

THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

VOL. II.

AUGUST—SEPTEMBER, 1922.

Nos. 8 & 9.

Luther's Return to Wittenberg in 1522.

PROF. W. H. T. DAU, St. Louis, Mo.

The cause of the Reformation entered a most critical stage when Luther was temporarily removed from public activity. The new movement had not been subdued at Worms, as the party of the Romanists at the Diet had passionately hoped. Luther's unyielding attitude towards the one claim that was, and ever will be, essential to the Roman position — the claim of papal absolutism — had for months before April 18, 1521, baffled his cunning and powerful adversaries, and his heroic address on that day in the Diet had blasted the last hope of optimists that an amicable understanding between Luther and the papists could be reached. Then Luther, after ten days of fruitless deliberation and palavering at Worms, went into voluntary exile, deferring to the counsel of his friends. Wittenberg was momentarily without its great teacher and the reformatory movement without its guiding spirit.

Soon a state of affairs developed at the metropolis of the new faith that boded the ruin of Luther's cause. The wise and affectionate friends at Worms had succeeded in saving the Reformer's person, but they seemed unable to save the Reformer's principles, from destruction. During Luther's absence at the Wartburg, Wittenberg and the surrounding country became a seething caldron of religious fanaticism. Radicalism was being substituted for an orderly reform of the Church. To remove from simple laymen the snare of idolatry, it was thought proper to remove and smash the images of saints. To abolish the blasphemy of the Roman Mass, the Sacrament was being desecrated. Monastic vows, chiefly the vow of celibacy, were thrown to the rubbish, and men and women left the cloisters to marry. The minds of men were becoming unsettled on fundamental religious matters; unrest pervaded the civic

communities; confusion invaded the councils of the magistrates. At the university that indispensable requisite for the pursuit of profound studies, external quiet and inward composure, were vanishing under the fervid oratory of the influential archdeacon, Dr. Carlstadt, and his followers. This restless Franconian, who habitually allowed his passion to master his judgment, was greatly aided by the new prophets of anabaptism, Storch, Stuebner, and Muenzer, who came up from Zwickau to argue the details of the new "evangelical liberty" to Melancthon, and so impressed this mild scholar that he became quite perplexed. Gabriel Zwilling (Didymus) was starting a campaign for the abrogation of celibacy. There was no one found capable of controlling all these turbulent elements and to pronounce the binding spell on their vagaries. Even the aged Elector and his trusted counselors could only view this outbreak of radicalism, in which not a little carnal license passed for holy fervor, with impotent dismay. Wittenberg was slowly, but surely being drawn into a fatal maelstrom, and the beacon light of the new evangelical teaching which had been set up at that place was about to be extinguished.

The lonely exile in the Thuringian Forest was watching these strange evolutions that were reported to him in letters of his friends and by the rumors that were passed from mouth to mouth along the countryside. He became increasingly restive under their influence, and began to chafe under the restraint which he had permitted to be put on him. In the solitude of his "Patmos," with nothing to distract his attention or deflect his meditation, his keen eye penetrated the gathering clouds, and he discerned in these unusual happenings storm-signals presaging a more fearful tempest than his friends imagined. The strong ferment that was setting the minds of the people agog, and the ugly spirit that was beginning to be manifested here and there against the authorities in the Church and in the State, were to him the forerunners of that terrible catastrophe which burst upon Germany with elemental force a few years later during the cruel and reckless Peasants' War. He saw clearly the wily deception that was being wrought on the injudicious mind of the common people: the new movement had borrowed the livery of heaven to serve the devil in; Satan was again garbling and wresting Scripture to palm off his awful designs as legitimate effects of the evangelical teaching, sanctioned by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The infernal hordes were preparing to ride ruthlessly over the young crop of faith that

had sprung up from his patient sowing, and the wells of salvation that had been opened up in the ecclesiastical deserts were to be poisoned.

