I recommend this thesis for acceptance by the Honors Program of Ball State University for graduation and honors.

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May 27, 1970
The Reformation, Düer, and The Four Apostles

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*All illustrations listed are found in Erwin Panofsky's The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955)
In the autumn, 1526, the town council of Nuremberg received the following letter from one of its leading citizens.

Prudent, honorable, wise, dear Masters. I have been intending, for a long time past, to show my respect for your WIsdoms by the presentation of some humble picture of mine as a remembrance; but I have been prevented from so doing by the imperfection and insignificance of my works, for I felt that with such I could not well stand before your wisdoms. Now, however, that I have just painted a panel upon which I bestowed more trouble than any other painting, I considered none more worthy to keep it as a reminiscence than your WIsdoms.

Therefore I present it to your WIsdoms with the humble and urgent prayer that you will favourably and graciously receive it, and will be and continue, as I have found you, my kind and dear Masters.

The author of the letter, Albrecht Durer, thus offered his painting The Four Apostles to his native city of Nuremberg. Perhaps Durer intended the gift as a token of homage to the civil authorities for the successful and relatively peaceful religious revolution they had achieved in the midst of the struggles of the Reformation. For Durer and his contemporaries, the world appeared to be full of uncertainty and strife during the revolutionary years of Protestant Reformation. The atmosphere was charged with internal and external disruption in which there was a violent clash of religious, social, and political ideas.

The whole era presented vast contrasts in the attitudes of the people. While there was the fear of the approaching Day of Judgment, there was also the honor of heroism on the battlefield. These were the days of the last knights and the first city merchants. People sheltered in cathedrals while others, like Luther, made bold trips into heretical spheres of thought. Inside the wall of the cities, the proletariat murmured; outside, the peasants showed signs of unrest.

In this period of "...swiftly moving, dangerous times," Dürer presented in his painting *The Four Apostles* an ideal of strength and zeal.

Not only does *The Four Apostles* confirm the personal attitude of Dürer in the religious struggles of his time, but it also illuminates the spiritual situation which existed in Germany revealingly.

The Reformation movement which forced Dürer and thousands of others into agonizing spiritual crises had begun courteously, piously, and rather unwittingly. For the beginnings of the German Reformation, one must first turn to Rome, then the center of Christianity. There, in 1517, the full papal coffers Pope Leo X had inherited from Julius II were nearly empty. Son of Lorenzo the Magnificent and the head of the powerful Medici family, Leo X was a poet, scholar, and gentleman. Thus while he had gaily wasted the church funds on somewhat questionable poets and artists, the massive basilica planned and begun by his predecessor Julius II had been neglected. It was quickly becoming

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apparent, however, that the old St. Peter's Basilica was beyond repair; something would have to be done immediately. Leo's papal advisor's persuaded him that to allow the basilica to remain unfinished would certainly be a disgrace to the Church, so reluctantly in March, 1517, Pope Leo X promulgated an indulgence offering it to all those who would contribute to the cost of completion of the shrine.

Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz in Germany, was appointed to manage the distribution of indulgences in Magdeburg and Halberstadt as well as in Mainz. Albrecht's principal agent for the distribution throughout this territory was Johann Tetzel. A Dominican friar, Tetzel had acquired a certain skill and reputation as a money raiser for, since 1500, his main occupation had been that of disposing of indulgences for the Church. Using his impressive, perfected formula, Tetzel would bestow a plenary indulgence to those who would penitently confess their sins and contribute, according to their means, to the building of a new St. Peter's.

Had Tetzel not approached too closely to the lands of Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, probably he would have escaped history. Moved by a reluctance to let the money of Saxony escape and perhaps by Tetzel's hyperboles, Frederick had forbade the preaching of the indulgence in his territory. Tetzel, however, was too shrewd to forgo the chance of augmenting the Church treasury with the money of the wealthy citizens of the Saxony province; so he ventured, therefore, so close to the frontiers of Saxony that the people of Wittenberg and the surrounding countryside could cross the border to obtain the indulgences.

