LUTHER THE REVOLUTIONARY:
A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

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PREFACE

Many prominent historians such as Roland Bainton in Here I Stand, Eric Gritsch in Martin -- God's Court Jester, and Lewis Spitz in The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559, view Martin Luther as a reformer, even through the turbulent 1520's and 30's. A few scholars label him a revolutionary, but they do it with some hesitation and fail to adequately define the term revolution. I hope to take a different perspective of Luther by defining revolution and examining him through three of his most famous works, all written in 1520: To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and The Freedom of A Christian. By writing these pamphlets Luther ceased to be a reformer and became a religious revolutionary.

A few words must be said about revolution and how it relates to Luther. A great deal of controversy surrounds the subject, and many scholars place this phenomenon in a purely political or social context. For instance, Ted Gurr in Why Men Rebel refers to a revolution as a sociopolitical change accomplished through violence; Chalmers Johnson in Revolutionary Change perceives it as a form of violent social change in which sociological, psychological,

military, economic, and political factors make up the movement; and Perez Zagorin in Rebels and Rulers defines it as an attempt by violent subordinant groups to bring about change in society or governmental change. However, in Luther's case, revolution must be put in a religious context because the fundamentals for his political, social, and economic thought came from the Bible. In this thesis, a revolution can be any movement against an established authority that results in sudden and radical change; a form of violence is necessary to achieve this end. Most importantly, in order for a movement to be called a revolution, it must meet with success.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Before Martin Luther became a revolutionary, he was a reformer. Luther wanted to help rid the Church of abuses that had set in over the previous five hundred years. The practice of annates, indulgences, and simony made some of the clergy rich and scandalous; also, ignorance of pastoral duties prevailed in many parts of Western Europe.[1] As a reformer, Luther desired reform within the traditional ecclesiastical structure. He and others conceived of purifying Catholicism by returning religion to a more primitive time, perhaps back to the era of the Church Fathers or even the Apostles. For a brief time, Luther belonged in the mainstream of reform that existed in the early sixteenth century, even though he would eventually be labeled a revolutionary.

Luther attained his status as a reformer in 1517, but only after a long, tumultuous, spiritual struggle that focused on his relationship with God. The problem lay in God's justice; Luther could not imagine the Heavenly Father as being both merciful and just in deciding man's salvation. This prevalent philosophical thought of the late Middle Ages, Occamism, greatly complicated the issue. Although

Occamism emphasized the absolute power of God, it also stressed man's free will which obligated him to obey the Ten Commandments. If man did what the Bible requested of him, then God could not withhold the grace necessary for salvation.[2] Occamism confused Luther because the philosophy showed him that by following the Scriptures, divine grace should not be withheld; but at the same time, Luther knew of God's arbitrary nature. Despair and helplessness totally overwhelmed him, especially in the monastery. He later expressed his feelings:

> Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I did not love God, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners . . . secretly, if not blasphemously.[3]

Only when Martin Luther was transferred to the University of Wittenberg in 1511 did his spiritual unrest begin to recede under the tutelage of Johann von Staupitz.[4]

New theological insights frequently appeared in Luther's lectures on Psalms during the years 1513 through 1515; but he had not yet, in his own mind, recognized their true meaning. Exactly when this religious experience occurred is not known, but it probably happened by the end of 1515 or the first few months of 1516.[5] Luther found a temporary solution to his religious problems in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The monk told of the event almost thirty years after it took place:

> In it the righteousness of God is revealed. He who through faith is righteous shall live. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the Gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith . . .[6]

Martin Luther had discovered for himself the "doctrine of justification by faith alone." The professor from Wittenberg then realized two things: first, man only obtained the grace necessary for salvation through faith, not by good works; and second, the Bible became the absolute authority for everyday Christian life. Luther maintained no conception of how his version of justification would later change the course of Western Christianity; he only knew that it liberated him from years of spiritual oppression.[7]

Indulgences served as the catalyst for Luther's short career as a reformer and eventually for his role as a revolutionary. An indulgence was the remittance of temporal penalties imposed by the Church; the sinner usually participated in a crusade, went on a pilgrimage or contributed a sum of money to the Holy See in order to obtain one.[8] In 1476, Pope Sixtus IV extended indulgences to the souls in purgatory. Gradually, simple Christians were led to believe that they could buy salvation with the purchase of an indulgence. This blatant misuse of a legitimate practice prompted calls for reform from many theologians, and Martin Luther spoke out the loudest. The event that induced him to write the Ninety-Five Theses occurred in the summer of 1517,

when a Dominican friar named John Tetzel sold indulgences in the towns of Juterbock, Eisleben, and Zerbst. Luther warned his parishioners of the dangers in indulgences during the previous year, but when some Wittenbergers went to hear Tetzel preach on salvation, the Augustinian monk could bear no more. As a priest Luther was responsible for the spiritual welfare of his congregational flock; consequently, he felt obligated to question this practice of the Church.[9] He did so by posting the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church on October 31, 1517.

Luther wrote the Theses in Latin, intending the propositions to be ninety-five topics for a scholarly debate on the issue of indulgences. He stressed three main points: the object of expenditure concerning indulgence revenue, the pope's power over purgatory, and the spiritual welfare of the sinner. The objective and content of the Theses are very important in understanding Luther as a reformer.

In point one, Luther disliked the fact that Pope Leo X used the money received from the sale of indulgences for financing the construction of St. Peter's basilica. The German people paid for a structure that they would never see. Luther asked, "Why does not the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one building of St. Peter with his own money rather than the merits of poor believers?"[10] This revenue had better purposes such as financing the building of local German churches or providing better salaries for German

pastors. Martin Luther, perhaps without realizing it, represented a popular grievance of his own people, who had suffered under the venality of the Roman curia.[11]

Because point two concerned papal authority over divine matters, the monetary aspect was the least important of the indulgence abuses. Luther denied the pope's power over purgatory when he said, "The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons."[12] The reformer logically inferred that Pope Leo was like any other bishop or curate in that he held jurisdiction only over the temporal realm of Christendom; as a man, he could never remove a penalty imposed by God. Also, the power of the keys did not extend to purgatory as indicated in the twenty-sixth thesis: "The pope does very well when he grants remission to souls in purgatory, not by the power of the keys, which he does not have, but by the way of intercession for them."[13] Luther conceded that the pope or a bishop had the authority to intercede on the behalf of souls in purgatory. He did not wish to attack papal authority; he merely wanted to put the pope's power into proper perspective.

The last point dealt with the spiritual welfare of the sinner. Luther stated that "A Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay for his sins; the bounty of indulgences, however, relaxes penalties and causes men to hate them."[14] The monk believed indulgences caused

complacency during penance, which impeded the buyer's chances for salvation. According to Luther, the horror of death and the feeling of being lost should consume the penitent; only in a state of utter desolation does salvation begin. All Christians should follow the example of Christ as he went through the pain and humiliation of crucifixion.[15] As a priest, Martin Luther viewed the sinner's spiritual welfare as the most important concern in the Ninety-Five Theses.