Under these circumstances the thought of his personal safety in snug concealment became detestable to Luther, and prudent silence seemed to him downright cowardice and a plain denial of his Lord. He must quit his quiet haven, and launch out upon the storm-tossed sea to wrestle with lying spirits of malice and deep guile, even though he must perish in the undertaking. His secret visit at Wittenberg in December, 1521, having produced no effectual check on the forces of evil, and the Elector's trusted advisers having proved themselves unable to suggest anything better than procrastination and dilatoriness, Luther decided that he must act for himself if he wished to save his cause. Undaunted by any prospect of danger to himself, with that typical courage of his which was ever ready to risk everything in obedience to God's Word and the sacred voice of duty in his Scripturally oriented conscience, he voiced his dissent from the timid counsels of his beloved Elector Frederick and his worldly-wise statesmen. While struggling to preserve the proper respect of a subject to his liege and in no wise suppressing in his heart the sentiments of gratitude to his powerful friend for his protection, Luther pointed out with remarkable clearness that indecision, vacillation, and endless chewing of the cud of deliberation is nothing else than playing the devil's game in the devil's interest. Already in January, 1522, he was firmly resolved to disregard the fearful warnings that were issued to him from the Elector's court, and calmly informed Spalatin that his return to Wittenberg was imminent.

Through no fault of Luther the execution of this purpose was delayed several weeks. When he finally left the Wartburg, there was surging in him tender regard for the Elector, whom he knew to be deeply concerned about him, profound sorrow over the waywardness of his beloved Wittenberg, and indomitable will, with the gracious help of the Lord, to become master of the disturbed situation in the town. We gather this from the letter to the Elector which he wrote from Borna:—

“Favor and peace from God, our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, and my most humble service.

“Most serene, high-born Elector, most gracious Lord. Your Electoral Grace's letter and kind opinion reached me Friday evening [February 28] as I was about to depart on horseback the next

day [Saturday]. I require, indeed, neither avowal nor testimony that Your Electoral Grace means the very best for me; for I believe that I am certain of that, as far as a man can be certain of anything. On the other hand, since I, too, mean everything for the best, methinks that I have my knowledge from a higher source than human information. However, this brings us nowhere.

"I have taken the liberty of supposing from Your Electoral Grace's letter that my letter [at the end of February] hurt Your Electoral Grace a little, because I wrote Your Electoral Grace to be wise. But over and against this surmise I have been put at ease by my great confidence that Your Electoral Grace knows my heart better than to imagine that with such words I meant to insult Your Electoral Grace's far-famed wisdom. For I trust that my heart has ever been so disposed that I have at all times had a profound and unfeigned pleasure and delight in Your Electoral Grace above all other princes and magistrates.

"What I wrote was from anxiety, to comfort Your Electoral Grace; not for the sake of my affairs (for I had no thought of that at the time), but for the sake of the untoward movement at Wittenberg, which was started there by our people to the great shame of the Gospel. I feared that Your Electoral Grace would suffer great inconvenience from it. For the calamity bore so hard even on me that, had I not been certain that we have the pure Gospel, I should have despaired of our cause. To my grief all that has so far been done in our cause has been turned into ridicule and rendered of none effect. If I could have done so, I would gladly have redeemed the cause with my life. Things have been done for which we can answer neither to God nor to man. And yet, all is charged against me, and before that, against the holy Gospel. That saddens my heart.

"Accordingly, most gracious lord, my letter was aimed no further than against those men [at Wittenberg], and did not relate to my affairs. I was afraid Your Electoral Grace might not see the present image of the devil in this game. And although Your Electoral Grace may not have been in need of such an admonition, still I felt the need of issuing it.

"However, as regards my affairs, most gracious lord, I have this to say: Your Electoral Grace knows (or if you do not, let me now inform you of the fact) that I have received the Gospel, not from men, but from Heaven only, by our dear Lord Jesus Christ, so that I could well have boasted and called myself a minister and

an evangelist, as I shall do in future. As to my offering myself to be tried and judged, that was done, not because I had any doubts [about my cause], but from sheer humility, and in order that I might excite the interest of others. But now that I see that my too great humility will tend to the abasement of the Gospel, and that the devil wants to occupy the entire space if I yield a span to him, I am, under stress of my conscience, forced to do otherwise. I have sufficiently deferred to Your Electoral Grace by stepping aside this year to serve Your Electoral Grace's interest. For the devil knows full well that I did not do it from craven fear. He saw my heart when I entered Worms, *viz.*, that, if I had known that there were as many devils lying in wait for me as there are tiles on the roofs, I would still have leaped into their midst with joy.

