
TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

MARTIN LUTHER'S
ROAD TO FREEDOM

A Survey of His Early Life and Teaching



*He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being.
He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death,
and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but
with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering
and death.*¹

Martin Luther wrote these words for his Small Catechism in 1528. He was explaining to his readers the liberating power of Jesus Christ's death on the cross. It is the pivotal sentence in the most influential book that Luther ever wrote.² These words serve as a useful starting point for those wishing to understand the man who shaped and directed the first wave of the Protestant Reformation. If we can obtain insight on what Luther meant by being freed "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil," then we also shall have gained a perspective that will bring his treatise "The Freedom of a Christian" into clearer focus.

A World of Sin, Death, and the Devil

The sixteenth-century world of Martin Luther was dominated by a fear of death that we scarcely can appreciate today. A person had to be prepared for death, for it could strike with very little warning. In the middle of the 1300s, Europe suffered from a cruel and brutal attack of the bubonic plague. According to some estimates, over a third of Europe's population died from this highly contagious disease. The plague did not distinguish between its victims, striking both rich and poor, noble and peasant,

1. Martin Luther, The Small Catechism, in *BC* 355.

2. Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 15.

city-dweller and rural villager. It would visit the continent repeatedly over the next four hundred years, including an outbreak in Luther's own German town of Wittenberg in 1527.³

Even in areas free of the plague, death was hardly a stranger. Infant mortality rates were exceptionally high, to say nothing of the many dangers accompanying women in childbirth. Famine, disease, war, and a poor diet combined to ensure that most people living in Luther's day would not see many years beyond their fortieth birthday.

There is also substantial evidence that the popular piety and official teaching of the church in this time tended to increase the fear of death with an extremely vengeful and judgmental understanding of God. Christ often was pictured in sermons and pamphlets as the judge coming on the rainbow at the end of time (see Matt. 25:31-46).⁴ In this great day of reckoning, he would separate the sheep from the goats according to the good deeds done in earthly life. The message for the average person was clear: Be ready to die—it could happen at any moment!—and give an account of your life to this supreme and severe judge.

Of course, we should be careful to balance this view of a harsh and demanding God with the church's understanding of grace. People were not left helpless and alone in the face of death and the demands of Christ. God's grace was made available to Christians through the sacrament of penance. Basically, going to confession (which was required annually and encouraged frequently) involved three steps. First, a person was required to confess all of his or her known sins. A priest, often with the aid of a confessional manual, attempted to scrutinize the penitent's conscience in order to reveal the depth of sin. This process could

3. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 27–30.

4. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 22.

be burdensome and even perverse. Second, following the confession of sins, the priest would pronounce absolution. Third, the penitent would be asked to do a work of satisfaction that was roughly equivalent to the sins he or she had committed. Having completed penance, a Christian then could go to the Eucharist (or worship service where Holy Communion was served) and receive the body and blood of Christ with a good conscience.

The sacrament of penance was where the church intersected with the daily lives of people in a highly significant way. In theory, it should have been the place where God's grace was made available to people burdened by sin and frightened of death. But there is a lot of evidence to suggest that it did not work that way.⁵ Sometimes the act of confession required such a lengthy and detailed recounting of sins that it virtually drowned out the voice of the priest pronouncing absolution. In other words, some found it difficult to hear the church's word of forgiveness after an exhausting investigation of their own unworthiness.

Also in connection with penance, there arose the practice of selling indulgences. These documents were authorized by the church and could be substituted for the third part of penance, the work of satisfaction. Instead of doing the prescribed acts of penance (prayers or a visit to a shrine, for example), it was possible to buy an indulgence that would satisfy the final part of the sacrament of penance. Originally, this was meant to cover the temporal punishment of sins that were already forgiven. But in Luther's day many were led by the church to believe they were purchasing forgiveness itself.⁶ Indulgences could be expensive, especially when they contained extravagant claims like promising to return the purchaser to the state of spiritual innocence that she enjoyed in baptism. We will visit the issue of indulgences

5. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 219–22.

6. *ER* II:314–15.



Matthias Gerung, *Sale of Indulgences*, 1546, woodcut.

again when we talk about the first stages of Luther's public rebellion against the church.

The fear of death and the dread of sin were but manifestations of a larger and darker power that haunted all of medieval life: the devil. It is tempting for modern people to dismiss the devil as a cartoon character or as a sinister but fictional force in horror films and novels. But Luther lived in a time that believed intensely in the reality of the devil. Indeed, Luther considered

him as the chief adversary of Christ and faith.⁷ Sin and death had the power to terrify, but they were mere manifestations of Satan, the dark, shrewd, and insidious power that attempted to wrest fragile souls away from God's embrace. Luther's battles with the devil were real and personal and, as the following passages show, often involved Satan's attempt to snare the Reformer's conscience:

