right to live on and work that portion of land, the peasants paid the lord a part of their crop in taxes. As subsistence farmers, they had to live off of the portion of the crop that was left after paying their fees to the lord. Despite the mutual benefits, the system was still inherently unequal because the lords held more power than the peasants. The lords desired to increase their wealth, but due to the growing bureaucracy in Germany at the time were forced to pay more and more taxes to support the government. Often, the lords simply passed that tax down to the peasants, charging them a higher rate. The dues owed by the peasants to the nobles "often accounted for as much as forty percent of production," not to mention the "ten percent in tithe" paid to the church.[13] Some peasants attempted to sell at least some of what was left over, in order to have money to purchase the things they did not produce themselves, but they had to keep enough to feed their families. In an attempt to maintain control over the peasants, the lords often restricted the peasants' access to the best markets, which meant low returns for their crops. The lords also restricted the peasants' access to such things as forests, which provided necessary resources. The peasants faced a vicious cycle of poverty, which was nearly impossible to escape.[14]

This societal system was in place for centuries. However, in the years leading up to the Reformation, the peasants' problems were exacerbated. The peasants struggled to

12. James D. Tracy, *Europe's Reformations, 1450-1650: Doctrine, Politics, and Community*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 223.

13. Scott, 9.

14. Tracy, 224-225; Scott, 7-9; Adolf Laube, "Precursors of the Peasant War: Bundschuh and Armer Konrad- Movements at the Eve of the Reformation," in *The German Peasant War of 1525*, ed. Jonas Bak (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1976), 50.

find enough land to cultivate because the system was based on the principle of partible

inheritance, which meant that a peasant family divided the land that the family occupied

between its sons. As generations passed and families grew larger, the amount of land that

each son inherited decreased, making the burden of taxation even more severe and the

ability to survive off the meager crop nearly impossible.[15] Adding further strain, the lords

continued to raise taxes to higher and higher levels and placed increasing restrictions on

the peasants' rights to the land. By the early 1520s, these problems left the peasants ripe

for a rebellion to gain fundamental equality.[16]

On top of their economic struggles, the peasants had no political rights. Local

assemblies met in many towns in Germany. However, the peasants did not have any form

of representation, thus they had no avenue in which to express their concerns and to have

their voice heard. During the early 1500s, the regional princes even started building up

bureaucracies of sorts, which led to a larger government and the need for tax increases.

Lords needed more money to pay for the growing size of government.[17]

Peasant Interactions with the Church

Also of note is how the peasants interacted with the Roman Catholic Church,

which, in general, dominated most aspects of society and life throughout the Middle

Ages. A growing number of peasants began practicing a sort of popular religion, which

adapted official Church doctrine and practice to make it applicable to the average

person's everyday life. This popular religion was a search for a more effective system of

meeting the people's needs. The peasants understood the role of the Church to "provide

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15. Baylor, 5.

16. Blickle, *The Revolution of* 1525, 87.

17. Scott, 10-11; Baylor, 5-6.

the grace, through the sacraments, that God had provided to Adam before the fall, in order that people might be saved."[18] The peasants grasped the concept of penitence and its necessity, but they felt that the Church was failing to properly provide for their everyday needs.[19] So, "religion as practiced by even the self-consciously orthodox was not necessarily that same as religion that was officially recommended."[20] For example, some people lit rowan braches on fire on May Day as part of some popular idea of the afterlife, although the practice did not reflect Church teachings on the afterlife.[21]

Also, during the decades leading up to the Protestant Reformation, anti-clericalism grew among the peasants. Monasticism grew up out of the idea of people taking up their cross and denying themselves for the sake of Christ. To live humbly and piously was the norm for the early clergymen. Benedict of Nursia, who helped establish Western monasticism, supposedly lived in a cave for three years, consuming only bread and water that was lowered to him on a rope. Thus, peasants were expected to live their lives with little or no property and devoted to prayer, fasting, and serving God and the people of the community. By the late Middle Ages, the general practice of clergymen had greatly diverted from this original intention of monasticism, seeking to gain money through different means and seeking after other things as more important that their vow to humbly serve God. The peasants recognized and resented the privileges afforded clergymen, as well as the growing number and frequency of their abuses.[22]

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18. Ozment, 28.

19. Ibid., 208, 217.

20. Diarmaid McCullough, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 16.

21. Ibid.

22. Ozment, 83.

The clergymen's chief privilege was that they did not have to pay the same taxes as the peasants. Although higher clergy had begun to levy some taxes on lower clergy, all clergymen were exempt from taxation by the temporal rulers because of their supposed service to God. In addition to paying taxes to their nobles and lords, the peasants had to pay taxes to the lower clergy, whose chief ways of making money were taking part of the tithe from the people and fees for certain sacraments or duties. Thus, there were fees for penance, marriage, baptism, the last rites, burials, and masses for the dead. In 1517, "priests in Bramberg charged one wax candle and [some change] for blessing a woman in childbirth; nine denarii for declaring a marriage; forty-eight [denarii] and food for a wedding mass; nine for the last rites."[23] Burials cost about a month's wage for a poor man.[24]

There were many other clerical abuses that contributed to anti-clericalism. Absenteeism, where the local priest would fail to be at his post for long periods of time, was an issue. Celibacy, which was required of clergymen, was not practiced by a growing number of clergymen.[25] More and more clergymen were appointed by nobles or princes for economic or political reasons and not because they possessed the same monastic spirit that embodied the early clergymen.[26] Although a few early reformers began to murmur utterances of discontent, the majority of society remained loyal in support of the Church

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23. Ibid., 213.