The Theses were written in anger; but they were not manifestoes for revolution. Luther considered them as articles for reforming a clerical abuse and a practice of the Church. He thought of himself as loyal to the Church and to the pope and he felt that it was his duty to warn the proper authorities of preachers like Tetzel who perverted the gospel with incorrect views on indulgences. On October 31, Luther sent a copy of the Theses along with a letter to Archbishop Albrecht. In the letter, he explained, in a polite but pointed way, his theological convictions concerning indulgences. He strongly urged Albrecht to ". . . command the preachers of indulgences to preach in another way."[16] Also, the reformer considered himself as a ". . . most enthusiastic papist . . ."[17] Although this statement might have been exaggerated, Luther maintained Pope Leo's innocence in the indulgence scandal:

> Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence preachers, he

> would rather that the basilica of St. Peter were burned to ashes than built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.[18]

Luther at this time did not advocate or imply an overthrow of the papacy or the restructuring of the sacramental system; he only desired to return the practice of indulgences to its original form. Martin Luther was still a reformer within the Catholic Church who echoed the thoughts of others such as Staupitz, Erasmus, and Cisneros.

On the night of All Saints Day in 1517, a few of Luther's students took the _Theses_ from the door of the church, translated them into German, and gave them to the fledgling printing industry. As is well known, copies soon appeared throughout Germany. While only a few people understood the meaning of the entire work, many identified with the first point of the _Theses_. This made Luther a hero among the German people; the _Theses_ also made him an enemy and a radical in the eyes of the Church, for the outspoken monk, like many others before him had treaded upon sacred ground when he questioned papal authority and practice.[19] Had Rome taken steps to correct the abuse of indulgences, most likely Luther would have been satisfied; instead, Rome pressed the issue that eventually forced the monk to come to grips with his entire theological position.[20]

The Church construed Luther's protest as a direct attack on papal supremacy. Rome immediately took the offensive when Pope Leo commissioned the Master of the

Sacred Palace of Rome, Sylvester Prierrias, to review Luther's case. In a tract entitled A Dialogue Against the Presumptuous Conclusions of Martin Luther about the Pope, Prierrias declared that the Roman Church was the universal church, consisting primarily of the Pope; as well, the Church, the pope, and the councils controlled all matters of faith and these institutions could not err. Luther responded by writing Reply to Prierrias; in this tract, he stated that Prierrias' conclusions had no scriptural basis and all authority rested with the Bible. Rome issued a citation ordering the monk to appear in the Holy City within sixty days to answer to charges of heresy and contumacy.[21] Unknowingly, Luther had taken a step toward revolution.

Rome labeled Luther a heretic because his entire theological position was contrary to Catholic doctrine and authority. In very general terms, the existence of the Catholic Church depended on the concordance of "'the universal congregation of the faithful.'"[22] When a majority of the believers agreed on certain religious articles, then the congregation had established Church doctrine; and this catholicity usually was manifested in general councils such as the Council of Nicaea in 325 or the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Also, the authority of the Roman Church came not only from the canons, but from the Scriptures as interpreted by the councils, the pope, and the Church.[23] Any person that opposed traditional Roman authority was viewed as a heretic. Thus, Martin Luther seemed extremely unorthodox as

seen in his view on religious authority and penance, and in his verson of justification by faith alone.[24]

Despite Luther's seemingly radical statements concerning the pope, he was not yet a revolutionary. Three factors give credence to this point: first, in the Theses Luther never directly attacked the pope and the Church; second, he remained unaware of the potentially revolutionary nature of his views on papal supremacy; and third, prominent reformers such as Johann von Staupitz and Desiderius Erasmus supported him in some way. Although Staupitz thought that Martin Luther had severely criticized the pope in the Ninety-Five Theses, he firmly supported his student's overall objective of reforming the current practice of indulgences; also, the vicar general of the Augustinian order backed the monk at the Heidelberg Disputation and he advised Luther during the interviews with Cardinal Cajetan.[25] Johann von Staupitz believed that once his pupil realized the severity of his thoughts concerning the pope, he would wisely apologize to the Holy Father. Erasmus, on the other hand, never publicly endorsed Luther. Instead, he adopted a very cautious attitude and praised Luther's literary talents. Erasmus defended Martin Luther's literary abilities from the hostile accusations of other Catholic theologians, as seen in this statement: "How unsuitable to the mildness proper to a divine when instantly, and without even reading his book right through, they break out with such ferocity . . .

against an excellent man . . ."[26] In both instances, some measure of support is indicated. Both men revered the traditions of the papacy and of the Roman Church; if they had viewed Luther as a revolutionary who posed a threat to papal supremacy or to the structure of sixteenth-century Catholicism, they would not have provided any measure of assent for the monk. Before the Leipzig Debate, Luther was a reformer who had the encouragement and friendship of Staupitz, and an inkling of support from the great Erasmus.

By the end of 1518, Luther's version of justification had matured into a theology he called theologia crucis. True theology and true knowledge of God rested within the crucified Christ, and this example was found only in the New Testament. No council, no pope, and no church had the authority to define religion and articles of faith. And Luther found no biblical evidence for four of the seven sacraments.[27] By the opening of the Leipzig Debate in the summer of 1519, he had already composed three major works on the sacraments of penance, baptism, and the Eucharist; these tracts contained the rudiments for one of the revolutionary pamphlets of 1520, The Babylonian Captivity of The Church. But Martin Luther remained totally ignorant of the revolutionary nature of his theology. It would take a humiliating defeat at Leipzig to force Luther to realize the true nature of his theological position.

ENDNOTES

[1]For the most recent account of church and clerical abuses and their role in the Reformation, see Lewis W. Spitz, The Protestant Reformation (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), pp.50-53.

[2]For information on William of Occam and his thought, see Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, 12 vols. (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne LTD, 1950-1958), 3:50-84; David Knowles, The Evolution of Medieval Thought (Baltimore: Helican Press, 1962), pp.318-328; and Gordon Leff, William of Ockham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

[3]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 34: Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, 1545, trans. Lewis Spitz, Sr. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp.336-337.

[4]Johann von Staupitz, the vicar-general of the Augustinian Order, became Luther's close friend and spiritual mentor. He knew that the secrets of Christianity rested within the Bible and he also knew that Luther, who possessed unusual religious sensitivity, would eventually find a cure for his tormented soul. Through a great deal of

persistence, Staupitz convinced Luther to pursue a doctorate in biblical theology, thus forcing the young friar to study the Bible. Staupitz probably prevented Luther from having a nervous breakdown. He certainly pointed Luther in the right theological direction. For an extensive account of their personal friendship, see Johann Sallaberger, "Johann von Staupitz -- Luther's Vorgesetzer und Freund, und seine Beziehung zu Salzburg", Mittleungen der Gesellshcaft fur Salzburger Landeskunde 117 (1977): 159-200; For a detailed account of the theological influence Staupitz had on Luther, see David G. Steinmetz, Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960).

