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PREVIEW

LUTHER AND THE EMPIRE: A STUDY OF THE IMPERIAL IDEAL  
IN REFORMATION POLITICS, 1522-1540

by

Frederick W. Henninger, Jr.

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of History

Under the Supervision of Professor John K. Yost

Lincoln, Nebraska

December 1972

**TITLE**

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REFORMATION POLITICS, 1522-1540

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## PREFACE

The completion of this study could not have been accomplished without the support and assistance of certain institutions and individuals whom I would like to acknowledge. The Graduate Research Council of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln provided a dissertation travel grant during the summer of 1970. The Foundation for Reformation Research awarded a junior fellowship to attend the Ninth Institute on Reformation Research from June 21 to July 31, 1971 in St. Louis, Missouri.

Three Reformation scholars whom I met at either the Institute or the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research, which was held August 22-27, 1971 in St. Louis, offered valuable advice. They are Professor Arthur Karl Piepkorn of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), Professor Martin Schmidt of the University of Heidelberg, and Professor Martin Brecht of the University of Tübingen. The members of my supervisory committee were particularly helpful in reading the manuscript and making suggestions for revision. They are Professors Edward Homze, David Nicholas, and John K. Yost.

Above all, I wish to acknowledge the valuable guidance

and constructive criticism during all phases of the study given by my adviser, Professor John K. Yost. Far different, but no less valuable, was the contribution of my mother and father, whom I thank for reminding me whenever I saw them that nothing in this world--not even studying history--ought to be taken with ultimate seriousness.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Hajo Holborn long recognized the strong political overtones and implications which the Reformation assumed after Luther's stand at the Diet of Worms. Considerable debate has developed, however, in the attempt to assess the impact of Reformation politics upon the structure and concept of the late medieval Empire. Lord Bryce observed in 1904 that the Reformation should be considered "as the cause of political changes, which still further rent the Empire, and struck at the root of the theory by which it had been created and upheld. Luther completed the work of Hildebrand."<sup>1</sup> According to Bryce, before the sixteenth century it had not seemed impossible to strengthen the German state into a monarchy, but the conflict between Charles V and the Lutherans put an end to all such hopes. In effect, the Reformation became a source of religious and political schism far more serious and permanent than any that had occurred before in the history of the Empire.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James Bryce, The Holy Roman Empire, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 371.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

This interpretation was modified somewhat by Georg von Below in 1918. He asserted that "at the end of the Middle Ages there existed little more of the universal Empire, so that the Reformation could hardly contribute any further to its political decline." Yet the imperial ideal certainly was not refuted until the impact of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> Below argued that the Reformation attempted to reform the entire ecclesiastical structure of the Empire through a national council. Since this effort failed and the Protestant movement came to a standstill, the Reformation resulted in an imperial schism which further strengthened the territorial powers.<sup>4</sup>

Wilhelm Pauck took a similar position in 1939. He observed though the Holy Roman Empire continued to exist nominally until 1806, "ideally and actually it had perished under the religious assault of Martin Luther. The reformer was aware of this achievement."<sup>5</sup> In Pauck's view, the traditional concept of the Empire no longer engaged Luther's interest. Instead "he thought of the emperor as a free German lord and king, and the concern for Germany as a free nation always was

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<sup>3</sup>Die Bedeutung der Reformation für die politische Entwicklung (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1918), pp. 11-12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup>"Nationalism and European Christianity," Environmental Factors in Christian History, ed. John T. McNeill, et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 302.

on his mind." Nevertheless, despite Luther's growing national consciousness, the Reformation allowed the territorial powers to establish themselves, thereby deepening the political division of Germany.<sup>6</sup>