24. Ibid.

25. Tracy, 17-18; Ozment, 213.

26. Ozment, 213.

over most aspects of life in spite of the rising anti-clerical fervor. Far-ranging discontent

inside and outside came to a head in Luther's time.[27]

Protestant Reformation

It was within this social context that Martin Luther in 1517 posted the Ninety-five

Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg, Germany. By this act, he unintentionally

started the movement that would become known as the Protestant Reformation. The

theses aptly expressed not only Luther's concerns with the growing corruption and greed

in the Roman Catholic Church, but also many other people's similar grievances,

particularly in regard to indulgences.[28] Indulgences were papal letters that the Church

sold to people in order to pay for their own sins or the sins of deceased family members.

The Church taught that the practice of buying indulgences could reduce the time one

spent in Purgatory. Many people believed that the Church was taking advantage of the

people by convincing them to spend exorbitant amounts of money, which was stuffing

the coffers of the pope and other Church officials.[29]

Luther based his theses and objections on truths that he had come to recognize in

his study of the Bible. Luther did not originally intend to create such a massive

movement resulting in a complete break from the Catholic Church. However, over the

next decade, Luther and other reformers articulated numerous doctrinal and practical

disagreements with the Church that went well beyond the scope of the Ninety-five

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27. Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 24-27.

28. Tracy, 50-51.

29. "Indulgences," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624-e-3024?rskey=FANFjQ&result=1 (accessed January 25, 2014); Ozment, 217.

Theses. Several of the doctrines that Luther brought to light from Scripture played a

major role in creating a great amount of tension in society, particularly in regard to the

Peasants' War and the relationship between the Church and the political authorities.[30]

Luther's Influential Theological Ideas

Over the course of the next several years after his posting of the Ninety-five

Theses, Luther began to articulate theological views contrary to teachings of the Catholic

Church, through intense study of Scripture and some of the early church fathers. Two of

Luther's primary theological teachings were *sola scriptura*, which means Scripture alone,

and *sola fide*, which means faith alone.[31] These ideas served as the foundation for all of

Luther's other beliefs.[32] By *sola scriptura*, Luther meant that only the Bible, which is the

inspired Word of God, should be used in determining religious doctrine, faith, and

practice. Luther scolded the Catholic Church for using tradition, papal decrees, and other

instruments to establish doctrines that stood in direct contradiction to the Bible. As part

of this belief, Luther believed that access to the Bible should not be restricted to the

clergy as it had been, largely due to fears of social ramifications. "[The Catholic

Church's] claim that only the Pope may interpret Scripture is an outrageous fancied

fable," Luther insisted.[33] Despite their rudimentary level of education, the peasants

grabbed on to this idea and called for more local control over the church and more access

to the Bible. Luther's idea, along with the explosion in printed material at about the same

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30. MacCullough, 123-124.

31. Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*, 157.

32. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 98, 121.

33. Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," 1520, in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society I*, ed. James Atkinson, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44: 134.

time, allowed peasants more access to Scripture and other material that they may not

otherwise have been able to obtain.[34]

Sola fide meant that salvation was by faith alone. This, likewise, took away power

and authority from the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church's teaching on justification

was quite unclear in the late Medieval period. There was a great difference of opinion in

regard to the issue. Medieval theologians were relatively united in their belief of

justification as both an act and a process, which meant that faith and works played some

part in salvation. Luther recognized, from passages like the third chapter of Paul's Epistle

to the Romans, that works, namely the purchasing of indulgences, played no part at all in

an individual's salvation. He understood justification as separate from regeneration or the

process of sanctification. Thus, Luther saw justification as a forensic act of God,

independent of human action or righteousness.[35] Luther experienced an enlightening

moment when he recognized the idea of justification by faith in the first and third

chapters of Romans. Per Paul's teaching, individuals are declared right by God based on

something that he brings about inside of them rather than based on what they say or do, a

teaching of the utmost consequence. Luther did add that, while faith alone justifies, faith

necessarily leads to good works, as evidenced in the second chapter of James.[36] Luther,

then, disagreed with the Catholic Church on the nature of justification.[37] The doctrine of

justification by faith lays a foundation of equal access to God, upon which Luther would

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34. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 98-100.

35. Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 181-183.

36. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 121-125.

37. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 184.

further expound in the most consequential belief for the peasants, the priesthood of all

believers.[38]

Luther articulated his belief in the priesthood of all believers in his letter "To the

Christian Nobility." He basically established a concept of egalitarianism that countered

the Catholic view of a hierarchical spiritual structure.[39] He said,

> It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual
> estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate.
> This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need to be intimidated
> by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is
> no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that
> we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the
> others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all
> Christians alike…. We are all consecrated priests through baptism…. It follows
> from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and
> priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of
> office and work, but not for the sake of status.[40]

In addition to 1 Corinthians, Luther based this belief on passages like 1 Peter 2:9, which

says in part that "[Christians] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation…," and

Revelation 5:10, which says that Christians have been made to be "a kingdom and priests

to our God…." Luther destroyed the privileged status that the clergy claimed, breaking,

on an individual level, the sacred-secular divide undergirding Medieval society. Within

the spiritual realm, Luther considered everyone equal. He placed the Pope on the same

spiritual level as the peasant. Both could read and understand the Bible. Both were

justified by faith. The clergy simply held a position of authority within the Church, but

Luther did not believe that that position gave them any better relationship with or

standing before God. This teaching had revolutionary consequences because it challenged

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38. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 121-125.

39. Baylor, 9; Tracy, 19.

40. Luther, "To the Christian Nobility," 44: 127-129.

the basis of the only known system of structure and authority in sixteenth-century Europe.[41]

The Reformation spread with a great vigor. Especially in Germany, many towns began to adhere to Luther's reforms and propagated his teachings. The princes and other leaders gladly accepted a theological basis for acting against the papacy and the clergy, whose authority and abuses they detested. They wanted greater political freedom, which they found in another aspect of Luther's Reformation theology. Luther's political theology recognized the legitimacy of both the temporal, earthly authority and the spiritual, church authority. By separating life into two distinct spheres, spiritual and temporal, this theology gave the princes their own realm over which to govern. Luther's political theology is known as the Two Kingdoms. Princes wanted the independence Luther's political theology granted to them, so they adapted all of Luther's theology for their own purposes, including the idea of the priesthood of all believers.[42]

The German Peasants' War

Peasants' Reaction to Luther's Theology

As the Reformation spread, peasants quickly latched onto Luther's teaching of spiritual equality. Like the nobles, they had long deplored the corruption of the clergy. The clergy were exempt from certain taxes and had other privileges, which they abused.[43] The peasants happily accepted a lowering of the clergy's elevated status. In addition, the idea of spiritual equality offered the peasants a foundation on which to base their calls for

41. Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 287-288.

42. Baylor, 29

43. Tracy, 16.

greater political, economic, and social equality. They saw the theological doctrine of the

priesthood of all believers as destroying not only the spiritual hierarchy but also the social

hierarchy set in place by the lords and nobles over them.[44] The core of society at this time

was religion. By challenging the religious basis for a hierarchical society, the idea of the

priesthood of believers carried with it social and political ramifications.[45] The peasants

said that Luther's teachings on the twelfth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians

indicated that all people were to cooperate equally in society. Prior to Luther, the

hierarchy established by the church had been widely accepted throughout society.

According to the Church's teaching, if a person disagreed with the Church, the priests

and the Pope had authority to excommunicate him or her, which resulted in not only a

lifetime of seclusion but also a future of eternal punishment and condemnation in hell.

Such a dire threat created fear among the peasants. Now that the threat of

excommunication by the Church was taken away by virtue of *sola fide* and the peasants

had a supposed theological basis for their total equality from Luther's priesthood of all

believers, any inhibitions toward a revolt to bring more total equality rapidly

diminished.[46]

The dramatic and widespread uprising that was the German Peasants' War began

in 1524. It cannot be explained simply by the economic and political problems under

which the peasants suffered. Despite the rising levels of taxation, the peasants had faced

economic plight throughout much of the Middle Ages. Indeed, the peasants established

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44. Kyle C. Sessions, "The War over Luther and the Peasants: Old Campaigns and New Strategies," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 3, no. 2 (October 1972): 26; Baylor, 12.

45. Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*, 92.

46. Baylor, 11, 14-15.

an informal tradition of revolution during the late Middle Ages. Peasant uprisings

occurred in Italy, Flanders, France, England, Bohemia, and Hungary over the course of

the fourteenth and fifteenth century.[47] All of the peasants in these uprisings shared the

common complaint of increasing fees.[48] In Germany, peasants referred to the movement

as *bundschuh*, which was the German word for the peasants' footwear, which was made

of rough rawhide. They meant for it to contrast with the boots of the nobles. Also, the

word *bund* means bind, which added another layer of significance to the title.[49] However,

none of those revolts came close to the magnitude of the Peasants' War in Germany in

the 1520s. The difference was Luther's posting his ideas in 1517, which sparked the

major movement responsible for providing the peasants with the extra impetus needed to

bring about a large-scale insurrection.[50]

One final word from Luther provided the peasants the only further motivation

they needed. In his "The Rights of a Christian Congregation," published in 1523, Luther

concluded that "a Christian congregation in possession of the gospel…has the right,

power, [and] duty…to avoid, to flee, to depose, and to withdraw from the authority" of

the clergy over them, since "they teach and rule contrary to God and his word."[51] Luther

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47. Ozment, 194; Peter Blickle and Cathleen Catt, "Revolts in the German Empire in the Late Middle Ages," *Social History* 4, no. 2 (May 1979): 223.