When I awoke last night, the Devil came and wanted to debate with me; he rebuked and reproached me, arguing that I was a sinner. To this I replied: Tell me something new, Devil! I already know that perfectly well; I have committed many a solid and real sin. Indeed there must be good honest sins—not fabricated and invented ones—for God to forgive for his beloved Son's sake, who took all my sins upon Him so that now the sins I have committed are no longer mine but belong to Christ. This wonderful gift of God I am not prepared to deny (in my response to the Devil), but want to acknowledge and confess.⁸

In summary, when Luther speaks in his Small Catechism of being “freed from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil,” he is not simply reciting theological abstractions culled from dusty textbooks. Sin, death, and the devil represented for him a diabolical trinity that haunted every corner of late medieval life. To a degree unimaginable to the modern Western mind, death was a regular and frequent feature of daily

7. Heiko Oberman makes this observation about Luther and the devil: “Luther’s world of thought is wholly distorted and apologetically misconstrued if his conception of the Devil is dismissed as a medieval phenomenon and only his faith in Christ retained as relevant or as the only decisive factor. Christ and the Devil were equally real to him: one was the perpetual intercessor for Christianity, the other a menace to mankind till the end. To argue that Luther never overcame the medieval belief in the Devil says far too little; he even intensified it and lent to it additional urgency: Christ and Satan wage a cosmic war for mastery over Church and world.” Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 104.

8. WATr 6:215–16 as translated in Oberman, *Luther*, 105–106.

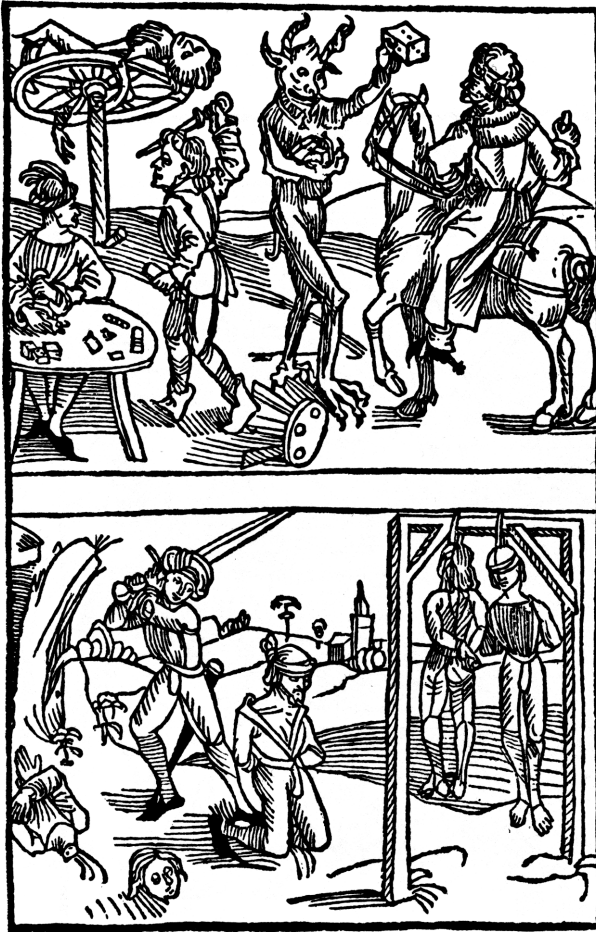
existence. Furthermore, death was not seen as happenstance or accidental; as the Christian Bible instructed, it was the fruit of sin. And finally, the force responsible for all this physical and spiritual havoc was none other than the devil himself.

Luther's Early Years

Martin Luther was born in a region of present-day northern Germany that was known in the sixteenth century as Saxony. The German national boundaries that are familiar to us did not come into existence until the latter part of the nineteenth century. In Luther's day "Germany" was actually a patchwork of semi-autonomous cities, states, and principalities that made up a region called the Holy Roman Empire. Saxony was a relatively powerful and influential part of the Empire. Its ruler would later play an important role in Luther's life and in the course of the Reformation.

Luther's birthplace was Eisleben, a small village near an area of copper mines. Luther's father, Hans, was a miner, and throughout his life Luther would make references to his humble beginnings. His parents were strict, but the discipline administered at home was generally well within the bounds of sixteenth-century standards. There was sufficient prosperity to allow Luther to attend school, and he seems to have thrived at each stage of his education. His instruction began in Mansfeld and continued in Magdeburg and Eisenach. In 1501, at the age of seventeen, he entered the University of Erfurt. At this point he seems eager to follow the wishes of his father that he become a lawyer.

It is not hard to speculate why Hans Luther would desire such a future for his son. A career in law undoubtedly seemed more attractive than the hard life of a miner. Furthermore, if Luther was eventually hired by the Saxon court or by some other branch of the nobility, it would bring renown to the family



Albrecht Dürer, Title woodcut to *Wie der Würfell auf ist kumen*, 1489, woodcut. Above: the devil tempts a knight to gamble, and a fight at the gaming table results in the punishment of death on the wheel. Below: executions resulting from gambling.

