

Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520)

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Introduction

This review is a précis examining Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520). It will outline the primary source (English translation, not the original Latin and German), and compare secondary documents in regards to the theological value in the socio-political and ecclesiastical environment of the Reformation. This review will familiarise terms potentially foreign to the reader, consider the nature of the document (including the intended audiences) and suggest Luther's purposes for the document.

1. Glossary

- a. Augustinian - pertaining to the *Order of Augustine* [of Hippo].
- b. Pope Leo X - born Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici (1475 – 1521) became Pope (1513-21). He is most noted for excessive spending, enhancing intellectualism, and failure to inhibit the Protestant Reformation.¹
- c. Curia (Roman Curia) - the ecclesiastical administrative courts of the Papacy consisting of Cardinals.

¹ Gore, B. (2013). 19. *The Renaissance: Fuel for the Reformation*. Retrieved July 16, 2020 from YouTube website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VG7OXAi1FQs>

Hageman, G. E. (1923). *Sketches from the History of the Church*. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House. 126, 132, 134.

Macculloch, D. (2004). *Reformation : Europe's house divided, 1490-1700*. London: Penguin. 120-121, 123-128.

Wallace, P. G. (2020). *The Long European Reformation : Religion, Political Conflict, and the Search for Conformity, 1350-1750* (3rd ed.). London: Red Globe Press. 62, 84, 87, 92.

d. Bernard of Clairvaux - (c.1090-1153) French theologian and Abbott of the *Order of Benedict* [of Nursia]. He was a proponent of *Sola Fide* and Mariology².

e. See/Apostolic See - attributed to the jurisdiction of the Pope (allegedly based on Apostolic succession as the *Bishop of Rome*)

f. Johann Eck - Johann Maier von Eck (1486 – 1543) was a Roman Catholic theologian antagonistic to the Protestant theologians³.

g. Cardinal (*Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae cardinalis*) - office of a leading Bishop (or Prince) in Roman Church, which duties include participating in formal meetings, and management when the Papacy is vacant.

h. Nuncio (Apostolic/Papal Nuncio) - ecclesiastical diplomat representing the Pope in matters of external states and organisations.

i. Elector Frederick (Frederick III / Frederick the Wise) - (1463-1525) was the Elector of Saxony (1486-1525) renowned for protecting Luther (his citizen).⁴

j. Dr Karlstadt - Andreas Rudolph Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486 – 1541) was a contemporary Protestant Reformer (Chancellor at *University of Wittenberg*) with Luther.⁵

² Douglas, J. D., Comfort, P. W., & Mitchell, D. (Eds.). (1996). *Who's Who in Christian History*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale. 80,81.

Gore, B. W. (2015, June 18). 11. *Bernard of Clairvaux*. Retrieved July 16, 2020, from YouTube website: https://youtu.be/P9xKM0_UBdw

³ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, et al (Eds.). *Who's Who in Christian History*. 219,220.

Macculloch, D. (2004). *Reformation : Europe's house divided, 1490-1700*. London: Penguin. 127-128.

Wallace, P. G. (2020). *The Long European Reformation*. 64, 93.

⁴ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, et al (Eds.). *Who's Who in Christian History*. 258, 259.

Wallace, P. G. (2020). *The Long European Reformation*. 61-3, 68, 69, 78, 92.

⁵ Hageman, G. E. (1923). *Sketches from the History of the Church*. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House. 135, 140, 143.

Macculloch, D. (2004). *Reformation*. 135, 140 156, 168.

Wallace, P. G. (2020). *The Long European Reformation*. 68, 69.

k. Karl von Miltitz - (c.1490 – 1529) was the Papal nuncio who is notable for investigating and condemning Luther's theology, and *Johann Tetzel* for fraud and embezzlement⁶.

l. Cajetan (Tommaso de Vio) - (1469 – 1534) was a Roman theologian who opposed and attempted to suppress Luther and his theology.⁷ He was appointed Cardinal Presbyter of San Sisto⁸.