48. Blickle, "Revolts," 231.

49. Laube, 49; R. W. Scribner, "Images of the Peasant, 1514-1525," in *The German Peasant War of 1525*, ed. Jonas Bak (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1976), 30.

50. Frantisek Graus, "From Resistance to Revolt: The Late Medieval Peasant Wars in the Context of Social Crisis," in *The German Peasant War of 1525*, ed. Jonas Bak (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1976), 5.

51. Martin Luther, "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture," 1523, in *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry I*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1970) 39: 308-309.

added that the local congregation should be able to choose their own minister. With this

final assertion of rights, Luther, in the minds of the peasants, granted the right to rebel

against authorities hindering their living according to the gospel. The peasants' political

rebellion stemmed out logically from Luther's opinion about church government,

although Luther never expressly said that the peasants should rebel against the political

leaders. However, Luther did not need to expressly state that right for the peasants to

tease it out of his other principles. The peasants now saw themselves on equal footing

with the Israelites in Egypt. They thought it was God's will that they be freed from the

bondage placed upon them by the clergy and the lords. The peasants came to see their

subservient status as contrary to their right as Christians to live out the gospel. Therefore,

they believed the Bible legitimized a revolt in such circumstances, and they placed the

blame for the revolt on the lords. They used the Word of God to establish any demand

they had.[52] In addition to all the teaching they heard from Luther, Huldrych Zwingli,

Thomas Müntzer, and other Reformation preachers propagated teachings that encouraged

even more radical sentiments of rebellion. These theological provocations combined with

the economic and political strains gave the peasants ample motivation to revolt.[53]

The War

The Peasants' War began in June 1524 in Stühlingen, Germany. The Countess of

Lupfen tried to make the peasants spend a holiday collecting snails' shells that she could

use to wind yarn.[54] The peasants refused and commenced coordinating the revolt. They

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52. R.W. Scribner and C. Scott Dixon, *The German Reformation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 31, 39; Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525*, 19, 92.

53. Baylor, 13.

54. Hubert Kirchner, *Luther and the Peasants' War*, trans. Darrell Jodock (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3; Baylor, 15.

began the revolt peacefully, by publishing a list of sixty-two grievances, voicing both agrarian and societal concerns.[55] Over the rest of 1524 and early January 1525, the revolutionary spirit spread quietly but steadily. Hans Muller and Thomas Müntzer, both radical revolutionaries, began to spread the ideas of the peasants around different parts of Germany. However, as winter came to an end in 1525, the peasants' vigor returned.[56] Spurred on by Müntzer, who was executed for his radical teachings on May 27, 1525, the peasants rose up violently.[57]

In March 1525, the peasants in Upper Swabia published the most important document of the war, which added a great boost to the peasants' cause by giving them a unified rallying cry in their war against the lords and became the fundamental goals of all of the revolutionaries. The "Twelve Articles" reflected the roots of the war in both the Reformation teachings and economic hardships and reflected the peasants' conviction that their actions were justified by Scripture for the sake of the gospel. "Since the peasants want to be taught and live by such a gospel [of love, peace, and unity], they cannot be called disobedient or seditious," the introduction of the "Articles" stated.[58] The "Twelve Articles" called for the rights of congregations to select their own pastor, fair tithe and tax laws, property rights, communal forests, equitable rent, and abolition of the death tax. They demanded an end to the vast inequality, unless it could be proven to be in accordance with the gospel. They concluded in the twelfth article "that if one or more or the articles is not in accordance with the Word of God, we will retract these articles. We

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55. Baylor, 16.

56. Baylor, 16-17; Scott, 43.

57. Kirchner, 8.

58. Lotzer, "The Twelve Articles," as quoted in Baylor, 77.

bid God the Lord to grant it to us to live and practice every Christian teaching."[59] The

peasants reprinted the proclamation several times, and it spread throughout all of

Germany.[60]

The Peasants' War took place in five major areas: Upper Swabia, Franconia,

Thuringia, Alsace and the Palatinate, and the Alpine lands. The revolution took on a

unique character in each region, with some more violent than others, but each group of

peasants committed itself to the same basic idea of gaining greater equality, based on the

"Twelve Articles." To the great detriment of the peasants, however, they were never able

to unite the different regional rebellions into one combined force, which could have more

easily defeated the lords or negotiated a favorable agreement with them. The difficulty of

traveling and communicating during that period, especially for those without means,

made it nearly impossible for much cooperation between the various groups.[61]

Within each of the five regions, however, the peasants organized quite effectively.

As the revolution began in many areas, assemblies played a large part. Peasants met as

equals to discuss grievances and to display their desire to join together to fight for rights.

The assemblies also signified that the peasants wanted a place within the political

systems of their regions. After the assemblies expressed dissatisfaction, the peasants

formed *haufens*, or bands. The bands ranged anywhere from four to twenty-thousand

people and served military and political roles. The bands appointed typical military

officials, like officers, infantrymen, paymasters, and preachers. They also served as the

basic fighting unit against the lords. Often, the groups, made up primarily of men, stole

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59. Ibid., 77-82.