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name. Finally, the financial rewards from being a lawyer might mean an easier life for the parents in their old age.

Luther received his master's degree from the University of Erfurt in 1505. He immediately began to study law but then

abruptly entered an austere Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. Later on in life he would describe this drastic change of direction as the result of a near-death experience in a thunderstorm just outside Erfurt. Fearing for his life as the lightning flashed nearby, he appealed to St. Ann, patron saint of miners, and vowed to enter the cloister if he survived the storm. The storm passed and Luther, determined to make good on his pledge, left his law studies behind and entered the monastery to become a friar.

Luther's daily routine in the monastery was carefully prescribed.⁹ A schedule was followed for when to eat, pray, worship, study, and sleep. As Luther progressed through the first year (the novitiate), he was recognized by his superiors as a good student and was eventually put on a track to be a teacher. But the main purpose of the monastery was the formation of Luther's soul. The disciplines he followed were designed to mold him to the image of Christ. Monks took seriously the command of Christ to take up their crosses and follow him. Accordingly, they committed themselves to lives of poverty, chastity, and obedience. This included regular worship (seven times per day following the canonical hours), fasting, prayers, and the frequent examination of their consciences.

Luther's monastery was especially strict. The monks strove for an astonishingly high ideal: to love God absolutely and to practice perfect humility.¹⁰ Note what is being required in these commands. God is not to be loved for any self-serving reasons. For example, a love of God that sought to avoid punishment would be an inferior devotion, because it was done for selfish

9. For more information on Luther's experience in the monastery, see James Kit-telson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 51–63.

10. Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 73.

reasons. Rather, God was to be loved absolutely (no other motives allowed!) because that is what should be rendered to the almighty Lord of the universe. This is fine in theory but could lead to troubling spiritual conclusions when put into practice. In Luther's case it led to a level of uncertainty that caused him to believe he was worthy of eternal damnation.

For Luther the crisis came to a head in his relationship with his beloved confessor, Johannes von Staupitz. Concerned to confess all his known sins, Luther wearied Staupitz with the revelations of his scrupulous conscience. Despite his confessor's attempt to console him, Luther found himself in the midst of a frightening downward spiral in his relationship to God. No matter how hard he tried, he could not seem to do enough to please God. A large issue here was the theology that Luther had been taught. He believed it was necessary that he take the first step in his relationship with God; once this initial act was done, God would reward the effort with grace. But Luther was never satisfied that he had done enough. When it came to confessing his sins, Luther's experience was one of bondage, not liberation:

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said, "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession."¹¹

The longer Luther lived as a monk, the more he was haunted by his doubts and failings. His inability to achieve salvation resulted in an intense trial known by the German word *Anfechtung*.

11. "Lectures on Galatians, 1535," WA 40(2):15; LW 27:15.

There is no precise English equivalent, but *Anfechtung* can be described as an experience of doubt and despair that pierces the very soul—far more than a case of “the blues.” *Anfechtung* points to a profound sense of being lost, alienated, and out of control. It is tempting by today’s standards to “psychologize” Luther and suggest he suffered from depression. This may be true, but for Luther it was not something happening only within his psyche. The battle was with an external foe: the almighty God himself. Luther was convinced that God had turned against him and was even actively assaulting him with his judgment and wrath. This struggle was not continuous, as that would have been unbearable. But Luther was also not able to shake *Anfechtung*. As yet another manifestation of the devil, it lurked nearby, seeking to rob him of faith and peace. The net result was a great irony. Luther entered the monastery seeking salvation but ended up convinced that he was condemned.

Luther’s Radical God

At this point, it is important to introduce a conversation partner that accompanied Luther during his years in the monastery: the Bible. As mentioned earlier, Luther was encouraged by his superiors to become a teacher. This sense of calling led him to become a student of the Scriptures, and he eventually earned his doctorate in 1512 and became a theology professor at the University of Wittenberg. At first the Bible only aggravated his bouts with *Anfechtung*. Many biblical passages simply reminded him of God’s role as judge and of his own unworthiness. Even Christ was more likely to be seen as the fearful final arbiter in the last judgment rather than the merciful savior of sinners: “I was often terrified before the name of Jesus . . . When his name was spoken I would rather have heard the devil mentioned, for

I thought I would have to do good works until by them Christ had been made my gracious friend.”¹²

But eventually, he came to read the Bible in a different way. Scholars long have debated the precise date on which Luther experienced his so-called breakthrough. It is probably more accurate to say that over a period of years he began to see God in a new light. From the perspective of a timeline, we know that Luther lacked the new insight in 1513 but had obtained it by 1518. Just what happened during those years?