2. What kind of document is this?

This document is a copy of an open letter to the Mayor of Zwickau, Hermann Mühlpfort⁹, written in 1520. It includes a tract regarding the doctrine of *Christian Liberty* and the concept of *Sola Fide* as understood by Luther.

It contains the communication Luther wrote to Pope Leo X translated from Latin into the vernacular of Saxony. By this means, he was able to make aware to the German public regarding his grievances and issues with the Pope and the Roman Curia (under his auspice).

The translation used in this review is translated directly from Leo X's Latin version into English.¹⁰

⁶ Hageman, G. E. *Sketches from the History of the Church*. 134.

⁷ Douglas, J. D., Comfort, et al (Eds.). *Who's Who in Christian History*. 125.

Hageman, G. E. *Sketches from the History of the Church*. 134.

Macculloch, D. (2004). *Reformation*. 86-7, 112, 126, 128.

Wallace, P. G. (2020). *The Long European Reformation*. 63.

⁸ Luther, Martin. (1989). *On the Freedom of a Christian* (Timothy Lull, Trans.). In Timothy Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. (Original work published 1520). 591.

⁹ Luther (1989/1520). *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 586.

Priesterhäuser Zwickau. (n.d.). *Sein Wirken*. Retrieved July 18, 2020, from Priesterhäuser Zwickau website: <https://www.priesterhaeuser.de/de/luther-in-zwickau/sein-wirken.php> (Translated into English).

¹⁰ Luther (1989/1520). *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 585.

The Tract following is an *apologetic* for Luther's teaching of *Christian Liberty* under *Sola Fide*, opposing the Roman Catholic teaching of "faith AND works" justification.

3. Who was Luther's intended or imagined audience?

Although addressed to the Mayor of Zwickau, containing the Pope and Curia as the ultimate recipients, it is a clearly a document directed towards teaching the general population of Saxony.

The letter was originally written to Pope Leo X (in Latin), and Luther provided this letter in German (the *lingua franca*) for comprehensible circulation amongst the Saxon people.

The tract regarding Christian freedom is addressed to everyone willing to read it.

4. What circumstances, both in the church and politically, prompted Luther to write this pamphlet?

While exhorting and extolling the office of Leo X, Luther makes arguments regarding godless practices implemented by the Curia to the See. As the Pope, Luther presents veiled implications that Leo X is ultimately accountable, without denigrating the office and exposing himself to direct attack from the See. (Based on the date, Luther may still hoped Leo X was spiritually a "Daniel in Babylon"¹¹ and concerned for his soul?)

¹¹ Luther (1989/1520). *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 586, 588, 589.

Eck is presented as a carnal man. His motivations for manipulating Luther into debating the Papacy at Leipzig were malevolent and self-serving¹².

Luther appeals to Leo X to present his concerns regarding the real malefactors of the church, especially Cajetan and Tetzel.

Tetzel was generating a revenue by selling indulgences for the “absolution” of sins that could be purchased for oneself or a relative in “purgatory”. Luther explained in his pastoral ministry, that the concept of *Sola Fide* renders these “works” without faith as not only worthless, but potentially leading people away from true salvation¹³. This errant doctrine (and other related matters) is the motivation for this letter.

A summary by this reviewer of the theology of the Tract is available to further examine the theological aspect of the Roman Church of the period¹⁴. Unfortunately, closer examination of the document exceeds the scope of this work.

¹² Luther (1989/1520). *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 591.

¹³ Macculloch, D. (2004). *Reformation*. 123-126.

Wallace, P. G. (2020). *The Long European Reformation*. 62.

Reeves, M. (2010). *The Unquenchable Flame : Introducing the Reformation*. Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press. 35 - 38.

¹⁴ Duffy, J. (2020). *Martin Luther's On the Freedom of a Christian Tract (1520)*. Retrieved from <http://johnduffy.net.au/academic%20notes/Martin%20Luther%20Tract%20Summary.pdf>

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Soli Deo gloria