Having received the indulgences, several Wittenberg burghers brought these "papal letters" to a professor of theology in the Wittenburg
university requesting him to attest to their efficiency. The professor, Martin Luther, refused; Tetzel responded by announcing Luther's refusal. Luther's purpose was clearly only to refute the extravagant claims made for indulgences and to correct the flagrant abuses made in their distribution. Certainly, as a fervent Catholic, he had no thought of upsetting the Church; for Luther's rebellion was far more against Catholic organization and ritual rather than church doctrine. To make his ideas clearly known and understood, Luther composed ninety-five theses and nailed them to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg. He did not consider these propositions heretical, nor were they inadvisable so. That his arguments would be widely understood, Luther also prepared a German translation of his theses to be circulated among the people.

Immediately, it appears, Luther's theses became the talk of literate Germany. Thousands had waited for such a protest and "... the pent-up anticlericalism of generations thrilled at having a voice." The number of books printed in the German states rose from 150 in 1518 to 990 in 1524. 80% of these book favored the Protestant Reformation movement. The books were sold everywhere, and whole provinces such as East Friesland, Silesia, and Schleswig-Holstein went over almost unanimously to Protestantism; clearly Catholicism had become moribund.

From the security offered by the Catholic Church, Luther challenged men to bring them face to face with God. With a deep understanding for the weakness of men, the medieval church had provided mankind in his

\begin{itemize}
  \item[4] Ibid., p. 368.
\end{itemize}
relationship to God with a whole succession of consecrated mediators equipped with special means of grace. Through the intervention of the saints by means of donations, confession, and repentance, the church assisted sinners in allaying their fears.

Fighting against the hierarchy of mediators Lutheran reform transferred the whole responsibility to the individual man depriving him of all assurances and consolations; man was left alone with his belief in the mercy of God. By forcing men to turn to God and by confining the decisive religious processes to themselves, Luther was returning to the beliefs of German mysticism.

Like many revolutionary movements, the Reformation produced a series of phenomena which by their radicalism repelled, and, in some instances, alienated its original supporters and forced its founder into a counter revolutionary position. Monasteries and convents were broken up by force, the peasants were insurgent and the poor were demanding a redistribution of wealth. The teachings of Luther were interpreted by the radicals as, among other things, a justification of iconoclasm, communism, and polygamy.

The leaders of the revolutionary sects and new forms of faith seemed to all agree, however, that religious art tempted people to worship statues and pictures rather than God Himself. Artists and craftsmen, therefore, were to feel the effect of the Reformation more directly than anyone else. Through nine centuries, all art in Europe had been inspired and financed by the church, but whenever the reformers established them-

5Durant, loc. cit., p. 3.
selves, the church no longer demanded the sacred subjects which had been the mainstay of medieval art.

Durer's own city of Nuremberg had prospered since 1420 as a center where craftsmen of precious metals flourished. Durer's father, a goldsmith, like the other craftsmen had made costly vases and church vessels, and metal workers had fashioned forms in bronze to adorn the churches. The churches had become vast repositories and museums of art. Since every guild or prosperous family commissioned some work of beauty for the shrine of a patron saint.  

One can gain a better understanding of the wanton devastation in the description of the activities of the econoelasts in Zurich in June, 1524.

Every standing statue was removed from its niche or its base and, together with icon, taken out of the church. It was then either broken up... if made of stone or plaster, or burned if made of wood. Every painting was taken down from the altars and burned outside. All murals were chipped away or scraped off the walls. The altars were stripped of all images and vessels, all native lamps were let down and melted outside, and all crucifixes were removed. Even the carved chair stalls were taken up and burned. Then the walls were whitewashed so that no traces whatsoever of the old decorations and appointments might be seen.

To the ecclesiastical statesmen who felt that myths were vital to morality, the use of art seemed reasonable; however, when the myths, like purgatory, were manipulated to finance the extravagances and abuses of the church, reformers rebelled against the painting and sculpture

6Durant, loc. cit., p. 298.

they felt "...inculcated the myths." Unfortunately, many spiritual leaders of the Protestant movement held all art to be synonymous with corruption; tragically their destruction of art was wholesale and indiscriminate.

Luther himself, however, was moderate, it appears in the matter of religious imagery; certainly he rejected the invocation evidence of Luther's attitude is obvious in his letters.

I (Luther) do not hold that the Gospel should destroy all the arts, as certain superstitious folk believe. On the contrary, I would fain see all art...serving him who had created them and given them to us."