For one thing, Luther began to read the Apostle Paul's writings in a new way, particularly his letter to the Romans and his teaching that a “person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:28). Previously, Luther believed that God's righteousness was something he had to attain (always aided by grace, of course); however, his experience in the monastery demonstrated the limitations of that view. Now he comes to see Paul as saying that God actually *gives* his righteousness to those who do not deserve it: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:22-24). Late in his life, Luther provided his own account of this period. It is worth quoting at some length as long as we keep in mind that he was looking back some thirty years to a tumultuous time:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. . . . At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words,

12. WA 47:590 as quoted in von Loewenich, 77.

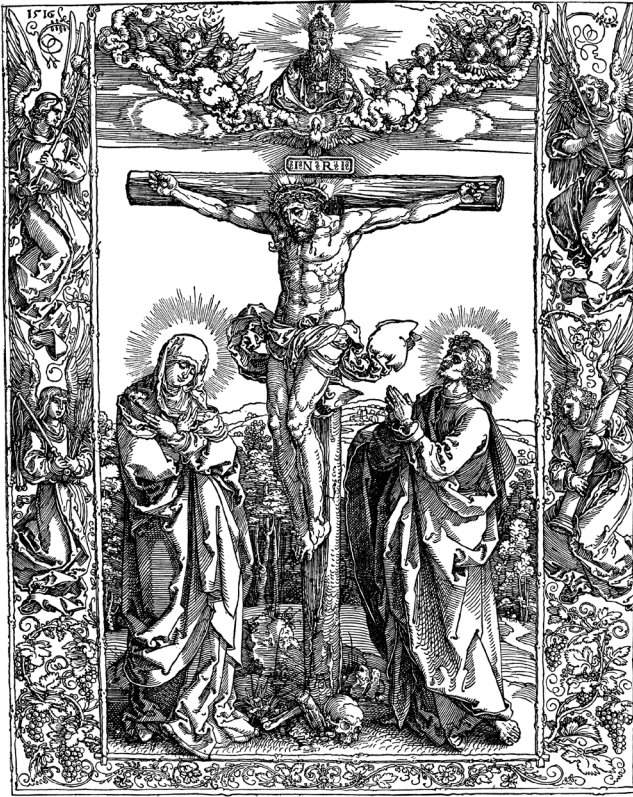
namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith. . . . Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.¹³

Further light can be shed on Luther’s new understanding of God by following his interpretation of the Psalms. We know that Luther regularly meditated on the Psalms, and we have many commentaries on them from this crucial span of years. Luther prized the Psalms especially for the way they expressed the highs and lows of the life of faith. They also helped him to clarify the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross. For example, while reflecting on Psalm 22, Luther was struck by the first verse: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹⁴ These were the very words used by Christ during his crucifixion. Luther began to ponder: Why would Christ utter this cry of dereliction? He recognized it was not only a cry of pain but the shriek of someone who had been abandoned and deserted. Luther puzzled over why Christ would feel the very *Anfechtungen* that had plagued him in the monastery. It just did not seem to make sense. After all, Christ had loved God absolutely. His devotion to God had been pure. It was not diluted with self-interest and mixed motives, like Luther’s imperfect love.

Luther’s view of the cross began to change when he realized that Christ’s cry or scream was the result of bearing human sin. Christ himself had not committed sin; he voluntarily took upon himself the entire sin of the world. This was not done only in a

13. “Preface to Latin Writings, 1535,” *WA* 54:185–86; *LW* 34:336–37.

14. See Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 47.



Albrecht Dürer, *Christ on the Cross*, 1516, woodcut.

conceptual or theoretical way. Christ really and truly took sin upon himself, as if he had committed them in the first place.¹⁵ We might ask ourselves: What would it feel like to be responsible for the world's sin? Of course, it is far beyond the power of our imaginations to conceive of such a thing. After all, who

15. An excellent introduction to this idea can be found in Robert W. Bertram, "Luther on the Unique Mediatorship of Christ," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph Burgess, 249–62 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

would want to have the conscience of a concentration camp guard or a child abuser? We struggle enough with our own guilt and shortcomings and certainly would not want the “baggage” of someone else’s life. But in Luther’s view this is precisely what happened on the cross, and it led directly to his new understanding of Christian freedom.

Luther’s next step was to take the “logic” of the cross and apply it to his own situation. If Christ has the world’s sin on himself, then Luther’s own sin is on Christ as well. If Luther’s sin is borne by Christ, then he (Luther) is free of sin. If he is free of sin, then he is righteous. The very thing that Luther tried to obtain by all his labors in the monastery was given to him freely in Christ. Luther termed this the “happy exchange,” whereby Christ, out of love, traded his righteousness and purity to sinners and received from them their guilt and shame. It is a terribly “unjust” exchange, since our sin kills Christ while his righteousness yields life and freedom for undeserving sinners. But it is all accomplished by God in Christ by a remarkable and radical act of love.

It is tempting in an introduction like this to telescope and flatten what is undoubtedly a complicated and uneven period in Luther’s life. What has been said above about Luther’s rediscovery of the gospel should be supplemented by the understanding that Luther’s insights were the result of years of struggle, argument, discussion, and anguish. However, for our purposes we do know that something dramatic had changed by 1517 or 1518: an intense engagement with the Bible resulted in a fresh and bracing interpretation of the Christian faith. It might be useful to follow the Lutheran tradition at this point and summarize Luther’s new theology under the following phrases: *grace alone*, *faith alone*, and *Christ alone*.

