Reformation ABCs

# P is for Peasants’ War

The largest popular uprising in Europe prior to the French Revolution began in the southwest German lands in the summer of 1524. Tensions between landlords and tenant famers – the Bauern -- had been common for two centuries. The English translation “peasant” is misleading. The Bauern tended to be prosperous rural leaders often finding common ground with their landlords, among them monasteries and cathedrals.

Luther’s reformation, with its assault on authority and its harsh rhetoric, made compromise more difficult. The uprising spread while the Bauern committed murder, destroyed religious images, sacked churches.

They proved no match for trained armies. Slaughter, torture and repression followed. Luther had initially sought peace, but in May 1525, in Against the Robbing and Murdering Horde of Peasants, he found a bloodthirsty new use for Romans 13:1: “Let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly…nothing can be more poisonous…than a rebel.” Luther’s ideas had fueled the uprising and he knew it. The evangelical movement had spiraled out of his control. Luther’s harsh words, justifying savage revenge, were condemned at the time and continue to indict him.

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# P is for Philip of Hesse (1504-67)

Philip was a landgrave (a noble with authority over a territory) in the Holy Roman Empire, a supporter of the Lutheran side but open to dialogue with Zwingli, one of Luther’s protestant opponents. He would only merit a minor footnote in Reformation history but for his unbridled lust (fully acknowledged by him), his profound fear of eternal damnation, his unhappy marriage, and his desire to bed the seventeen-year-old Margarethe von der Saale. Margarethe’s mother insisted that he would have to marry her. He turned to the Lutherans for the pastoral answer while also threatening that he might have to turn to Rome if he did not get the answer he sought.

However reluctantly, Luther provided that answer. Philip was free to marry a second time in secret. This was confessional advice and thus meant to be secret. But it did not remain secret, damaging Luther’s credibility both with Rome and the German lords.

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