

# Luther's Call to Action:

A Consideration of *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*

Passional Christi  
Christo eine Dornenkronen man bereit't—



und Antichristi.  
Von Gold der Papst drei Kronen treyt.



WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY  
A Symposium on Martin Luther's 1520 Treatises

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# JESUS<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door in Wittenberg. The Lutheran Reformation was off and running, and the rest was history. But not so fast! Those theses were written in Latin by a gifted, rising, but still largely unknown German monk for scholars to debate the church's teaching on indulgences. After five hundred years, that incident does not seem to be an event epic enough to move the foundations of Western Civilization. Indeed, after those five centuries, many who follow Luther would not even agree with many of the statements he fixed to the door that day.<sup>2</sup> So why has history crowned that event with such significance? It was the beginning.

The beginning of the Reformation can be traced to that event as Luther was vaulted to global fame in a matter of weeks (which was a short time in those days), but that movement had a long way to go before it would truly shake the world. Luther continued to grow and develop in his understanding of theology as he studied the Scriptures more and more. As he did, he continued to teach and preach and write. He found an audience that grew along with him and was eager to devour his evangelical insights as quickly as he could produce them. As more people were touched by the gospel that, by the grace of God, Luther had restored to its place of prominence, the impact of that gospel could not be ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a monastic tradition, Luther often began his writings and letters with the name "Jesus," especially early in his career. It would seem this practice was a prayer for assistance as well as a dedication of sorts. He began *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* in that fashion, and it seemed fitting to begin this essay the same way. Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) 264 n. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Examples might include thesis 17, "It seems necessary that, for souls in purgatory, as the horror decreases so love increases," and thesis 26, "The pope does best in that he grants remission to souls [in purgatory] not by 'the power of the keys,' which he does not possess [here], but 'by way of intercession.'" Wengert, *Annotated Luther*, 37.

The Reformation began in 1517 at the door of the Castle Church, but it truly began to mature a few years later as Luther produced an incredible number of books, treatises, and pamphlets. His output from 1520 was especially impressive, not just because he wrote so much over such a short time, but the insight of the content he produced stands out to this day. It is the task of this symposium to consider some of the works Luther produced that year. In six months' time, from June to November of 1520, Luther published, in addition to other material, the *Treatise on Good Works*, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Each played an important role in allowing the Reformation to blossom under God's providential hand.

This essay will focus on *To the Christian Nobility*. It will begin with a consideration of the historical background, focusing primarily on the events that immediately preceded the publication of these works. This section of the paper will set the stage for a review of all the treatises to be discussed at this symposium. It will then give an overview of the treatise itself. Finally, it will conclude with seeking to answer the question of why this treatise is still talked about, and worthy of consideration at this symposium, five hundred years after it was published.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE TREATISES

Before a person can properly wrestle with these treatises of Luther, he must understand the setting for these writings. From the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* until the *Treatise on Good Works* was published, less than three years had passed. But in that short span of time, a great deal had taken place in the events surrounding Luther. He was also growing in his own development as a theologian and reformer. To see that, one need only compare the way Luther wrote and the topics he chose to deal with in the Theses to those he explored in these treatises.

For example, Luther would never have included in his Theses some of the things he said about the pope in these treatises. So, what had happened to bring about such a change?

### **Theological Factors**

After the dramatic beginning of the Reformation in 1517, it can be tempting to jump to the heroic scene of Luther standing before the emperor at Worms in 1521. But many of the events in between these two milestones were important in shaping Luther's person and theology that shone through in the treatises of 1520.

In 1518, the Imperial Diet was meeting in Augsburg.<sup>3</sup> While the princes haggled with Emperor Maximilian about many things, Cardinal Thomas Cajetan was in attendance as a representative of the pope. He had work to do at the Diet on behalf of Rome. But once the Diet had ended, he was to deal with the problematic monk from Wittenberg. When Luther appeared before Cajetan, he was finally facing a man who was a direct representative of the pope and a bright and respected theologian in his own right. But in addition, Cajetan was also the man who had played a leading role in the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517), during which he worked to bring about a decree that the pope's authority was truly superior to any church council.<sup>4</sup> In his meeting with Luther, Cajetan took a fatherly tone. But the threat of seizure by force with death to follow was very real, and Cajetan and Luther both knew it.

The cardinal expected the exchange to be swift and decisive in his favor, but Luther succeeded in drawing him into a theological discussion. It did not take long to reach the critical

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<sup>3</sup> The Diet was the regular meeting of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire. The estates of the Empire consisted of the Electors, the princes, and the imperial cities as they met with the emperor. It was the vehicle for discussion and negotiation within the Empire, but not truly a legislative body. In Augsburg, the demand from Rome for more money and support was an important point. That topic was nothing new, and it would be something Luther addressed in his writings, especially in *To the Christian Nobility*. For a more detailed summary of the Diet of Augsburg in 1518, cf. Sam Wellman, *Frederick the Wise: Seen and Unseen Lives of Martin Luther's Protector* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 2015), p 176-179 and Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Viking 2017), 140-144.

<sup>4</sup> Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 142.

issue: the authority of the pope versus the authority of the Scriptures or a council of the church.<sup>5</sup> Cajetan pointed to papal decrees and insisted the pope had every right to authorize indulgences and govern church affairs. Luther responded that any human source could make mistakes, and so God speaking in Scripture must remain the authority on such matters. He asked the cardinal to show him his error based on the words of Scripture. After the exchange reached the third day with no resolution,<sup>6</sup> it became clear to Luther that the cardinal cared far more about maintaining the supremacy of church decrees than anything Scripture said. A few months later, after he was safely back in Wittenberg, Luther wrote to his friend Wenceslaus Linck, “I think I can demonstrate that today Rome is worse than the Turk.”<sup>7</sup>

A second important theological development occurred as Luther debated Johannes Eck at Leipzig in 1519. Luther’s support and popularity had been growing since he posted the Theses, but opposition grew as well.<sup>8</sup> Although his relationship with Luther was friendly at its beginning, it did not take long for Eck to become one of Luther’s bitterest adversaries. This feud played out in print until the Leipzig Debate in 1519.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Luther’s safe return from Augsburg was not a forgone conclusion. Elector Frederick worked to secure promises of safe passage from the emperor and the cardinal because he clearly had his doubts about their intentions. After Luther was dismissed on the third day of meeting with Cajetan, he waited for a time to be summoned again. As time dragged on, it seemed more likely that he would be seized. Indeed, the doors to the city had been locked presumably to prevent him from leaving. After almost a week of waiting, Luther “escaped,” most likely being let out of a small gate in the wall under the cover of darkness. There he mounted a horse and was guided on a forty-mile journey that night with forty-five miles more waiting for him the next day. When he reached Nuremberg, he was shown a copy of the pope’s guidance to Cajetan which instructed that reconciliation with the church was possible for Luther only if he recanted. If not, send Luther bound to Rome. What prevented this action and why it was not carried out soon after will be treated under the section of *Political Factors* in this essay. For further details on these events, cf. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1990), 78-85 and Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 152-157.

<sup>7</sup> Kittelson, *Luther*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> After the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, this trend of support picked up speed as Luther continued to add more substance to his evangelical teaching. Both Martin Bucer and Johannes Brenz joined Luther after Heidelberg. Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> The *Ninety-Five Theses* were the turning point in their relationship. Eck’s clever response to Luther was entitled *Obelisks*. This term was taken from typography and referred to a small dagger-shaped mark placed in the margin of a text to mark that text as one of spurious origin. Not to be outdone in wit, Luther’s gave his riposte the

Although Andreas Karlstadt, Luther's university colleague, began the debate against Eck, all were waiting for Luther's turn at the rostrum. The debate was supposed to center on the question of indulgences as well as touch on purgatory, sin, and grace. But Eck also included one thesis on the primacy of Rome, which was a direct challenge to an underlying, but unstated, note in Luther's previous writings. Eck stated that it was divine right, not human invention or arrangement, that placed the bishop of Rome in his place of prominence and authority in the church. It had never been Luther's intention to debate the authority of the pope, councils, or canon law. Eck forced the issue, however, by tacking on a single thesis to this debate.<sup>10</sup> In many ways, this issue of authority defined the debate.

The two disputants could not have approached this issue more differently. Eck largely quoted canon law<sup>11</sup> and took every opportunity to associate Luther with Jan Hus.<sup>12</sup> Luther countered with the argument that the primacy of Rome could not be found in Scripture, and so it

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title *Asterisks*. This term also referred to a marginal note in a text which pointed to sections that were especially valuable. They were the opposite of an obelisk, and that title was fitting as Luther argued for the authority of Scripture over against Aristotle and the unquestioned authority of the pope. For a fuller treatment of this exchange, cf. Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 129-130.

<sup>10</sup> Luther considered this tactic underhanded, and it angered him that Eck had done it. He had not intended to speak publicly on the topic of papal authority because he knew how provocative it could be. He would have been eager to avoid unnecessarily raising further controversy after the close call in Augsburg and based on a tentative agreement he had made with Karl von Miltitz, another emissary from Rome, in a meeting they had in January of 1519. Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 157-166.

