

# The Reformation of Wolfshausen A Mighty Fortress, 1527\*

*"Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Cross, cross,' and there is no cross!"-93rd Thesis*

When Vater Karl could stand it no more, it was nearing dawn. Trudi had returned from a visit home with the baby and Gretchen was back from a brewhouse where she had refreshed and freshened. The cleric asked the others assembled to spare him an absence. He had not left the vigil for almost two days and received his consent in a nod, two smiles and a burp. He started down the walk as the sun began to rise over the castle, casting cheerful shadows over the beams on which rested the large houses of the merchant class and senior bureaucrats.

There was a nervous excitement in the old man's joints. He reached the alley in which the Prince's interrogator and the high priest of the old church had held their vertical negotiation. The steps looked steeper now than Karl had ever seen them and he slipped or mis-stepped several times, once catching himself on the wall of the household to the right and one time barking his shoulder on the building to the left.

There was no pain, but he didn't get away with it either. A window opened upstairs and an old man stuck his nose out, looked down on the scrambling cleric and cursed.

Karl reached the market road with a thump and forced his mind to travel from its wandering to his moving feet. In a few minutes he reached St. Elizabeth's church and looked up once more at the spire above which the now blue sky made him think about freedom and about fate. It was Sunday and the mass was about to begin. Vater Karl entered the church by the front door and took a place in the back of the nave, kneeling before his seat and praying for certainty and success.

A few pious peasants were seated near the front of the church. Some merchants who specialized in the needs of the peasantry were also present and grinning humbly. Most of the church, however, was empty.

Karl was surprised when Vater Johann, trailed by several novices, entered to begin the service with the congregation still so inauspicious. As the high priest entered, though, Karl was impressed with the triumph still in the heavy man's step.

The sermon was in bewildering Latin, but the priest in the pews understood his old friend's dialect. He was amused to find the pastor speaking from Galatians, chapter 5, the very text he'd used in his improvised sermon on the palace wall.

Once the lesson was given and the eucharist consumed on behalf of the congregation, the recessional began. Vater Johann left as proudly as he had entered but this time recognized his old colleague attending the mass. The larger, higher servant of Rome grimaced and from there, his departure took the mask of retreat followed by all the regal pomp of the recently imperial religion.

Karl let the peasants and merchants precede him in wishing the pastor well and promising better tithes soon. Finally, the congregation was down to the pastor and the fugitive priest, standing out in the morning breeze.

"It was a slow day," said Vater Johann, hopefully.

"This time of year," reassured Karl, "the people are too tired from the harvest to sin and too well fed to repent. I'm sure you will have your usual crowd when the winter has come. I hate to intrude twice in so short a time on your beneficence, but I have a favor to ask."

"Come to my office," the senior Priest said curtly. He then led the way around the side of the soaring church to the squat building behind it where all of Heaven's private business was conducted. The smaller priest followed humbly behind, hands behind his back and with his attention on the ground in front of him. The excitement in his old bones was only squelched with a great deal of energy.

Johann unlocked the door to his chamber where weeks before, Karl had asked after Jeremiah's whereabouts. Now he had the opposite problem with which he was seeking assistance.

"I believe I might know where your boy turned up," the host proclaimed.

“You are more gracious than even your high post demands,” the guest answered. “The thing is, we have found him.”

“And now you want him baptized before he gets lost again?”

Vater Karl laughed at that, “I can still baptize, although I might have to see you for sanctified water in which to immerse him. It will take a lot of rinsing to wash away his sin. No, he is in the Prince’s jail. I believe he is being held there until a case can be made against me. I would like your help getting his release.”

“Now, old friend,” Johann lowered his tone to a menacing growl, “If the Prince will sustain me in this great church built by his ancestor, what possible interest could he have in prosecuting a penniless informal preacher from whatever town it is you’ve been scratching the fleas of.”

Karl began to answer but his superior continued, “Second, while the Prince has not yet found the inspiration to attack the one true Church in his langraviate, you will notice that I was not invited for the theological rumination now in progress up the hill. I am not without power,” the high priest allowed a rare silence until Karl opened his mouth to disagree at which point Johann raised his hand to interrupt. “But the earthly might of the Church in Hessen deserts her quickly in these times. Why do you think I can have the boy let out if the Prince wants him kept in?”

The pleading priest tested the atmosphere by inhaling and opening his mouth as if to speak. Succeeding, he spoke. “Betray me.”

“There would be some justice in that, old friend. I had much more to answer for when you were here and more than that in the days after you left. While I appreciate and will certainly consider your kind invitation with a generous heart, do you have a particular treason in mind?”

“I believe the boy is being held until he has given evidence against me. You do not know Jeremiah beyond a brief meeting but no child should be locked up less than he. He is as energetic as a Turk and as adventuresome as one of the Knights Templar.”

“All boys are energetic. All children are Turks.”

Karl was generally candid except in the company of his current companion. He chose candor, nonetheless. “Jeremiah understands little of the rules that guide civilized society. He may give me away...”

“You are asking me to give you away.”

“Yes, because you think me a defect in the church and he considers me a friend. He will not know that he is betraying me until he sees me bound. Imagine the guilt he will live with once he knows. Imagine Simon Peter when the cock crowed. Consider what he felt. That is what I fear Jeremiah will feel for as long as he lives.”

“You understand you are Jesus in this homily, but then you always were Jesus in all your homilies.”

“I am a poor friend. Jesus was the best friend. The only comparison I intended was between Peter and Jeremiah.”

“You haven’t answered why a Catholic priest with no home in the Catholic church would be of so much interest to the Prince that he would bait his trap with a child. Why would you matter to the Castle?”

Karl sighed. “Because several years ago, before the Prince made his fateful and sorrowful choice, I gave hospitality to traveling evangelists tied to Thomas Münzer.”

Vater Johann’s face turned red and he pounded the desk in front of him before rising to his feet.