

Resurrection Life of Jesus Church

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PART 12: THE REFORMATION AT A CROSSROADS

THE GERMAN PEASANTS' WAR

The German peasants rose up because they were being crushed by a system that gave lords, princes, monasteries, and bishops control over their land, labor, money, and legal rights.

They suffered under heavy rents, church tithes, forced labor, marriage fees, death dues, inheritance fees, and unjust local courts. Many peasants also resented losing traditional rights to common lands to gather wood, graze animals, fish, hunt, and use village lands that their families depended on for survival.

The peasants had little protection because the same lords who collected dues often controlled the courts. When peasants complained about new burdens or lost rights, they had few peaceful ways to defend themselves.

The resulting uprising was fueled by a combination of economic pressure, legal inequality, loss of customary rights, clerical wealth, noble exploitation, and the belief that Christian justice should not permit such oppression. Luther initially admitted that many of their complaints were legitimate, but condemned the violent revolt that took place.

The German Peasants' War (1524-1525) deeply damaged the Reformation's public image and forced Luther to separate his religious reform from social revolution. Many peasants heard Luther's language of Christian freedom and believed it supported their demands for relief from oppression. The Twelve Articles listed their demands:

1. Congregations should have the right to choose and remove their own pastors.
2. Tithes should support pastors and the poor, not enrich lords or church officials.
3. Serfdom should be abolished because Christ has made believers free.
4. Peasants should have restored rights to hunt, fish, and use forests.
5. Common forests should be returned to village use for firewood and timber.
6. Forced labor services should be reduced and made fair.
7. Peasants should not be forced to perform labor beyond agreed obligations.
8. Rents should be fair and not so heavy that peasants cannot survive.
9. Punishments and fines should follow established law, not arbitrary lordly power.
10. Common meadows and fields taken by lords should be returned.
11. Death dues should be abolished so widows and orphans are not robbed when a peasant dies.
12. All demands are submitted to Scripture; if any article is proven unbiblical, they will withdraw it.



But when the uprising turned violent, Martin Luther rejected it, arguing that the gospel did not give peasants the right to overthrow civil authority by force. In his harsh tract *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, he urged princes to crush the revolt.

This action made many peasants feel betrayed. They were asking for justice under the Word of God just like Luther had done. The Twelve Articles revealed the peasants' revolt was not merely about hunger or anger. It was about economic exploitation, loss of traditional rights, abusive lordship, church corruption, and a desire to apply Christian teaching to society.

Some demands were theological, such as choosing pastors and reforming tithes. Others were practical survival issues, such as access to forests, fair rents, reduced labor, and protection from arbitrary punishment. The most important article may have been the last article because it demonstrated how deeply the Reformation had influenced them when they claimed Scripture as the standard over both church and society.

It is estimated that 300,000 peasants took part in the German Peasants' War, though they were never one united army. While they had large numbers, they were poorly trained and armed, and loosely organized. The princes had fewer men in some battles, but their forces were professional, disciplined, and equipped with cavalry, artillery, and experienced mercenaries. About 100,000 peasants were killed by the end of the revolt.

The war did not free the peasants. In many places, their conditions became worse because defeated communities were punished heavily. The larger effect was that the Reformation became more politically conservative. Luther's movement survived, but increasingly under the protection and control of sympathetic princes rather than as a popular social uprising.

THOMAS MÜNTZER

Thomas Müntzer was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest who started to question the authority of Romanism. He agreed with Martin Luther that the Roman Catholic Church was corrupt and was initially part of the broader reform movement. He admired some of Luther's early stands against Rome, preached reform, but then chose to move in a much more radical direction.

Müntzer was connected to the same fanatical atmosphere as the Zwickau Prophets. He emphasized direct revelation, the second return of Jesus, and a more immediate work of the Holy Spirit.

Thomas Müntzer was not satisfied with Luther's reformation; he wanted to go further and revive faith in the Holy Spirit and return the church to the way it was in the Book of Acts. This resulted in him pulling away from Luther and starting a movement with other young former Roman Catholic priests.