<sup>11</sup> Canon law was the collection of regulations from ancient church councils and was considered authoritative in the Roman church. It had been assembled and synthesized by Gratian of Bologna, a monk and teacher from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. A number of additional papal bulls and council decrees had been added in the centuries following Gratian. Richard J. Serina Jr., "After Canons, Councils, and Popes: The Implication of Luther's Leipzig Debate for Lutheran Ecclesiology" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* Volume 83, no. 3-4 (July/October 2019): 201.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Hus (c.1372-1415) was the Bohemian reformer who was declared a heretic and, after an imprisonment of seven months, was executed at the Council of Constance although he had been promised safe conduct by the emperor. Luther certainly felt some sympathy for Hus and recognized more than a few similarities between what Hus had said and his own writings. Make no mistake, the memory of what happened at Constance was very much still on the minds of those in the Germany of Luther's day. Luther even identified himself with what he viewed as the prophetic words of Hus spoken shortly before he died, "Holy Johannes Hus prophesied about me when he wrote from his Bohemian prison that they might now be roasting a goose (for Hus means goose), but in a hundred years they will hear a swan sing, which they will not be able to silence." Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, Translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image Books, 1992), 55.

had to be a human arrangement. As a result, it was not a binding doctrine of the church. He corrected his opponent when Eck included a few medieval forgeries in his proofs from canon law. Luther also quoted a well-known doctor of canon law in support of his own argument, as he repeated frequently, “For in matters concerning the faith even the statement of one private person could be preferred to that of the pope, if the former were inspired by better reasons and authorities.”<sup>13</sup> At one point in the debate, Luther addressed the crowd and began to speak in German because he feared he was being misunderstood by the people who had come to observe. As part of that vernacular interlude, he included this thought: “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it. As for the pope’s decretal on indulgences I say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture.”<sup>14</sup> For Luther, popes and councils were human and fallible, and, as “creatures of the Word,” they were subject to the correction of the Word.<sup>15</sup>

What were the results of this debate when the dust settled? Both sides claimed victory, but Luther enjoyed more lasting and far-reaching fruits of victory as his fame, as well as the number of his supporters, continued to grow. These words provide a summary of the significance of the Leipzig debate, and they hint at some reasons as to why the rift between Luther and the church was only growing wider to which the debate bore clear witness.

What is of greatest importance in this Leipzig disputation is that because he was in a debate, Luther said things he would likely never have said in another context. He felt compelled to respond to whatever falsehoods were being put forward and to win, and this forced him into territory he wouldn’t have treaded on if he had been given a choice. But in the heat of battle, he took some new and shocking theological positions from which he could never again retreat. He came out decisively for the idea that the Bible must supersede the church, which came to be known as the idea of *Sola scriptura*. He also derided the doctrine of purgatory, asking where in the Bible it could be found. These were dangerous and provocative stands that no one had any idea he would take—not least

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<sup>13</sup> Serina, “After Canons,” 204. A thought similar to this quote appeared also in *To the Christian Nobility*.

<sup>14</sup> Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 176.

<sup>15</sup> Serina, “After Canons,” 199.

himself—when two years earlier the subject of indulgences first prompted him to write his *Ninety-Five Theses*. He was somehow being compelled to expose more and more of the rickety underpinnings of some church doctrines, and as a loyal son of the church he felt and indeed knew that to speak these truths, he was doing the Holy Church a great service. And he was sure that God was pushing him forward as he did so. But would the church leaders ever see it that way?<sup>16</sup>

Following the events at Leipzig, Luther felt that the chains were finally removed. Part of the reason for this feeling of freedom, it would seem, was the growing sense that the church had truly entered into the Last Days. A big part of this realization came from Luther's developing understanding on what Scripture taught about the Antichrist. He began to express his thoughts first privately in letters.<sup>17</sup> Then in June 1520, Luther makes the claim in print for the first time that the papacy might have already been revealed as the Antichrist. In his response to Augustine Alfeld,<sup>18</sup> a monk from Leipzig, entitled *On the Papacy in Rome against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig*,<sup>19</sup> Luther stated he is ready to label the papacy as, “the true Antichrist of which all Scripture speaks,” and called it the “scarlet whore of Babylon.”<sup>20</sup> With this piece of prophetic fulfillment beginning to fall into place, Luther felt the time for the world was very

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<sup>16</sup> Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Luther first mentioned his thoughts to Wenceslaus Linck in a letter on December 18, 1518. This letter can be found in WA Br 1:270, 11-14. He repeated his thoughts a few months later to Spalatin. That letter can be found in LW 48:114.

<sup>18</sup> Luther hardly considered Alfeld a worthy opponent. He chose not to respond to him initially but delegated his reply to a teaching assistant. When Alfeld persisted and printed a work in German which would have had greater impact among the common people, Luther responded with *On the Papacy in Rome*. In Alfeld's writing, Luther felt all of his opponents (e.g. Eck, Cajetan, etc.) were hiding behind this inferior opponent and attacking him “as the Pharisees attacked Christ. They put up somebody thinking, ‘If he wins, we have all won; but if he loses, he alone is defeated.’” LW 39:56.

<sup>19</sup> This work can be found in LW 39:49-104.

<sup>20</sup> LW 39:102. It is true that Luther is speaking conditionally in this writing, and he spoke that way in several works after this one, including *To the Christian Nobility*. He is not ready to make this charge as boldly and clearly as he did in the Smalcald Articles, but it seems he is becoming more convinced of this truth himself. He also felt compelled to raise the question and speak the warnings he does already in 1520. As this conviction grew, it seemed to Luther that the return of Christ must be imminent.

short. Thus, he felt compelled to speak, as he flat out said in *To the Christian Nobility*, “The time for silence is past, and the time to speak has come.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Political Factors**

It would be a mistake to think that it was only Luther’s theological development that brought him to the point of producing the important works of 1520. The hand of God’s providence was also at work in the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire to allow Luther to take the next steps forward in what would come to be called the Reformation. The structure of the Empire itself played an important part. The emperor served as the head of state, but his powers were quite limited. As a result, there was no true centralized government as there was in France or England at the time. This vacuum of central authority left the princes of each territory with a great deal of power and independence within their own borders. The Diet, the regular meeting of the Imperial estates, was a cumbersome body and could only meet for a limited length of time.<sup>22</sup> As such, it could not effectively govern the affairs of state. Roland Bainton offered this summary of the Empire as Luther found it in his day.

Germany was segmented into small and overlapping jurisdictions of princes and bishops. The free cities twinkled in the murky way of entangling alliances. The knights were a restive class seeking to arrest the waning of their power, and the peasants were likewise restive because desirous of a political role commensurate with their economic importance. No government, and no class, was able to weld Germany into one.<sup>23</sup>

What was the result of this political environment? “Dismembered and retarded [in her national development], she was derided by the Italians and treated by the papacy as a private cow.

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<sup>21</sup> LW 44:123. Consider in addition these words from *To the Christian Nobility*. “[The abuse of the Roman church (and the conditions it produced especially in Germany)] has even compelled me now at this time to cry aloud that God may inspire someone with his Spirit to lend a helping hand to this distressed and wretched nation... With God’s help I intend to expose the wiles and wickedness of those men, so that they are shown up for what they are and may never again be so obstructive and destructive.” LW 44:124-125.

<sup>22</sup> Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany: The Reformation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 49-50.

<sup>23</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 122.

Resentment against Rome was more intense than in countries where national governments curbed papal exploitation.”<sup>24</sup>

Within the complicated structure of the Empire, there were powerful princes that fostered Luther’s work and protected it from Rome’s interference. None of those supporters was more important than Frederick the Wise.<sup>25</sup> As one of the seven electors of the Empire, Frederick not only ruled a strong and significant territory, but gaining his favor or provoking his displeasure could also mean the difference between victory and defeat in Imperial politics. Especially after Leipzig, support for Luther among those in power grew. For example, he received expressions of support and even offers of protection from men like Ulrich von Hutten, Franz von Sickingen, and Sylvester von Schaumberg.<sup>26</sup> The knowledge that he was not without support would certainly have been important to Luther at this critical point in the events of his life. It must have added to his courage as well since he began to speak even more boldly as he took his next steps forward in the midst of such uncertain circumstances.

One important event that dare not be overlooked at this critical point in Luther’s life that allowed him the freedom to develop his thoughts and communicate them so boldly was the death of the Emperor Maximilian on January 12, 1519. Why was this event so significant? “No one in power in all of Europe would talk of anything for months except for the election of the new Holy

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<sup>24</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 122.

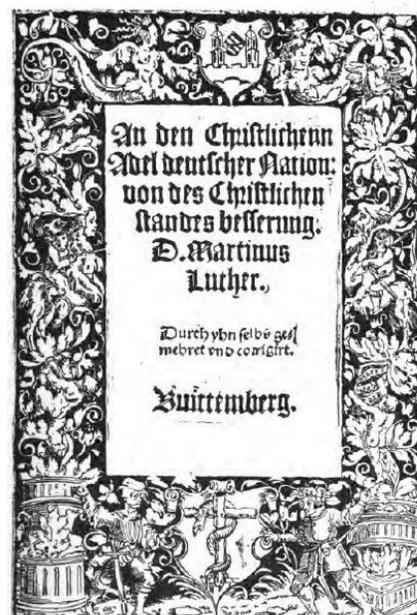
<sup>25</sup> For an example of Frederick’s wisdom and importance, one need only look at the Diet of Augsburg in 1518. He “stood like a wall” against pressure from both the pope and the emperor as he made sure to end any talk of a new crusade against the Turks. In addition, he thwarted an end run around the law to appoint prematurely the emperor’s grandson, Charles, as his successor. In doing so, Frederick’s own importance only increased as both the pope and emperor very much wanted him on their respective sides in the next Imperial election, which seemed soon to follow. As the debate was wrapping up, it was again the work of Frederick to arrange the meeting between Luther and Cajetan with assurances of safe conduct. This single event should be enough to show what a vital role Frederick played in the events of the Reformation. However, if one wanted a fuller treatment of his importance, one might want to consider the book by Sam Wellman. Wellman, *Frederick the Wise*, 176-181.

<sup>26</sup> These men are among the lesser nobles and knights, but they are examples of how more people were coming forward in open support of Luther. Martin W. Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, Translated by James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 370.