[5]Most scholars place Martin Luther's conversion or "tower" experience between 1513 and 1518. This historian believes that late 1515 or early 1516 is the correct date because Luther begins his lectures on Romans. When Luther read Romans 1:17, "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith," he suddenly realized the true meaning of the righteousness of the Heavenly Father. Just recently, one scholar has placed Luther's conversion in 1518 or 1519 because it was there that he exhibited a complete understanding of the meaning of conversion as indicated in his lectures on Galatians. See Marilyn J. Harran, Luther on Conversion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp.185-186.

[6]Luther, Preface to Latin Writings, p.337.

[7]Heinrich Boehmer, Road to Reformation, trans. John W. Doberstein and Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), pp.109-177.

[8]For an excellent discussion of indulgences and how they relate to Martin Luther, see John Todd, Luther: A Life (New York: Crossroads, 1982), pp.374-378.

[9]Roland Bainton, Here I Stand (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950; reprint ed., New York: Mentor Books, 1977), pp.53-60.

[10]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 31: Ninety-Five Theses, trans., C. M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), No. 86, p.33.

[11]Bainton, Here I Stand, p.61.

[12]Luther, Ninety-Five Theses, No. 5, p.26.

[13]Ibid, No. 21, p.27.

[14]Ibid, No. 40, p.29.

[15]Ibid, p.34.

[16]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed., Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 48: "Luther's Letter to Cardinal Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz: Wittenberg, October 31, 1517", trans. Gottfried G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p.48.

[17]Luther, Preface to Latin Writings, p.328.

[18]Luther, Ninety-Five These, No. 50, p.30.

[19]Others such as Marsiglio of Padua, John Wyclif, and John Hus had questioned papal authority and the Church condemned them as heretics. Hus was burned at the stake in 1415.

[20]Bainton, Here I Stand, p.65.

[21]Eric Gritsch, Martin--God's Court Jester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp.23-24.

[22]Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1983) 4:99-100; also see 4:98-110.

[23]Ibid, 4:120-122.

[24]Ibid, 4:253-256.

[25]Todd, Luther: A Life, p.119; also see Sallaberger, "Johann von Staupitz -- Luther's Vorgesetzer und Freund", pp.181-193.

[26]Desiderius Erasmus, Collected Works of Erasmus, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, vol. 6; "Letter 939" (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p.297.

[27]Gerhard Ebeling, Luther: An Introduction to His Thought, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp.226-228.

CHAPTER II

LEIPZIG: PRELUDE TO REVOLUTION

The Leipzig Debate took place in June and July of 1519. The two primary contestants were John Eck, a Dominican theologian and German humanist from the University of Ingolstadt, and Martin Luther. Eck defended orthodox doctrine and asserted that the Church, the councils, and the pope were the sole authorities of religious issues in Western Christendom even though he admitted to the misuse of indulgences. However, Eck felt that Luther had gone to far when he questioned the pope's authority in the _Ninety-Five Theses_. Since Rome could not silence Luther, Eck wanted to humble the rebellious monk for the Church and expose him as a heretic by debating him at Leipzig. Martin Luther welcomed the opportunity to debate because he had desperately wanted to explain his views on indulgences, the Church, and the papacy since his interviews with Cajetan. The confrontation at Leipzig was important for two reasons: first, Eck forced his opponent to face the true implications of his theological convictions; and second, Luther ceased being a reformer and became a revolutionary, although he would not move against the Church until a year later.

Martin Luther left the debate knowing that he and Rome had uncompromising positions.

The entire debate focused on Luther's famous thirteenth thesis. It read:

> The very feeble decrees of the Roman pontiffs which have appeared in the last four-hundred years prove that the Roman church is superior to all others. Against them stand the history of eleven-hundred years, the text of divine Scriptures and the decrees of the Council of Nicaea, the most sacred of all councils.[1]

This radical statement indicated Luther's growing discontentment with the papacy. Because of the bull Cum postquam and the reviewing of past papal decrees in preparation for the debate, Luther suspected that the pope was a tyrant who forced people to place their faith in papal authority rather than in the Scriptures.[2] Luther felt compelled to speak out against the pope; thus, the thirteenth thesis became the first public challenge of the pontiff's authority.[3]

The main issue of the debate proved to be papal authority. Luther wanted to demonstrate that Christ did not divinely appoint Peter as pope. He interpreted "the rock" in Matthew 16:18 as Scripture, Christ, or faith, not Peter or the pope.[4] If "the rock" meant Scripture, then the primary purpose of Peter and the apostles was to teach and preach God's Word. Therefore, according to Luther, Jesus did not single out Peter in order to confer on him divine jurisdiction over the other apostles; all twelve had equality in terms of religious power. Perhaps Peter ranked

first among the apostles, but this position was due to honor rather than power.[5] Even the African council stated that:

> The bishop of the first seat shall not be called the chief of priests, or anything comparable, but only the bishop of the first seat. Nor shall the Roman bishop be called the universal pontiff.[6]

Using this statement as evidence, Luther denied papal primacy by divine right and in doing so, he publicly refuted more than a millenium of Catholic tradition.

John Eck represented and defended traditional Catholicism. He argued that both the Church and the Pope were of divine origin. In Eck's interpretation of Matthew 16:18, Christ founded his church on Peter as the rock, and Jesus constituted Peter as monarch of the church by divine right. Christ also conferred the same power on Peter's successors. Eck logically inferred that sacredotal unity flowed from the Roman pontiff, making the Catholic Church the supreme church in all of Christendom.[7]

By denying papal primacy, Luther unconsciously aligned himself with the heresies of John Wyclif, Marsiglio of Padua, and John Hus. The clever Eck took advantage of Luther's mistake and quickly pointed out that:

> Among the many dangerous errors of which John Wyclif was condemned was the assertion that belief in the supremacy of the Roman church is not required for salvation. So, too, among the pernicious errors of John Hus was his belief that Peter was never head of the holy catholic church.[8]

Of course Luther vehemently denied any association with the Bohemians, and thus said, "No kind of schism ever pleased me, nor will it ever and the Bohemians did wrong in separating themselves from unity."[9] Although Luther had heard of Hus and his movement, he had read none of the Czech reformer's works; the monk must have felt profound disbelief knowing that his interpretation of the Bible was almost the same as that of a condemned heretic. Eck had publicly accused his opponent of being a Hussite and he had taken the first step in exposing him as a heretic.[10]

The subject of John Hus and the Council of Constance provided more fuel for Eck's attack against Luther. During a brief recess, Martin Luther examined the proceedings of the council and discovered, much to his surprise, similarities between his theology and the condemned theses of Hus.[11] He returned to the debate and clearly announced that

> . . . many articles of John Hus or the Bohemians were fully Christian and evangelical, which the universal church cannot condemn, as for example the one affirming that there is only one universal church.[12]

Eck seized the advantage and explained that by championing some of Hus' propositions, Luther implied that the Council of Constance had erred. Once again, the professor from Wittenberg had publicly opposed Catholic doctrine. According to the Church, divine spirit guided a legitimately conceived council; a council of this nature could not err and it possessed the power to determine articles of faith.[13]

Luther vigorously disavowed Eck's charge, but the Dominican theologian succeeded in exposing him as a schismatic and as a heretic in front of a predominantly pro-papal audience.

