

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

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Introduction

Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520)¹ [hence forth *Freedom*] was one of many crepuscular rays among the storm clouds of post-Renaissance Latin theology. The hierarchy of the *Church of Rome* [RC] had mostly denigrated into a 'white-washed tomb' and 'den of thieves'.

Freedom presents Luther's convictions that Christians are no longer compelled to keep God's law to obtain salvation. He expands *sola fide* from former theologians and his own Scripture meditations. This essay will enable the reader start to appreciate the controversy of Luther's tract in this religious, intellectual, social, cultural and political environment. Sadly, a comprehensive examination of the complexities of the controversy of *Freedom* greatly exceeds the scope of this essay.

Lutheran Theology in *Freedom*

Freedom attacks the Roman church in several ways, apart from the theology. It is antagonistic to the ecclesiology (or more precisely it's corruption). In his preamble to Leo X, Luther makes scathing references to the corruption of the Curia and key figures such as Eck and Cajetan (blaming them for the controversy²). Although Luther Biblically (Ps.105:15, 1 Chr.16:22, Luk.6:37) doesn't confront the *office* of Pope, he boldly presents the *person* having ultimate responsibility to silence all parties, erroneously having the sole authority to interpret Scripture, and being unholy (an antichrist and an idol)³.

In the body of the document proper, Luther emphasises the true doctrines of the Bible contrasted with the false Roman doctrines. This includes the concept of "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."⁴

Firstly, he expounds a man's fallen nature, regenerated (body and spirit). This leads him to proclaim the only thing necessary for "Christian life, righteousness and freedom", exclusively being the Word of God, the gospel of Jesus the Christ. Luther continues to elucidate that faith alone, not the works of men, is the means of God's grace. This is diametric to the extra-Biblical, Roman doctrines requiring penance, indulgences and 'meritorious works' as the means of salvation⁵.

¹ Luther, Martin. *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Translated by Timothy Lull. In *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, edited by Timothy Lull, 1989. 585–629.

² Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 590-592.

³ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 593-594.

G.E. Hageman, *Sketches From The History Of The Church* (St. Louis, MO.: Concordia Publishing House, 1950). 127-130..

⁴ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 596.

Hageman, *Sketches From The History Of The Church*. 134-136.

⁵ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 620.

Luther continues further to address the false Roman offices (and their nature) of “popes, bishops [as defined by the papists], and lords”. According to Scripture, they are to be “ministers, servants and stewards” serving God and edifying His people. Instead, they became one of the most powerful tyrannies on earth, rivaling all other political powers. Luther claims they became “servants of the vilest men on earth who abuse our misfortune to serve only their base and shameless will.”⁶ As a consequence, the gospel of Christ was not faithfully proclaimed by the majority of papists. Luther discusses the necessity of proclaiming the whole counsel of God (which was missing), being the law (to show man’s sinfulness and need for redemption) and grace (whereby God performs all the atoning works required by men for salvation)⁷.

Intellectualism and *Freedom*

Traditionally, through the Middle Ages, the church maintained the predominant domain of academic thought. It produced the manuscripts, maintained the libraries (and access to them), enabled research, and educated the elite few (based on the privileged wealthy, noble or talented)⁸. In Luther’s times, this was changing.

In 1520, when Luther wrote *Freedom*, Europe was at an intellectual nexus where the *Renaissance* intersected the *Protestant Reformation*. 1505, in Florence Italy, Michaelangelo’s “David” was unveiled, epitomising the dawn of the Renaissance [“Rebirth”]⁹. Western civilisation was now revolutionising science, politics and economics, and providence was sweeping theology with it, under the philosophy of *human secularism*. Christianity was not simply about eschatology, but an expression of the *Imago Dei* by incorporated creativity and reason. Artists sought to glorify humanity and thereby glorify God. Da Vinci embraced multiple forms of art, studied science and naturalism. Gutenberg’s printing technology proliferated and disseminated knowledge and ideas throughout society as never before. Savonarola and Machiavelli shaped modern politics. Columbus had explored the Americas, to prove an hypothesis, exploit potential lands and prepare for missionary opportunities. Copernicus (whom Luther held in low esteem¹⁰) had promulgated a rejection of geocentric astronomy¹¹.

Luther was an accomplished public relations figure and extroverted personality. He exploited the technological opportunities of his era, to extend the kingdom of God, including this document. He produced articles using the new printing technology which were illustrated by a political satirist (the famous Lucas Cranach). His sermons, lectures and notes were able to be published and spread prolifically. He was a popular author not only because of the message he proclaimed, but because he wrote in the vernacular, in a witty and concise manner. The use of illustrations to emphasis his points helped the illiterate to understand

⁶ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 608.

⁷ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. 616. D.A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016). 90-98.

⁸ Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World : How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2011). 83-115, 183-193, 210-213, 233-242

⁹ The statue acknowledged the Church (symbolically represented by the David looking towards Goliath, naked without Saul’s armour), but *hidden in plain sight* obvious signs of the individual humanistic capability to affect change (including the obvious uncircumcised penis of a Gentile and disproportionate, large hands for personal effort).