His views of art are even more clearly seen when he called upon his followers to "...assail the...idolators of the Roman Anti-Christ by means of painting." Reformers less human than Luther, however, preferred to quote the law of Moses, thereby outlawing religious painting and sculpture altogether and completely clearing the churches of all ornament; truth banished beauty as an infidel.

Durer attacked those who accused art of serving heathenish ends. He writes:

It happens often, because of the interference of the uncouth who would like to stamp out art, that men who possess noble genius are likewise snuffed out. A good Christian is no more likely to be induced into idolatry through paintings and pictures than a pious man into murder by

7Durant, loc. cit., p. 820.
9Durant, loc. cit.
10Durant, loc. cit.
11Ex. 20:4.
the mere fact that he wears a sword at
his side. Indeed, he must, in truth, be a
stupid lout who would pray to a thing of
paint or wood.\textsuperscript{12}

Not only the iconoclasts but also the other splinter sects of
the Reformation movement shocked and angered Durer. He felt all con-
structive elements had to combine to protect the real ideals of the
movement against internal party dissension and to give to the Reformation
that permanent form that transform it from the religious political move-
ment of the revolutionary years would be done the Evangelical Church.
Lacking homogeneity from the very beginning, which prompted its disinte-
gration, the Lutheran movement was appropriated by the populace for
their own purposes and was nearly ruined with their excesses. Free will
asserted itself against the authority of the law while the individual
boasted of his rights as opposed to those of the community.

The city of Nuremberg witnessed its share of anti-clerical,
reformatory, and radical communist ideas. In 1521, the Tranconian
city was troubled by the activities of a theologian Johannes Denk,
Rector of the Selzsalms School, Denk stirred up trouble by advocating
the discarding of the letter of the Bible in favor of its inner meaning.
He preached a kind of self-identification with God, considered the life
and death of Christ an example rather than a work of redemption, and
prompted anabaptism.

Anabaptists and other fanatics continued to upset the public order
by calling for the abolishment of all private property. In 1524, an
innkeeper from Wohr and a clothmaker's journeyman were executed in

\textsuperscript{12}H.J. Masper, \textit{Albrecht Durer} (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1
1953), p. 44.
Nuremberg for inciting the peasants and burghers to free themselves from oppression. They had "...thought the time was ripe to pay no more taxes and to rebel against all forms of impostors invoking the Gospels and Bible as a code of social law to reform Germany."13

Hieronymous Andreus, one of Durer's own collaborators, was imprisoned for his connections with the revolutionary peasants.14 In 1525, three artists of Durer's own school were banished from Nuremberg for questioning divine authorship of the Bible. There were other artists in the city as well who tended to apocalyptic, fanaticism, sectarian, anabaptistry, and communistic ideas; Albrecht Durer, the acknowledged leader of the artistic fraternity in Nuremberg felt the dignity of his position and of his religion was being tarnished by the activities of such radicals.

The religious urge tempered by the spirit of his age, was the most essential and noble element in Durer's character. It became the unifying element in his nature from which his genius could develop. Only from this element can his troubles and fears be understood.

In all that he did, Durer felt himself to be under the directing power of God. In a letter written from Venice, Durer says that he will return to Germany "... when God helps (him) home."15 In his diary he mentions he will accomplish a task only "... if God will."16

13 Waetzoldt, loc. cit., p. 167.
15 Conway, loc. cit., p. 152.
16 ibid.
For Dürer the problem of his salvation was increasing in urgency as he approached his fiftieth birthday in 1519. Since he had an intense fear that he was losing his sight and skill, Dürer sought more and more the method and way of salvation, and, as he questioned, he grew dissatisfied with his old faith. He had to formulate a new scheme for the safety of his soul. The field on which the battle of Dürer's struggling and tormented soul was fought became his workshop.

It is in his art that Dürer expresses his joy and fears. Because of his conception of religion and of the ultimate aim of existence, Dürer could never wholly satisfy himself. He believed "...a work of art is well pleasing to God." Dürer also knew that "God grants great power to artistic men," therefore, he could "...never rid himself of feeling he had been 'called'." Obsessed by the fear of not achieving, Dürer felt he would be unable to answer for his works at the Last Judgment. If he were not to soon create a monumental work, he was certain he would be damned to Hell.