Most scholars agree that Leipzig made Luther face the true meaning of his theological convictions. Martin Luther entered the debate hoping to narrow the rift that had developed between him and Rome by discussing his theological viewpoints on the papacy, the Church, and indulgences.[14] Instead of mending the differences, an irreparable breach resulted over the subject of papal primacy. Eck used the example of John Hus to force Luther to realize that the Catholic Church considered his version of justification to be heretical, since it placed the Scriptures above the authority of the pope. It was almost as if an unseen hand, which represented centuries of Catholic tradition, had slapped the outspoken monk across his face; he suddenly realized that his interpretation of religion did not agree with that of the Church's. Luther knew that he could no longer remain a loyal son of the Roman Church.

The monk stood alone against the Church. But he did not recant for two reasons: first, the Church failed to convince him of his errors; and second, Luther knew he had interpreted the Gospel correctly because God had called him to become a doctor of theology and a reformer.[15] If Luther was right, then the Roman Church was wrong, and Leipzig forced him to accept this heretical view. He now saw the pope as a spiritual despot and Rome as the unholy seat of

the Antichrist and his servants. A few months following the debate, Luther turned his back on the Holy city with these angry words:

> Farewell unhappy, hopeless, blasphemous Rome! The wrath of God hath come upon thee as thou deservest. We have cared for Babylon, and she is not healed: let us then, leave her, that she may be the habitation of dragons, spectres and witches, and true to her name of Babel, an everlasting confusion, a new pantheon of wickedness.[16]

Luther admitted that God had given him a new mission; his task was to seek out and correct the human errors of the Church by using the Holy Scriptures. The time had come for the professor from Wittenberg to move against the Church.

Luther became a revolutionary, even though he still thought of himself as a reformer. During the early modern period, the word revolution referred to the movement of the heavenly bodies; the term meant circular motion.[17] Revolution would never have been used to connote an overthrow of authority because order and stability were highly valued concepts. Nevertheless, revolutionary and revolution are the only two terms that can adequately describe Martin Luther and his movement. After Leipzig, the change from reformer to revolutionary is obvious. For instance, in 1517, Luther wanted to reform the practice of indulgences; two years later, he envisioned reforming the entire Church, beginning with the office of the pope and ending with the sacramental system. His sole desire was to remove human traditions from religion and restore the

Scriptures as the absolute authority in Christendom. But Luther's idea of reform transcended the ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Church; it implied the abolition of Catholic authority and the establishment of a new church. This is a revolution with the suggestions of both sweeping, radical change, and a return, for Luther believed that he would take the Church back to primitive, biblical Christianity. Although he did not accomplish exactly what he wanted, his movement survived. Luther would begin his revolution with the publication of <u>To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation</u> in August of 1520.

ENDNOTES

[1]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 31; Disputation and Defense of Brother Luther against the Accusations of Dr. Johann Eck, trans. Harold Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p.317.

[2]Pope Leo X issued Cum postquam on December 13, 1518. In this bull, Pope Leo defined the Church's position on indulgences. He said nothing new and he failed to cite Scripture or Church teachings for support. Martin Luther in private correspondence, stated that he would not recognize such a decretal; in effect, Luther opposed a decree of a reigning pope on a private level. See Scott Hendrix, Luther and the Papacy (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp.76-81.

[3]Ibid, p.13.

[4]Donald J. Ziegler, ed. Great Debates of the Reformation, trans. Alfreda K. Stallman (New York: Random House, 1969), pp.7-10; Also see Luther's biblical evidence, I Corinthians 13:25 and Ephesians 4:15.

[5]James Mackinnon, Luther and the Reformation 4 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell Incorporated, 1925; reprint ed., 1963), 2:134-143.

[6]Ziegler, Great Debates, p.11.

[7]Ibid, pp.14-15.

[8]Ibid, p.15.

[9]Ibid, p.15.

[10]In private correspondence, Eck had accused Luther of being a Hussite. See Eck's Obelisk's in Bainton, Here I Stand, p.82.

[11]Before Leipzig, Luther was not familiar with John Hus and his writings. But because of Eck, Martin Luther became aware of Hus by reading the proceedings from the Council of Constance in 1415. Later, the monk read De Ecclesia and discovered many similarities between him and Hus. Both men maintained analogous views on the idea of the church, the pope, and on indulgences; also, Luther and Hus believed that the Scriptures served as the sole authority for all religious matters. John Hus stated this belief in his most famous work:

> . . . every Christian is expected to believe explicitly and implicitly all the truth which the Holy Spirit has put in Scripture, and in this way a man is not bound to believe the sayings of the saints which are apart from Scripture, nor should he believe papal bulls, except in so far as they speak out of Scripture, or in so far as what they say is founded in Scripture simply.

Quoted from John Huss, De Ecclesia, trans. David S. Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1915; reprint ed., Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974), p.71. For a detailed biography of Hus, see Matthew Spinka, John Hus: A Biography

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). For a detailed examination of the relationship between Hus and Luther, see Scott Hendrix, "'We Are All Hussites?' Hus and Luther Revisited." Archiv Fur Reformationgeschichte (1974) v. 65, pp.134-161.

[12]Ziegler, Great Debates, p.18.

[13]Ibid, pp.19-22.

[14]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, v. 31; "Letter from Luther to Spalatin Concerning The Leipzig Debate", trans. Harold Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), pp.324-325; also see E. G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p.420.

[15]As early as 1513, Luther felt that God had controlled him. See Harran, Luther on Conversion, p.55.

[16]Quoted from Gordon Rupp, Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms, 1521 (Chicago: Wilcox and Follet Company, 1951), p.82.

[17]Perez Zagorin, Rebels and Rulers, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1; 21-22.

