

The Freedom of a Christian Man

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The Life and Thought of the Christian Church: 1500 A.D. to Present

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LUTHER: THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN MAN

Martin Luther, father of the German reformation, is arguably most remembered for his October 31, 1517 posting of the “Ninety Five Theses” on the Wittenberg Castle church door. This incident, a reaction to the gross materialism and preaching of indulgence by John Tetzel, has been perceived as marking the beginning of Luther’s epic conflict with the papacy, and the Holy Roman Church. In fact, although commonly misperceived as so, at this time Luther was not redressing the Pope, church hierarchy, or essential theology; his contention was with indulgences, a minor point in Catholic theology. In 1520 Martin Luther would compose *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, one of the three influential papers which have been called his primary treatises.¹ These “primary treatises” would level challenges to the structure, authority, and theology of the Catholic Church.

Luther wrote *The Freedom of a Christian Man* at the beginning of the sixteen century, during an age characterized by substantial political, social, intellectual and religious transition. Politically, Europe was decentralizing; power was shifting from the Holy Roman Empire (and subsequently the papacy) to the nation states of Portugal, Spain, France, and England. As the influence of these states continually expanded through their colonization beyond Europe, the Holy Roman Empire was further compressed by the advances of the Muslims across Eastern Europe. Socially the full impact of the Renaissance was being felt. Humanism, a major theme of the Renaissance, contributed to increased secularization of life, emphasizing individualism and

¹ Luther’s “primary treatises” written in 1520 include: *Address to the German Nobility*, *Babylonian Captivity*, and *The Freedom of the Christian Man*.

creating a new confidence in humankind's ability to solve its own problems. Renaissance fascination with the literature of antiquity renewed interest in ancient languages, including Greek, resulting in new Biblical studies.

Fueled by humanism, the thirst for knowledge evident during the Renaissance was advanced by the rapid growth of new universities and the invention of the printing press. The establishment of universities and production of accurate duplicatable publications provided education for more and more people, encouraging a positive critical spirit. When directed at the church, this critical spirit exposed religious decadence and provided fertile ground for reformation. The Holy Roman Church, still the most prominent religion in Europe, was buckling as a result of its own institutional weight. The immorality of the clergy, economic oppression, sale of indulgences, and the evils of simony stimulated numerous calls for reform from the populous at large. This time of political and social restlessness welcomed the notions delineated in Luther's tract *The Freedom of a Christian Man*.

In *the Freedom of a Christian Man*, Luther develops a supposition on the relationship between faith and works in the life of the Christian. He begins the piece with the oddly complementary theses that the Christian is both a free lord subject to none and also a servant subject to all. Acknowledging the apparent contradiction in these theses, Luther proceeds to meld the statements by distinguishing between the spiritual and bodily portions of human existence he terms the "two-fold nature" of humankind. The work continues with cascading theological arguments flowing from the two theses and the corresponding two realms of existence. As the pamphlet unfolds the reader is treated to glimpses of Luther's developing thought which eventually become foundational for ecclesiastical reform; most notably his position on

“righteousness by faith.” The treatise culminates with warning against extreme positions which can develop from polarization between the faith and the works proponents.

The first portion of *the Freedom of a Christian Man* is devoted to the thesis that the Christian is both a free lord subject to none. After the statement, Luther begins immediately to make his distinction between the twofold nature of humankind, associating the spiritual (inner or “new man”) with the first thesis. This spiritual man is free from the power of any external influence to produce righteousness and freedom or unrighteousness and servitude. The only thing necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom is the Word of God; which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as distinguished from written Scripture which he divides into two parts, commandments and promises.² The soul (spiritual man) needs only the Word of God, and is justified by faith alone and not by any external works. Luther continues noting the power of faith as: liberating, making the law and works unnecessary for righteousness and salvation; as God honoring, by trusting His promises; and as unifying, Christ and the soul become one flesh, each laying claim to the others attributes. The result of faith in the Word of God (Christ) is that all who believe in Christ are priests and kings in Christ. Kingship does not equal physical power but spiritual power, and priesthood (more excellent than kingship) denotes our worthiness to appear before God on our own, praying for ourselves and others. Luther closes this first portion asserting that preaching should have the goal of establishing an internal faith in the believer, not simply reciting the works, life, and words of Christ.

The second section of this work declares the Christian is a servant, subject to all. In the introduction of this segment, Luther directly connects servant Christians with their outer (bodily,

² Commandments show us what we ought to do but not give us the power to do it. Promises declare the Glory of God, and provide for us what the commandments demand, namely Grace.

carnal) nature, and confronts the question of why good works are commanded. Luther avers we are not wholly spiritual beings yet; our present lives in the flesh require that we control our bodies and must have dealings with other mortals. One purpose of works is to control our carnal desires (lusts), holding their influence on our inner (spiritual) man in check. Utilizing the example of a good tree not bearing evil fruit, Luther drives home the understanding that “Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works.” Works then are not a means of righteousness, but a byproduct of righteousness by faith. Returning to his thesis of servitude, Luther exhorts that we do not live in our mortal bodies alone but also with other humans; in fact with Christ as our example, we live only for others and not for ourselves. The fullness of Christian liberty we enjoy should be emptied out in service to others, in essence becoming Christ to one another. Luther concludes this section reminding believers that such Christian service should not be done for personal motive or benefit, but out of neighborly love.

Luther closes *the Freedom of a Christian Man* with a short admonishment of those who would misunderstand or abuse the principles of Christian freedom found in justification by faith alone. Luther surmises two extremes. First, those who would embrace freedom but turn it into an opportunity for the flesh; by thinking “all things are now allowed them.” These radicals try to demonstrate their freedom by finding fault in and despising ceremonies, traditions and human laws. The second extremist group relies solely on the observation of ceremonies, traditions and laws for their salvation. These errants do not experience justification by faith, but mistakenly rely exclusively on works. Luther censures both groups, accusing them of neglecting the “weightier things which are necessary to salvation” and emphasizing and quarreling loudly about the “trifling and unnecessary matters.” In response the Christian is encouraged to take the

middle course between the two, respecting ceremonialism on behalf of the weak, yet the embracing the principle of justification by faith alone.

Martin Luther creates a dialectic tension in the third paragraph of *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, immediately captivating readers with his ostensibly contrasting theses. Yet in the remainder of the work, Luther methodically and biblically demonstrates no dichotomy; the Christian is both a free lord subject to none and also a servant subject to all. The mastery of this piece lies in his systematic reconciliation of these contrasting statements. In resolving the disparity, Luther uses the theme of Christian freedom to delineate his own understanding of the nature of the Christian Gospel and the believer's resultant new life in Christ. The Christian freedom from works, provided by "righteousness through faith alone," is a freedom we relinquish in love and service to others.

The Freedom of a Christian Man leaves no doubt that Luther believes his perspective on "righteousness by faith alone" to be normative in the Christian experience. The locus of faith for Luther is in God alone, humankind can make no contributions. For the believer, faith is recognition of what God has done, not an action on our part. Luther's assertively personal stance on the nature of faith has been regarded by many as overweening. In this treatise he leaves no room for those with divergent opinion. Even while espousing the "middle course" in the more moderate closing, Luther refers to them as "tyrants," "hypocrites," and "the weak." Yet such is the nature of those we call reformers or revolutionaries,³ if their writings were not dogmatic and confrontational they would not be so labeled. Luther's strong theological stance evident in this composition would shortly serve him well at the Diet of Worms; standing behind his famous declaration, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God . . . Here I stand, I can do no other."

³ Most Protestants look back on Luther as a reformer, many Catholics rather view him as a revolutionary (in revolt).