First, Luther’s theology put an emphasis on grace alone. He came to understand grace as an active power from God that

communicates God's love to us. The "alone" is important because it stresses that God's grace does not need any works to complete it. Luther was surrounded by traditions and practices in the late medieval church that suggested we had to do certain things to qualify for grace, or we at least had to cooperate with grace. Luther became convinced that any attempt to combine works with grace ends up undermining grace and glorifying human effort.

Second, God's grace has the power to change human beings or to transform them into people who trust God. Thus there is an emphasis in Luther's theology on faith alone. Again, note the "alone." Faith is sufficient—it does not need to be completed by any human works. Furthermore, Luther was careful not to limit faith to mere "belief." Faith is more than intellectual assent to certain ideas or propositions. For example, simply to mouth the words of the Apostles' Creed is not the same thing as faith. Luther understood faith as "trust," something that embraced the whole self—the heart and the body as well as the mind. The difference between belief and trust might be likened to the difference between knowing the definition of a mother and having a mom. The former is purely intellectual and is knowledge anyone could have. The latter involves a relationship and presumably implies years of love, nurture, and care. The ability to trust is supplied by God, who works in us through the power of his Holy Spirit. In 1528 Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostle's Creed in his *Small Catechism* underlines this teaching: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith. . . ."¹⁶

Finally, grace alone and faith alone are possible because of what Christ alone did on the cross. The "happy exchange"

16. *Small Catechism*, in *BC* 355.

discussed above means that the righteousness necessary before God has been given to us by Christ. This is wholly God's act on our behalf, and we can add nothing to it. When talking about Christ, Luther often uses the image of a marriage, as he does in "The Freedom of a Christian." When two people get married they end up sharing each other's property. In financial terms, the debts and assets of the groom become those of the bride and vice versa. Luther suggests that a similar thing happens when the sinner is joined to Christ by the "wedding ring" of faith. All of Christ's righteousness and innocence are transferred to his bride while he receives shame and guilt from her. The result of this union is a Christ laden with sin and a Christian made pure and righteous.

The triad of grace, faith, and Christ alone rest on Scripture. But care needs to be taken when talking about Luther's views on the Bible. From the time he began lecturing in 1513 as a newly minted doctor of theology until his death in 1546, many of his waking hours were spent poring over the meaning of biblical texts; however, strange as it may seem, the Bible for him was never an end in itself. The center or heart of Scripture is the proclamation of Christ, crucified and risen, all for the sake of human sinners. Luther knew very well that his opponents also took the Bible very seriously. It was not the authority of the Bible as such that drove him to challenge the teachings of his day. Rather, it was the Christ revealed in Scripture that fueled his new way of thinking. This was not an attempt to degrade the Bible's authority. Indeed, for Luther this way of thinking enhanced the Scriptures because it is only through them that one encounters this God who through Christ justifies the ungodly (Rom. 5:5).

Luther Goes Public

We need to return to Luther's life story. We have traced the development of his theological revolution while he was in the

monastery. His first seven years (1505–1512) as a friar also witnessed his ordination to the priesthood (1507) and his reception of a doctorate degree (1512) that qualified him to be a professor of the Bible. The latter is particularly important because to the end of his life Luther understood his vocation as one called to interpret the Scriptures for the church. In the same year that he received his degree, he was sent to the German city that would be intertwined with his name for the rest of his days: Wittenberg.

As a professor at the University of Wittenberg, Luther expounded for his students the meaning of the various books of the Bible. From 1513 to 1518 we have his lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. As noted above, these years were decisive in the formation of his new theological sensibilities. Luther was also more than an academic. He was a preacher in Wittenberg's church. But Luther was not content to remain in the classroom or the pulpit. As he cast his eye on the practices of his church, he became convinced that he needed to call attention to a community that had strayed from the core teachings of the Scriptures.

The immediate object of his wrath was the sale of indulgences. In order to understand what happened, it is necessary to take a brief excursion into the complicated world of sixteenth-century ecclesiastical politics. Pope Leo X authorized a sale of indulgences in northern Germany for the purposes of raising money to build St. Peter's basilica in Rome. Actually, the indulgences were not sold in Wittenberg itself because they would have competed with the money attracted by the elaborate relic collection of Frederick the Wise, the prince of electoral Saxony. But they were available in villages and towns close to Wittenberg, and some of Luther's parishioners purchased them. This incensed Luther because the underlying theological rationale of indulgences suggested that God's grace could be purchased.

He responded with a protest document known as "The Ninety-five Theses," which he posted on the door of the Castle



Hans Brosamer, *Martin Luther in the Pulpit*, woodcut.

