

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PART 10: THE REFORMATION UNDER SIEGE

THE ZWICKAU PROPHETS

The Zwickau Prophets were a small group of radical lay preachers from Zwickau, Saxony, who appeared during the early Reformation while Luther was hidden at Wartburg Castle.

Nikolaus Storch, Thomas Dreschel and Markus Stübner arrived to Wittenberg in December 1521, while Luther was still in hiding after the Diet of Worms. Their message included claims of direct revelation from God, criticism of infant baptism, the imminent return of Christ, local churches should be formed of people who had professed Christ, and expressed impatience with the slow reforms happening in Wittenberg.

Their basic claim was dangerous to the Reformation because they placed private spiritual revelation above Scripture, preaching, and orderly reform. They believed the Holy Spirit was speaking directly through them in such a way that superseded normal church teaching, academic training, and rendered the Bible of secondary importance.

Philip Melanchthon was Martin Luther's closest scholarly partner and the leading academic theologian at Wittenberg after Luther. After the Diet of Worms, while Luther was hidden at Wartburg Castle, Melanchthon helped lead the university and reform movement in Wittenberg, but he struggled to control the radical unrest. The Reformation was moving quickly and students, townspeople, and reform-minded leaders were impatient. Some wanted immediate changes to worship, images, the Mass, monastic vows, and church practice. Then the Zwickau Prophets arrived and spoke openly for three months with claims of direct revelation and radical reform.

SECRET RETURN TO WITTENBERG

Philip Melanchthon did not know what to do with the Zwickau Prophets. He was impressed by their seriousness and biblical speech, but was also alarmed by their claims and the unrest they created. He did not want to reject the genuine work of the Holy Spirit, but there was a danger of disorder coming into play.

The influence of the Zwickau Prophets created chaos in Wittenberg and this uncertainty was a major reason why Luther returned from Wartburg Castle in March 1522 despite the threats on his life.

“During my absence, Satan has entered my sheepfold, and committed ravages which I cannot repair by writing, but only by my personal presence and living word.”

Luther was greatly concerned the Reformation would be discredited and restoring order required his presence. He preached the famous *Invocavit Sermons*, a series of eight messages, calling the city back from disorder, coercion, and religious radicalism. Luther argued that reform must proceed through the Word of God, not mob action, mystical



claims, or forced change. He called such radicals Schwärmer (enthusiasts); those who claimed special inner light of the Holy Spirit, while loosening themselves from the Bible.

The Zwickau Prophets inadvertently forced Luther to fight on two fronts. Rome on one side and radical spiritualism on the other. Rome exalted church authority over Scripture; the Zwickau Prophets exalted private revelation over the Bible. Luther rejected both sides. Luther was able to restore his leadership in Wittenberg and resolidified his grip on his followers.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Charlemagne's empire represented the high point of Carolingian power in AD 800 and laid the imperial foundation later claimed by the Holy Roman Empire with its first emperor, Otto I in 962. Charlemagne's empire covered much of western and central Europe. At its height, it included most of what is now France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, western and central Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and northern Italy, with influence extending into parts of northeastern Spain, Bohemia, and the western Balkans.

Charlemagne's empire was built mostly by Frankish conquest, absorbing different peoples and territories into one Carolingian realm. It was a union of the Frankish heartlands, Burgundy, Aquitaine, Bavaria, Saxony, Frisia, the conquered Lombard kingdom in northern Italy, frontier lands in northeastern Spain, and former Avar territories in central Europe.

Charlemagne's empire was a Frankish monarchy that became an imperial monarchy after he was crowned emperor in AD 800. It was a personal empire ruled by a king whose authority rested on conquest, inheritance, Christian kingship, military power, noble loyalty, and church support.

Otto I's empire in 962 was a German-centered imperial monarchy that became the Holy Roman Empire. It continued as a monarchy, but the political center, territorial structure, and reliance on church officials changed.

The Holy Roman Empire had an elective element from AD 900s to 1100s for choosing the emperor. In the 1200s, a smaller group of powerful princes increasingly became recognized as the ones with the right to elect the king. Around 1273, a group of seven electors was effectively established in practice. The Golden Bull of 1356 was a major law of the Holy Roman Empire issued by Emperor Charles IV, which formally defined the election system, specified the prince-electors, regulated the process, and reduced papal interference.

There were three church electors:

1. Archbishop of Mainz¹
2. Archbishop of Trier
3. Archbishop of Cologne

¹ Albert of Brandenburg was a church elector as Archbishop of Mainz. He came from the family that held the secular Brandenburg electorship, but his brother Joachim I Nestor was the Elector of Brandenburg during Albert's career.