He identified strongly with the peasants and common people, feeling it was his duty to be part of the revolution because God was using them in a revolutionary, end-times struggle. He preached that God would judge corrupt rulers and that the common people could be instruments of divine judgment.

Müntzer organized the “Eternal Covenant of God” in Mühlhausen and made the city a center of the uprising in central Germany, going so far as to assume command of the local troops during the revolt. At the Battle of Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525, his peasant army was crushed by princely forces. Müntzer was captured, tortured, and executed shortly afterward.

Luther did not come to the aid of Müntzer even though he too had also rejected Roman Catholicism. Since Müntzer was in the same category as the Zwickau prophets with his embrace of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Luther was relieved to learn of his death.

LUTHER’S VIEW OF THE REVOLT

Martin Luther became enraged when he toured the German state Thuringia shortly afterward the Battle of Frankenhausen and viewed the widespread destruction of convents, monasteries, bishops’ palaces, and libraries.

“Therefore, let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel ... For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who, of their own free will, do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4 [:32–37]. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others—of Pilate and Herod—should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, want to make the goods of other men common, and keep their own for themselves. Fine Christians they are! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure.”

Luther’s pamphlet *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants* was published the same month, right at the peak and collapse of the revolt. The timing matters because by the time it appeared, some killing had already happened, and some major massacres were still unfolding or just about to unfold. The death toll would negatively affect Luther since he had harshly called for the peasants to be hunted down and killed. The next year he issued a statement:

“I, Martin Luther, have during the rebellion slain all the peasants, for it was I who ordered them to be struck dead.”

Nevertheless, Luther did not publicly repent of siding against the revolt. He believed the peasants had committed rebellion, murder, robbery, and disorder, and thought the princes had a duty to suppress them. Even after the bloodshed, he defended the need to punish violent rebels.

Luther knew his words had been severe. He had already admitted in other controversies that his language could be too sharp, and the peasant pamphlet became one of the most damaging examples, providing his enemies with fodder to accuse him of helping justify the massacre.

The slaughter of the peasants grieved the Holy Spirit and the Reformation intended by God halted. The Lutherans as they came to be known, stagnated and less than forty years later the teaching that a person is justified by faith was lost.

The different nations where Luther's teaching witnessed the birth of the Lutheran churches saw them transition into state churches under royal authority with kings serving as the heads of the national churches.

When the Holy Spirit raised up the Baptist movement, the Lutheran state churches repeated the past actions of Roman Catholicism and Baptists were persecuted, arrested, and sentenced to prison. Some were even stripped of their citizenship and forced to leave their nation of birth.

BIBLICAL DUTY TO THE POOR

The Bible repeatedly condemns the oppression of the poor and declares that mistreating them is direct offense against God.

"He that oppresseth the poor reproacheth his Maker: but he that honoureth him hath mercy on the poor." (Proverbs 14:31)

The prophet Isaiah likewise condemned rulers who used their authority to deny justice to the needy, widows, and fatherless.

"Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; To turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless!" (Isaiah 10:1-2)

These passages are especially significant when considering Luther's response to the German Peasants' War. Luther acknowledged that many of the peasants' complaints were legitimate, yet when the revolt became violent, he sided with the princes and called upon them to suppress the rebellion.

This was not surprising since Luther's position depended heavily upon princely protection. Elector Frederick III had protected him from arrest and possible execution after his break with Rome, and the survival of the Reformation in Saxony depended upon sympathetic political rulers. The uprising therefore placed Luther in a difficult position. He was confronted with genuine abuses suffered by the peasants while simultaneously depending upon the political order they were challenging.

The Bible does not permit a Christian to ignore the suffering of others merely because it is inconvenient or politically dangerous.

"But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him." (1 John 3:17-19)

Luther was not a peasant and did not live under the rents, forced labor, death dues, loss of common lands, and arbitrary local justice that had driven so many of them into desperation. His condemnation of their violence was consistent with his teaching concerning civil authority, but his call for the princes to “smite, slay, and stab” the rebels went far beyond simply rejecting insurrection.