60. Baylor, 21.

61. Scott, 20-44; Baylor, 17-18, 28-29.

for their food. The bands also formed their own political bodies, known as *landschafts*,

which attempted to take over the government in towns where one existed or establish a

new government where one did not exist already. The members in the bands all

covenanted together and took oaths of allegiance to their cause. In some cases

sympathetic men from the upper classes assisted the peasants. For their lack of formal

education and lack of a strong system of communication, the peasant bands worked quite

well on a local level.[62]

In regard to the actual fighting, the peasants enjoyed an early advantage. Almost

without exception, the peasants' attacks took the lords by surprise. The lords had to

scramble to assemble their own military forces to respond. In 1488, German princes and

cities had formed the Swabian League in order to keep the peace not only in Swabia but

also in the surrounding areas. However, it responded slowly for several reasons. First of

all based on past history, most peasant rebellions did not become significant revolutions

worthy of the time and expense necessary to employ a large force to put them down.

Therefore, individual lords and the League sought to negotiate with the peasants at first,

in hope that fighting would not be necessary. However, as it became clear that this

uprising was much larger and much more violent, the League finally began allying with

the lords to supply aid.[63] Also, the attack caught the nobles and princes surprised and

unprepared. Many of the best troops were fighting in the Habsburgs' Italian war with

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62. Baylor, 23-25; Scott, 14-17.

63. Scott, 56-57; Thomas F. Sea, "The Swabian League and Peasant Disobedience before the German Peasants' War of 1525," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 89-90, 110.

France and did not begin the return back north until after a crushing victory at Pavia in

February 1525.[64]

Despite their early advantages, the peasants were unable to land a decisive blow

against the lords. Indeed, at the time when it appeared they could finally win a significant

victory over the lords, the peasant leaders agreed to stand down their superior forces in

exchange for some concessions, known as the Treaty of Weingarten on April 17, 1525.[65]

However, the lords merely made an agreement with the peasants in order to buy time to

build up their forces. After that agreement, which allowed the lords to keep their growing

forces intact, the peasants never regained the upper hand. The lords' cavalry and superior

weaponry proved to be too much for the peasants. The majority of the battles became

routs for the princes and lords. These battles quickly took their toll on the peasants.[66] In

most places, the rebellion ended by July 1525, although some uprisings continued in

remote places into the summer of 1526. More than 300,000 peasants took part in the

revolution, far more than any popular rebellion to that time. In all, about 100,000 people

died during the Peasants' War, the majority of whom were peasants.[67]

After the war, the peasants did obtain some minor concessions. Annates, which

were taxes passed down to the peasants, ended, local clergymen improved, some of the

fees and tithes were done away with, and greater land and forest use rights were

granted.[68] Despite the concessions, the peasants also faced major derision from many

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64. MacCullough, 159.

65. Baylor, 27.

66. Scott, 60-61; Baylor, 28.

67. Kyle C. Sessions, ed., *Reformation and Authority: The Meaning of the Peasants' Revolt* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1968), 11; Baylor, 29.

leaders throughout Europe, including Martin Luther, the man from whom the peasants

drew much of their motivation and rationale for the uprising.[69]

Luther's Response to the War

Despite his revolutionary theology and his eventual call for a break from the

Church, Luther strongly opposed the Peasants' War. Throughout the period of conflict,

Luther published pamphlets imploring the peasants to advocate for desired reforms

peacefully rather than violently. Luther even travelled to witness the revolution for

himself. In his April 1525 "Admonition to Peace," which was a response to the Twelve

Articles published by the peasants, Luther admonished the princes and lords and the

peasants to do their part in keeping the peace. Luther recognized that the lords needed to

reform their actions. "We have no one to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you

princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and priests, whose hearts are

hardened…. You must become different men and yield to God's Word," Luther stated.[70]

To the peasants, however, Luther noted that "the fact that the rulers are wicked and unjust

does not excuse disorder and rebellion," calling the peasants "far greater robbers" than

their adversaries for attempting to take the nobility's authority.[71] By May 1525, Luther

said that the peasants were "doing the devil's work."[72] He said that the rulers should

oppose the peasants to keep the peace and uphold the gospel. Meanwhile, the peasants

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68. Ozment, 288-289.

69. Ibid., 284.

70. Martin Luther, "Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles," April 1525, in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 46: 19-20.