There were also four secular electors:

1. King of Bohemia
2. Count Palatine of the Rhine
3. Duke of Saxony-Wittenberg²
4. Margrave of Brandenburg

These men were not merely voters; they were some of the most powerful rulers in the empire.



The Holy Roman Empire ended when Napoleon's military victories broke its remaining political structure, leading Emperor Francis II to abdicate and dissolve it in 1806. The empire slowly had weakened for centuries with its loose collection of kingdoms, duchies, bishoprics, free cities, and principalities.

Napoleon defeated Austria and Russia at the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805. After that, several German states left the Holy Roman Empire and joined Napoleon's new alliance

² Frederick the Wise was a Saxon prince from Electoral Saxony of the Ernestine branch of the Wettin family, whose territory included Wittenberg. His cousin, Duke George of Saxony, ruled the Albertine branch of Wettin Saxony, also known as Ducal Saxony, and he deeply opposed Luther.

called the *Confederation of the Rhine* in 1806. Francis II saw that Napoleon might try to claim control over the imperial title, so he formally gave it up and dissolved the empire.

HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

The Holy Roman Empire was a loose imperial structure made up of many rulers under an emperor: kings, dukes, electors, bishops, abbots, counts, margraves, landgraves, and free cities. The emperor stood at the top, but many princes ruled their own territories with considerable independence.

The Emperor

The Holy Roman Emperor was the highest ruler of the empire. He was supposed to defend Christendom, protect the church, maintain order, and act as supreme secular ruler. But he was not an absolute monarch over the whole empire. His power depended on personal lands, noble support, church support, election, and military strength.

Prince-electors

The seven prince-electors were the most important princes because they had the right to choose the emperor.

King of Bohemia

There were a few royal titles inside or connected to the empire. The most important was the King of Bohemia. Bohemia was part of the empire, and its king was one of the prince-electors. That made him one of the highest-ranking rulers beneath the emperor.

The emperor himself could also hold other kingships. For example, some emperors were connected to the crowns of Germany, Italy, Burgundy, Bohemia, Hungary, or Spain, depending on dynasty and inheritance.

But the empire itself was not one kingdom. It was a layered imperial system.

Dukes

Dukes ruled large territories called duchies. In the early empire, duchies were especially powerful because they represented major ethnic or regional divisions such as Saxony, Bavaria, Swabia, Franconia, and Lorraine. Dukes often acted almost like kings within their own regions.

Margraves

A margrave ruled a march (a frontier territory). Their job was originally to defend the borderlands of the empire. Because border regions were dangerous and strategically important, margraves often gained great independence. Brandenburg, Meissen, and Austria were margraviates.

Landgraves

A landgrave was a high-ranking count with more authority than an ordinary count. The most famous example was the Landgrave of Hesse. Landgraves could be major territorial rulers and sometimes had influence comparable to dukes.

Counts

Counts ruled smaller territories called counties. They were local rulers, judges, military leaders, and tax collectors. Some counts became extremely powerful over time, especially if they controlled wealthy lands, trade routes, or castles. The Counts Palatine of the Rhine eventually became so powerful that Rupert I was made prince-electors.

Prince-bishops and prince-abbots

One unusual feature of the Holy Roman Empire was that many churchmen were also territorial rulers. A prince-bishop was both a bishop in the church and a prince ruling land in the empire. A prince-abbot was similar; he was an abbot who ruled an imperial territory. This meant the empire had both secular and ecclesiastical princes.

Free imperial cities

Some cities like Nuremberg, Frankfurt, Augsburg, Lübeck and Strasbourg were not ruled by a duke, bishop, or count. They answered directly to the emperor and that is why they were called free imperial cities.

These cities had councils, guilds, merchants, and local privileges. They were not democratic in the modern sense, but they had more self-government than many other places.

THE KNIGHTS' WAR

The Knights' War, also called the Knights' Revolt, was a failed uprising of German imperial knights in 1522-1523, during the early Reformation period, shortly after Luther's stand at Worms.

They were lower-ranking nobles in the Holy Roman Empire. Many had castles, local military power, and old feudal privileges, but they were being squeezed by powerful territorial princes, wealthy cities, changing warfare with introduction of gunpowder, rising costs, stronger central governments, and the declining usefulness of small private armies.

Some knights admired Luther's attack on Rome and tried to use Reformation language for their own political revolt. But Luther did not want the Reformation advanced by private war or armed rebellion. Luther opposed Rome, but he also opposed revolutionary violence.

After the disastrous Knights' War, the castles and lands of the rebellious knights were seized or brought under stronger princely control, and their class lost much of its remaining independence. The latter state was worse as they became increasingly minor nobles under the shadow of the larger territorial states.