On January 12, 1519, the Emperor Maximilian died. He had been a kindly and generous employer as well as a friend for Dürer. To Dürer, his death seemed to emphasize even further his own approaching day of

18 Conway, loc. cit., p. XVI.
19 Conway, loc. cit., p. 152.
20 Westzold, loc. cit., p. 106.
reckoning. Durer's dearest friend, Willibald Pirckheimer noted in a
text written two weeks after the emperor's death that Durer was "... in bad shape." 21

Durer's distress during this period was spiritual; clearly it was economical or physical. In the spring and summer, 1519, he betrayed a nervous restlessness which appears to bear out his friend's concern. A hardworking economical man, Durer made plans in the spring of 1519, to leave his home in Nuremberg for England and Spain, yet ultimately he went to Switzerland on an impractical, futile trip.

When Durer had returned from his journey, young Jan Van Scorel came to Nuremberg. Scorel had hoped to take advantage of Durer's artistic advice and instruction; however, Scorel found him so preoccupied with the teachings by which Luther had begun to stir the world that he pretended to go to other parts of Germany.

By 1520, however, Durer could look back and speak of Luther as the man who had brought him out of great distress: the man whose portrait he wished to draw as a lasting memorial if they ever met. Although only faint echoes of Durer's own spiritual crisis are caught, the problems and uncertainties of salvation which had haunted him appear to have been solved through the Gospels which offered him a rock of faith that rose firmly when revealed by Luther.

That more is healed by faith is the assurance proclaimed in Luther's The Freedom of Christian Man, published in 1520—the year of Durer's own healing. Apparently Durer found in Luther's achievements in religion what he had sought in art—final clarification and liberation.

It was for this he had gone to Italy, had searched through books, and had questioned men. For this, he had meditated and racked his brains until he stood on the borders of depression.

The strength of Dürer's faith in Luther is evident in the following passage taken from his diary:

...he (Luther) had suffered for the truth of Christ and because he rebuked the un-Christian Papacy, which strives with its heavy load of human laws against the redemption of Christ. And if he has suffered it is that we may again be robbed and stripped of the fruit of our blood and sweat, that the same may be shamefully and scandalously squandered by idle-going folk, while the poor and the sick therefore die of hunger. But this is above all most grievous to me, that, maybe, God will suffer us to remain still longer under their false, blind doctrine, invented and drawn up by the man above whom they call Fathers, by whom also the precious Word of God is in many places wrongly expanded or utterly ignored...

Clearly Dürer's conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism is reflected in his art. Profoundly inspired by Lutheranism, Dürer's style, after 1520, changed from his earlier splendor and freedom to a strongly impassioned austerity where he attained a monumental grandeur. Increasingly his interest appeared to center upon religious subjects of a strictly evangelical nature; for Dürer seemed to feel this was his duty toward German art and Protestant subjects. Now Dürer, the man who had done more than anyone else to familiarize the Northern world with the true spirit of pagan antiquity, (figs. 1, 2) almost wholly abandoned secular subject matter except for scientific illustrations, traveler's records, and portraiture. (figs. 3, 4) "The lyrical and visionary

1
Musical Satyr and Nymph with Baby

2
Apollo and Diana
Head of a Walrus
Antwerp Harbor
element was suppressed in favor of a scriptural virility which ultimately tolerated only the apostles, the Evangelists, and the Passion of Christ.\(^\text{23}\)

As evidence of Durer's change of style, one may compare two of his drawings. *Madonna with a Multitude of Animals* (fig. 5) executed about 1503, is a meticulously detailed, elaborated drawing. Surrounded by animals and exotic vegetation, the richly draped Virgin is dwarfed by the vast German landscape. However, in *The Last Supper* (fig. 6), a drawing of 1523, the space is without adornment; Durer cuts away the distracting detail of everyday reality. The simple draperies and reduced table surface appear to enhance the monumentality of the figures.

To defend the Lutheran doctrine (as well as the honor of his station) against radicals and fanatics, Durer, infused with a new religious fervor, entered the fray with pictures and written word.

During the time of disorder in Nuremberg, Durer had in his workshop an uncompleted altarpiece. The original project had been the Virgin with eight saints in the center panel, St. Phillip on the right wing, and St. James the Lesser on the left wing; however, it failed to materialize, apparently due to the political and religious conditions in Nuremberg. As the city moved rapidly toward Lutheranism under the guidance of liberal theologians, humanists, and the overwhelming majority of the particulars, the moment certainly not suspicious for the dedication of a "sacra conversazione."

