

**Calling to the German Nobility:
Why the Church Needs Reforming**
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On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, thus, ushering in the first step of the Protestant Reformation. Three years later, in 1520, having abandoned hope of reform by the clergy, he penned *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom* as a means by which to try to reform the Catholic Church with the help of the nobility of Germany. From 1517 to 1520 was an important time: Luther was summoned to appeal to the pope, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian died and Charles V was elected in his stead, Luther debated with Eck in Leipzig, and then Luther was excommunicated from the church. Because the nobility of Germany had more influence than Luther did in the church he penned his *Appeal* to explain to them why the reformation needed to happen and how it would benefit them and the country. He had tried to do this through the clergy before, but they seen him as a heretic. In taking such radical action, Luther is concerned not only for his own soul, but those of his parishioners as well. He believes that the Catholic church is not looking out for them because it has become corrupted. Luther also needs the help of the nobles so that Germany will not end in financial ruin. Through his strong belief in God and his understanding and interpretation of the scripture, and understanding of the business of the church, Luther tries to convince the nobles to stand up and push for reform.

Luther begins telling the nobles, “All classes in Christendom, particularly in Germany, are now oppressed by distress and affliction, and this has stirred not only me but everyman to cry out anxiously for help.”¹ This had come to light three years prior when Pope Leo X and Albrecht of Mainz decided to sell indulgences to pay for St. Peter’s Basilica at Rome in the archdiocese of Mag-de-burg. According to Luther, these indulgences were fake. “The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by cannon law.”² Thus he began to look into the dealings of the church and ultimately called for reform. In *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics*, John M. Owen observes, “The Church was a major landholder and her princes (i.e., bishops), including the Pope, held temporal power over specified territories. The Church was not under the authority of secular princes and resisted, usually successfully, attempts by the latter to tax them.”³ Luther hints at this when he explains, “It came to pass in former times that good princes, Emperors Frederick I and II, and many other German emperors, were shamelessly trodden underfoot and oppressed by the popes whom all the

¹ Martin Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom*, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962) 403-485 at 405.

² Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 490.

³ John M. Owen, “Church and State 1500-1700,” in *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010*, by John M. Owen IV (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 79-121 at 89.

world feared.”⁴ The nobility of Germany created and enforced the law, and under canon law any member of the clergy was exempt from all secular laws and taxes imposed by the German nobility. Luther asks, “What is the purpose of Romanist writers who make laws by which they exempt themselves from the secular Christian authorities?”⁵ By appealing to the power struggles held between the clergy and the nobility Luther attempts to convince the nobles to call for reform, both in how the church is run and also of its teachings.

In his *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality*, Luther identifies three “walls” the Romanists have instilled to protect them from reform. The first wall he brings to light the idea that the clergy call themselves the religious class, while all others, including royals are members of the secular class. Owen reinforces this when he calls the bishops and cardinals princes of the church. Luther, though, insists that “all Christians whatsoever really and truly belong to the religious class.” He also argues that all Christians are equally priests as well.⁶ Thus, he implies that the nobility should have the same authority and power as members of the clergy and papacy. Roland Bainton, in his book entitled, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, interoperates that the first wall puts “spiritual power above the temporal” and thus the church should not have the political power that it was exercising in Luther’s day.⁷ He goes on to give an example that if a member of the clergy murdered someone, they would typically be absolved and go unpunished, while if a peasant did this they would be punished to the full extent of the secular law. Thus, the argument was made, why should only members of the clergy be exempt when all Christians are priests? Or why should the clergy be exempt at all since their status is no different from the laity?

Luther believes that the office of the clergy is to preach the word of God and officiate sacraments while that of the seculars is to protect the righteous and punish evildoers. The clergy should have no more power than those of the secular class. The clergy play a different role, but they are not exempt from the laws and punishments created by the seculars. This is also where Luther states his doctrine of the priesthood of the believer: “our baptism consecrates us all without exception, and makes us all priests.”⁸ To Luther everyone was deemed a priest because “our baptism consecrates us all without exception and makes us all priests.”⁹ In the first days of the Catholic Church the laymen would choose who among them would become priests and bishops. Thus, if they were to be removed from their position they went back to be a layman, whereas now they remained a priest or bishop for life. To Luther no one should put themselves on a higher pedestal based on their religious standing.

The second wall for Luther is that “the Romanists profess to be the only interpreters of scripture, even though they never learn anything contained in it their lives long.”¹⁰ They claim

⁴ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 405.

⁵ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 410

⁶ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 407.

⁷ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 119.

⁸ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 408.

⁹ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 408.