In his biography of Charles V, which was published in the same year (1939), Karl Brandi demonstrated a similar line of argument. He maintained that Luther and his reform program attempted unsuccessfully to transform the universal and Christian concept of the Empire into one of a national union of the German people. According to Brandi, Luther became a party to a fatal contradiction in German history--the conflict between the universal and national theory of the Empire. Brandi observed that for centuries before the Reformation "the theory of universal Empire had been exploited to imbue the German people with Christian culture, in readiness for a world-order based on God's eternal laws. In spite of the vigorous individuality of their various groups, so prone to division, coalescence or change, this idea had held them together."<sup>7</sup> To Luther, having accepted the belief that God's kingdom was worldwide and the Empire was its reflection, national theory became but a means to an end; it solved the problem of secularization of church organization. Strongly

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>The Emperor Charles V, trans. C. V. Wedgwood, 3rd ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 293.

influenced by the power of the German language, Luther was able to appeal ever more directly to the inner unity of the German nation over the aggressive claims of the papacy. Yet Brandi believed the reformer had nothing to give the German people which could help them to form a new political unity for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

This view was generally supported by Geoffrey Barraclough in 1946. He argued that Luther's religious appeal, by opposing the particularism of the princes, nobility, peasantry, and towns, sought to exalt the overall unity of the German nation.<sup>9</sup> According to Barraclough, Luther's challenge to the rule of the Roman papacy appealed directly to the national consciousness of the German people, who had been disappointed and frustrated in the past with the failure of imperial reform. Believing that the basis of religion lay in the inner experience of spiritual freedom, Luther sought to unite the German emperor, princes, clergy, and people against the oppressive ecclesiastical system administered from Rome. Though he intended to reform the doctrinal and moral abuses of the universal Church, the vociferous resistance of the papacy impelled Luther to rely increasingly upon German support and gave his reform program a distinctively national tone. Therefore,

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The Origins of Modern Germany, 3rd ed. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), p. 370.

Barraclough believed the appeal of the Reformation enhanced the political power of the German nation, as opposed to the Roman institutions of the papacy, councils, episcopate, and canon law.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously enough, however, a close examination of change and continuity in imperial theory during the Reformation has remained a neglected task. This is particularly true in view of the fact that recently two contemporary historians have pointed up the need to focus further attention on the problem. In his "Introduction" to a newly-published collection of Pre-Reformation grievance literature, Gerald Strauss has asserted that above all the personal, class, and local issues facing the German people on the eve of the Reformation loomed the problem of the Empire. Indeed, in no other aspect of public life was the discrepancy between ideal and reality so pervading or so obvious.<sup>11</sup> According to Strauss, the traditional notion of a universal state of Christendom, the sacrum imperium Romanum, had lost most of its potency and was, in fact, a political anachronism by the late fifteenth century. At the same time, the Empire considered as a territorial ideal, the regnum teutonicum, was also relatively ill-prepared to govern effectively or meet its political obligations. Strauss

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 368-369.

<sup>11</sup>Manifestations of Discontent in Germany on the Eve of the Reformation, ed. and trans. Gerald Strauss (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. xii.

points out though modern historians may find some positive features in the weakness of the Empire, such as rising political self-confidence among the territorial estates and growing rationalization of urban government, contemporaries did not view the Empire in these terms. Rather, they became increasingly concerned and troubled by the cumulative ills of the Empire and looked for aid and inspiration to reinforce its declining institutions.<sup>12</sup> Judging from this analysis, the implication is clear that it remained for the humanists and reformers of the sixteenth century to strengthen, even revitalize, the structure and concept of the Empire. It is necessary, therefore, to determine to what extent the participants in the Reformation, particularly Luther, succeeded in accomplishing this task.