¹⁰ Thomas Schirrmacher, “The Galileo affair: history or heroic hagiography?” *Journal of Creation* 14, no. 1 (April 2000): 91–100, <https://creation.com/the-galileo-affair-history-or-heroic-hagiography>.

¹¹ Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World*. 83-115, 183-193, 210-213, 233-242

the messages. His pamphlets¹² spread all over Europe, like “a flock of birds”, as the population was enamoured by Luther’s theology and its implications.

Socio-culturalism and *Freedom*

Villagers lived mostly subsistence agricultural existence of toil in serfdoms. Bowing to the regional noblemen (Dukes) who protected them from pillagers and maintained jurisprudence. Overseeing society was the prominent and wealthiest structure in the towns, the church. Most people were poor. The Roman church filled the vacuum of the loss of the Roman empire (c.500AD) which led to the middle ages - church provided not only Christian worship, but stability, comfort and continuity to Europe. The Middle Ages church condoned feudalism, as a hierarchy of the church “over-shepherding” (intellectual elite ‘controlling’ the Word of God and spiritual blessings) the Nobles (secular power and land) over peasants/serfs (90% population paying rent, tax, fees, or labour to the landlord). Child mortality was high. Punishments for the poor were often extreme. Plague often terminated the population. Food reserves were often barely sufficient from year to year¹³.

The miserable existence for the poor was predominantly tolerated based on the promise of Heaven in the next life. The church offered hope, with the promise of eternal happiness in paradise. Art was legitimate only if it glorified God - to teach and terrify. Entire communities dedicated generations of their resources and labour to the church to construct the massive cathedrals. Artists were commissioned to produce stained glass windows, statues, pulpits and altar pieces. The medieval “age of faith” is characterised by the soaring steeples and naves, with elaborate Gothic arches - all pointing towards heaven and God. Each week, the illiterate serfs would enter the churches to be humbled by their physical insignificance among towering columns and divine lights. The art would provide an exciting hope of the beauty of God’s presence in glory to reward the faithful and the horrific warning to those who disobeyed the church (as the emissary of God)¹⁴.

Works by Luther (and many others) offered a new liberty, whereby the corrupt church had started to lose control over the masses. This was to contribute to various Knights and Peasant Rebellions throughout Europe in the future, despite Luther’s protestations later¹⁵.

¹² *Flugschriften* [literal German “writings that fly”] may be the aetiology of the modern term “flyers”.

¹³ Robert McHenry, ed., “Luther,” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago, Ill.: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1993). 16:919

¹⁴ Robert McHenry, ed., “Luther,” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 26:236

¹⁵ Peter George Wallace, *The Long European Reformation : Religion, Political Conflict, and the Search for Conformity, 1350-1750* 3rd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2020). 70-71

Politics and *Freedom*

Vestiges of the Roman empire were incorporated into the RC church¹⁶. Since the Ecclesiastical hierarchy had been appropriated by means of financial support and nepotism by the Medici family, the various offices were corrupted for political and carnal gain.

The other political entity was the *Holy Roman Empire* [HRE], ruled by a Habsburg. Charles V. The Papacy mandated (1356) that the Emperor had to be elected by at least four of seven *Electors*, with gratuities. This allowed the church and specific nobles to regulate the power and efficacy of the HRE. Charles V ruled over most of Europe and the entire “New World” apart from Brazil, but despite the legacy of Charlemagne and other predecessors, the HRE was diminishing in consequence. This was due to the lack of nationalism (since it consisted of a collective many former sovereign states) that neighbouring countries possessed, coupled with the inability to substantially raise taxes or military, diseconomy of size, and the increasing rebellions from separatism and Islamic territories. In addition, Luther and Protestantism also destabilised the balance of power for the church (as parishioners were abandoning financially, and later attacking militantly), which Charles politically (and morally?) felt obliged to support. As a consequence, Charles V ‘invited’ Luther to the address the *Diet of Worms* (1521), guaranteeing his safety, to address (recant) his theological persuasions (and protect the political force of the RC church, the endorser of the HRE)¹⁷.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the restrictions of the scope of this essay prevent a better exposition of the interconnectivity of the influence of Luther’s *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Theologically, it had greater ramifications than the two previous recent works¹⁸, however was not as controversial socio-politically. It was however “the last straw” for the RC church and HRE, who would not allow further attacks on the Popery. Collectively, the Lord used Luther’s works (and others) to ignite the *Protestant Reformation* changing Civilisation and restoring the Church (directly for Protestants and indirectly for RC, through the Counter Reformation). This has become the continual declaration of the Reformed church¹⁹ - *Ecclesia semper reformanda [est]*.

¹⁶ Senators became “bishops”. Law courts became “basilicas”. Roman Emperor title *Pontifex Maximus* was embraced by Popes. Of course it ruled from Rome and was a “universal” (catholic) church.

¹⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided, 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004). 131.

¹⁸ *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (18 August 1520) and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (6 October 1520)

¹⁹ Quoting Karl Barth, allegedly from Augustin of Hippo, *the church must always be reformed*.

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Soli Deo Gloria. Amen.