"Now, Duke George is still far from being the equal of a single devil; and since the Father of infinite mercy has by the Gospel made us happy lords over all devils and death, and has given us an abundance of confidence to address Him as our dearest Father, Your Electoral Grace can see for yourself that it would be the grossest insult to such a Father if we were not to trust Him to the extent of believing that we shall be masters even over Duke George's wrath.

"I am fully persuaded in my own mind that if the state of affairs were the same at Leipzig as it is at Wittenberg, I would nevertheless ride into it even if (Your Electoral Grace will excuse my foolish talk!) for nine days it were to rain nothing but Duke Georges, and each one of them were to be nine times as furious as this one. He regards my Lord Christ as a man braided out of straw. My Lord and I can suffer that a while. I shall not conceal from Your Electoral Grace that I have more than once prayed with tears for Duke George that God might enlighten him. I shall once more pray for him with tears, and after that no more. I request that Your Electoral Grace will help me pray, and urge others to pray, if perchance we might turn from him the judgment (O Lord, have mercy!) which is advancing without halt to overtake him. I could throttle Duke George in a jiffy with one word if anything were gained by that.

"These matters I wished to write to Your Electoral Grace, in order that Your Electoral Grace might know that I am returning to Wittenberg under a far higher protection than that of the Elector. Nor do I intend to invoke Your Electoral Grace's protection. Yea, I hold that I shall protect Your Electoral Grace more

than you could protect me. Moreover, if I knew that Your Electoral Grace were able and intended to protect me, I would not come. This affair must not and cannot be adjusted or helped by the sword; God alone must work in this matter, without any person's worrying and cooperation. Hence, in this case he that believes most will afford the greatest protection. Now, inasmuch as I perceive that Your Electoral Grace is yet very weak in faith, I can in no way regard Your Electoral Grace as the man who is able to protect or save me.

"Since Your Electoral Grace desires to know what you are to do in this matter (for you think that you have done far too little), I humbly answer that Your Electoral Grace has already done too much, and should not do anything. For God will not and cannot tolerate Your Electoral Grace's or my worrying and urging in this matter. He wants this matter to be left to Him; that is the long and the short of it. Let Your Electoral Grace be governed accordingly. If Your Electoral Grace believes this, you will be secure and have peace; if you do not believe, I, for my part, shall believe, and Your Electoral Grace's unbelief will have to undergo its torturing anxiety such as all unbelievers deserve to suffer.¹⁾

"Now, then, since I do not purpose to follow Your Electoral Grace, Your Electoral Grace is without blame before God in case I should be captured or slain. Before men Your Electoral Grace should act as becomes an Elector, *viz.*, obey the government, let His Imperial Majesty, as is proper and in accordance with the statutes of the empire, rule in Your Electoral Grace's cities and estates in matters concerning the physical life and possessions of the citizens, and by no means oppose or resist him, nor desire others to resist or place obstacles in the way of the powers that be, in case they should wish to capture or slay me. For no one should thwart the powers that be or resist them, except He who has ordained them; otherwise there will be rebellion and opposition to God. But I hope they will have the good sense to recognize that Your Electoral Grace's cradle stood in too lofty a birthplace for you to become my executioner. If Your Electoral Grace leaves the gates open and

1) There is a marginal gloss at this place in the Wittenberg edition to this effect: "Doctor Martin says, and persons worthy of credence assert, that they have heard him say more than once that he had never in his entire life written to a great lord in as stern language as to Duke Frederick, the Elector, who, nevertheless, took all in good part," etc.

keeps the free Electoral safe-conduct for them, in case they should come themselves or send their deputies to fetch me, Your Electoral Grace will have done enough for obedience. They can demand nothing more of Your Electoral Grace than to know whether Luther is with Your Electoral Grace. And this will have to be done without putting Your Electoral Grace to any trouble, work, or into danger. For Christ has not taught me to be a Christian at some one else's expense. But if they should be so unreasonable as to demand that Your Electoral Grace lay hands on me yourself, I will tell Your Electoral Grace what is to be done: Whether Your Electoral Grace believes it or not, I shall keep Your Electoral Grace safe in body, estate, and soul from injury or peril arising from this affair of mine.