¹⁰ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 412.

powers awarded to the pope and insist that as pope he cannot err, but they never use scripture to back up their claims. Luther asks the question, “Who could enlighten Christian people if the Pope erred?” His answer is that everyone should be able to do so, for all Christians are priests and thus can interpret the scripture.¹¹ He says the reason they could not trust the pope’s interpretation is because he did not have true faith like other, good Christians. Thus, he asks, “why then should we not distinguish what accords or does not accord with the faith quite as well as an unbelieving Pope?”¹² In other words, he asks the nobility, why should you not be allowed to interpret scripture? You are just as knowledgeable. He ends by saying, “Hence it is the duty of every Christian to accept the implications of the faith, understand and defend it, and denounce everything false.” To date the princes either have not understood this as their responsibility or they have been prevented from doing so by the papacy and canon law.¹³

The third wall according to Luther is that the pope is the only one who can summon a church council. Luther argues that according to scripture this is not how it is supposed to be, for St. Peter was not one to call the first council of the church but the apostles and elders; this is backed up by the Bible in Acts 15:22 which states, “Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose delegates from among themselves to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.”¹⁴ The council was not selected by St. Peter but by the church, and so Luther makes the point that the pope does not have the authority to be the only one to hold a council, and that if the nobles want a reformation in the church they should push for a council to be convened. Bainton states, “Here again the priesthood of all believers gave the right to anyone in an emergency, but peculiarly to the civil power because of its strategic position.”¹⁵ Luther also recalls how the council of Nicaea was not called by the pope, but by the Emperor Constantine. He urges the German nobility, “No one is able to do this as the secular authorities, especially since they are also fellow Christians, fellow priests, similarly religious, and of similar authority in all respects,” so they must act quickly on calling for reform.¹⁶ Luther notes as well that the church at present is much like a town on fire. Are we going to stand aside and let it burn, he asks, because we do not have the mayor’s authority to put it out? Or are we going to act right away and put it out before it gets worse? Before he goes to speak on what needs to be brought up at the council he tells the reader, “The church has no authority except to promote the greater good. Hence if the Pope should exercise his authority to prevent a free council, and so hinder the reform of the church, we ought to pay no regard to him or his authority.”¹⁷ Thus the pope and his minions collectively are the antichrist and share nothing in common with Jesus except in name. Indeed, “if an authority does anything against Christ, it is due to the power of the antichrist and of the devil, even if that authority makes it rain and hail miracles and plagues.”¹⁸

¹¹ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 413.

¹² Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 414.

¹³ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 414-415.

¹⁴ Acts 15:22 (NJB).

¹⁵ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 119.

¹⁶ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 416.

¹⁷ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 416.

¹⁸ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 417.

Next Luther creates a list of the things that need to be reformed in the church. The first is that the pope should not call himself the Vicar of Christ. He says that the pope acts and lives like he is the King of Kings and not a humble servant, and that the Romanists “declare him Lord of the earth.”¹⁹ This is not who the pope should be; he should be Christ-like, not Christ. If the pope continues in this way, then soon Germans will be forced to bow down to him and treat him like royalty. The second point Luther makes is that the papacy is gaining control of monasteries, parishes, institutions and benefices by creating new cardinals to oversee their properties and incomes. He says that, because of this, Italy is distraught and now the pope is bringing this to Germany. He believes this could possibly be the ruin of Germany because the monasteries are going bankrupt trying to keep the cardinals in Rome. According to Luther the Cardinals believe that “the drunken Germans will not understand what the game is, till not a single bishopric . . . not a cent or farthing, is left for them.”²⁰ Luther suggests that the best way to deal with this problem is to create far fewer cardinals and award them fixed incomes; if the pope insists on doing otherwise, he should pay the cardinals from his own resources. Instead of acting as wealthy property owners, the clergy should be missionaries of God, doing what is best for the people and the church. By knowingly allowing these organizations to pay a majority of their income to Rome and to the cardinals overseeing them, thus preventing them from growing and serving their community, the clergy is deemed guilty then of misplaced priorities.

The third thing that must be changed is that the pope employs too many people in all throughout Europe. Luther estimates that pope employs around 3,000 secretaries along with countless other employees. Along with this the papacy is taxing Germany heavily: “some estimate that more than 300,000 guilders go annually from Germany to Rome” while Germany receives nothing good in return.²¹ Years prior the German nobility gave the pope permission to take half of the first year’s income of any bishop, to help pay for the war against the Turks. This though got abused and now is the full year’s income and is considered a tax paid to Rome. The Romanists believe that the Germans are fools and will never catch on to their scheming plans. Luther states that the Germans must protect their country. Indeed, “the German bishops and princes ought not to allow their country and people to be so pitiably harassed and impoverished without any regard for justice”; instead, they should make a law stating that annates are either suspended or abolished since Rome has no right to them.²² The Germans must stand up for themselves and not allow Rome to control them.