In a recent symposium re-evaluating the impact of the Reformation, Theodor V. Brodek has underscored the need to reassess the socio-political realities of the Holy Roman Empire within the context of the Reformation. Brodek emphasizes the danger of accepting Guy Swanson's hypothesis which employed a systematic association or mathematical correlation of particular types of regimes and the societal acceptance or rejection of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>13</sup> He

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>13</sup>"Socio-Political Realities in the Holy Roman Empire," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 1, No. 3 (1971), 395. For Swanson's thesis, see Religion and Regime: A Sociological Account of the Reformation (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967).

explains that Swanson's typologies, which are based on various degrees of centralized and decentralized power-structures in sixteenth-century continental Europe, fail to take into account the complex constitutional and administrative development of the German Empire. Clearly, the Empire lagged behind parallel trends in the Western monarchies. According to Brodek, the impact of the Reformation upon the territories and cities of the Empire must be viewed in large measure as a function of the entire process of imperial political and social history during the preceding centuries.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, in view of these observations, it is clear that the attempt to see the idea and reality of the Empire as the Reformation era did requires a fresh approach to the sources. It demands, in the case of Luther, that the reformer's entire understanding of the Empire--its role in Christian antiquity, its medieval development, and the crisis of the Reformation--be seen consistently and comprehensively from his own unique perspective.

This approach is especially important because the German Reformation created new beliefs and altered circumstances which forced a significant reassessment of the traditional view of the Empire. Both the movement to reform the Church as the community of believers and the political opposition mounted by the Emperor contributed to the need for a

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<sup>14</sup>Brodek, 397, 404.

readjustment and a new perspective of the imperial ideal and past. Though Luther was in no sense a politician or political philosopher, he was constantly concerned with imperial issues. As theologian and reformer, he found it necessary to understand political problems which confronted the participants in the Reformation. Throughout his career, he continued to pass judgment on aspects of imperial politics, using his religious perspective, historical knowledge, and legal reasoning to adapt the existing concept of the Empire. Luther's correspondence, table talk, treatises, and biblical scholarship constitute a rich source of documentation which reveals how his political thought and outlook were shaped by the theory and reality of the Empire.

As a general topic of study, Luther's understanding of politics has not remained unexplored. Luther's approach to political questions has been examined by a number of theologians and historians.<sup>15</sup> The tendency to focus mainly upon

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<sup>15</sup> See for example the following monographs and articles: Paul Althaus, Luther und die politische Welt (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1937); Arnold E. Berger, "Luther und der deutsche Staatsgedanke," Luther-Jahrbuch, I (1919-1920), 34-56; Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther's World of Thought, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958); Erich Brandenburg, Martin Luthers Anschauung vom Staate und der Gesellschaft (Halle: Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, 1901); Ulrich Duchrow, Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Traditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1970); Werner Elert, Morphologie des Luthertums (Munich: Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932); Walter Elliger, Luthers politisches Denken und Handeln (Berlin: Evangelische Verlags-Anstalt, 1952); George W. Forell, "Luther and Politics," Luther and Culture, ed. George W. Forell, et al. (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1960), pp. 3-69; Hans



the theological perspective and political theory of Luther, however, and thus to concentrate overmuch on his view of the Two Kingdoms and church-state relations, helps to explain why scholars have neglected Luther's concern for the history and meaning of the Empire.<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to achieve a sound historical understanding of the character and importance of Luther's political reflections from 1522 to 1540, the present

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R. Gerstenkorn, Weltlich Regiment zwischen Gottesreich und Teufelmacht (Bonn: Bouvier & Co., 1956); Harold J. Grimm, "Luther's Conception of Territorial and National Loyalty," Church History, 17, No. 2 (1948), 79-93; Günther Holstein, Luther und die deutsche Staatsidee (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1926); Albert Hyma, New Light on Martin Luther (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmans Press, 1958); Hermann Jordan, Luthers Staat-auffassung: Ein Beitrag zu der Frage des Verhältnisses von Religion und Politik (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1917); Ernst Kinder, Luther und die politische Frage (Neuendettelsau: Freimund-Verlag, 1950); Richard H. Klann, "Luther on War and Revolution," Concordia Theological Monthly, 25, No. 5 (1954), 353-366; Georg Merz, Glaube und Politik im Handeln Luthers (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1933); Ernest G. Schwiebert, "The Medieval Pattern in Luther's Views of the State," Church History, 12, No. 2 (1943), 98-117; Lewis W. Spitz, "The Impact of the Reformation on Church-State Issues," Church and State under God, ed. Albert G. Huegli (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 59-112; John M. Tonkin, "Luther's Interpretation of Secular Reality," The Journal of Religious History, 6, No. 2 (1970), 133-150; and Sheldon S. Wolin, "Politics and Religion: Luther's Simplistic Imperative," American Political Science Review, 50, No. 1 (1956), 24-42.

