



Henry of Navarre

Paul Willert

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FRENCH historians, anxious to vindicate in all things the priority of their nation, point out that in 1512, five years before Luther denounced the sale of indulgences, Lefevre, a lecturer on theology and letters at Paris, published a commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul in which he taught the doctrine of justification by faith.

But an isolated theologian might deny the efficacy of good works without danger to the established system, so long as the logical consequences of such doctrine were not pressed vigorously home against the abuses of Rome. Lefevre had nothing of the passionate activity of a successful reformer; his teaching produced little effect till the minds of men were stirred by the great events taking place in Germany.

Lefevre and his friends did little more than give expression to the general desire that the Church should be reformed from within. They were supported by the sympathy of the scholars and men of letters who had long been engaged in a bitter quarrel with the monkish pedants, to whom the system and the maxims of the schoolmen were not less sacred than the cardinal doctrines of the Church.

The false renderings, the spurious documents, the historical frauds and obsolete philosophy, on which the Catholic theologians of the day relied, hardly allowed a learned man to be orthodox.

But these cultivated men had not the fervour and their doctrine lacked the emphasis needed to stir popular enthusiasm; the real impulse to the Reformation in France was given by men of more decided views, who at first, with the exception of Farel, a friend of Lefevre, belonged to a lower class.

The growth of heresy did not escape the notice of the University of Paris, the acknowledged judge and champion of orthodoxy throughout Latin Christendom. In the 14th century the University had interfered in politics with the authority of a Fourth Estate and had lectured kings and princes. In the 15th century at the Councils of Constance and Basle its doctors had been the acknowledged leaders of the Western Church. As if foreseeing the approaching struggle, the faculty of theology, the Sorbonne, as it was called from the name of the College founded by Lewis IX. for the support of the teachers of divinity, appointed a permanent committee to watch over the purity of the faith...

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