Roman Emperor. The Luther affair seemed to evaporate.”<sup>27</sup> Luther, who was almost seized in Augsburg only months earlier, now enjoyed a respite from the attention of Rome. The pope could not afford to anger Frederick, which pushing the issue of Luther would be sure to do. The pope was forced to back off if he wanted Frederick on his side when it came to choosing a successor to the Imperial crown that would be to Rome’s advantage. As the heat from Rome cooled, Luther was free to write with the increasing boldness evident in his works from 1520.

*OVERVIEW OF TO THE CHRISTIAN NOBILITY OF THE GERMAN NATION  
CONCERNING THE REFORM OF THE CHRISTIAN ESTATE*<sup>28</sup>

When it comes to the treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, the first question one must answer is why Luther chose to write to the nobility about taking steps to reform the church. Luther specifically referred to Emperor Charles in his opening words,<sup>29</sup> but with this treatise he was addressing all the estates of the German Nation, i.e. the Holy Roman Empire, as represented in the Diet. Luther felt compelled to write to the nobility because the church was simply not interested in reforming itself. In addition, he felt the nobility had every right to step in and work for change because they too were royal priests and, due to their vocation as leaders in the Empire, might be able to assist in bringing about much-needed change.<sup>30</sup>



<sup>27</sup> Wellman, *Frederick the Wise*, 187.

<sup>28</sup> For any who might be curious, the title in German is *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung*.

<sup>29</sup> LW 44:124.

<sup>30</sup> Luther’s justification for thinking this way is rooted in Scripture’s teaching on the priesthood of all believers and should become evident as the summary of this treatise moves forward. Erling Teigen, “Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: Luther and the Papacy,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Volume 58 no. 1 (March 2018): 12.

However, it would also seem Luther had the people in mind as he wrote *To the Christian Nobility*. He wrote this treatise in German which meant it was accessible to many more readers than it would have been had he chosen to write it in Latin. He also knew that many of the concerns he touched on in this work were on the hearts and minds of many people. As such, it was well-received from the time it was printed. Many of the leaders and people alike saw Luther associating himself with their cause and giving eloquent voice to many of the long-standing grievances they had with the abuses, especially financial abuses, they had too often seen in the church.<sup>31</sup>

Following his opening remarks, Luther organized the treatise into three sections. The first section discussed the three walls “the Romanists have cleverly built ... around themselves.”<sup>32</sup> Then he went on to discuss many grievances held against the church. The middle section of the treatise handled “the matters which ought to be properly dealt with in councils.”<sup>33</sup> The final section offered twenty-seven “propositions for the improvement of this dreadful state of affairs ... what could and should be done, either by the temporal authority or by a general council.”<sup>34</sup>

### **“The Three Walls”**

The first section is the most well-known, and it is easy to understand why. The metaphor of the three walls is a picture that is a simple one to grasp. That Luther chose three walls was not just a coincidence. Rather it would seem he is making a clever reference to ancient mythology. For the Greeks, Tartarus was the lowest region of the underworld, and it was surrounded by three

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<sup>31</sup> Even if some were not eager to grab hold of all the theological points put forward here, they were eager to support Luther and what he said because he was finally exposing the greed in the church which had caused so many problems. This growing base of support meant a great deal since the attention of Rome and many leaders was beginning to return to the matter of this German monk after the election of Charles V. Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 127.

<sup>32</sup> LW 44:126.

<sup>33</sup> LW 44:139.

<sup>34</sup> LW 44:156.

walls. This “hell” was a place where the defeated challengers of the gods were sent for punishment. This allusion is not only an indicator of what Luther thought of his opponents in the church, but it is also another reminder of how he felt he needed to speak out because the souls of so many were at stake.<sup>35</sup>

More importantly, Luther used the picture of the walls to allude to the account of the battle of Jericho,<sup>36</sup> which he clearly stated, “May God help us, and give us just one of those trumpets with which the walls of Jericho were overthrown to blast down these walls of straw and paper in the same way.”<sup>37</sup> But far from a call to arms or revolution, Luther wanted “to lead the people into the biblical narrative in which God delivers Jericho to the Israelites as they act in obedience to his direction. It was not the Israelites’ mighty blowing of trumpets that knocked down the walls of the city, but God’s power.”<sup>38</sup> He used the rhetorical device of the three walls in connection with the biblical account as a way to remind his audience there was more at stake here than money or power. There was a need to act because souls were in the balance. The whole reason the church constructed these walls in the first place was to immunize itself against reform.<sup>39</sup> Luther knew that approach needed to change.

Luther summarized the first wall the Romanists had constructed around themselves this way: “When pressed by the temporal power they have made decrees and declared that the temporal power had no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the temporal.”<sup>40</sup> Such a claim meant there was no authority from which one could

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Pietsch, “Dangerous Political Propaganda or Passionate Prophetic Speech?: An Alternate Reading of Luther’s 1520 Treatise ‘To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate,’” *Lutheran Theological Journal*, Volume 48 no. 2 (August 2014): 68.

<sup>36</sup> Joshua 6:20 (NIV).

<sup>37</sup> LW 44:127.

<sup>38</sup> Pietsch, “Dangerous Political Propaganda,” 72.

<sup>39</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 370.

<sup>40</sup> LW 44:126.

legitimately correct the papacy when it fell from the truth. Luther had been hearing such claims trumpeted by his opponents for years, but now he took the opportunity to challenge their claims.

Luther based his challenge of this first wall on Scripture's teaching of the priesthood of all believers. This priesthood began at baptism.

Since those who exercise secular authority have been baptized with the same baptism, and have the same faith and the same gospel as the rest of us, we must admit that they are priests and bishops and we must regard their office as one that has a proper and useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope.<sup>41</sup>

What did Luther mean by this priesthood? “We are all one body of Christ the Head, and all members of one another.” He goes on to explain that more fully. “A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another.”<sup>42</sup> For Luther, the priesthood was a status before God for each believer, given at baptism, that carried a responsibility to serve others. For these priests, the Lord will give unique opportunities to serve others as they carry out their various vocations as royal priests to the glory of God.

To back up his claim, Luther pointed to Scripture. He specifically referenced the following passages. The first two are quite similar and emphasize the unity God's people have in the body of Christ. “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each

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<sup>41</sup> LW 44:129.

<sup>42</sup> LW 44:130. Perhaps some have heard the quote, alleged to be from Luther, “The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” That quote would seem to be one of those sayings Luther never said, at least not in those words. However, some of the thoughts in that quote are like the thoughts Luther expressed here.

member belongs to all the others.” (Romans 12:4-5) And, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free.” (1 Corinthians 12:12)

The third passage speaks of the identity believers have as royal priests and what it means to live as one. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9)<sup>43</sup> Priests are to serve others from their place in the body of Christ, especially as they declare the praises of God in all they say and do.

When speaking in the context of these three walls, Luther was asking the princes as Christians to speak up against the abuses of the church and demand change. He was not doing this to curry favor or to turn the church over to the princes. Rather he had reached a theological decision based on his study of Scripture. So, what did that mean? If all Christians are chosen to be royal priests and if those who hold offices in the church do so because they have been appointed from among the community of priests to serve their fellow priests with the Word, then those who were not considered part of the ecclesiastical estate were elevated tremendously from their previous status. In effect, the distinction between clergy and laity disappeared along with any idea of a divinely mandated hierarchy.<sup>44</sup> There was not a shred of support from Scripture that would allow the Romanists to make such a claim. In truth, it was contrary to what Scripture said.<sup>45</sup> Luther knew the ecclesiastical estate had not been able to reform the church because it had simply not been willing to make the attempt. So now that change had to come from the royal

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<sup>43</sup> Luther also referred to this passage as an example of how God has declared his people to be royal priests: “With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9b-10)

<sup>44</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 371.

<sup>45</sup> Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 126.

priesthood of believers, and he was calling on the nobility to begin that work of change.<sup>46</sup> Luther was calling on the emperor and the princes, as Christians who belonged to the priesthood of believers, to hold those in the church accountable because those who had power to bring about reform “have a duty to act where the ecclesiastical authorities are unwilling to do what is right.”<sup>47</sup>

As Luther brought this teaching of Scripture back into the light, it was incredibly freeing for all who were part of the temporal estate. Now that those in the ecclesiastical estate, including the pope, were no longer placed on an unreachable pedestal, all would be subject to the same law. All could be criticized and judged by the same standard. For Luther, it was clear the standard all should follow was Scripture, which he had quoted and referenced several times already in this work. Now that the first wall had fallen, there was a path forward to bring about change.

The second wall dealt directly with the standard of Scripture. Luther stated the claim of the Romanists this way:

The second wall is still more loosely built and less substantial. The Romanists want to be the only masters of Holy Scripture, although they never learn a thing from the Bible all their life long. They assume the sole authority for themselves, and, quite unashamed, they play about with the words before our very eyes, trying to persuade us that the pope cannot err in matters of faith, regardless of whether he is righteous or wicked. Yet they cannot point to a single letter.<sup>48</sup>

The teaching of papal infallibility was not defined as an official doctrine of the Roman church until the First Vatican Council.<sup>49</sup> So why did Luther attack it here? Although it did not become officially defined until 1870, papal infallibility had been discussed in the church since the

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<sup>46</sup> Teigen, “Address,” 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> LW 44:133.

<sup>49</sup> Serina, “After Canons,” 204.

fourteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Even more so, Luther's opponents often threw this claim back at him when he appealed to the authority of Scripture over popes or councils. Sylvester Prierias<sup>51</sup> had argued in his attack on the *Ninety-Five Theses*, "whoever does not rely on the teaching of the Roman church and the supreme pontiff as an infallible rule of faith, from which even Holy Scripture draws its vigor and authority, is a heretic."<sup>52</sup> Luther knew that this wall must be toppled if he were to succeed in making his case.

