

## Martin Luther, Faith, and the Reformation of the Church

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The journey to reformation began when Martin Luther wrote the *95 Theses* in 1517. Forged in rage, this document laid the foundation for the ever changing and developing opinions and beliefs of Luther. During his preparation for the Leipzig debate in 1519, Luther's opinions grew to be more radical. Thus, the year 1520 was monumental for Martin Luther. He published three of his most important treatises that year, including *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Accompanying the treatise is a dedicatory letter addressed to Pope Leo X. In it, Luther is kind towards Pope Leo, whom he believes is being misled by those around him. In so doing, Luther is actively trying to gain his trust and convince him to follow his lead in reforming the Catholic Church. At the same time, the language of the letter is so inflammatory and the ideas of the treatise so revolutionary that there was never any real possibility that Pope Leo X would accept Luther's offer.

At first glance, the letter to Pope Leo X almost does not register as being written by Martin Luther, for he addresses Pope Leo X in high regards. It is unclear if Luther is genuine in his praises as this letter is the product of the papal nuncio Karl Miltitz's and the Augustinian friars' encouraging Luther to "address the pope a disclaimer of personal abusiveness and a statement of faith"<sup>1</sup> as a form of mediation. What is clear, though, is that Luther has an agenda: he hopes to gain Pope Leo's trust so that he may reform the Catholic church. Luther attempts to draw a distinction between the Roman See and the individual pontiff who occupies its seat, Pope Leo. He claims that he has not said horrid things about Pope Leo, that "to my knowledge, [I have] spoken only good and honorable words concerning you whenever I have thought of you."<sup>2</sup> All of this builds up to Luther asking, or in his words begging, to be given a hearing after he has proven himself with this letter, stating again that he has no ill will towards Pope Leo and adding that he has "no quarrel with any man concerning his morals but only concerning the word of truth."<sup>3</sup> Luther's demeanor changes when he writes that Rome is "more corrupt than any Babylon or Sodom ever was."<sup>4</sup> He continues stating how angry he is over the fact that "good Christians are mocked in your name and under the cloak of the Roman church"<sup>5</sup> and insists that he "will continue to resist your see as long as the spirits of faith lives in me."<sup>6</sup> Then Luther regains his composure and clarifies that he places no blame on Pope Leo himself for the current state of the church, but adds biblical examples to illustrate that Pope Leo is a lamb sitting amongst wolves.<sup>7</sup> Luther goes on to explain that it seems that his power is limited because even if Pope Leo were to begin the process of reformation, the consequences could potentially be deadly.<sup>8</sup> Luther tries to convince

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1977), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. and trans. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 42-85 at 44.

<sup>3</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 46.

Pope Leo that he is telling him the truth because he wishes him well.<sup>9</sup> Luther ends his letter to Pope Leo X by giving Pope Leo a gift by dedicating the treatise of *The Freedom of a Christian* to him. *And what a gift it was!*

In the treatise itself, which Luther proceeded to dedicate to the pontiff, Luther first defines the tensions involved with being a Christian. Then he expounds upon the basic components of the Christian faith and what it requires of us, so that people can gain the benefits of being a Christian. *On the Freedom of a Christian* is thus a ‘how to’ guide on being a Christian the ‘correct’ way while at the same time pointing out the faults and dangers inherent in the Catholic church’s teachings. Luther’s purpose in writing this was to prove to Pope Leo X that he is qualified to lead the reformation of the Catholic Church. Luther’s arguments towards the faults of the church were supported by scripture and his solutions were also supported by scripture, which in his opinion made his arguments and solutions valid, at least according to Luther’s interpretation. As might be expected, however, the pontiff and other high Catholic clergy held rather different views from Luther’s.

*On the Freedom of a Christian* begins with Luther stating how Christianity has been seen as an easy faith to embrace, though he quickly disregards this claim by stating that they “have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith.”<sup>10</sup> To simplify the process, Luther presents two bold propositions in strong tension that concern the freedom and the bondage of the Christian:

(1) “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none”; and

(2) “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>11</sup>

Following the Apostle Paul, Luther recognizes the mystery involved here, namely, in that both propositions seem contradictory to each other, and yet, at the same time, he asserts, “If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve out purpose beautifully.”<sup>12</sup> Luther then goes on from there to do just that.

The first point that Luther explains is the man is composed of two sides, a spiritual side and a bodily side, which he further explains as the inner man and outer man. Luther claims that “no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude,”<sup>13</sup> so works and any other physical activities such as meditation, praying, fasting, and etc. cannot help gain justification. According to Luther, there is only two things that a Christian needs, namely, Christ and the Word of God which, according to Luther, is “rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of Life.”<sup>14</sup>

One common emphasis that appears in some, if not all, works by Martin Luther is the importance of faith. Faith helps a Christian gain righteousness and freedom. So where can faith be found? According to Luther, faith is received through scripture, which is divided into the

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<sup>9</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 54.

commandments and the promises. The commandments are the whole of the Old Testament. The commandments teach man what is good and what man ought to do, and explain how to satisfy the law, for the law has to be satisfied (though Luther concludes in the end that the law can only condemn us). The promises are found in the New Testament, which declares the glory of God, that through Him “has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything and whoever does not have faith will have nothing.”<sup>15</sup> The commandments and the promises are interconnected, for the promises that God has given are the result of the commandments. The promises of God are thus to a Christian man: faith suffices for everything and there is no need for works for justification. This connects to what Luther calls the first power of faith, which is that one does not need the law or works for justification and salvation.