The bloodshed left a lasting stain upon Luther’s relationship with the common people. He continued to defend the suppression of the revolt and never publicly repented of the language he had used against the peasants, ignoring the biblical fact that actions have consequences.

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.” (Galatians 6:7-8)

Luther continued his work after the Peasants’ War, but his life was about to change in another significant way. Only weeks after the Battle of Frankenhausen and while the revolt was collapsing across Germany, Luther married on June 13, 1525.

The former monk who had rejected compulsory clerical celibacy now entered marriage with a former nun, making their union one of the most visible symbols of the Reformation.

KATHARINA VON BORA

Katharina von Bora was born in 1499 to a minor noble family in Saxony. As a young girl, she was placed in a convent and eventually became a Cistercian nun. After Luther’s writings against compulsory monastic vows spread, Katharina and several other nuns became convinced they should leave convent life.

In 1523, Luther helped arrange their escape from the convent at Nimbschen. A merchant named Leonhard Köppe reportedly smuggled Katharina and the other nuns out among empty herring barrels. They were brought to Wittenberg, where Luther and his friends worked to find them husbands, homes, or honorable means of support. That is how Luther came to know Katharina.

Luther had no intention of marrying her. He tried to arrange her marriage with someone else, but Katharina refused and reportedly said she would marry either Luther or Nikolaus von Amsdorf (a friend of Luther), but not the man being proposed to her.

They were married on June 13, 1525. The news of their nuptials was shocking because Luther was a former monk and Katharina was a former nun. Their union became a powerful symbol of the Reformation’s rejection of compulsory celibacy and the idea that monastic life was somehow spiritually superior to marriage.

Luther affectionately called her “my lord Katie” because she was strong-willed, capable, and ran the household firmly. He also called her his “rib,” echoing Genesis. They had six children together: Hans, Elizabeth, Magdalena, Martin, Paul, and Margarethe.

The Black Cloister in Wittenberg was originally an Augustinian monastery. John the Steadfast, Frederick the Wise's brother and successor as Elector of Saxony, formally gave the Black Cloister to Martin Luther in 1532.

Katharina was not merely Luther's wife as she managed the household with remarkable skill. Their home became a busy center of hospitality, theological conversation, students, guests, children, and reform activity.

Katharina von Bora became Martin Luther's wife, household manager, mother, hostess, and practical partner in the Reformation. Her marriage to Luther helped redefine Protestant views of marriage, family, vocation, and the dignity of ordinary domestic life. Luther may have been the public reformer, but Katharina kept the household functioning.

MARRIAGE IS GIFT FROM GOD

The Bible presents finding a wife as a blessing from God.

"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD."

(Proverbs 18:22)

Luther had spent much of his adult life as a monk under the Roman Catholic system of compulsory clerical celibacy. His marriage to Katharina von Bora represented a complete departure from that way of life. The former monk now accepted marriage as an honorable institution established by God. From the beginning, Jesus declared that man was not designed to live alone.

"And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him." (Genesis 2:18)

Katharina became exactly that kind of companion to Luther. She managed their household, raised their children, handled financial and practical affairs, cared for guests and students, and provided the stability that allowed Luther to continue his work. A prudent wife is ultimately a gift from God.

"House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the LORD." (Proverbs 19:14)

Katharina proved herself to be capable, industrious, and dependable. Luther may not originally have intended to marry her, but she became one of the greatest earthly blessings of his later life.

Marriage, however, is not simply about a man receiving a good wife. The Bible places a serious obligation upon the husband concerning how he treats the woman God has given him.

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it." (Ephesians 5:25)

The biblical standard therefore goes beyond finding the right woman. A man must also become the kind of husband who will love, protect, provide for, and faithfully care for his wife.

In Katharina von Bora, Luther found a wife who stood beside him through the remaining years of his life. Whatever failures marked Luther's response to the German Peasants' War, his marriage demonstrated that it was not spiritually inferior to monastic life. It was an institution created by God from the beginning.

"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD."

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