How did Luther attack the second wall? He once again returned to Scripture and built upon the truth of the priesthood of all believers that he had established in his assault on the first wall. Here are a few examples of how he refuted the claim of the Romanists. "Since these Romanists think the Holy Spirit never leaves them, no matter how ignorant and wicked they are, they become bold and decree only what they want. And if what they claim were true, why have Holy Scripture at all? Of what use is Scripture? Let us burn the Scripture and be satisfied with the unlearned gentlemen at Rome who possess the Holy Spirit!"<sup>53</sup> He quoted Scripture directly.

But so as not to fight them with mere words, we will quote the Scriptures. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 [:30], 'If something better is revealed to anyone, though he is already sitting and listening to another in God's word, then the one who is speaking shall hold his peace and give place.' What would be the point of this commandment if we were compelled to believe only the man who is talking, or the man who is at the top?<sup>54</sup>

He also showed that what he had said earlier about all Christians being priests and equal to each other connected to what he was saying here, and he showed how both claims were consistent with what Scripture taught.

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<sup>50</sup> LW 44:133 n. 31.

<sup>51</sup> Sylvester Mazzolini, from the town of Priero in northwest Italy, was a Dominican, the order that was started to protect church doctrine. He was also an entrenched Thomistic scholar. At the Vatican, he held the title "commissioner of the Sacred Palace" which meant he served as an inquisitor and censor of books for Rome. He was tasked with responding to Luther. He boasted that it only took him three days to respond with his *Dialogue* to this arrogant German monk. Metaxas, *Luther*, 132-133.

<sup>52</sup> Wengert, *Annotated Luther*, 387 n. 25.

<sup>53</sup> LW 44:133-134.

<sup>54</sup> LW 44:134.

If we are all priests, as was said above, and all have one faith, one gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in matters of faith? What becomes of Paul's words in I Corinthians 2 [:15], "A spiritual man judges all things, yet he is judged by no one"? And II Corinthians 4 [:13], "We all have one spirit of faith"? Why, then, should not we perceive what is consistent with faith and what is not, just as well as an unbelieving pope does? We ought to become bold and free on the authority of all these texts, and many others. We ought not allow the Spirit of freedom (as Paul calls him [II Cor. 3:17]) to be frightened off by the fabrications of the popes, but we ought to march boldly forward and test all that they do, or leave undone, by our believing understanding of the Scriptures.<sup>55</sup>

Once the first wall had fallen and the pope was no longer above the reach of criticism, the second wall fell easily.

That was the case with the third wall as well. "The Romanists have no basis in Scripture for their claim that the pope alone has the right to call or confirm a council," Luther wrote.<sup>56</sup>

Again he did not choose to address this topic out of the blue. Canon law made such statements repeatedly. In addition, Prierias had recently advanced this claim against him, when he said, "When there is one undisputed pontiff, it belongs to him alone to call a council," and that "the decrees of councils neither bind nor constrain unless they are confirmed by the authority of the Roman pontiff."<sup>57</sup> Again it was a claim Luther had to address, but he confidently stated, "The third wall falls of itself when the first two are down."<sup>58</sup>

Luther attacked this wall also with Scripture. He began by appealing to Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18 where he spoke about dealing with a brother caught in sin.<sup>59</sup> Luther explained, "Here every member is commanded to care for every other. How much more should we do this

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<sup>55</sup> LW 44:135.

<sup>56</sup> LW 44:136.

<sup>57</sup> Wengert, *Annotated Luther*, 390 n. 27.

<sup>58</sup> LW 44:136.

<sup>59</sup> Luther specifically quoted Matthew 18:15-17, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. <sup>16</sup> But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' <sup>17</sup> If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

when the member that does evil is responsible for the government of the church, and by his evil-doing is the cause of much harm and offense to the rest!”<sup>60</sup> He also recognized that the vehicle available to the church to call its leaders to repentance was a council. “But if I am to accuse him before the church, I must naturally call the church together.”<sup>61</sup> He then used the Council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 to prove his point. Peter, whom the Romanists claimed was the first pope and leader of the church at the time, was not the one to call that council. Rather it had been the apostles and elders together. He also pointed to the Council of Nicaea as an example of the early church fathers following the pattern established at Jerusalem in Acts 15. Indeed, each of the first four ecumenical councils followed that pattern, and no one called those gatherings heretical or invalid.<sup>62</sup> As a result, Luther concluded,

Therefore, when necessity demands it, and the pope is an offense to Christendom, the first man who is able should, as a true member of the whole body, do what he can to bring about a truly free council. No one can do this so well as the temporal authorities, especially since they are also fellow-Christians, fellow-priests, fellow-members of the spiritual estate, fellow-lords over all things.<sup>63</sup>

### *Gravamina*

In the next two sections of the treatise, Luther dealt with the same topic in slightly different ways. He spoke on the *gravamina* that the Empire had put forth against Rome. *Gravamina* is the Latin word for “grievances.” These grievances had been a constant at virtually every meeting of the Imperial Diet since the middle of the fifteenth century. They had also been a topic for discussion as recently as the Diet of Augsburg in 1518.<sup>64</sup> Many of these grievances dealt with the financial fleecing of the German people by the church of Rome and had been a

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<sup>60</sup> LW 44:136.

<sup>61</sup> LW 44:136.

<sup>62</sup> LW 44:136-137. The first four ecumenical councils were Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). Rather than being considered heretical, Luther referred to them as “the most Christian of all.”

<sup>63</sup> LW 44:137.

<sup>64</sup> Wengert, *Annotated Luther*, 371.

source of complaint for some time. Part of the reason Luther's attack on indulgences had found such eager ears in Germany was that so many felt those indulgences were just another way for Rome to siphon large amounts of money to itself away from its favorite cow.<sup>65</sup> In grabbing hold of these *gravamina*, Luther joined in the long tradition of critics of the church, and even some of his enemies agreed it was necessary to address certain wrongs Luther was bringing to light.<sup>66</sup>

How did Luther arrive at the list of grievances he tackled in this treatise? Had he just copied the *gravamina* from the last Diet? Had others told him what they wanted him to fix? A direct external source would seem to be unlikely because it is hard to find any one source that matches the list of items Luther addressed here. He would certainly have known of the *gravamina* brought to the Diet of Augsburg. He had also been involved in ongoing arguments on many of these topics with his opponents over the previous years. In addition, he had been wrestling personally with his own theological development while at the same time serving as preacher and teacher and counselor to any number of people on a wide variety of issues. In mixing his own reflection and experience with the information he gathered from other sources and the discussions he had with colleagues and opponents alike, it would seem Luther made up his own mind when he formed the list of grievances he was calling the nobility to act upon.<sup>67</sup>

### **“The Matters Which Ought to be Properly Dealt with in Councils”**

In the second section, Luther pointed to problems he wanted a council to address. He offered three specific targets which all had to do with the pope and his extended administration in the church. First Luther wrote about the wealth and pretension surrounding the pope, “It is

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<sup>65</sup> As mentioned above by Bainton. Cf. n. 22.

<sup>66</sup> Duke George, Luther's harsh critic and staunch opponent who ruled Albertine Saxony at the time, was one of those enemies who found himself agreeing with many of the points Luther made in *To the Christian Nobility*. He did not want the treatise printed in his lands (however, it was on two separate occasions), but he recognized some of the abuses Luther articulated. He blamed the greed of Rome for those abuses, and he also felt a council may be necessary to check the abuses and improve the conditions in the church. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 376-377.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

horrible and shocking to see the head of Christendom, who boasts that he is the vicar of Christ and successor of St. Peter, going about in such a worldly and ostentatious style that neither king nor emperor can equal or approach him. He claims the title of ‘most holy’ and ‘most spiritual,’ and yet he is more worldly than the world itself.”<sup>68</sup> Next Luther attacked the cardinals and how they served primarily to accumulate land and wealth for the church. “Of what use to Christendom are those people called cardinals? I shall tell you. Italy and Germany have many rich monasteries, foundations, benefices, and livings.<sup>69</sup> No better way has been discovered of bringing all these to Rome than by creating cardinals and giving them bishoprics, monasteries, and prelacies for their own use and so overthrowing the worship of God.”<sup>70</sup> In his third point, Luther took issue with the size of the Roman curia, which again seemed to exist for the sole purpose of finding ways to bring money to the church. “If ninety-nine per cent of the papal court were abolished and only one per cent kept, it would still be large enough to give answers in matters of faith ... There are so many offices that one could scarcely count them. These are all the people lying in wait for the endowments and benefices of Germany as wolves lie in wait for the sheep.”<sup>71</sup>

After raising those three points, Luther challenged the basis for the church’s actions. It was obvious there was no legal foundation for what they were doing, and that included any basis in the church’s own canon law.

I do not at the moment complain that God’s command and Christian law are despised at Rome, for the state of Christendom is such—Rome in particular—that we may not complain of such exalted matters now. Nor am I complaining that natural law, or secular law, or even reason count for nothing. My complaint goes deeper than that. I complain

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<sup>68</sup> LW 44:139.

<sup>69</sup> Luther mentioned several practices and institutions from the church of his day that may be unfamiliar. Appendix B on p. 38 offers a brief glossary of these ecclesiastical terms.

<sup>70</sup> LW 44:141.

<sup>71</sup> LW 44:142-143.

that the Romanists do not keep their own self-devised canon law, though it is in fact just tyranny, avarice, and temporal splendor rather than law.<sup>72</sup>

It was the greed of Rome that drove their actions and lengthened the list of abuses. Luther began to call it the “Roman See of avarice and greed” and repeatedly referred to it as “Avarice” throughout the rest of this section.<sup>73</sup> He then gave several examples from the church of his day of the practices “Avarice” had established for the purpose of accumulating more and more wealth for itself. It is not necessary to detail all the practices and institutions Luther listed here, but it is a shocking display of corruption and self-centeredness in the administration of the church. The many examples Luther cited showed how dishonest and greedy the rulers of the church had become in dealing with the people they claimed to serve, and his original audience knew that truth only too well.