71. Ibid., 46: 25.

72. Martin Luther, "Against the Murdering and Robbing Hordes of Peasants," May 1525,in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 46: 49.

continued to argue that they would obey a fair government. Finally, by June or July,

Luther called rebellion "a flood of all wickedness," again slandering the peasants for their

violent actions.[73]

Luther's view of two different theological points inclined him to oppose the

rebellion. First of all, Luther saw in passages like the thirteenth chapter of Romans and

the second chapter of 1 Peter a mandate for the ruled to obey the authority of their rulers,

because God ordained political authorities for a reason. While the secular ruler should

wield authority in accordance with the gospel and the teachings of Scripture, even a

corrupt ruler should be obeyed at all costs. Rather than rebellion, Luther insisted the

peasants should pray for their leaders and trust that God would be faithful to establish

whomever he wanted to rule. Second, Luther held to a theology of vocation, which held

that any occupation was performed to the glory of God.[74]

Two Kingdoms

Luther's political theology, now known as the Two Kingdoms, which dealt with

the relationship between the church and the state helped to bring clarification to how

these objections fit into his system of theology. Luther held that there were two separate

realms in life, the spiritual and the temporal; this view led him to deny, to an extent, that

the gospel had the social ramifications that the peasants attempted to ascribe to it.[75]

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73. Martin Luther, "An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants," June or July 1525, in. *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 46: 81. MacCullough suggests that Luther may have so vehemently opposed the Peasants' War because he felt a sort of personal responsibility for it. Without the Reformation, it is unlikely that such a cataclysmic event would have occurred. This view is certainly viable as a partial explanation. See page 160.

74. Robert N. Crossley, *Luther and the Peasants' War: Luther's Actions and Reactions* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974), 119-20; Arnal, 452-459.

Luther held that one kingdom dealt with spiritual matters and the other dealt with

political and temporal matters. The spiritual kingdom consisted of all of those whom God

had saved, while all living human beings belonged to the earthly kingdom. God ruled in

the spiritual realm through the Word of God, Christ as the truest revelation of His Word,

and the Holy Spirit, or conscience. Spiritually speaking, no hierarchy of people existed.

Every person started life in rebellion against and separated from God due to sin. All those

who had been saved by faith entered into the spiritual realm and became priests, whether

their place in society is that of a peasant or that of the pope. Likewise, God ruled in the

secular realm through law, justice, and the restraining of sin, often by way of a

magistrate, not by way of the pope or the Church.[76]

Luther did call for three distinct spheres of authority in society. The first was the

family, or household, led by the father. The second was the civil government, led by the

magistrate or prince, who held political authority. The third was the Church, led by the

clergy, who held authority under God over spiritual matters.[77] Rather than creating a

hierarchical society, this idea merely recognized the different jurisdictions that exist in

every society and provided a leader for each. In Luther's mind, the pope had no authority

over secular matters whatsoever. This directly contradicted the Catholic tradition which

allowed leaders in the church, most notably the pope, to exercise both spiritual and

temporal authority. Also, the church, because it is within society, should adhere to the

rules of that society, as enforced by the secular authority, as long as those rules did not

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75. Robert N. Crossley, *Luther and the Peasants' War: Luther's Actions and Reactions* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974), 119-20; Arnal, 452-459.

76. David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 115; John Witte, Jr., *The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100.

77. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 210-213.

violate the Word of God. In Luther's ideal world, the laws of society would not violate

the Word of God because that is the very thing upon which society would be founded. In

reality, Luther recognized that magistrates often transgress God's will, as was the case

with the lords who held authority over the oppressed peasants. However, Luther believed

that God sovereignly establishes even wicked rulers to chasten or punish wicked

people.[78]

Luther based the Two Kingdoms theology on passages throughout the Bible.[79]

First, Luther saw, in Genesis, the creation of the two different kinds of authority from

soon after creation. In the second chapter of Genesis, before the fall of man, God

ordained spiritual authority by telling Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil. Then, after man fell, God recognized the need for a secular

authority to suppress sin, so he told Noah in the ninth chapter of Genesis that anyone who

murders someone will himself be murdered. Then, Luther noted the clear distinction

between the two kingdoms prophesied in the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis, where Jacob

meant that "the kingdom of my son David, which cannot be administered without the

sword and arms, will not endure; but the kingdom of... (Shiloh) will follow, and it will be

governed by the Word alone."[80] In that passage, the kingdom of David refers the

kingdom of Israel as a political entity over which David held authority. The writer also

spoke of a future kingdom of Shiloh, which refers to the spiritual kingdom ushered in

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78. Steinmetz, 115; Witte, 100.

79. W.D.J. Cargill Thompson, *The Political Thought of Martin Luther,* ed. Philip Broadhead (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1984), 2-3, 5. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 60; Quentin Skinner, *The Age of Reformation*, vol. 2, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 60-64.

80. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," 15444, in *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 45-50*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hanson, trans. Paul D. Pahl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 8: 244.

initially by the first coming of Christ, which will be consummated at the second coming

of Christ and will never end.[81]

Luther pointed to the thirteenth chapter of Romans and the second chapter of 1

Peter to argue that God ordained secular authority, but he saw in passages like the

Sermon on the Mount a call for different authority and standards in spiritual matters.[82]

Based on his study of the Old Testament, Luther said that the Old Testament high priest,

who, although he was a subject of the secular authority, did not try to interfere with the

secular authority, while the Pope "[allowed] his feet to be kissed…and [wanted] to be the

king of kings—something even Christ himself did not do."[83] Augustine's *City of God*

provided a model of life based on two "cities," which Luther adapted to form his view.[84]

Luther also employed some of the tools of Renaissance humanism in his

development of the Two Kingdoms theology. Luther, like those before him, saw that the

Bible discussed and provided examples of the two different kingdoms in which a person

operated. However, Luther also believed that the practice of a separation between the

Two Kingdoms could be directly applied to life in the sixteenth century.[85] This fascinated

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81. David M. Whitford, "Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis," *Church History* 73, no. 1 (March 2004): 47-53, 59-62.