Church in Wittenberg in 1517. They were written in Latin, the academic language of the day, and were intended to provoke a debate within the university. They did much more than that. Within months, remarkably fast by sixteenth-century standards, they were translated into German and distributed throughout the cities and universities of northern Europe.¹⁷ Suddenly, Luther no longer was an obscure monk teaching in a backwater Saxon university. His name was now on the minds and lips of the day's leading theologians, scholars, and church people.

"The Ninety-five Theses" sparked debate because they attacked the church's understanding of penance. The first two theses make Luther's argument clear: (1) "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the

17. For the importance of printing, see Mark U. Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006 [1994]).

entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” (2) “This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.”¹⁸ As explained earlier, the late medieval church had much invested in the sacrament of penance. It was a key intersection between the institution and the life of a late-medieval Christian—a place where he or she sought refuge from the tyranny of “sin, death, and the devil.” Laypeople assumed that in order to be in a right relationship with God it was necessary to partake in the church’s ritual of confession; however, in the “The Ninety-five Theses,” Luther called this entire worldview into question. He claimed that confession should not be understood within the narrow confines of the sacrament of penance. Rather, repentance is a continual and repeated part of the Christian life and should not be relegated to a formal relationship with a church and a priest. From Luther’s perspective, the life of faith involves a constant battle with the devil. Repentance needs to take place daily, even hourly, in this new understanding. Relegating it to a sacramental practice simply does not do justice to Satan’s tenacity and the fragility of faith.

Not only did Luther attack the understanding of penance in “The Ninety-five Theses,” but he also criticized the practice of selling indulgences that had come to be associated with this sacrament. He made clear that people cannot be reconciled to God through the purchase of indulgences (Thesis 33). Moreover, he suggested that love of neighbor and giving money to the poor are better uses of a Christian’s time and resources than the purchase of indulgences (Thesis 43).¹⁹

The indulgence controversy opened a gap between Luther and Rome. A series of representatives from the pope would now

18. Luther, “Ninety-five Theses, 1517,” *WA* 1:233; *LW* 31:25

19. *Ibid.*, *WA* 1:235; *LW* 31:28–29.

attempt to mediate the dispute; however, all efforts to bring the two sides closer together failed. In fact, the opposite occurred. Each time Luther was challenged, he tended to become more radical in his assessment of the church's teachings. By 1520, some three years after his critique of indulgences, Luther would challenge the fundamental assumptions of papal authority.

The first figure to respond to "The Ninety-five Theses" was an Italian named Sylvester Mazzolini, known better as Prierias. He wrote a "Dialogue against the Arrogant Theses of Martin Luther concerning the Power of the Pope." As the title of the work suggests, it was basically a reassertion of papal power. In other words, Luther's position was wrong because the pope said so. Prierias's writing also became the basis for the pope's demand that Luther appear in Rome and defend himself against the charge of heresy.

At this point, Luther appealed to his prince, Frederick the Wise. We have neither time nor space to provide a detailed explanation of the complex political context; however, Frederick the Wise proved to be a dependable patron and protector of Luther. Some of his support can be attributed to the pride that he took in his University of Wittenberg and thus his reluctance to expose his now-famous professor to a tribunal hundreds of miles from Saxony. Frederick arranged for Luther to be examined in Germany instead. In October of 1518 Luther met with Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg. Expecting a dialogue, Luther was shocked to discover that Cajetan was not interested in conversation, only in a recantation of his teaching. The meeting ended abruptly with Luther escaping from Augsburg under the cover of darkness.

Another event occurred in 1518 that was crucial in Luther's theological development: the Heidelberg Disputation. At a meeting for Augustinian monks, Luther offered a series of theses for debate that contained his radical ideas about law, good

works, and the freedom of the will. He made clear his rejection of scholastic theology which is now termed a "theology of glory" in contrast to a biblical "theology of the cross."²⁰ Several future reformers were present at the disputation and highly impressed by Luther's proposals. These included Martin Bucer, who would later lead the reform in Strassbourg, and Johannes Brenz, who would be an influential Lutheran in southern Germany.

Returning to our overview of the political drama between Luther and Rome, the next person to enter the fray was John Eck, professor of theology at Ingolstadt. Eck challenged Luther's colleague at Wittenberg, Andreas Karlstadt, to a debate in Leipzig. The disputation finally took place in July of 1519. After Eck and Karlstadt disputed for a week, Luther entered the ring. Eck, a learned and clever debater, was able to get Luther to admit that the real subject was not the question of indulgences but rather the issue of ultimate authority in the church. Luther had now moved to the position of challenging the primacy of Rome. An intensive study of early Christianity convinced him that the pope's claim to have the last word was fairly recent and not rooted in the ancient tradition of the church. Moreover, in the course of his arguments with Eck, he also admitted that popes and councils of the church were capable of error. The Leipzig Debate was a public demonstration of how far Luther had strayed from Roman understandings of authority. It also set up an inevitable collision between the Wittenberg reformer and the ecclesiastical establishment.