#### **“Propositions for the Improvement of this Dreadful State of Affairs”**

In the third section of the treatise, Luther listed twenty-seven specific proposals to be acted upon “either by the temporal authority or by a general council.”<sup>74</sup> Time does not permit a detailed discussion of each of these statements,<sup>75</sup> but the list of grievances in this section does lend itself to categorization. A threefold division of the twenty-seven points works nicely. For the purposes of this essay, the grievances will be divided, and a theme for each section will be offered as a summary. After each summary, an example will be shared to see how Luther addressed one of the grievances he sought to reform.

The first division covers the first thirteen points Luther made. These points all deal with powers the papacy had gathered to itself over the years which now should be corrected or

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<sup>72</sup> LW 44:143.

<sup>73</sup> The first instance occurs on page 146 but there are several examples in the pages that close out the second section of the treatise. LW 44:146-156.

<sup>74</sup> LW 44:156.

<sup>75</sup> A summary of each of the twenty-seven points can be found in Appendix C on p. 40.

abolished.<sup>76</sup> Luther dealt with several financial abuses in these points. He also rebuked certain claims on power and reverence reserved for the pope.

As an example here, consider Luther's ninth point: "The pope should have no authority over the emperor, except the right to anoint and crown him at the altar just as a bishop crowns a king."<sup>77</sup> This point echoed some of the thoughts Luther shared in his discussion of the first wall. Here he pointed out that certain practices the pope required of the emperor as they interacted with each other sprung from the pride of the pope and reinforced that first wall.<sup>78</sup> He claimed it was the devil who was instigating such bold claims in order to "usher in the Antichrist and raise the pope above God, as many are now doing and even have already done."<sup>79</sup> Rather the pope also should be subject to the temporal authorities like everyone else, as Scripture taught, except in his spiritual office and work "such as preaching and giving absolution."<sup>80</sup> The pope was to follow



the example of Christ as he was the perfect servant of all in his life on earth, but Luther only saw the pope trying to claim the power and glory of Christ as he ruled from heaven. Luther concluded with pointed and careful words:

<sup>76</sup> The basis for the division of grievance and the summary of each section came from Teigen's article. Teigen, "Address," 29-32.

<sup>77</sup> LW 44:164.

<sup>78</sup> Luther specifically referenced how the emperor was to kiss the pope's feet, sit at his feet, hold the bridle of the pope's mount as he was about to go riding, and, worst of all in Luther's opinion, swear allegiance to the pope. These practices cast the emperor as a servant or worse when compared to the pope. There was no basis for demands like that, except that which could be found in canon law. Luther also mentioned how he had already addressed some of these issues in a previous treatise, *On the Power of the Pope*. LW 44:164-165.

<sup>79</sup> LW 44:165.

<sup>80</sup> LW 44:165.

“The Romanists turn all that upside down. They take the heavenly and kingly form from Christ and give it to the pope, and leave the form of a servant to perish completely. He might almost be the Counter-Christ, whom the Scriptures call Antichrist, for all his nature, work, and pretensions run counter to Christ and only blot out Christ’s nature and destroy his work.”<sup>81</sup>

For the pope to claim such authority and secular rule was not according to Scripture but was based on lies. Luther specifically cited this passage against the pope’s claim: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them ... But you are not to be like that.” (Luke 22:25-26) Then he addressed the lie that was the *Donation of Constantine*.<sup>82</sup> This work had been exposed eighty years earlier as a forgery from the eighth century, and Ulrich von Hutten had republished the work exposing this forgery in 1517, which had caught Luther’s attention shortly before writing *To the Christian Nobility*.<sup>83</sup> The church had been pointing to the *Donation* for centuries as a basis for their claims to power and authority, but it had been proven to be a lie. With all the effort and energy the Romanists had put into seizing and maintaining power, it prevented them from the more proper duties of the pope which were to “preach, pray, study, and care for the poor.”<sup>84</sup> It would be impossible for the pope to “rule an empire and still remain pope,”<sup>85</sup> but sadly, it seemed to Luther, that was exactly what the pope desperately wanted to do.

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<sup>81</sup> Again, note how close Luther comes, even at this relatively early stage of his career, to identifying the pope as the Antichrist. He stops short, however, as it would seem he was still hoping for meaningful change from within the church. He was also able to distinguish between Leo as a person and the office of the papacy. LW 44:165.

<sup>82</sup> “The *Donation* was an early medieval forgery that purported to record the transfer of the Western Roman Empire to the papacy;... According to the legend it records, Pope Sylvester I cured Emperor Constantine the Great of leprosy, and out of gratitude for his healing, he ceded control of the Western Empire to the papacy when he removed to his new capital in Constantinople. On its face, the *Donation of Constantine* bestowed political supremacy in the West on the popes,... The *Donation* presumed to give the papacy the right to crown or depose Western rulers.” Mark A. Lotito, “Wittenberg Historiography: Philipp Melanchthon and the Reformation of Historical Thought” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2011) 68-69.

<sup>83</sup> Clearly Luther found this revelation to be important, and he would publish his own annotated translation of the *Donation* in 1537. LW 44:166 n. 133.

<sup>84</sup> LW 44:166.

<sup>85</sup> When Luther said “still remain pope,” he meant the pope was to act as the servant leader of the church and adequately oversee its spiritual affairs. LW 44:166.

The second division covers points fourteen through twenty-four. These proposals sought to reform a variety of institutions within the church, especially dealing with monasticism, the priesthood, and different practices that worked against true piety and devotion to God and his Word. This section also included an encouragement to answer several questions still surrounding the followers of Hus. Luther counseled patience in dealing with them, and the goal should be to bring them back into the church.

In his fourteenth point, Luther addressed the forced celibacy of the clergy. He appealed to what Scripture said in the pastoral epistles: “A bishop shall be a man who is blameless, and the husband of but one wife, whose children are obedient and well behaved.” (1 Timothy 3:2,4; Titus 1:6-7) The choice to marry or not should be free rather than forced on a person. To forbid marriage was done “at the bidding of the devil” according to God’s Word.<sup>86</sup> The reasons Luther offered for allowing marriage were these: some need help to keep life in order, and most would not be able to remain chaste apart from marriage. But allowing a priest to have a “housekeeper” but not allowing them to marry would be “just like putting straw and fire together and forbidding them to smoke or burn!”<sup>87</sup> In addition, Luther said it went against the natural order of God’s creation, and the laws that prevented marriage for the clergy did not come from God but from the canon law. He did allow a prohibition of marriage in other offices in the church like “popes, bishops, canons, and monks” because these offices were “taken upon themselves.” But those who “minister word and sacrament to a congregation, among whom they reside” should be “given liberty by a Christian council to marry to avoid temptation and sin.”<sup>88</sup> Sadly, the consciences of many otherwise faithful priests had been unnecessarily burdened and those they

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<sup>86</sup> Luther was referring to 1 Timothy 4:1,3. LW 44:176.

<sup>87</sup> LW 44:178.

<sup>88</sup> LW 44:176-177.

served well in every other area had been scandalized by their shepherd's weakness. Luther placed the responsibility for this offense squarely on the pope "for all the sins which are committed, ... for all the souls which are lost, and for all the consciences which are confused and tortured because of this ordinance."<sup>89</sup>

The third division contains only three points. Each point stands apart from the others, and each is somewhat lengthy. In his twenty-fifth point, Luther turned his attention to the universities. "What are they but places where loose living is practiced, where little is taught of the Holy Scriptures and Christian faith, and where only the blind, heathen teacher Aristotle rules far more than Christ?"<sup>90</sup> He also objected that the study of canon law received too much attention. Luther preferred that "the universities only ought to turn out men who are experts in the Holy Scriptures, men who can become bishops and priests, and stand in the front line against heretics, the devil, and all the world."<sup>91</sup>

In the next point, Luther spoke to the Holy Roman Empire. Luther communicated his understanding that the Empire of his day was included in the prophecies of Scripture spoken about Rome. He also explained how the German claim to the Empire came to be mostly because of the deceitful work of the papacy, which it did for its own gain and benefit.<sup>92</sup> Luther was now calling for "the German emperor [to] be really and truly emperor."<sup>93</sup> What did he mean by that? He wanted Charles V to act as the rightful heir of Karl der Große<sup>94</sup> and work to set right the

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<sup>89</sup> LW 44:178.

<sup>90</sup> LW 44:200.

<sup>91</sup> LW 44:207.

<sup>92</sup> For a thorough treatment of how this transfer took place and how it was justified by scholars up to Luther's time, Mark Lotito's work is an excellent resource. It also speaks to the reform that took place in the universities, which Luther was proposing in his previous point, especially in the study of history.

<sup>93</sup> LW 44:211.

<sup>94</sup> Some might prefer Charlemagne, but "let the *German* emperor be really and truly emperor," as Luther said. It would seem he would also prefer him to be German.

wrongs of the papacy. It is easy to understand the appeal this point would have among the Christian nobility of the German nation and their people.

In his final point, Luther addressed the “failings of the temporal estate.”<sup>95</sup> These failings dealt primarily with economic issues. However, each economic point had a moral component for Luther. He first spoke against “extravagant and costly dress” among the nobility. Luther saw this vanity as a stress on the coffers of many nobles and a cause for pride and envy.<sup>96</sup> He then complained about the trade of spices. Luther recognized the spice trade was a source of great wealth and commerce, but he also felt that more harm than good came into the land because of it. Next he pointed to the *zynskauf* as the “greatest misfortune of the German nation.”<sup>97</sup> The *zynskauf* was a legal way to get around the laws against usury, and it was especially beneficial to Rome.<sup>98</sup> He also lamented the frequent abuse of food and drink among his countrymen. Luther felt it gave the Germans “a bad reputation in foreign lands,” was a waste of money, and led to other forms of immorality.<sup>99</sup> Finally, Luther found it sad that prostitution continued to be tolerated especially in larger cities “when all of us are baptized unto chastity.”<sup>100</sup> He encouraged the nobility to act in these areas to bring about much good for the German people.