Apparently Durer, therefore, had little intention of ever completing the altar piece when in the spring of 1523. Nuremberg led the way.

\(^{23}\)Rosenkly, loc. cit., p. 199.
Madonna with a Multitude of Animals
The Last Supper
in Germany in declaring for Luther and in officially giving "leave to the Pope." 24

Durer, never wavering in his loyalty to Luther and staunchly opposed to the demagogic dialects of the Nuremberg radicals, decided to use those mighty figures, were to have flanked a picture, now became meaningless as messengers of what he believed to be the truth.

"With the hope that they would serve as true models for human conduct..." 25 and as a confession of faith, Durer chose to represent on the panels four apostles. Since the earliest beginnings of monumental Christian art, the apostles had been regarded as heroes, preachers, and heralds of things to come; 26 therefore Durer was remaining in the old tradition by making those heroes of Christianity speak once more. When contemplating the "sacra conversazione" Durer had chosen to use St. Phillip on one of the wings, because he felt the scale of an earlier engraving he had done of the saint transcended the limitations of a small print. (fig. 3).

Having discarded the idea for the altarpiece, Durer found he would also need to change the identity of St. Phillip for Phillip had left no written records which would support the Reformation movement. St. Paul, however, was so universally accepted as the spiritual father of Protestantism that Protestants were called Paulines by friend and foe alike.

24 Panofsky, loc. cit., p. 234.
26 Metzoldt, loc. cit., p. 169.
St. Phillip
The St. Phillip, therefore, was transformed by Durer into a St. Paul. The bushy beard with its short, square beard gave way to the traditional type of Paul, a bald skull, flowing beard, and aquiline nose. The cross staff of St. Phillip was replaced by the sword of Paul. Like the St. Phillip, St. James the Lesser, who was to have filled the left panel originally, had no special significance for the Lutheran reform movement. The intended image of St. James, therefore, became St. John the Evangelist. Possibly Durer chose St. John because he was the favorite evangelist of Luther himself. Probably Durer was also familiar with one of the earliest and most ardent monastic supporters of Luther, Friar Heinrich von Kotterbach, who had opened his Praxis Practiciert aus der heylger Bibel in 1523 calling upon St. Paul and St. John the Evangelist as witness for Luther's cause.

Although Durer had planned in his "sacra conversaziones" to use only one figure in each panel, he now conceived the idea of crowding four figures into his composition. For the age of Durer, the number four was the basis of an orderly universe in balance; there were four seasons, four races of man, four compass points, and four mystical rivers in Paradise. Though the order associated with the number four and through the writings of four apostles Durer believed he could further reinforce his appeal for the observance of reason and moderation in troubled Nuremberg.

The two saints chosen by Durer to complete his composition were St. Peter and St. Mark. Holding the golden keys, St. Peter is, of course, representative of the Roman Catholic Church. For Durer, the Gospel of

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St. Mark was particularly powerful; he felt it "...was as live as if it had hands and feet." This was the power Durer transmitted into the glowing features of his St. Mark and into the substance of the resultant painting, The Four Apostles.

Although the four apostles are all holy men conveying the same message with respect to the problems of the day, they are different in character and, from the point of view of a conservative Lutheran, in human and religious merit. Durer wanted to insure that The Four Apostles would be interpreted in a specific way that the message of the apostles would be clearly understood.

Therefore, to each panel, he affixed a strip or tablet with a lengthy inscription. The text of the inscriptions began with Durer's own prefatory warning to the secular powers:

All worldly rulers in these dangerous times should give good heed that they receiveth not human misguidance for the Word of God, for God will have nothing added to His Word nor taken from it. Hear therefore these four excellent men, Peter, John, Paul, and Mark, their warning....

Durer then proceeded to quote pertinent passages from the writings of the four holy men portrayed. They can be heard inveighing the powerful German of Luther's Septemberbibel against "false prophets," "dannable

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29 Panofsky, loc. cit., p. 234.
30 Russell, loc. cit., p. 159.
heresies, "31 and those who "believe every spirit;" 32 against the sinners "having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof;" 33 and against the "scribes who love to do in long clothing and love salutations in the market places." 34 Perhaps the passages sound anti-sectarian rather than anti-Catholic; nevertheless, they were meant to castigate radicals and papists alike.