82. Brent W. Sockness, "Luther's Two Kingdoms Revisited: A Response to Reinhold Niebuhr's Criticism of Luther," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 95.

83. Martin Luther, "On the Papacy in Rome," May 1520, in *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry I*, ed. Eric W. Gritsch, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 36: 72.

84. David M. Whitford, "The Papal Antichrist: Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 41. Augustine's view of political theology differed from Luther's. Augustine did not see any kind of overlap between the spiritual city and the temporal city, meaning that Augustine did not believe that Christians were members of both kingdoms, as Luther did. However, in most other areas, the views were very similar. This is evidence that Renaissance humanism contributed to the development of Luther's theology.

85. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 20; Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 40, 59.

Luther. He boasted that "not since the time of the apostles have the temporal sword and

authority been so clearly defined or so highly praised as by me," clearly illustrating his

belief that his ideal represented a return to the early church's idea of how church and state

properly related.[86] Luther's predecessors would have agreed that the Bible provided good

examples, but, before the rise of the humanism, they would not have been as assertive as

to apply the biblical example to the present day.[87]

Luther used the idea of a rhetoric of faith to overcome skepticism about his faith.

The rhetoric of faith opposed the standard rhetoric of knowledge and learning, a topic of

great discussion among humanists. Luther employed the dichotomy of epistemological

thought which resulted from such a view of different types of rhetoric. The idea of the

rhetoric of faith is that knowledge of religious matters comes from God by virtue of faith

while standard rhetoric holds that knowledge of earthly ideas comes from reason. Luther

said that the Word of God "is only understood by hearing and is believed in faith, since it

cannot be apprehended in any other way," while temporal things involved visual and

material items and human action.[88] Luther affirmed that the truest, best methods of

governance and communication were the gospel and faith, which belonged to the spiritual

realm. Likewise, he recognized the difference in the methods of communicating a

message in the spiritual realm, where faith made an actual understanding of truth

possible, and in the worldly realm, where reasoning led to only a rudimentary level of

knowledge. This meant that "it is out of the question that there should be a common

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86. Luther, "Whether Soldiers too Can be Saved," 1526, in *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 46: 95.

87. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 20.

88. Martin Luther as quoted in Lindhart, 99. Martin Luther's Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, vol. 1-58, Weimar 1883-1948; 57, p. 138

Christian government over the world," since "a man who would venture to govern an entire country or the world with the gospel" would be like "a shepherd who should place in one fold wolves, lions, eagles, and sheep together and let them freely mingle with one another."[89]

Luther mastered this art of the "dialectic—of holding two doctrinal opposites in tension."[90] Luther, although he never directly stated his belief in the separate spheres as the theology of the Two Kingdoms, was rooted in the dichotomy of the Two Kingdoms and displayed much of his theology in a similar opposing fashion: "spirit and flesh, soul and body, faith and works, grace and nature, Law and Gospel, sinner and saint, inner man and outer man, alien righteousness and proper righteousness, civil uses and theological uses of the law," and others.[91] Debate flourishes to the present over whether Luther's theology of Two Kingdoms served as the basis for the rest of his theology, so often represented by pitting opposite ideas against each other.[92]

Luther's theology created a great deal of tension in sixteenth-century society. The logical implications of Luther's theology did not match up with what he called for in reality. The theology of the priesthood of all believers appeared to level the playing field, granting all individuals equal standing before God. The peasants understood that idea to entail equal religious, social, economic, and political opportunities. However, Luther completely denied that the opportunities went beyond the spiritual realm. By separating

89. Martin Luther, "Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 371; Lindhart, 61-65, 98. The rhetoric of faith is very intricate idea, as described by Luther and later scholars of his work. For more information, see Wright.

90. Witte, 88.

91. Ibid., 88-89.

92. Further research is needed to determine if that assertion is accurate.

life into two distinct spheres, Luther enabled himself to be able to call for the equality of

all persons in one area without calling for their complete equality in the other. Luther did

not agree with the way that the princes treated the peasants or with the terrible plight of

the peasants. Thus, Luther believed that the peasants should have more equal rights, but

he did not believe that there should be or could be complete equality in society.[93] He did

not think that society had to be naturally hierarchical, but it was. Therefore, Luther

thought it best to maintain the status quo.

Potential Historical Contextual Explanation

It is likely that Luther's personal situation also played a role in shaping his

political theology in regard to the Two Kingdoms and rebellion against authority and his

vocational theology, in which he acknowledged even the Medieval subsistence system as

legitimate. Luther was not the first man to seek reform within the Church. Throughout the

Middle Ages, popes and preachers made attempts to reform faulty or corrupt practices.