Luther goes on to talk about the Christian “who does not believe,”<sup>16</sup> in short the individual who does not believe in the Word of God and/or in Christ. Luther believes that those who do not believe are by nature deceived. Non-believers, according to Luther, are a servant to all, while everything that a non-believer does is inherently evil because they do things for their own advantage. Luther believes that the reason why non-believers are evil stems from human nature following the Fall, which can only be corrected through faith in Christ.

The benefits of being a believer of Jesus Christ include truth, righteousness, and uniting the soul to Christ. Luther compares uniting the soul to Christ with marriage, in that both become one flesh as Christ and his bride must share all of the things that are their own. In doing this, Christ shares the weight of sins, death, and hell that his believer possesses and in turn the believer is freed from sins, death, and hell and is granted righteousness, life, and salvation.

Luther believes that all Christians receive the priesthood through faith, which allows them to be worthy enough to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach the things that are of God. Above all, Luther believes that helping one’s fellow man is a Christian’s responsibility, one that is passed down to us from Jesus Christ as we model our lives after him. Luther then criticizes the Catholic Church by questioning why there should be a difference in power and authority between a priest and the laymen when scripture does not support such a claim. He further criticizes the Roman Church with the fact that the God calls ministers to serve others and teach them the teachings of Christ and the freedom that comes with being a believer, precisely the opposite of what the clergy of his day were doing.

Along with the priesthood, according to Luther, Christians are a part of God’s kingdom. Luther quotes 1 Peter 2:9: “You are a chosen race, God’s own people, a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”<sup>17</sup> But being a part of the priestly kingdom does not spare Christians of suffering; in fact, Luther believes that “the more Christian a man is, the more evils, sufferings, and deaths he must endure.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 63

Luther then turns his attention to the outward man, explaining why good works are commanded even though faith does everything. The first part of Luther's treatises explains that a "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all." This is accomplished through faith. The second part explains that "a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." This is covered by the outward man and good works that result from his faith. This is where the real work begins: "Here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline."<sup>19</sup> In doing this the person is weakening their outer self so that they can be taken over by the spirit so that it will conform to the inner man and thus, the inner man rejoices for it can reap the benefits. The key point of this though is that the person has to do this purely out of wanting to please God, for if it is done in a wanting an advantage way then it is invalid.

Though faith and good works are intertwined so that one cannot be done without the other, they both don't have the same value. Without faith Luther believes that those works no longer have positive value; instead they are done out of evil or as a result of deception. The exception to this is if the person first becomes a believer and a Christian, for a believer does good works not because of the good works per se, but rather, because they believe. Therefore, a non-believer who does good works, is not a good person, because since s/he is a non-believer, his/her intentions cannot be pure and good because they are deceived and are deceiving others. Again, the thing that makes a person evil is not their evil works, but their human nature along with the fact that they lack faith.

This treatise in particular was the cause of a lot of commotion, especially among the peasants who read it or else had it read to them. Luther later claimed that the peasants had misinterpreted what he meant by a Christian being "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." Peasants' daily life consisted of laboring for their lords, and though in turn they were able to live, they in fact had little control over their lives. So, a peasant reading or hearing *On the Freedom of a Christian* would not have truly understood what Luther actually meant in his distinction between spiritual liberty and earthly freedom.

In the end, the fault of the Peasants' Revolt of 1525 could not be laid at a single individual's doorstep because several factors ultimately led to the revolt, with the first factor being the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the system in which all of the clergy including priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope were seen as being the highest in authority. This system demands that there be a laity over which the ecclesiastical elites exercise control. Though the clergy did not have direct control over the peasants in terms of the tasks they performed every day, they did have control over the peasant's religious life. For example, the clergy encouraged peasants to give up their hard-earned money as offerings and to buy indulgences so that they could gain entrance into heaven or at least shorten their sentence in purgatory. Along with the peasants' other demands outlined in their famous *Twelve Articles*, this control may have led the peasants to denounce the church and in turn help lead to the revolt.

A second factor, of course, was Martin Luther and his writings, especially *On the Freedom of a Christian*. In the treatise, Luther addresses all Christians as equals, "be they princes or

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<sup>19</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, 67.

commoners, and by insisting on their freedom, he broke with social deference.”<sup>20</sup> This undermined the power structure between the peasants and the elite nobility. Luther then extended this to religious freedom by stating that “everyone can pass a safe judgement on all works and laws and make a trustworthy distinction between them and know who are the blind and ignorant pastors and who are the good and true”<sup>21</sup> Lastly, Luther trusted that people would understand the treatise in the same way that he did, that in Christ the inner man is free and the outer man is dutiful, not vice versa. He could be called naïve because of this or just plain ignorant to the fact that the peasants were not educated in the way that he was.

In conclusion, it is evident that Luther had the people’s best interest in mind and was very adamant about this. In the letter to Pope Leo X, Luther states multiple times that he has no ill will towards Pope Leo and claims to believe that Pope Leo has no control over the current state of the church, but does this in a contradictory way and then goes on to explain that the church stands in grave need of reform, which in itself implies that the church leaders have not been doing their jobs. The treatise itself is essentially a guide on how to be a Christian the correct way, which in turn is a guide for how the church should be reformed. His primary motive is to try to convince the pontiff and higher Catholic clergy that they should follow his lead in reforming the church because he understands through scripture what is wrong with it and how its erroneous practices can best be corrected.

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<sup>20</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2016), 156.

<sup>21</sup>Luther, *On the Freedom of the Christian*, quoted in Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, 168.