<sup>16</sup>For a critical appraisal of this historiographical trend--the preoccupation with Luther's theology at the expense of the historical context of the Reformation--see Bernd Moeller, "Problems of Reformation Research," Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays, ed. and trans. H. C. Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3-16. This essay was originally published in Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte, 14 (1965), 246-257, as "Probleme der Reformationsgeschichtsforschung."

study examines the nature and development of Luther's imperial ideal and its relationship to the course of Reformation politics. It has two immediate aims: (1) to provide an analysis of Luther's consideration of imperial history, problems, issues; and (2) to demonstrate the significance of his approach toward imperial politics for the evolution of the concept of the Empire during the Reformation.

In particular, this study undertakes a fresh approach to an understanding of Reformation politics and its impact upon the imperial ideal in Luther's thought and work. To set the historical background, it examines imperial politics before the Reformation, the imperial ideal in medieval and humanist perspective, and the influence of Pre-Reformation tradition on Luther's view of imperial history. It then focuses upon the development of Luther's conception of the Empire through his judgments on the course of events in Reformation politics from the Edict of Worms to the crisis of the Augsburg Recess and the Torgau Conference of 1530. Finally, it moves to an analysis of Luther's transformation of the imperial ideal as a result of Protestant-imperial negotiations over the Religious Peace of Nuremberg, the prorogation of the Council, and the crisis of the Frankfurt Assembly in 1539.

This pattern of organization follows the methodology used in the study. The background chapters are based on the assumption that in order to understand Reformation politics and its relationship to Luther's imperial ideal, it is

necessary to consider the political structure and character of the Empire before the Reformation and its relationship to the medieval and humanist conceptions of the Empire. It is important to recognize the discrepancy between ideal and reality and the extent to which this influenced Luther's view of the imperial past. The works of Luther that have been consulted in the remaining chapters cover the career of the reformer from 1522 to 1540 and have not been limited to any one period in his life. The sources have been selected to show the chronological development of Luther's relationship to the context of imperial affairs. Priority has been given to the correspondence since it reflects most directly his close involvement with imperial questions from his own point of view. Special attention has been given to relatively untouched parts of Luther's tracts, commentaries, and table talk which deal with his concern with important imperial matters.

In demonstrating Luther's understanding of imperial politics, the material from the early period (1522-1529), which has been traditionally over-played, has not been allowed to have a controlling influence. Any statement or judgment made by the early Luther, or at least prior to 1530, has been checked against its counterpart in the later period (1530-1540) in order to show a change, development, or consistency in a particular position. Therefore, while this study takes into consideration the earlier period, the

primary emphasis rests on the Luther who has become a spokesman for all Germans after the Diet of Augsburg, who has recognized the threat of war with the Emperor, and who has developed his mature imperial thought.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER I

### IMPERIAL POLITICS BEFORE THE REFORMATION

To understand the origin and development of Reformation politics, it is necessary to examine the political structure and character of the Empire in the period before the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Historically and intellectually, the Empire was a highly equivocal expression.<sup>2</sup> The first official use of the title "Roman Empire" (imperium Romanum) by a German king occurred under Conrad II in a document dated 1034. It referred to the three kingdoms of Germany, Italy, and Burgundy which were welded as one political unit under the emperor and passed as one bloc by hereditary succession to the new emperor. This followed the Carolingian or Ottonian meaning of the term as the highest secular authority.<sup>3</sup> In the reign of Frederick Barbarossa (ca. 1157) it became

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<sup>1</sup>For an introduction to the problem of the Empire in the Middle Ages, see Geoffrey Barraclough, The Medieval Empire: Idea and Reality (London: The Historical Association, 1950).