The Church had shown their sternness toward those who challenged their authority,

though, most notably in regard to Jan Hus. A Czech preacher during the early fifteenth

century, Hus began to appeal for some reforms similar to those for which Luther would

eventually call. Although Hus's reforms were not quite as revolutionary as Luther's, the

Church condemned him as a heretic and had him burned at the stake. The Church would

not tolerate the propagation of ideas contrary to their own for fear that their authority

might be compromised. Luther knew of Hus when he began to speak out against the

Church. There are indications that Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Pope

would have liked for Luther's fate to be similar to that of Hus.[94]

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93. Crossley, 130.

However, two major factors prevented Luther from being killed as a heretic. First, the vast increase in printing and the higher level of education in society due to Renaissance humanism and other factors allowed for the easier spreading of ideas in Luther's day than it had in Hus's time. More people heard about and supported Luther's ideas in a much quicker period of time, making it more difficult for the Church to control the flow of information.[95] For example, "between 1518 and 1524, the publication of books in Germany alone increased sevenfold. Luther's "Address to the German Nobility" and "Freedom of the Christian" went through fifteen and nineteen editions respectively within a year."[96] In addition, there were twenty-two editions of the Bible published in either High or Low German from 1466-1522.[97]

Second, and more importantly, was the structure of political authority in Germany at the time of Luther's revolt. As mentioned earlier, there were hundreds of princes in Germany by the early sixteenth century. In 1356, a system for electing the German king, who was also known as the Holy Roman Emperor, had been established. Even though the pope managed to influence the process, the decision technically rested in the hands of seven electors, four of whom were secular—the rulers of the Palatinate, Saxony, Bohemia, and Brandenburg—and three of whom were ecclesiastical—the archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier.[98] Although Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor during the early Reformation, technically had political authority over the region, he depended on the

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94. Tracy, 3-7.

95. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 12-13.

96. Ozment, 204.

97. MacCullough, 73.

98. Benecke, 5; Ozment, 185.

electors in Germany for support. As Luther's ideas spread, one elector in particular

adopted Luther's views and used his political leverage to help ensure that Luther was not

harmed. The elector, Frederick of Saxony, intervened to protect Luther from possible

execution after the Diet of Worms in April 1521. Luther had the option to recant or to

uphold his beliefs in front of high Church authorities. "Unless I am convinced by the

testimony of Scripture or by evident reason, I am convicted by the Scripture which I have

mentioned and my conscience is captive to the Word of God," Luther famously said.

"Therefore I cannot and will not recant…."[99] Charles responded by signing an edict that

called on every person and city in the empire to stand against Luther. However, Frederick

offered Luther safety within Wartburg Castle, which Luther took advantage of for several

years as the Reformation spread and the power of the Church to execute him dwindled.[100]

Incidentally, also to Luther's advantage was the fact that simultaneous opposition from

the French, the pope, and particularly the Ottoman Turks kept Charles V extremely

occupied.[101]

  One of Luther's harshest critics at the conclusion of the Peasants' War, Johannes

Findling, cited political motivations as the main reason for Luther's stringent,

hypercritical reaction to the peasants. However, Luther strongly repudiated the idea.[102]

He said,

> Suppose I were to break into a man's house, rape his wife and daughters, break
> open his strong box, take his money, put a sword to his chest, and say, "If you
> will not put up with this, I shall run you through, for you are a godless wretch";

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99. Martin Luther, as quoted in Hans J. Hillebrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participant*s (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 91.

100. Crossley, 127; Marty, 68-69

101. Ozment, 253.

102. Ibid., 285-286.

then if a crowd gathered and were about to kill me, or if the judge ordered my head off, suppose I were to cry out, "Hey, Christ teaches that you are to be merciful and not to kill me," what would people say? That is exactly what these peasants and their sympathizers are now doing.[103]

Still, it is not unreasonable to think that Luther might have shaped his political theology, whether intentionally or instinctively, in such a way as to thank or please Frederick or the other German princes, whose towns began to accept his teachings. Luther's political theology resulted in a great increase in power and authority for the secular leaders. By separating life into two kingdoms, Luther gave the princes almost total control over the all of societal life. The rulers now had a justification as to why the Pope could not intervene in their area of jurisdiction. Also, by refusing the right to revolt to the peasants and enshrining a theology of vocation in which it could be possible to honor and serve God in every profession, Luther helped stabilize the authority of the princes. It is possible that Luther was a bit pragmatic in these areas of his theology.

Conclusion

By 1526, the peasants found that their condition had not changed much in comparison to the years before the Peasants' War. The deplorable economic conditions suffered under the system of Medieval sustenance agriculture and the teachings of Luther and other leaders of the Reformation, which gave the peasants a biblical explanation for their armed resistance, combined to lead the peasants to revolt. However, despite their well-organized bands, the peasants suffered from an inability to unite groups from different regions and from a deficiency in weaponry and firepower. The power and organization of the German princes and nobles overcame the peasants. This resulted in the death of over 100,000 people along the way. The peasants genuinely believed their

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103. Luther, "An Open Letter," 46: 68.

cause, even after Luther spoke out harshly against them for rebelling against their

authorities. The Peasants' War served as a clear example of the tension that Luther's

theological views unintentionally created in sixteenth-century German society.

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