In bringing the work to a close, Luther offered a few remarks on how it might be received. He acknowledged that he had spoken severely at times and that many of his suggestions for improvement would be dismissed as impractical. He also gave a nod to the *Treatise on Good Works* he had written several weeks earlier and hinted at *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* he was intending to publish soon. Again, he repeated that duty had

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<sup>95</sup> LW 44:212.

<sup>96</sup> It is interesting to note that a proposal for such a law was brought to the Diet of Worms in 1521. LW 44:212.

<sup>97</sup> LW 44:213.

<sup>98</sup> Teigen, “Address,” 32.

<sup>99</sup> LW 44:214.

<sup>100</sup> LW 44:214-215.

compelled him to speak, and he said the suggestions in the treatise were “the things [he] would do” if he had the power to do so. Finally, he closed with these words: “God give us all a Christian mind, and grant to the Christian nobility of the German nation in particular true spiritual courage to do the best they can for the poor church. Amen.”<sup>101</sup>

#### WHY THIS TREATISE IS STILL TALKED ABOUT TODAY

Luther wrote a great deal on a wide variety of topics. Even though Luther was writing five hundred years ago, his works are more than just a snapshot in history. Much of what he said can still inform and instruct God’s people in the twenty-first century. Last year at this time, most Christians would have considered Luther’s pamphlet *Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague*<sup>102</sup> a curiosity from days long gone. In 2020 with the advent of Covid-19, theologian and layperson alike found his words comforting and insightful. Although many are more familiar with his work *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*<sup>103</sup> and criticize him for it, Luther’s first writing on the peasant rebellion entitled *Admonition to Peace*<sup>104</sup> would have offered insight to both sides in the civil unrest of the past months. This work, however, dealt with the relationship between civil authority and church leadership, which is far different now than it was in Luther’s day. How can Luther’s words here instruct Christians today?

Luther’s address *To the Christian Nobility* was an instant best-seller. The printer had to use more than one press to fulfill the initial run of four thousand copies, an unprecedented number for this kind of work. That edition sold out within the first two weeks, and a second edition with minor edits hit the shelves before the month was out. It certainly struck a chord with his intended audience: the princes and civic leaders of the Empire. They appreciated how he had

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<sup>101</sup> LW 44:217.

<sup>102</sup> LW 43:113-138.

<sup>103</sup> LW 46:45-56.

<sup>104</sup> LW 46:3-44.

articulated with theological support their grievances about the financial power of the church. It caused Luther's base of support to grow at a time when his fate was very much uncertain.<sup>105</sup> However, it is not the initial impact of this work that merits consideration here. This treatise is still remembered and talked about because of its theological content.<sup>106</sup> It is time to explore those applications and consider why this treatise is being discussed here today.

### **The Blossoming of the Reformation**

During Summer Quarter 2020, the Seminary offered a course entitled, "The Reformation Blossoms." The subject of that course was the significant writings of Luther in 1520, which included all the works to be considered at this Symposium. In his many writings in this pivotal year, Luther was speaking to a wide and varied audience.

At one and the same time he had to address himself to the theologians and scholars who differed from him on a wide variety of grounds,... as well as those who generally agreed with him, but were apprehensive about where his theology would lead;... to Emperor Charles V, whose concept of reformation was a purified medievalism;<sup>107</sup> to the responsible laity, i.e., the nobility; and to the common man.<sup>108</sup>

As he addressed people in all these varied callings, Luther expanded, defended, clarified, and communicated his teachings drawn from Scripture. Many were beginning to understand the far-reaching implications of this evangelical faith.

Until this point, Luther was known to many as a critic but not so much as a reformer. He had spoken against scholastic theology, indulgences, and the papacy (when finally pressed into it). But in 1520 and especially with *To the Christian Nobility*, he began to offer specific suggestions and guidance as to what the church and Christian life should look like after the

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<sup>105</sup> Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 127.

<sup>106</sup> Kittelson, *Luther*, 151.

<sup>107</sup> Charles would have welcomed a reformation of the church that went back to simple medieval piety without all the corruption and abuse that had crept into the church. He would not have wanted to follow Luther to the extent Luther knew the changes needed to go.

<sup>108</sup> LW 44:xvii-xviii.

abuses of the old regime had been removed. The first evidence of a true reformation of the church, i.e. taking the evangelical faith and applying it to specific, practical, and comprehensive proposals for a new and revitalized church life, appeared in *To the Christian Nobility* and continued in a number of Luther's writings from this point forward.<sup>109</sup> This treatise deserves continued study even today because in it one sees the blossom of the Reformation just as it was beginning to break open.

It would be good to note the approach Luther took to his "program" of reform. He did not just tear down what was there, but he was offering positive ideas to build on going forward. Luther did not conceive of these proposals in the ivory tower of his university classroom. They sprang from his everyday interactions with people as a teacher, preacher, and pastor as he applied the Word to souls who were hurting. Luther was truly a *Seelsorger*,<sup>110</sup> and this treatise also is clearly "the work of a pastor and preacher, speaking out of deep concern for souls."<sup>111</sup> With his words here, he is acting as "a prophet of repentance, leading the nation not to victory but to the confessional, to see to it that through chastisement we are 'reformed.'"<sup>112</sup> It would be wise for those who seek to follow in Luther's footsteps to remember that his goal, and the work that stemmed from it, was the care of souls.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 349, 375.

<sup>110</sup> Literally, "one who cares for souls."

<sup>111</sup> Pietsch, "Dangerous Political Propaganda," 74.

<sup>112</sup> Oberman, *Luther*, 46.

<sup>113</sup> It would be easy to mistake Luther's efforts in *To the Christian Nobility* as something political or even a call for revolution. He is addressing the nobility after all. He uses vivid, even incendiary, language to persuade his audience. But to read this work in that way would be a mistake, although some remain insistent on making it. It would be anachronistic to do so. Something like a revolution as one might think of it today would never have crossed Luther's mind. In addition, his tone is religious throughout this work. His frequent quotations from Scripture and use of biblical imagery demonstrate that truth. That tone set his work apart from other nationalistic calls to action. Luther was not calling to political authority as such, but he was calling those leaders to action as individual Christians who could affect change within their vocation. It was the leaders' responsibility, the emperor most of all, to hold the leaders in the church accountable. Luther was not looking for more freedom for the state or the individual. He wanted to purify and liberate the church so she could perform her work of caring for souls without so many worldly cares. Much more could be said on this topic. For more information, cf. esp. Pietsch, "Dangerous Political Propaganda," 64-75.

### The Question of Authority

Another reason this treatise deserves further discussion, even after five hundred years, is that it speaks to the question of authority. Some have pointed out that the true subject of *To the Christian Nobility* has been hidden by its title. The subject of the treatise is the papacy and its abuse of authority in any number of ways.<sup>114</sup> In this treatise, Luther wrestled with the question of authority within the church. He also wrestled with the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical authority.<sup>115</sup> Luther was not asking the nobility to take over spiritual matters, but he wanted them to step in and protect the people from the abuses of the church. When the clergy were acting as secular rulers, then “the temporal Christian authority ought to exercise its office without hindrance, regardless of whether it is pope, bishop, or priest whom it affects. Whoever is guilty, let him suffer.”<sup>116</sup> And when it came to calling a council, if the church leaders would not do it, then as the priests that they were, “let ordinary people and the temporal authorities do it without regard to papal bans and fulminations.”<sup>117</sup> But once the council was in session, Luther wanted the theologians to take the lead again on matters of faith. That is when the true heart of this issue of authority becomes clear.

Where does the true authority lie when it comes to governing matters of faith and the affairs of the church? For the Romanists, the answer was the church itself as it was embodied especially in the pope. He was infallible, which meant he was more authoritative than councils or even Scripture itself. As he quoted canon law in one of his attacks on Luther, Prierias went so far

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<sup>114</sup> Teigen, “Address,” 11.

<sup>115</sup> As such, some have incorrectly pointed to *To the Christian Nobility* as the place where Luther begins to teach the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Certainly, some of his thoughts here connect to that teaching, but it was not really what Luther was getting at in this work. In addition, it would not be until 1523 when he began to flesh this teaching out more fully, e.g. *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed* [LW 45:77-133], and that work was hardly Luther’s final word on the matter.

<sup>116</sup> LW 44:131.

<sup>117</sup> LW 44:139.

as to say the pope could not be denounced “even if he were to give so much offense as to cause people in multitudes... to go to the Devil in Hell.”<sup>118</sup> For Luther, such an answer was unacceptable. He had felt the lies of Rome firsthand. He had seen the damage they inflicted on the souls he served. For him, the answer to the question of authority had to be Scripture. Luther was pressed to take this radical position at the Leipzig debate,<sup>119</sup> but his conviction of its truth had only grown from there. It was on full display in *To the Christian Nobility*. He frequently referenced the Scriptures and quoted them often as was mentioned earlier. He made clear where he stood when he said, “So as not to fight them with mere words, we will quote the Scriptures... Even Christ said in John 6[:45] that all Christians shall be taught by God... Has the pope not erred many times? Who would help Christendom when the pope erred if we did not have somebody we could trust more than him, somebody who had the Scriptures on his side?”<sup>120</sup> In a study of *To the Christian Nobility*, one can see the principle of *sola Scriptura* at work as Luther was just beginning to put it into practice.