<sup>2</sup>H. S. Offler, "Aspects of Government in the Late Medieval Empire," in Europe in the Late Middle Ages, ed. J. R. Hale, et al. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 218.

<sup>3</sup>Barraclough, The Origins of Modern Germany (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), pp. 73-74.

customary to speak of the Empire as "holy," the sacrum imperium. This was intended to stress the divine origins of imperial power.<sup>4</sup> Since the time of William of Holland (ca. 1254), the Empire was designated as both holy and Roman (sacrum imperium Romanum). This was during the period of the Great Interregnum (1250-1268), however, when "in fact the Empire had ceased for most purposes to count."<sup>5</sup> By 1486 in an imperial peace promulgated by Frederick III, the Empire began to be called the "Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation" (Heiliges romisches Reich deutschen Nation).<sup>6</sup> Beginning in the eleventh century, therefore, the traditional idea of empire, the old notion of an imperium Christianum or Christian commonwealth with universal functions and responsibilities, gave way to a concrete and definable territorial ideal limited in time and space.

As a mode of government, the Empire was established as a federative regime embracing emperor and princes according to the Golden Bull of 1356, so called after its golden seal. This constituted the largest single piece of imperial legislation during the medieval period and by the sixteenth

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<sup>4</sup>Hajo Holborn, A History of Modern Germany: The Reformation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>Barracclough, Medieval Empire, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Fritz Hartung, Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte vom 15. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart, 7th ed. (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler Verlag, 1959), p. 5.

century it became recognized as the fundamental law or constitution of the Empire.<sup>7</sup> It was the result of negotiations between the emperor and those German princes who since 1257 had claimed the exclusive right to elect the emperor. The Bull fixed and legalized the status quo of the Empire as previously decreed by the declarations of the Diet of Rhens in July 1338.<sup>8</sup> Promulgated under Charles IV at a Diet held at Metz in December 1356, the Golden Bull determined the procedure for the election and coronation of the emperor and designated the official members of the electoral college.<sup>9</sup> The imperial electors are to consist of the duke of Saxony, the margrave of Brandenburg, the king of Bohemia, the count palatine of the Rhine, and the three archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier.

The Golden Bull opens with a verbose and pompous preamble on the evils of discord, the purpose of the law being described as the cherishing of unity among the electors, the securing of unanimous elections, and the avoidance of strife in general.<sup>10</sup> Considerable attention is then devoted to the

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<sup>7</sup>Holborn, pp. 27-28.

<sup>8</sup>Barraclough, The Origins of Modern Germany, pp. 316-317.

<sup>9</sup>"The Golden Bull of the Emperor Charles IV. 1356 A.D., in Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages, ed. and trans. Ernest F. Henderson (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), pp. 220-261.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 220-221.

preliminaries of an election. All subjects of the Empire are to facilitate the passage of electors to the place of meeting, and to each elector are allotted certain princes, lords, and cities who shall be bound, if required, to furnish him with an adequate escort while he is passing through their territories. To avert long vacancies of the throne, it is stipulated that within one month after the death of an emperor has been made known, the archbishop of Mainz shall communicate the news to the other electors and summon them to choose a successor within three months, the election to be held at Frankfort-on-Main. Precautions against violence at elections are prescribed. No elector may bring with him more than 200 mounted followers, of whom only fifty are to be armed men. Those who absent themselves and omit to send proxies shall forfeit their votes for the election concerned. The citizens of Frankfort, while the election is in progress, shall admit no one to the city except electors and their attendants.<sup>11</sup>

The clauses dealing with the election itself are less complicated. On the day after the electors have assembled at Frankfort, they shall hear a mass sung to the Holy Spirit in St. Bartholomew's Church, and each shall then swear that he will direct his full discretion and wisdom to the choice of one suitable to be King of the Romans and future Emperor, and that he will give his vote without any payment or reward

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 222-228.