CHAPTER III

THE ATTACK ON THE ANTICHRIST

Martin Luther began his movement against the Church with the publication of To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520. In this work, Luther expressed his discontent with the state of religious affairs in Germany and he asked the laity to accept the responsibility of reforming Christendom as indicated in this famous passage:

> I am carrying out our intention to put together a few points on the matter of the reform of the Christian estate, to be laid before the Christian nobility of the German nation, in the hope that God may help his church through the laity since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent.[1]

More importantly, this treatise was the culmination of four years of frustration and growing hostility towards the pope; in this pamphlet, unlike the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther viciously attacked the entire institution of the papacy. According to Luther, the pope was now the Antichrist, who founded his despotic rule on human traditions and laws, rather than on the authority of the Bible.[2] In his massive verbal assault on the pontiff, the angry monk suggested four revolutionary changes: first, he advocated a complete

removal of various papal practices; second, he demanded that the pope withdraw from temporal politics; third, he encouraged sweeping secular change; and fourth, he introduced his revolutionary concept of "the priesthood of all believers." Rather than abolish the office of the pope, Luther sought to restore the proper, biblical responsibilities of the Holy Father. <u>To The Christian Nobility</u> represented Luther's first revolutionary step in returning Christendom to his conception of the tranquility and purity of its beginning.

Martin Luther reacted against the religious control of the Roman Church when he moved against the papacy and the sacramental system. Through authority and the sacraments, the Church regulated the spiritual lives of Christians all over Western Europe. This control was not despotic; it was necessary for the maintenance of order, stability, and the unity of faith. But Martin Luther viewed the Church's control as tyrannical and detrimental to the souls of Christians, since he believed that human traditions obscured scriptural authority. He attacked the papacy and the sacramental system in an attempt to free Christians from what he perceived to be human laws, and he wanted to restore the Holy Scriptures as the only source of religious control. When Luther referred to freedom, he vaguely meant the liberation of Christians from the control of Roman Catholic authority; the monk provided a complete definition of spiritual freedom in <u>The Freedom of A Christian</u>. The ideas

of control and religious liberty were essential to the understanding of _To The Christian Nobility_ and to the Lutheran revolution.

Luther devoted a small part of his pamphlet to the misuse of traditional papal practices such as the annate tax and papal reservations. The abuse of these customs had plagued Germans for more than two hundred years, and the Germans had regularly included them in their list of grievances, or _gravamina_, to diets since the mid-fifteenth century. Although Luther never intended to become a spokesman for the German people concerning the mishandling of these issues, Karl Bauer has maintained that a few influential yet unidentified members of the Saxon court convinced the monk to write and publish a booklet on clerical abuses in order to give them theological expression.[3] Originally _To The Christian Nobility_ was not an attack on the papacy. However, when Luther severed all ties with Rome, he construed certain ecclesiastical practices as instruments by which the pope and his followers exerted control over Christians:

> Are not these vexations and devilish little inventions? Let us beware! Soon Mainz, Magedeburg, and Halberstadt will quietly slip into the hands of the Romanists . . . After that they will make all the German bishops cardinals and thus there will be nothing left.[4]

This brief section according to Bauer, constituted the core of _To The Christian Nobility_. But Luther provided much more

than theological manifestation for this booklet; by labeling the annate tax and papal reservation as implements for religious control, and by calling for their abolition, he gave the work a revolutionary character.

Luther questioned the use of the annate tax because much of its revenue partially supported the huge papal curia in Rome, an organization that the monk viewed as non-essential to religion. In its initial form, the annate was the income received by the pope from a newly elected or appointed bishop. But by Luther's time, the annate had become a fixed tax on all vacant church offices.[5] Luther complained, not about the original use of the annate, but of its misuse:

> The popes have so far used the splendid and simple devotion of the German people -- they have received this money for more than a hundred years and have made it an obligatory tax and tribute . . . they have used it to endow posts and positions at Rome and to provide salaries for those posts as though the annate was a fixed rent.[6]

A large part of the money obtained from taxation, the sale of indulgences, and the selling of ecclesiastical offices financed the thousands of secretaries and clerks that made up the bureaucracy known as the papal curia. According to Luther, the money of honest and pious Germans wrongly maintained the wealth and avarice of that ". . . swarm of parasites in that place called Rome."[7] All of this pomp and circumstance was of no value to the Christian faith.

Although Martin Luther never provided an explanation on how the curia could function without its staff, he wanted a complete abolition of the annate tax and the removal of a large percentage of the papal court.[8]

Luther also stated that the pope had extended his control over German provinces and faithful Christians by papal reservation. Traditionally, the pope reserved the right, on every other month of the year, to appoint whomever he desired to fill vacant clerical positions and benefices. Luther disliked this practice because some of the best German benefices had fallen into the hands of foreigners who had the support of the pope; as well, he thought that the German people were being directly subjected to the power of the pope. Luther maintained that competent Germans should control their native provinces, and he said that it was ". . . high time to abolish papal months altogether."[9] Instead of the pope appointing a bishop, Luther cited two alternatives: first, let the laity elect the bishop; and second, allow the bishops of surrounding provinces to choose the new bishop, as seen in an ancient source, the fourth canon of the Council of Nicaea:

> A bishop should be chosen by all the bishops of the province. Should this be difficult on account of some emergency or because of distance, then three bishops should meet together at the same place, the votes and agreement of those absent having been given in writing, and the ordination can take place.[10]

Martin Luther accepted the authority of the Council of Nicaea for two reasons: first, the Council was not under papal influence; and second, the monk believed that the canons of Nicaea agreed with the Scriptures. Luther had provided a revolutionary solution to what he perceived to be a critical problem by moving against an established authority with the implications of radical change.[11]

To The Christian Nobility did not neglect political matters. In his movement against the pope, Luther demanded that the pontiff withdraw from secular politics because he viewed the Holy Father as a purely religious figure. He began his denouncement of the pope's political involvement in European affairs by refuting the Donation of Constantine. The Donation was a document written in the mid-eighth century, stating that Constantine the Great conferred secular power on the pope so he could rule the surrounding territories near Rome; subsequently, the papacy, during the following centuries, claimed its right to temporal power on this work.[12] But Luther, who based his contentions on the research of Lorenzo Valla, called the Donation a lie and a forgery. He believed that the pontiffs used this elaborate work in order to gain unnecessary political influence.[13] According to the monk, the primary duty of the pope was to preach the Gospel and "do nothing else but to weep and pray for Christendom and to set an example of utter humility."[14] To label the Donation a fake was not very significant since many before Luther had questioned its authenticity; but to

suggest that the pope should not participate in secular politics and that he possessed only a religious function, seemed revolutionary because he had, for centuries, dominated the temporal affairs of Western Europe.