Rejecting the views of illegitimate followers, the passages serve to chastise the rebels; however, the positive content of the inscription also breathes the spirit of Lutheranism. There is, first, an emphasis on Christ as God Incarnate, revealing Durer's faith in the Lord "... who has achieved our salvation." 35 Also apparent in the inscription is the unshakable Lutheran attitude toward the holy Scriptures as the "... holy, pure Gospel." 36 Thus, The Four Apostles have to do with the unperverted word of God prophesying that the false teaching will be separated from the true.

The most complete, thorough investigation of the inscription has been made by Carl Neumann. 37 He draws attention to the disharmony between the monumental attitude of the figures and the calligraphic flourishes of the inscriptions. Unlike Durer's portraits, 38 this text  

31 II Peter 2:1-3.
33 II Tim. 3:1-9.
34 Mark 12:38-40.
35 Waetzoldt, loc. cit., p. 169.
36 Waetzoldt, loc. cit.
37 Waetzoldt, loc. cit., p. 172.
38 Ranofsky, loc. cit., Portrait of Ulrich Varnbüler and Portrait of Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (Fig. 300, 301).
is not inserted in the form of an ornament the area of the painting. Rather, it is disproportionately small and confused; it appears under the feet of the four men. The lettering certainly is not suited to the style of the draperies by a choice of monumental roman letters, for it is the small "Frankfurter" or Gothic script.39

Due to the choice of lettering, Durer seems to force his audience to come closer to read the message conveyed by the painting. The panels were intended for the low-ceiling room of the Rathaus or town hall of Nuremberg where the city treasurers worked. This was a room in which decisions vital to the future of the community were made. Surely the governing regents must have felt the impressive effect of the panels and their inscription as they worked; for against their dark background, in narrow frames, the four larger than lifesize figures have a physical power and intellectual significance that overflows the edges.

The inscriptions, which add to the eloquence of these figures, were written in Durer's workshop by a professional calligrapher, Johann Neudorffer. In latter life, Neudorffer wrote a series of short biographies of Nuremberg artists. In his book, he writes that The Four Apostles represented "...properly speaking, a sanguine, a choleric, a phlegmatic, and a melancholic,"40 the four humors medieval man considered responsible for one's health and disposition. It has been argued that a great artist such as Durer would never have used four holy figures as an excuse for portraying the four temperaments; nevertheless, it is surely impossible to totally discard this statement of a man who had worked so closely with Durer.

39Stadtsoldat, loc. cit.
40Panofsky, loc. cit., p. 234.
Perhaps Durer did the opposite of what some critics argue by using the theory of the four temperaments, one fundamental importance for him and his age and no longer be stressed, for the characterization of four holy men. The theory of the four temperaments of humor implied a difference in physical and psychological qualities and also a hierarchy of values. Fortunately enough is known of the physical and psychological criteria of the four humors and about their associations with the four seasons, four times of day, and four ages of man to tell which temperament belongs to each man.

It appears that the figures of Paul and John, dominant from a compositional point of view, are also representatives of the noblest temperaments. St. John, whom Christ loved, clearly is representative of the sanguine.

Durer portrays St. John as a young man of about twenty-five. His ruddy complexion, composed and serious, yet gentle and kindly, indicates the presence of the sanguine humor; contemporaries of Durer considered the sanguine the most balanced and desirable temperament, and some felt it had been the innocent condition of man before the Fall. Harmonious with the mildness of the somewhat bowed spiritualized, blonde young head of St. John is the muted vermillion of his cloak lined in yellow that falls in powerful folds over his relaxed posture.

While St. John stands relaxed, St. Paul in contrast, is rigid. Represented as a man between fifty and sixty, he is domineering and austere. Paul's gleaming eye looks outward, a direction accentuated formally by a white spot on his bald skull. The cold white of his cloak is in opposition to the warm red of St. John's dress just as his temperament stands in opposition to the sanguine.
Given to St. Paul is the dusky face mentioned repeatedly as a symptom of sanguine biles, thus identifying his temperament as the melancholic. Hero of a new creed, Paul was perhaps chosen to be melancholic since melancholy was also the significant sign of a new human type called genius.