Rome takes property and benefices in other ways as well. The first is “if anyone possessing a “free” living [i.e., an unattached benefice] should die in Rome or on his way there, that living [by default] becomes the property in perpetuity of the Romish . . . papacy.”²³ This would be beneficial to Rome because the journey there is long and potentially dangerous. Death would be common on this journey and thus Rome could gain the property easily. Secondly, if

¹⁹ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 419.

²⁰ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 419.

²¹ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 421.

²² Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 422.

²³ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 423.

anyone works for a cardinal or the pope and has a benefice, or anyone who has a benefice and then decides to go work for the pope or a cardinal, the benefice goes to the pope. This Luther states encompasses thousands of people, including many who do not live in Rome. The pope could place someone working for him anywhere the church was found, at this time spread throughout Europe. The third way is that when a dispute is made in Rome over a priest's benefice, the benefice eventually will belong to Rome. Bainton states that "litigation in church courts involving Germans should [have been] . . . tried in Germany under a German primate" not all the way in Rome under a Roman primate.²⁴ Luther says this explains why bishops were now required take an oath to the pope and that this had been Rome's "objective when the Romanists imposed the oath and explains why the very richest bishoprics fall into debt and ruin."²⁵ Thus, when a vacancy occurs in a monastery, but an incumbent still resides, the papacy takes steps to make sure they get the most out of it. First, the pope presents the incumbent with an assistant who then sends the incumbent to Rome; thus the income from the monastery now comes to Rome through the assistant. The second way is when the pope gives a cardinal a well-off monastery or abbey. The cardinal then "drive(s) out the incumbent, take(s) possessions of the properties, and income or install(s) some apostate monk, a truant from the monastery."²⁶ The way this would happen would be the monasteries would close off and spend their time selling trinkets to pilgrims on their way towards Rome. The third and final way is that the pope combines parishes so that one man may oversee them. Under canon law, one person cannot oversee more than one parish at a time. This can also be done Luther says when a parish or bishopric gains an abbey or monastery under the bishops control. Another way Luther states that Rome controls this is by selling or disposing of an abbey or monastery, but then under the terms of sale or disposition ownership or control of the income from the property reverts to the papacy when the new owner dies. The final way is by selling benefices. Luther states that a benefice can be given to one person but when "another applicant who either offers to purchase the same benefice, or makes his claim in consideration of services rendered to the pope," then the pope gives the benefice to the new person.²⁷ This happens so much Luther states that the pope has a building set up just for this and sells the benefices for high fees. This goes a step further in that "one can pay to legally charge interests on loans of any sort. You can get a legal right to goods you have stolen or seized. Here vows are annulled; here monks receive liberty or leave their orders; here marriage is for sale to the clergy; here bastards become legitimate, and any form of dishonor and shame can achieve dignity." Luther thus proves that Rome is not the holy place it claims to be, and that the church is anything but holy and just.²⁸

Lastly Luther lists 27 proposals for improving Christendom. Luther begins, "Firstly, I suggest that every prince, peer, and city should strictly forbid their subjects to pay the annates to

²⁴ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 119.

²⁵ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 425.

²⁶ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 426.

²⁷ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 428.

²⁸ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 429.

Rome, and should do away with them entirely.”²⁹ As previously mentioned, annates were paid to Rome in return for papal appointments. Next, he believes that bishops should not travel to Rome for his or another’s confirmation or pallium. According to the council of Nicaea, a bishop could be confirmed by two of the closest bishops or an archbishop to his diocese. But during this time bishops were going all the way to Rome to be consecrated. If they did not travel, this process would be much quicker and a lot less expensive to the diocese. Also, Luther believes that secular matters should be resolved in the country of origin, namely, Germany, rather than being tried at Rome. This way they can be resolved quicker and under local law rather than in ecclesiastical courts.