But even for those who gladly uphold *sola Scriptura*, a challenge remains. What happens when there is a disagreement on what Scripture says? There is no Lutheran pope to decide. The princes no longer oversee the church or fund theological faculties. Does the decision rest with a vote of a council or convention? If so, could not that same body open the matter for discussion again and change its mind? Or must that question wait until the Lord reveals the answer with some New Testament Urim or the Spirit’s buzzing in the ear or a mysterious burning in the bosom? For the past five hundred years, followers of Luther have vigorously studied Scripture because they are convinced of its clarity and its authority in matters of faith and life. That study

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<sup>118</sup> Oberman, *Luther*, 42.

<sup>119</sup> Serina, “After Canons,” 206.

<sup>120</sup> LW 44:134.

must continue. That trust in the perspicuity of Scripture must also continue, and so must the reliance on the Word of God as the authority for what is believed and taught. When two sincere brothers disagree, that situation calls for love and patience and prayer. It should also be a renewed call to study even more closely the point in question. Above all, share Luther's confidence when he said to his friend Johann Lang "in a letter shortly following his disputation with Eck in 1519, 'Truth will prevail.'"<sup>121</sup>

### **The Priesthood of All Believers**

One cannot leave a discussion of *To the Christian Nobility* without talking about the priesthood of all believers. Some today try to make the case that Luther created this teaching to advance a democratic agenda of equality and affect social change.<sup>122</sup> It is true that some in Luther's day grabbed hold of his words here and in other writings to justify their cause and excuse their rebellion. As a result, some who read this work can only see it through a political lens. But is that what Luther had in mind? Even among those who want to follow Luther closely, there seems to be some misunderstanding or, at the very least, an oversimplification of what he was talking about with the priesthood of all believers. Some would simply say being a royal priest gives a Christian the right to go directly to God. But in opposition to that claim, "Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the 'Protestant' sense of the Christian's freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator."<sup>123</sup> Others might say being a royal priest is about sharing Jesus, the Great High Priest, with others. But again, to the contrary, "In our day, we expect a discussion of the universal priesthood to lead to a

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<sup>121</sup> Serina, "After Canons," 211.

<sup>122</sup> Pietsch, "Dangerous Political Propaganda," 73.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Translated by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 314.

discussion of evangelism. However, that is not Luther's purpose here."<sup>124</sup> So what did Luther have in mind?

It would indeed be profitable to discuss thoroughly and at length the teaching of the priesthood of all believers, but time does not permit such a discussion.<sup>125</sup> Allow these words to serve as a summary. When Luther talked about the priesthood of all believers, he was not so much concerned with individual rights and privileges. It was not about gaining power or influence for oneself. For Luther, this priesthood meant the priest was to stand before God on behalf of others. It was the beautiful expression of the congregation as a community. One priest served another by praying for each other, proclaiming the Word to each other, and sacrificing oneself for each other. It was a constant reminder to come before God on behalf of fellow Christians and even the world.<sup>126</sup> As a priest, one shared in and served the Christian estate, no matter what position that person held in their worldly callings. Neither hierarchy nor status could threaten the unity of this priesthood.<sup>127</sup> For Luther, being a royal priest was not about right or privilege or power over others; it was about a person recognizing the responsibility given him by this status before God to serve his neighbor in every vocation God had given him.

So, what does that look like as it plays out in real life? Every Christian serves as a priest; that is what each one was called to be at baptism. Every priest is called to serve others and has been equipped to do so. In that priestly function, one is to serve in such a way that a person

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<sup>124</sup> Teigen, "Address," 25.

<sup>125</sup> A wonderful resource to study this teaching further would be "Luther and the Saints: The Priesthood of All Believers – A True Treasure of the Lutheran Reformation." It was a symposium essay by President Mark Zarling in October of 2017. It can be found on the website of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary at this address: [https://www.wls.wels.net/rmdevser\\_wls/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Zarling-and-Zabell.pdf](https://www.wls.wels.net/rmdevser_wls/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Zarling-and-Zabell.pdf)

<sup>126</sup> Althaus, *Theology*, 314.

<sup>127</sup> Pietsch, "Dangerous Political Propaganda," 73.

becomes a “little Christ” to his neighbor.<sup>128</sup> That is the greatest assignment and the guiding principle for life as a royal priest of God. As such, those priests “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9) “What does it mean to show forth the praises of God? What else but to reflect in their lives their gratitude for the message of the gospel. As their lives reflect their devotion to the Word of God, Christians especially long to show forth God’s praises as they share the good news of forgiveness and salvation with one another and the world!”<sup>129</sup> Motivated by the gospel, royal priests seek to love, serve, and forgive each other, as difficult as that can be at times. Perhaps these words serve as a fitting summary of this call to serve: “Each and every believer, young and old, men and women, all alike are kings and priests before God, entrusted with the keys of the kingdom.... They unlock heaven as they carry out their royal and priestly functions of forgiving one another and sharing the message of that forgiveness with one another and the world.”<sup>130</sup>

One additional point should be mentioned in this discussion of the priesthood of all believers. What does this mean for the holy office of the ministry? Was Luther trying to do away with public ministry? That was not the case. As soon as he said “whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest,” he followed that statement immediately with these words: “Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community.”<sup>131</sup> But how can such statements stand side by side?

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<sup>128</sup> Kittelson, *Luther*, 151. This thought certainly appears in Luther’s discussion in *To the Christian Nobility*, but it would seem the language of being a “little Christ” might better fit with what Luther says in *The Freedom of a Christian*, cf. esp. LW 31:367-368.

<sup>129</sup> Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 473.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 474-475.

<sup>131</sup> LW 44:129.

Luther's fundamental principle was that all Christians share the same priestly status (*Stand*) on account of their baptism; they may, however, exercise different functions (*Amt*) within the community of faith, reflecting their individual God-given gifts and abilities.<sup>132</sup>

One must remain vigilant to guard both the priesthood of all believers and the holy office of the ministry to avoid stealing glory from God or causing damage to souls.

Like Luther, we must always guard ourselves on two fronts whenever we speak of the relationship of the priesthood of believers and the public ministry. On the one hand, we must speak highly of the rights and the royal status of the priesthood of all believers in order to guard against every form of hierarchicalism that makes the people of Christ subservient to the clergy. On the other hand, we must also speak highly of the called public ministry in order to guard against disrespect for it and usurpation of its duties. To laypeople who jealously covet the privileges of the called public ministry, we must say, "Isn't it enough for you that God has made you his royal priests?" (compare Nu 16:8-11). To called workers who would jealousy deny God's royal priests the opportunity to serve, we must say, "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them," (compare Nu 11:26-29).<sup>133</sup>

What does that look like as it plays out in the day-to-day interaction of royal priest and public minister of the Gospel?

It is a beautiful and wondrous thing: God gives the gospel means of grace; through the gospel means of grace he creates the church, this royal priesthood; through his church, his royal priests, he calls workers to the holy office of the ministry; through their service with the means of grace he continues to build his church, to call and build up other royal priests. It is one grand circle by which God is glorified in the world, souls are rescued from the jaws of the devil, and the church marches on from the church militant on earth to the church triumphant in heaven.<sup>134</sup>

That is a beautiful and wondrous thing, is it not?

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

"Of making many books there is no end." (Ecclesiastes 12:12) These words might even be truer today than when Solomon first wrote them. The Teacher's point to his readers was to

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<sup>132</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co, 1993), 206.

<sup>133</sup> John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 55.

<sup>134</sup> Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 483-484.

stick to those works which have been proven to be profitable and edifying. Why is that? As a Christian, and especially as a theologian, a person is shaped and formed by what he reads. Luther knew this truth also, and he would very much agree with Solomon's words. Those words may have even inspired a very similar comment he made when he was talking about the reform of the universities in this treatise. He said, "The number of books on theology must be reduced and only the best ones published. It is not many books that make men learned, nor even reading. But it is a good book frequently read, no matter how small it is, that makes a man learned in the Scriptures and godly. Indeed, the writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time so that through them we may be led into the Scriptures."<sup>135</sup> To be fair, Luther did not exactly follow his own advice as he was the most prolific author of his day. But much of what Luther wrote belongs on that short reading list, including *To the Christian Nobility* and the other treatises covered at this symposium.

But what qualities must a book have to make that list? As a man makes his way through seminary and begins attending conferences and the like throughout his ministry, the suggested reading list only grows. Indeed, many books carry a recommendation that they should be read every year a pastor serves in the ministry. No doubt most of those books are good to read and offer many valuable insights on any number of topics. However, the best books, the ones Luther wanted on his reading list, were the ones that clearly and accurately led a person to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures and how to apply them to Christian life. So much of what Luther wrote led his readers into the Scriptures, and his writings continue to do so even today.