Following Leipzig, Eck went to Rome and helped compose the case against this German monk who soon would be declared a heretic. Meanwhile, the monk himself entered

20. See Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation, 1518" *WA* 1:353–74; *LW* 31:35–70. An excellent commentary on the disputation is found in Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

into a remarkably fruitful period of writing. During the year 1520, Luther penned three²¹ of his most famous treatises: “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,”²² “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,”²³ and “The Freedom of a Christian.” All three writings reflect the confidence of a soul freed by the belief that we are justified by grace through faith alone and not by our works, efforts, or human achievements. In particular, the first two pieces are also strong criticisms of a church and culture that have strayed far from this anchor.

“The Freedom of a Christian” differs in that it is less polemical. It did not attempt to reform an institution or practice but rather sought to establish a framework for the Christian faith. As the reader will see (pp. 31–45), the treatise is actually appended to a letter that Luther sent to Pope Leo X. This epistle deserves careful consideration. It is at once arresting and moving. Luther addresses Pope Leo almost casually at times, as if he were speaking to an equal who has been unwittingly duped by his close associates. But Luther also evidences a deep concern for the state of the church and the pope as a person. Toward the end of the letter, Luther announces his intention to provide Leo with a “summary of the Christian life.” What follows is “The Freedom of a Christian” and Luther’s conviction that we have been liberated by God for attentive service in the world.

Luther’s writings in 1520 only inflamed his terribly strained relationship with Rome. “To the Christian Nobility” questioned

21. A strong argument can be made that there were actually five writings in 1520 that were crucial in the development of Luther’s theology. In addition to the three named above, *The Papacy in Rome: An Answer to the Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig* (WA 6:285–325; LW 39:55–104) and the *Treatise on Good Works* (WA 6:202–296; LW 44:17–114) are important texts on the church and ethics, respectively.

22. WA 6:404–69; LW 44:123–217.

23. WA 6:497–573; LW 36:11–126.

the church-state nexus that had dominated Europe for almost a millennium. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" undercut the sacramental structure that was fundamental to Rome's self-understanding. The momentum generated by these texts coupled with Rome's earlier opposition to Luther meant that he would be excommunicated from the church. Luther defended his teaching before the political and ecclesiastical elite in Worms in 1521. His dramatic testimony concluded with the defiant words: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience . . . may God help me. Amen."²⁴

Sometimes these defiant words have been misinterpreted as a trumpet call for individual autonomy and the right of human beings to be governed by conscience rather than an oppressive structure like the medieval church. Luther would have been shocked by such evaluations of his action at Worms. It was not in the name of individualism that Luther challenged the authority of the church. He saw himself and his conscience as bound or controlled by an external norm: the Scriptures. Luther was even more wary than medieval Catholicism of the ability of the self to determine its own future. The Reformer's words at Worms were bold, but it is hard to draw a direct line from them to modern notions of individual rights and liberties.

It should also be pointed out that while Luther was the leading figure, he was not the only reformer in the early years of the Reformation in Germany. Joining the Wittenberg faculty in 1518 was a young Greek scholar by the name of Philip Melancthon.

24. "Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521," *WA* 7:838; *LW* 32:112–13.

His skills with biblical languages would prove invaluable as Luther and his followers began to interpret the Scriptures in light of justification by grace through faith. Furthermore, Melancthon would become a formidable theologian in his own right. In 1521 he authored his own theological textbook, the *Loci Communes* (praised by Luther as worthy of being included in the canon of the Bible!).²⁵ Melancthon also wrote the Augsburg Confession (1530), one of the central confessions or faith statements of the Lutheran movement. Also in Luther's circle in the early years were Johann Bugenhagen,²⁶ who would play a fundamental role in organizing Lutheran churches throughout northern Europe, and Nikolaus von Amsdorf,²⁷ who was with Luther at the Diet of Worms and introduced the Reformation in several important cities and territories in northern Germany.

As a result of Worms, Luther's excommunication was now official. He was regarded as an outlaw and a heretic by church and state. But his story would take an even more dramatic turn on his way home to Wittenberg. Frederick the Wise, desiring to buy some time for his beleaguered professor, arranged for Luther to be kidnapped and placed in the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach. Nine months later, following a period of internment when he translated the New Testament into German, Luther returned to Wittenberg. Much to his surprise (heretics had not fared well in the hands of the church—witness the case of Jan Hus, burned at the stake in 1415), Luther lived another twenty-five years. In addition to getting married and having a family, he used the time to shape and nurture what became known as the Lutheran Reformation.²⁸

25. Von Loewenich, *Martin Luther*, 204.

26. *ERI*: 226–27.

27. *ERI*: 27–28.

28. This introduction provides an overview of Luther's early life and teaching. The goal is to help the reader understand the historical and theological context of



Hans Brosamer,
Katherine von Bora, 1530,
woodcut. Schlossmuseum, Gotha.



Hans Brosamer,
Martin Luther, 1530, woodcut.
Schlossmuseum, Gotha.