Proposals five through eight deals with how the church should have less power. According to Luther, “The Romanists ought to be severely punished for blasphemous misuse of excommunication and of God’s name in support of their robberies.”³⁰ The papacy was using excommunication as a means to get rid of anyone who threatened their power. We know this because within the next year the Papal Bull *Exsurge Domine* excommunicated Luther from the church. Luther also asserts that the pope does not have the power to absolve reserved cases for great sins such as counterfeiting papal bulls. In most cases this can be done by any priest. Selling offices in the church should also be abolished, and the pope should pay these officials from his own income. To Luther all these posts are unneeded and cause a hindrance to worship. Finally, Luther states that bishops should not take an oath to the pope because it imprisons them. “This example of oppression and robbery hinders the bishop from exercising his proper authority and is harmful to the needy souls” if the bishop must follow the popes every order then how can he help his parishioners?”³¹

The next grouping of proposals regard the pope as a king of kings. Luther notes that Christ washed his disciple’s feet and was a servant to everyone on earth. The pope, though, does just the opposite. The Holy Roman Emperor is a servant to the pope. He is obligated to help the pope mount his horse and kisses his feet, just like a servant. The pope needs to become like a servant once again humbling himself and doing what is best for the church. Luther also believes that monasteries should be brought back to their former glory as in the days of the medieval Church. They should return to being schools that teach the bible.

To Luther every Christian is a priest, so we should not be denied confession. He says, “If your superior will not allow you [a member of the monastery] to confess your secret sins to someone of your own choice, nevertheless take them . . . to the brother or sister to whom you prefer.”³² Because all Christians are priests, the clergy should also be allowed to marry. Masses celebrated for the dead need to end, as most priests only do them for the money they receive. Instead monasteries and parishes should reserve one day a year to celebrate one mass for the dead. The majority of church celebrations should also be abolished. Luther concedes, “but, if it is preferred to keep the festivals of Our Lady and of the greater saints, they should all be

²⁹ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 432.

³⁰ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 436.

³¹ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 438.

³² Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 452.

transferred to Sundays, or observed only at morning Mass, after which the whole day should be a working day.”³³ This is because festival days are full of sin in the form drinking, gambling and idleness. Churches created just for pilgrimages should be abolished. To Luther these places are fake, he believes that Bishops only had saints in their region canonized to enlarge its number of pilgrims each year. Luther brings forth the idea of a welfare system in the towns as well. He says, “an overseer or guardian . . . would know all the poor, and would inform the town council or the pastor what they needed” because the Christian way is to help those in need.³⁴ The power to grant dispensations should be destroyed. This relates back to the priesthood of the Christian, in that if the pope can grant these dispensations then so should priest be allowed to. The role of a papal legate should be abolished as well for they “make unrighteousness righteous, dissolve vows, oaths, and agreements, thereby destroying and teaching us to destroy faithfulness and faith.”³⁵

Next Luther believes they should unite with the Bohemian Hussites. This is because they also have been wronged by the church when John Huss was burned in Constantine. Like Luther, Huss was condemned wrongly. Next the emperor should send an embassy of religious bishops and scholars, none of whom work directly under the pope, to see if there is a way peacefully to unite the different sects of their religion. Then they should be allowed to choose a bishop or archbishop, but not have to pay Rome for the position.

Next, he says that universities need to teach more on the scripture and writing by Aristotle on physics, the soul and ethics be disregarded. If a university does not put the Scripture as its most important subject, then to Luther they are doomed to fail. Luther states that he believes we should live more humble lives: no more fancy clothes or foreign spices and jewels that take money away from Germany. Finally, if you wish to join the clerical life you should not join before you are thirty in order to reduce the doubt that this is not your life calling. If you wish to join the ministry, your whole heart should be in it and your love and concern should be for yours and other souls.

Through this letter, Luther has urged the nobles of Germany finally to take a stand against the papacy and call for reform. The Catholic Church has been slowly gaining full control over Germany much as it has done in Italy, according to Luther. Because of this, Germany is on its way to ruin. Luther lists all the means by which the church has taken power and holds more authority than even the emperor. First, he states that they call themselves the religious and every other Christian is of the laity, and second, that the pontiffs are the only ones allowed to interpret scripture. Thirdly, he refutes canon law, according to which only the pope can call a church council. Next, he goes into what needs to be reformed in the Church. The pope needs to become humbler and not live like the king of kings on earth, for in his vows he claims to be the servant of servants, and he must stop proclaiming he is the vicar of Christ. The pope employs too many people and confirms too many cardinals each year, all out of greed and a quest for more power. This should end or the pope should pay all of these people out of his own pocket. Finally, Luther

³³ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 454.

³⁴ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 460.

³⁵ Luther, *An Appeal to the Ruling Class of the German Nationality*, 463.

asserts that the pope has too much control of property and beneficiaries. He places his employees under monasteries and abbeys so that the property automatically becomes property of Rome, he makes clergymen pay their first year's salary to him, and he sells beneficiaries to people with the highest bid along with many other things that go against the church. Luther calls for action with the nobles because if things don't change, soon they will find their lives controlled by the pope, and they will be left with nothing, while their misguided subjects will be doomed to eternal damnation.