Against these two extremes of attitude are those which by comparison, are deficient either in fervor or poise; the patient resignation of Peter and the fanaticism of Mark. St. Mark, a man of middle age, had greenish skin, gnashing teeth, and rolling eyes, which characterize him as the choleric. Clutching a scroll of paper, Mark is garbed in dark blue sinking him into the black background. He is the perfect embodiment of the workman whose spirit has been stirred; his eyes seem to flash sideways as if on guard against unseen dangers.

Finally, the temperament of the phlegmatic is indicated by St. Peter, the oldest of the holy group; he has a pallid, flushy, and tired countenance with downcast eyes. Holding the golden keys to symbolic of papal authority, Peter is the least prominent of the figures. He appears to yield homage to the open Bible held by St. John, the youngest of the four men. The passage upon which St. Peter concentrates is the opening lines of St. John's Gospel in the Lutheran translation. Interestingly Durer associates the phlegmatic, the temperament suggesting sluggishness, with Catholicism and associates the sanguine, the temperament suggesting new hope, with Lutheranism.

In addition to the theory of the four humors, the medieval contrast between "vita contemplativa" and "vita activa" is apparently embodied in the two pairs of men shown in the panels. St. Peter and St. John are concerned with the study of the divine truths as manifested in the scriptures. St. Paul and St. Mark, however, are concerned with the
defense of these truths against disbelievers, scoffers, and those who
would lead men astray.

The reading and the fortification of belief through reading, the
"vita contemplativa", is emphasized as strongly as the threat of the
sword, the "vita activa." It is evident that these men are not to be
trifled with "...no more than Luther himself who did not hesitate to
advocate resort to the sword when the Word was not enough."41 Perhaps
one can even see in Durer's painting four aspects of Luther himself.
The man of the Bible is represented by John; the thinker, by Peter; the
leader, by Paul; and the fighter, by Mark.

Although one can further interpret the painting The Four Apostles
in numerous ways drawing attention to the differences in ages, expression,
and character of the apostles and to symbolic interpretations of the number
four, it is definitely clear that each figure exemplifies human nature at
the height of its powers and religious faith at the height of its assurance
and intensity. Perfect youth and dignified virility both possess a gentle,
yet unshakable devotion and stern, yet self-possessed strength.

Perhaps most would agree, therefore, that Durer tries in The Four
Apostles to simply reaffirm the unity of all men, whether Catholic or
Protestant, in an era of chaos; for the four humors were considered to
be in perfect balance only when fused together. As the cardinal points
of a compass, therefore, the unity of mankind encircles "...the Deity
who is at the invisible center of this 'triptych.'"42

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41Haetschelt, loc. cit., p. 169.
42H.W. Janson, History of Art (New York and Englewood Cliffs:
Few years after the completion of The Four Apostles, Albrecht Durer died. He had hoped to initiate a Protestant art in Germany as grand as the Catholic art in Italy. Due to the spiritual leaders of the Reformation who looked upon such notions with indifference and hostility, his desire remained unfulfilled. Nevertheless, Durer continued to believe that "...only through painting have men learned to comprehend the vastness of the earth, and seas, and stars." Fortunately German art lived after Durer to assume the heritage he bequeathed to it.

Not only a wealth of pictorial motives, technical processes, and theoretical ideas were given to art by Durer, but also something far greater and more important for the legacy of Albrecht Durer was primarily a moral. Due to Durer, German art once more became a living idea, allying itself with a society that was breaking away from the old church and its powers of civilization.

It was Durer himself who created an ideal of strength and zeal in the Reformation struggle with his four apostles. The immobile dignity of these figures placed in an undefined, shallow space and animated only by vigor of expression cannot be viewed from a merely aesthetic standpoint; it demands consideration in light of Durer’s own personality and the spirit of the day.

In an era when a thousand forces – political, ecclesiastical, and social were converging, The Four Apostles stands out the parting of the ways. When the whole existence was saturated with the religious impulse,

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The Four Apostles has a peculiar pathos, the manifestation of an inner strength which attained the goal in the face of resistance and of a lasting solidarity which remained when all around beliefs were being dissolved into waver ing forms.
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