When Luther insisted that the pope had no business being involved in worldly politics, he brought up a much broader issue concerning the roles of church and state. Throughout the Middle Ages, these two respective realms remained in constant conflict, always vying for an advantage. But Luther arrived at a solution to the problem in To The Christian Nobility. He contended that the spiritual realm belonged under the subjection of the temporal realm since the secular authorities had the responsibility to dispense justice and govern society in order to maintain stability.[15] This meant that all clergymen were bound to obey temporal laws. If the pope or any other church official committed a civil offense, they should be tried, not in a bishop's or ecclesiastical court, but in a temporal court. Luther reaffirmed his belief that the authorities of the Church held no special privileges simply because they performed religious functions; they lived in the same society with the princes, noblemen, and peasants.[16] Luther's advocation of a separation between the spiritual and temporal spheres was revolutionary because he attacked a revered papal tradition -- the pope's claim of jurisdiction over the Holy Roman Emperor. The monk denounced this right: "The pope should have no authority over the emperor, except the

privilege to annoint and crown him at the altar as a bishop crowns a king."[17] The roles of the two spheres now became obvious: the Church was strictly responsible for the performance of religious duties while the state tended to the administration of law and order.

There existed a few items in To The Christian Nobility that were essential to the overall meaning of Luther's movement against the Church, even though they were not directly related to his assault on the pope. Martin Luther proposed changes concerning mendicant orders, festival days, and education. Luther despised the number of religious orders present in Europe because he thought that they led men to live according to works, rather than through faith in God. The orders quarreled among themselves as well, and many friars, who were not priests, preached and heard confession; this caused a great deal of friction between the regular and secular clergymen. Luther suggested the total abolition of all monasteries and nunneries, a statement that foreshadowed his own renunciation of vows in 1523.[18] On a note of minor social importance, Luther asked the German nobility to abrogate all festival days with the exception of Sunday, since ". . . the feast days are abused by drinking, gambling, loafing, and all manners of sin."[19] Lastly, the monk criticized the theological curricula of the universities. He affirmed the need for educational reform because:

> . . . it is here in the universities that the Christian youth and our nobility, with whom the future of Christendom lives, will be educated and trained. Therefore, I believe that there is no work more worthy of pope or emperor than a thorough reform of the universities.[20]

Luther also demanded the immediate removal of Aristotle's _Physics_, _Metaphysics_, and _Ethics_; these works were a part of the theological cirriculum at many universities throughout Western Europe. But the monk wanted to retain the philosopher's works on _Logic_, _Rhetoric_, and _Poetics_, since he considered these books as useful in teaching students to speak and preach properly. More importantly, Luther believed that there existed too much emphasis on Lombard's _Sentences_ and not enough on the Bible; to correct this problem, he contended that instructors of theology should only teach the Holy Scriptures.[21] These intended changes of religious orders, festival days, and theological education reflected Luther's desire to purify sixteenth-century Christianity.

Martin Luther first presented his idea of the priesthood of all believers in _To The Christian Nobility_. Like the Lutheran version of justification by faith alone, Paul first formulated the concept of the priesthood.[22] In its original form, as seen in the New Testament, there is nothing revolutionary about the doctrine; however, when Luther reintroduced the idea nearly fifteen hundred years later, it became extremely radical since it opposed many of the commonly held religious traditions of the sixteenth

century. Also, Luther used the priesthood of all believers as a weapon against the papacy. The monk believed that the pope and his followers had:

> . . . cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has been able to reform them. As a result the whole of Christendom has fallen abominably.[23]

The words and customs of men, and papal decrees comprised these three walls: the first wall placed the spiritual estate above the temporal estate; the second wall consisted of the pope's claim of being the sole interpreter of the Scriptures; and the third wall was the right of the pontiff to summon a council.[24] Luther viewed the walls as fabricated lies by which "the Antichrist" had enhanced his rule over Christendom. The monk would use the idea of the priesthood of all believers to destroy these three barriers.

The priesthood of all believers rested on the assumption that all Christians were spiritually equal before God. And all Christians, regardless of social status, shared one baptism, one faith, and one Bible. If these presumptions of spiritual equality remained true, then every baptized Christian became a priest. Luther used an interesting analogy to prove his point:

> If a group of pious Christian laymen were imprisoned in a desert, without an episcopally ordained priest among them, anyone of these men, if confirmed by the others, could be charged with the responsibility of baptism, presiding over

> mass, pronouncing absolution, and preaching the Scriptures.[25]

According to this statement, every baptized Christian possessed the power to administer the sacraments, preach the word, interpret Scripture, and attend to other religious matters. This idea of spiritual equality was the reason why Luther asked the Christian nobility and Charles V to assume the responsibilities of reforming Christendom.[26]

By introducing the priesthood, Martin Luther destroyed the differences between the temporal and spiritual realms.[27] He claimed that the clergymen and the pope held no special privileges or powers over other members of society. Luther maintained that all baptized Christians belonged to the spiritual realm; and he pointed out that there existed no ". . . true basic differences between laymen and priest, prince and bishop, between religious and secular, except for the sake of social status."[28] The terms "priest" or "prince" denoted a human office held by a person in society. For instance, a priest was responsible for discharging certain religious functions while a prince was charged with the duty to govern and administer justice in the temporal sphere. But, if the need arose, anyone could execute spiritual duties. Martin Luther, with his priesthood of all believers and its doctrine of religious equality, removed the barriers between the temporal and spiritual estates.

Since the priesthood allowed for individual interpretation of the Bible, Luther attacked the pope's right of

explaining the Bible. During the Middle Ages, several popes proclaimed that they were the only interpreters of the Scriptures. They supported this privilege by referring to the power of the keys Christ had given Peter. But Luther refuted this claim on two grounds: first, he maintained that Jesus extended the keys to all twelve apostles for the binding and loosing of sin on earth, not for interpreting doctrine and the administering of government; and second, Luther contended that any faithful Christian who possessed a true understanding of the Word had the right to define Scripture.[29] According to the priesthood, all Christians were spiritually equal; therefore, they had the authority to discuss and study the meaning of the Bible. The pope was one among many Christians who, if he was baptized and if he believed in the Word, could explore the messages of the Holy Bible. Luther, with his priesthood of all believers, destroyed the second wall.

Martin Luther questioned the pope's right to call an ecumenical council. He believed that this papal privilege as well had no scriptural basis. The monk used two examples of the remote Christian past, the Apostolic council and the Council of Nicaea, to demonstrate that others besides the pontiff had convened a synod. The apostles and elders, not Peter, summoned the Apostolic council in Acts, and the Emperor Constantine the Great, in 325 A.D., called for the gathering at Nicaea to solve the Arian controversy.[30] Both the apostles and Constantine had the right to ask for a

synod because they belonged to the priesthood of all believers. Luther stated:

> . . . 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.[30]

The pope, Luther maintained, did not have any biblical basis in claiming that he was the only person who possessed the authority to summon a council; the examples of the Apostolic and Nicaean councils proved this point.

The real significance of the priesthood of all believers becomes much more evident when it is compared to the term "control". Following the Leipzig Debate, Luther referred to the pope as the Antichrist who controlled Christians by various means such as the annate tax, papal reservation, the right to call an ecumenical council, and the privilege to interpret the Scriptures. These rights and practices of the pontiff were Catholic traditions; yet, Luther found no Scriptural references for such things. He felt that the pope had subjected Christians to a reign of religious tyranny based on the customs of men in order to gain political influence, wealth, and spiritual domination. According to Luther the priesthood of all believers freed Christians from the control of the pope by giving them equality and the authority to carry out sacred religious acts. In both <u>The Babylonian Captivity</u> and <u>The Freedom of A</u>

Christian, Luther further explained the meaning of the priesthood as it related to religious control.