Luther and “Freedom”

Readers of “The Freedom of a Christian” should keep in mind how Luther used the word *freedom*. It is difficult to give a precise definition.²⁹ Our culture tends to think of freedom in an economic or political sense. In other words, to be free is to have a wide choice of consumer products or to have a range of options

“The Freedom of a Christian.” But it would be unfortunate if this was taken to mean that the young Luther is the whole Luther. In fact, the vast majority of his writing takes place after 1520. There are many fine treatments of Luther’s later years. James Kittelson’s *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986) is a comprehensive and clear account. Mark U. Edwards’s *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–46* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004 [1983]) is a great resource on the controversies Luther faced in the 1530s and 1540s.

29. As Mark U. Edwards points out, even in Luther’s day “Christian freedom” was interpreted in a variety of ways. See Mark U. Edwards, “The Reception of Luther’s Understanding of Freedom in the Early Modern Period,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 62 (1995):104–20.

when visiting a polling booth. Neither of these definitions of freedom should be minimized. After all, closed societies that severely limit consumer choice and restrict political liberty bring to mind the grey, oppressive, and bureaucratic regimes that ruled in Eastern Europe prior to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Few would point to these states as just ways to organize human communities. But these economic and political definitions of freedom do not really address Luther's concerns.

Further complicating the task of understanding Luther's view of freedom is our historical location on this side of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This movement tended to define freedom as deliverance from oppressive thought structures, especially those connected with church dogma. The goal was to be "autonomous," not ruled by any external laws or norms, especially those of the ecclesiastical establishment. As a result, "self-rule" became closely associated with freedom. Again, there is much to be valued in this understanding of freedom. The church did restrict thought in ways that often served the interests of the few. It sometimes created a suffocating intellectual climate in the name of protecting the Bible or the church. But this is yet another definition of freedom that is far from Luther's view. He would have been puzzled by the Enlightenment's belief in autonomy.

Luther was convinced that the self simply lacked the resources to govern itself in a way that would lead to true liberation. As he made clear in "The Freedom of a Christian," the picture of humanity that emerges in light of God's laws and commandments is anything but a self under control. Instead, human beings are driven and frightened, knowing despair and pride much more than an autonomy that claims to be both "master of fate" and "captain of the soul."³⁰ Rather than knowing real

30. See the poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henly in *Leading Lives That Matter*, Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 434–35.

freedom, people are much more prone to cling to some earthly good such as wealth, status, or sex. The result can be a bondage that is deep and profound. And it often is ironic because it can happen under the guise of a supposedly autonomous self that is simply doing as it pleases.

The “freedom” Luther has in mind is deeply relational. As he makes clear in “The Freedom of a Christian,” it is found in a relationship with Christ, who has liberated the self from a horizon limited by the forces of “sin, death, and the devil” mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. Parallels in the human realm are difficult to locate. Perhaps analogies can be seen in long-term relationships that have an abundance of faith and trust, such as a faithful marriage or good friendship that has known much joy and sorrow. Within such relationships there is little pretension or need to prove one’s worth or value. Hours can pass without a word, and yet there is no need to explain the silence. This sense of freedom cannot be purchased on the market or obtained via a ballot box. It cannot be generated through the earnest efforts of an individual will. Rather, it is a gift of the relationship itself.

Furthermore, as Luther makes clear, for the one on whom this freedom is conferred, the world now becomes an arena for service and good works. The bondage formerly known in relation to “sin, death, and the devil” is transferred now to the needs of the neighbor and the world, but the motivation is completely transformed. The very love that has enabled freedom now flows forth in service.³¹ It is not timid or sentimental; the shape of this love itself is cruciform. Consequently, those held by this love should not be surprised to find themselves in the midst of a remarkable adventure that reflects both the suffering and joy of Christ’s death and resurrection. As Luther says in “The Freedom of a Christian”: “From faith there flows a love and joy in the

31. A classic study in Luther’s ethics is George Forell’s *Faith Active in Love* (New York: American, 1954).

Lord. From love there proceeds a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves the neighbor and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. We do not serve others with an eye toward making them obligated to us. Nor do we distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or ingratitude. Rather we freely and willingly spend ourselves and all that we have. . . .”³²

The Texts

The translation of Luther’s Letter to Pope Leo X is based on the Latin text found in *WA* 7:42–49. Also used in the preparation of the text was the English translation by W. A. Lambert (rev. Harold J. Grimm) as found in *LW* 31:334–343 and the German translation by Fidel Rädle in *Martin Luther: Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*.³³

The translation of “The Freedom of a Christian” is based on the Latin text as found in *WA* 7:49–73. Also acknowledged is the assistance of the English translation by W. A. Lambert (rev. Harold J. Grimm) as found in *LW* 31:343–377 and the German translation by Fidel Rädle in *Martin Luther: Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*.³⁴

32. “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520.” See my translation on page 83.

33. Johannes Schilling, ed. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), II:101–19.

34. *Ibid.*, 120–85.