"And now I commend Your Electoral Grace to the mercy of God. We shall talk further of this matter, if it is necessary. For I dispatched this letter hurriedly, lest Your Electoral Grace should have been saddened by the report of my return; for if I mean to be a true Christian, I must be a comforter to everybody and an injury to no one. He with whom I have to do is a different man from Duke George; He knows me quite well, and I know Him fairly well. If Your Electoral Grace would believe, you would see the glory of God; but since you do not believe, you have so far failed to see anything. God be loved and praised forever. Amen.

"Given at Borna, by the hand of my companion [Michael von der Strassen], on Ash Wednesday, 1522.

"Your Electoral Grace's obedient servant

"MARTIN LUTHER." 2)

This plain-spoken letter, with its tone of rugged cordiality, mirrors to us the genuine Luther, who has become endeared to the common people — the Luther from whose vision every earthly aspect vanishes the moment he fixes his eye upon the cross of Christ and the Gospel; the Luther who forms transcendent views of the value of men and affairs, who is inaccessible to human influences and cannot be swayed by human regards; the Luther who is unconquerable in the strength of his unsophisticated faith — our Martin *Coeur de Lion*.

But Luther's great spiritual strength was used in an altogether unexpected manner when he began to address the Wittenbergers.

2) XV, 1989-93. Comp. Smith, *Luther's Corresp.* II, 93 ff.

Deferring to the Elector's wish, he delivered the famous series of eight sermons during the first week in Lent, not at the *Schlosskirche*, but at the *Stadtkirche*. There was no sign of nervousness, no bluster, no violence in him, as he appeared for the first time after nearly a year's absence before his well-known audience. One of the Swiss students who had met Luther traveling incognito at the Inn of the Black Bear in Jena, Kessler, was in the church and took notes. He relates that Luther began by expounding briefly the ordinary Gospel-lesson for *Invocavit Sunday*. "Then he dropped his text and took up the present trouble."

This absence of any inclination to rush the enemy's position by a dashing immediate attack, and of anything sensational in the exordium of his first address, exhibits to us not only the self-control which Luther knew how to exercise in critical moments, but also the calm courage of his well-grounded conviction. The Wittenbergers were deeply gratified to see their beloved Doctor Martin in his pulpit again; they were glad to have him back alive after months of agitated suspense. That Sunday morning Luther could have had the joyous assent of the majority of his audience to any position he might ask them to take on the mooted questions. He disdained to ride into his goal on the crest of his popularity; he made no strategical use of the admiration of his friends and the general good will of the people. His opponents must not have a chance to say afterwards that he had taken an unfair advantage over them. He had come to make his audience think the thoughts of God, and to frame their resolutions upon quiet reflection, with minds freed from bias and all outward constraint.

They did think. One by one the subjects that had deeply stirred them during the past months passed in review before them as they listened to the preacher who stood before them, perfectly self-possessed and composed, talking to them with that quiet deliberation and mild earnestness with which an older brother talks to his hot-headed younger brothers. The marriage of monks and nuns, the removal of images from the sanctuaries, the proper way to treat the Sacrament, the Mass, confession — all these issues were taken up and measured by Holy Writ. "Such and such are the facts in the case — thus it is written — so far we may go in this matter": in this objective manner Luther sought to lay in the hearts of his hearers, first, a solid foundation of knowledge. He made them see the exact truth in each issue. Next, he surprised them by his way of treating error. He revealed no anger at the strange views which