This essay, and really this entire symposium, is a chance to examine a small portion of what Luther wrote and to consider how he depended on the Scriptures and encouraged others to

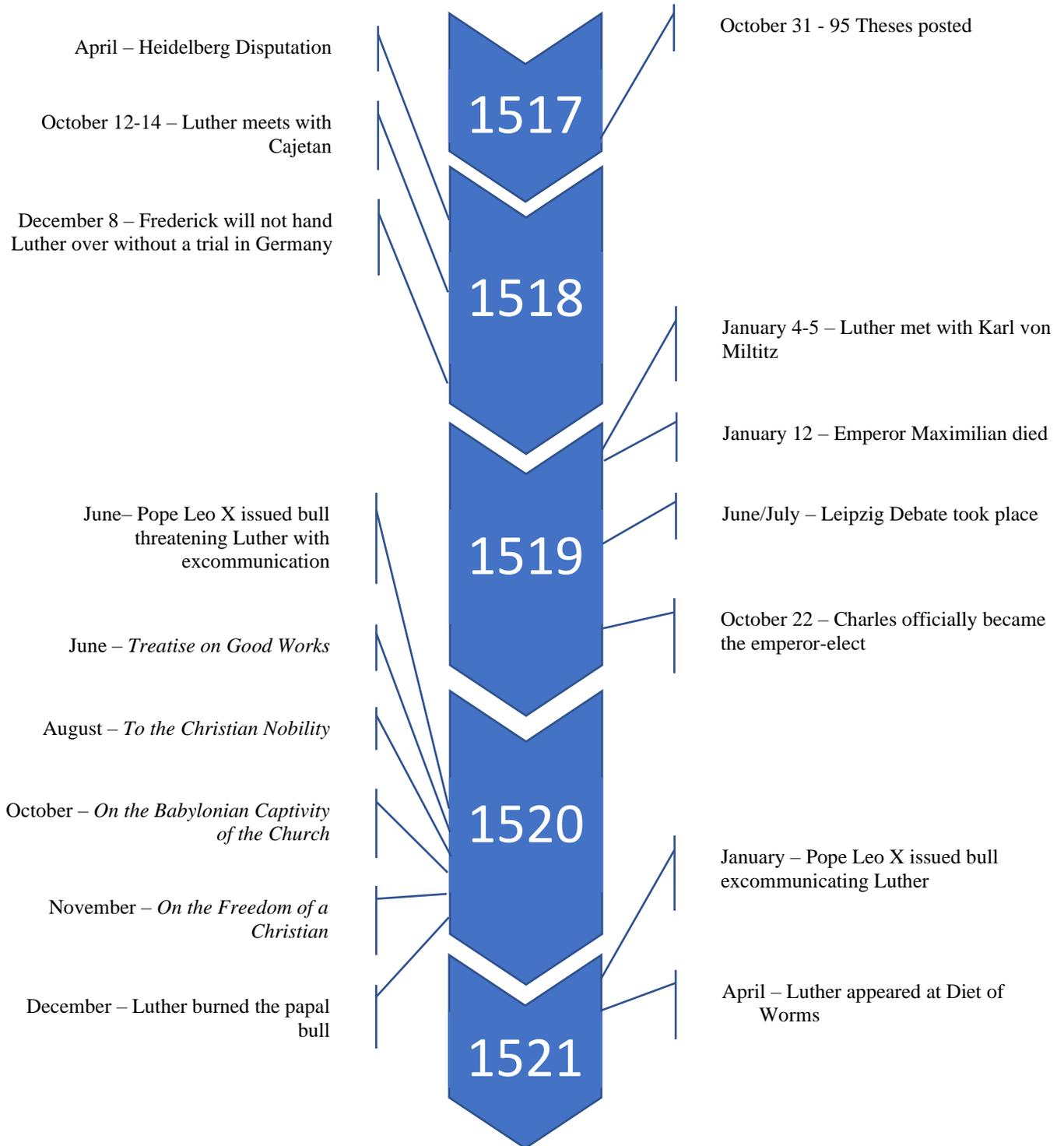
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<sup>135</sup> LW 44:205.

do the same. That should be reason enough to encourage those who want to follow Luther to pick up his books from time to time and seek to grow in that art, not only for themselves but for those they would serve as royal priests throughout their various callings. With that encouragement in mind, make some time to read Luther, and be led by him to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the Word. And in doing so, be formed into the kind of theologian Luther was: a theologian who loves to hear the Lord speak in his Word and who loves to serve souls with that Word.

S.D.G.

## APPENDIX A: TIMELINE OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS FROM 1517-1521



## APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY OF ECCLESIASTICAL TERMS<sup>136</sup>

<i>Administratio</i> :	A person could hold a position with all its income and privileges without holding the title.
Aggravation:	The threat of excommunication.
Annates:	The first year's revenue of an ecclesiastical benefice paid to the papal treasury in return for the appointment of that benefice.
Benefice:	A permanent church appointment for which property and income are provided.
Brotherhoods:	Associations of laymen that formed for the purpose of promoting religious life among its members. In 1520, Wittenberg had twenty such groups.
Bull:	A mandate of the pope on any subject under his authority. The name comes from the <i>bull</i> , "seals," attached to an official document.
Butter letter:	Written dispensation which allowed a person to consume butter, cheese, and milk during the fast of Lent.
Canon law:	A general term for the decrees of councils and the decisions of the popes collected in the <i>Corpus Iuris Canonici</i> . It comprised the whole body of church law and embodied in legal forms the medieval theory of papal absolutism.
Chapels in forests/fields:	They were built as destinations for pilgrimage, not as parish churches.
<i>Casus reservati</i> :	Cases where priests were forbidden to offer absolution because it could only be offered by the pope.
<i>Commenda</i> :	The assignment of a benefice without any obligation to perform the spiritual services connected to it.
<i>Compositiones</i> :	Fees paid for dispensations from the provisions of canon law.
Confessional letter:	A letter that allowed a person to choose his own confessor who could absolve offenses that normally only a bishop or pope could forgive.

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<sup>136</sup> The information for this glossary was collected and summarized from *The Annotated Luther* by Wengert and from the notes contained in LW 44.

<i>Datarius:</i>	The papal bureau that granted dispensations and was responsible for the issuing, registration, and dating (hence the name) of papal appointments. A fee had to be paid for its services.
Deposition:	Permanent dismissal from clerical office.
Endowment:	Income derived from a property.
Faculties:	Extraordinary powers to grant indulgences and absolution in reserved cases.
Foundation:	Endowed institutions of universities or cathedrals.
<i>Gratia expectiva:</i>	Promises to bestow a benefice not yet vacant.
Golden year:	Jubilee years where pilgrims to Rome were able to gain plenary indulgence after meeting certain conditions. Originally begun in A.D. 1300 to be repeated every century, but by Luther's day it had become every twenty-five years and had become a great source of income for Rome.
<i>Incompatibilia:</i>	Offices that cannot be combined in the hands of a single officeholder.
Indult:	A permission or privilege from ecclesiastical authority granting exemption from a norm of canon law.
Irregulars:	Monks who had violated the rule ( <i>regula</i> ) of their order and were no longer in a position of good standing. Concealing sins in the confessional would be an example of such a violation.
Masses for the dead:	Masses said for the repose of the souls of people on the anniversary of their deaths, usually supported by an endowment.
Mendicants:	Monks who sustained themselves in part by begging. They included the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Carmelites, and Servites.
<i>Officia:</i>	Offices of the church that could be purchased.
Pallium:	The pallium is a woolen shoulder cape that was the emblem of the archbishop's office. Canon law prescribed the archbishop-elect must secure it from Rome within three months of his election. It was originally a gift, but it had become extremely expensive to acquire by Luther's day.

<i>Pectoralis reservatio:</i>	“The reservation in the heart” allowed the pope to award a benefice to one person and then “change his mind” to award it to someone else.
Primate:	Highest ranking archbishop in a country. In Germany, the primate was the archbishop of Mainz.
Reaggravation:	Excommunication.
Sexton:	A person who was charged with maintenance and upkeep of church properties.
<i>Signatura gratia/justitiae:</i>	A court of the church presided over by the pope or a cardinal, respectively.
Suspension:	Temporary dismissal from clerical office.

APPENDIX C: TWENTY-SEVEN GRIEVANCES FROM PART THREE OF  
*TO THE CHRISTIAN NOBILITY OF THE GERMAN NATION*

1. “Every prince, every noble, every city should henceforth forbid their subjects to pay annates to Rome and should abolish them entirely.”<sup>137</sup>
2. The nobility should prevent Rome from appointing benefices or from receiving benefices that are in Germany.
3. Bishops should be appointed by neighboring bishops rather than by the pope.
4. “It should be decreed that no temporal matter is to be referred to Rome, but that all such cases shall be left to the temporal authority.”
5. Rome should not be allowed to receive benefices upon the death of then incumbent or in the case of a dispute.
6. “The *casus reservati*,<sup>138</sup> reserved cases, should also be abolished.”
7. The curia should be limited in size and supported “out of the pope’s own pocket.”
8. “The harsh and terrible oaths which the bishops are wrongfully compelled to swear to the pope should be abolished.”
9. “The pope should have no authority over the emperor, except the right to anoint and crown him at the altar just as a bishop crowns a king.”
10. “The pope should restrain himself, take his fingers out of the pie, and claim no title to the kingdom of Naples and Sicily.”
11. “Further, the kissing of the pope’s feet should cease.”
12. Pilgrimages to Rome should not be allowed or encouraged except by direction of the local priest.
13. The pope should not endorse any new monastic orders but should limit the number there already are, in addition to limiting some of their rights and privileges, e.g. preaching and hearing confession unless called by local authorities to do so.
14. Forced celibacy for priests should be abolished.
15. Superiors of monastics should not limit those who can offer absolution.

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<sup>137</sup> Where quotation marks are used, the text is taken directly from Luther’s Works. If there are no quotation marks, a summary of the grievance has been provided.

<sup>138</sup> “Those cases in which the granting of absolution was reserved to the pope.” Cf. Appendix B p. 39.

16. "It is also necessary to abolish all endowed masses for the dead, or at least to reduce their number, since we plainly see that they have become nothing but a mockery."
17. "Certain penalties or punishments of canon law should be abolished, too, especially the interdict."
18. "All festivals should be abolished, and Sunday alone retained."
19. "The grades or degrees within which marriage is forbidden, such as those affecting godparents or the third and fourth degree of kinship, should be changed."
20. Special pilgrimage sites around the countryside should be abolished.
21. "One of the greatest necessities is the abolition of all begging throughout Christendom."
22. "It is also to be feared that the many masses which were endowed in ecclesiastical foundations and monasteries are not only of little use, but arouse the great wrath of God."
23. Many different practices for raising funds for Rome should be abolished.
24. The many questions still surrounding the Hussites need to be settled.
25. "The universities, too, need a good, thorough reformation."
26. Let the emperor truly be the emperor and work reform in the Empire.
27. "We shall now devote a section to the failings of the temporal estate."

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