To The Christian Nobility vibrated with overtones of German nationalism, and had its author been of a different mind or spirit, this pamphlet could have been used as a manifesto for a massive social and political uprising against Rome. Because of his German heritage, Luther naturally experienced some sense of loyalty toward his own people; but unlike Ulrich von Hutten, who represented the nationalist movement in Germany, Martin Luther had no political pretensions.[32] His sole, overriding concern in everything he wrote was spiritual. He constructed To The Christian Nobility upon a religious foundation from which came political, economic, and educational changes. Luther composed his most famous work as a religious revolutionary.

The words revolution and revolutionary are the only two terms that adequately relate the meaning of this pamphlet and describe Martin Luther. The monk viciously attacked the pope with the desire to restore to the pontiff his scriptural responsibilities. Luther began by abolishing the customary ecclesiastical practices of the annate tax and papal reservation; then he demanded that the pope extricate himself from the political affairs of Western Europe; next, on a matter not directly related to his assault on the papacy, Luther advocated stringent educational reforms; and finally, the professor from Wittenberg presented the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The first,

second, and fourth changes suggested by Martin Luther were designed to curb the pope's power and to return him to a position of spiritual leadership as seen in the example of Peter in the New Testament. But a purely religious pope who led Christendom in humility was almost unheard of in the sixteenth century. Of course the Holy Father remained the preeminent spiritual figure in Europe, but he remained inexorably entwined in secular politics. And Luther's priesthood of all believers devastated two viable papal traditions and destroyed the division between the spiritual and temporal realms. Luther's versions of the "priesthood of all believers" and of a pope who did nothing but preach the Holy Scriptures were revolutionary ideas. _To The Christian Nobility_ represented the beginning of a revolution because Martin Luther moved against an established authority with the implications of sudden, radical change.

ENDNOTES

[1]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Juroslav Pelilsan, vol. 44 To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, trans. C. M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 38.

[2]Luther used the term "Antichrist" in referring to what he considered to be the anti-christ like qualities of the pope's during the latter Middle Ages. See Gritsch, Martin--God's Court Jester, p.38.

[3]Karl Bauer, "Luther's Aufruf an dem Adel, die Kirche zu reformieren," Archiv fur Reformationgeschichte, (1934), pp.170-173.

[4]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.147.

[5]Originally, the pope received about one half of a bishop's first year income. Most of the money financed the crusades against the Muslims. But by the sixteenth century, a few of the popes abused the annate tax and they often charged a newly elected bishop his entire first year income. In order to reimburse himself, the bishop would tax his parishioners. Luther hated this aspect of the annate tax. See Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.144.

[6]Ibid, p.144.

[7]Ibid, p.143.

[8]Ibid, pp.142, 156-157.

[9]Ibid, pp.146, 157.

[10]Quoted from Colm Luibheid, The Council of Nicaea (Galaway, Ireland: Galaway University Press, 1982), p.12; Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.128.

[11]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, pp.146-147.

[12]Geoffrey Barraclough, The Medieval Papacy (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World Incorporated, 1968), pp.37-39.

[13]Spitz, The Protestant Reformation, pp.71, 90.

[14]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.140.

[15]Ibid, p.130.

[16]Ibid, pp.130-131, 160.

[17]In this quote, Luther meant the crowning of Charles the Great. The popes of the high Middle Ages often referred to this event for evidence of jurisdiction over the Holy Roman Emperor. Some pontiffs even went so far as to claim possession of imperial power in the event of a vacancy on the throne. Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.164.

[18]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, pp.170-173.

[19]Ibid, p.182.

[20]Ibid, p.202.

[21]Ibid, pp.201, 204-205.

[22]See I Corinthians 12 and I Peter 2:9.

[23]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.126.

[24]Todd, Luther: A Life, pp.169-172.

[25]Ibid, pp.128-129.

[26]See above, p.27.

[27]Three estates described the social divisions in medieval society: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work, (the clergy, the knights or nobility, and the peasants). Still, these three estates could be divided into two broad categories -- the spiritual and temporal realms. Because the members of the spiritual realm participated in the mysteries of the sacraments and claimed to be closer to God, the clerics demanded a certain amount of reverence from other members of society; since the laymen could not partake in these religious functions, there existed a distinction between the two spheres. For a good general discussion of the topic, see Denys Hay, Europe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (London: Longman Group Limited, 1966; reprint ed., 1980), pp.45-59.

[28]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, pp.129-130; also see I Corinthians 12:12.

[29]Ibid, p.135.

[30]Ibid, pp.136-137; Luibheid, Council of Nicaea, pp.6, 97.

[31]Luther, To The Christian Nobility, p.137.

[32]Ulrich von Hutten was a German humanist, an Imperial Knight, and a contemporary of Luther. As a humanist, he was known for Letters of Obscure Men, a satirical work directed at the incompetence and corruption of some of the Roman clergy. As an Imperial Knight, Hutten hoped to unify

Germany against Rome. Unfortunately, for Hutten, his only followers were other Imperial Knights who resisted the advances of the territorial princes and bishops, and the movement failed. Luther never supported nationalism because of its violent and political nature. See Spitz, The Protestant Reformation, pp.102-103.

CHAPTER IV

THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE SACRAMENTAL SYSTEM

Martin Luther's second great revolutionary manifesto was The Babylonian Captivity of the Church. In this long, unorganized pamphlet, Luther savagely attacked sacramentalism because he believed that the priests had asserted a despotic rule over the souls of Christians through the invention of certain sacraments and through the use of clerical privilege. He compared this tyranny of the Church to the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites in the early sixth century B.C. But Luther did much more than criticize the use of the seven sacraments: he assailed the very means by which the Roman Church controlled the religious lives of Christians from birth to death, and in this aspect, The Captivity became revolutionary. Martin Luther denied the existence of five of the seven sacraments, altered the meaning of the remaining two, and attempted to destroy the priestly caste system, all in an effort to free Christians from what he viewed as the laws and traditions of men. As seen in his previous works, Luther sought to prove that true religious authority rested within the Holy Scriptures.

The idea of spiritual control reappears as an important theme in this work. Church doctrine taught that men received God's grace through the sacraments, even though the number of sacraments varied from two to twelve throughout the Middle Ages. The Church did not canonize the seven traditional sacraments until the Council of Trent; however, by the end of the twelfth century baptism, the Mass, penance, confirmation, ordination, marriage, and extreme unction were generally accepted as sacraments by Peter Lombard and other theologians.[1] Since the priests baptized, gave absolution, united Christians in marriage, and performed other holy acts, they exercised a great deal of spiritual and social control over other members of society. Thus, a certain amount of religious control was achieved through the sacramental system and priestly prerogative. The Church upheld the legitimacy of this control by referring to the New Testament where Christ instituted each of these sacraments.