had been propagated, but took them up for criticism with a sympathetic concern. Nor did he indulge in any wholesale condemnation of errorists, but plainly distinguished between leaders in erroneous views and their simple-minded victims. His hearers received the impression from Luther's addresses that the mere fact of a Christian brother deviating from the divine norm of doctrine does not yet deprive him of all fraternal consideration on the part of his fellow-believers. On the contrary, the common faith that has existed between the erring brother and those who are still free from error must prompt the latter to extend all possible aid to the former, in order that the bond of fellowship may not be utterly disrupted. With great emphasis Luther dwelt on this thought, that faith is void if it is without love. In a loveless faith there is nothing but a semblance of faith, the external form of godliness, without its internal vitality and power. With very great force he applied this truth to the Sacrament, which he depicted as the seal of faith. Accordingly, in his view the divinely intended fruit of the use of the Sacrament must be love, more intense and more persistent love. Thus, while combating their plain errors with the weapons of the Spirit, Luther lovingly wooed the souls of his erring friends. In the very first sermon he gave them a full view of his tender concern for them, when he described his present task as that of a mother who nurses her puny and feeble children with sweet milk. The love of God is his great model in this task. In the sermon on Saturday, March 15, he compares God to "a roaring furnace of love, which reaches from earth to heaven." This drastic effort of Luther to make his hearers realize God's love powerfully gripped their hearts. Moreover, Luther deprecated the use of any other weapon in fighting error than the Word of God, and declared that such had always been his policy. "If I had proceeded with violence," he said, "I would have caused great bloodshed in Germany; yea, I might have arranged a drama at Worms that would have put the emperor in jeopardy. But what would that have been? It would have been a fool's play." Above all, Luther despised playing to the gallery, appealing to the decision of the uninformed populace, and relying on human authority. "It will not do," he says, "for you to say: Such and such a one has said so, as Provost Doctor Carlstadt, Gabriel [Zwilling], and Michael [Storch] have preached to us. No; every one must take his own stand and be armed for conflict with the devil." There was in all the addresses of Luther during that critical week after his return from the Wart-

burg a wonderful equipoise between bold, aggressive courage and considerate condescension, ministering love, and meekness. After the turbulent debates of the past months, the impetuous harangues of demagogues, and the untimely wobbling of magistrates, the people now saw and heard a man of order, who was trained to self-discipline and respect for every divinely ordained authority, and fearlessly insisted on a like discipline among the high and the low. In Luther's estimation peace and good public order are at all times something holy, something that God demands. The anarchist Luther whom Pope Leo XIII and the Jesuits have tried to palm off on decadent Protestantism, the Luther who was the original advocate of revolution, and whose teachings were represented to Americans recently as the indirect cause of the late World War — this Luther is a fiction. What Luther has said about a critical episode at Worms has since been abundantly verified by historical research. It has been established beyond question that the nobility of the German Nation, and even some of the princes were determined to retaliate upon the person of the emperor any violence perpetrated against Luther. There was a rumor that Luther would get out of Worms alive as little as Huss got out of Constance; but when men repeated this rumor, they would mutter: "If he burns, he will not burn alone." The man who kept their fierce spirits in leash was Luther himself.

In 1909 there was published in the *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte* (VI, 467 ff.) the following letter written on March 27, 1522, by Albert Burer, a Wittenberg student, to his patron, Beatus Rhenanus: —

"On March 6 Martin Luther returned to Wittenberg in equestrian habit, accompanied by several horsemen. He came to settle the trouble stirred up by the extremely violent sermons of Carlstadt and Zwilling. For they had no regard for weak consciences, whom Luther, no less than Paul, would feed on milk until they grew strong. [1 Cor. 3, 2.] He preaches daily on the Ten Commandments. As far as one can tell from his face, the man is kind, gentle, and cheerful. His voice is sweet and sonorous, so that I wonder at the sweet speaking of the man. Whatever he does, teaches, and says is most pious, even though his impious enemies say the opposite. Every one, even though not Saxon, who hears him once desires to hear him again and again, such tenacious hooks does he fix in the minds of his auditors. In short, there is nothing lacking in that man which makes for the most perfect Christian

piety, even though all mortals and the gates of hell may say the contrary." 3)

Under these calming discourses of Luther Wittenberg became quiet. The disturbing elements quit the town and chose other fields for their operation. The citadel of the evangelical faith was restored to its former distinction and became the exponent of the conservative Reformation.