Luther detested this control because he believed that it was based on the traditions of men rather than on the Holy Scriptures. The monk thought that confirmation, marriage, extreme unction, penance, and ordination did not meet the specifications for a sacrament; he considered them as human instituted rites. As for the Mass and baptism, they qualified as sacraments, but human traditions obscured their original meaning. Luther viewed this spiritual control, which the priests exerted through the sacraments,

as tyrannical and contrary to the Word of God. Unlike the pope's claim of spiritual power, these doctrines seemed to be more damaging since they concerned the attainment of divine grace.

After writing the preface to The Captivity, Luther began his pamphlet by defining sacrament. He believed that a legitimate sacrament should have a divine promise with an attached sign. According to Martin Luther, the true power, nature, and substance of a sacrament resided in the words spoken by Christ. For example, Jesus visibly established the Mass as indicated in the passages of Matthew 26:26, I Corinthians 11:24-25, and Luke 22:19-20.[2] Within these verses lay the divine promise of salvation and of the remission of sins made by God to man and confirmed by the death of Jesus. At the Last Supper, Christ, knowing the eminence of death, promised everlasting life for those who would have faith in him.[3] Finally, some sort of visible sign represented the promise. Luther stated, ". . . it is also true that God is wont to add to well-nigh every promise of His a certain sign as a mark or memorial so that we may thereby the more faithfully hold to his promise . . ."[4] The bread and wine, which signified Christ's body and blood, was the sign in the Mass. The promise, the sign, and the divine institution became the essential characteristics of Luther's version of a sacrament.

The "laying on of hands" was commonly known as confirmation. The Church referred to Acts 8:17 and Mark 10:16 for

the scriptural basis of the sacrament; Christ supposedly instituted this ritual in these passages.[5] But Luther condemned confirmation since he believed that it had no divine promise. In citing the same biblical verses, he said ". . . we read nowhere that Christ ever gave a promise concerning confirmation, although he laid his hands on many . . ."[6] Luther never denied the existence of confirmation; he just regarded it as a ceremony of the Church that resembled other human rituals such as the blessing of the holy water.[7] Although very little space was devoted to confirmation in The Captivity, Luther had moved against an established authority and repudiated a sacrament of the Roman Catholic Church.

Nor did marriage meet the specifications of a Lutheran sacrament.[8] Besides the absence of a divine promise and sign, Luther argued that marriage was not distinctly Christian. He demonstrated that this ritual had endured since the beginning of time and that it existed in non-Christian societies. However, the joining together of a man and a woman was of divine law, a fact that prompted Luther to denounce clerical celibacy.[9] If marriage was an ordained manner of life, then the laws of man became subservient to biblical laws. Luther stated that there existed ". . . between a priest and his wife a true and indissoluble marriage approved by divine commandment."[10] Marriage, like confirmation, remained nothing more than a human rite.

Martin Luther viewed extreme unction as a man-made ritual that substantially deviated from its original form during biblical times.[11] The Church referred to James 5:14-16 as the scriptural evidence for extreme unction, claiming the presence of a divine promise and a sign. Luther denied unction as a sacrament: ". . . no Apostle has the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament, that is to give a divine promise with a sign attached; for this belongs to Christ alone."[12] But Luther pointed out that James made a promise of health and recovery, and he added a sign -- the anointing of oil.[13] Instead of a sacrament, James established a human rite that differed considerably from the sixteenth century version of extreme unction. Luther called this ritual a "counsel of James", which was a simple ". . . ceremony of the early Church whereby miracles were wrought on the sick," through the faith of the recipient.[14] Luther contended that the Apostle never instituted his counsel as an "extreme unction" because he had created the ritual not just for the dying, but for all those who were sick. Luther blamed the priests for the abuse of this custom; he believed that they had purposely invented a sacrament called extreme unction which deprived the sick of a chance for a miracle.[15] From the Lutheran viewpoint, the traditional Roman Catholic sacrament of last rites was nothing more than a human custom, often misused by the priests of the latter Middle Ages.

In the preface of The Captivity, Luther called penance a sacrament.[16] However, he later changed his mind when he became convinced that the priests had so thoroughly abused the sacrament that none of its original meaning remained. A divine promise existed in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, but Martin Luther maintained that the clerics had destroyed it with their own teachings:

> in all their writings, teachings, and preaching, their sole concern has been, not to teach Christians what is promised in these words or what they ought to believe and what great comfort they might find them, but only to extend their own tyranny far and wide through force and violence.[17]

These human traditions included the priestly claim of binding and loosing of sin. Catholic doctrine taught that Christ gave the Church certain discretionary powers concerning sin.[18] But Luther denounced this, saying that no cleric possessed any sort of heavenly rule, for they were ministers who had the responsibility of arousing the penitent's faith by preaching the Word. Also, Luther criticized the emphasis of good works over faith during contrition and satisfaction. He argued that the priests should not instruct the sinner to obtain the forgiveness of sins through a contrite heart; they needed to teach that contrition would follow as a result of a firm belief in the divine promise.[19] Likewise, Martin Luther blasted the vigils, fasts, prayers, pilgrimages, and indulgences done for satisfaction because he believed that these acts caused the Christian to lose

sight of faith.[20] Once again, Luther reaffirmed his most fundamental principle, Christians received God's grace by having faith in the Word. His renunciation of penance was revolutionary since he moved against many years of tradition and the Roman Church's control over sin.

The Eucharist satisfied all of Luther's qualifications for a sacrament: Christ had divinely instituted it, and the sacrament had a promise with an attached sign. But Martin Luther believed that the sixteenth-century practice of the Mass substantially deviated from its scriptural example. He asserted that the sacrament had become tainted with human traditions such as the withholding of one specie, transubstantiation, and the acceptance of the Mass as a sacrifice. These customs obscured the true meaning of the Eucharist. Luther sought to purify the Mass by returning the ritual to its original form as seen in the New Testament.

The first captivity of the Mass concerned the withholding of the cup from the laity. The priest traditionally administered both bread and wine to fellow clerics and the bread to the laity; it was of common belief that one specie was more than sufficient for the proper reception of the sacrament. There existed several reasons why wine was not distributed to the laity: first, the rarity of wine in certain districts; second, the problem of reserving wine for the Mass; third, the practicality of professing faith in the presence of Christ whole and entire under either species;

and fourth, the fear of spilling the wine.[21] Luther disliked the practice because he felt that the Christian had the right to choose the bread or the wine or both. The true sin lay in the denial of the Christian's right to exercise free choice.[22] Of course Martin Luther accused the priests of being tyrants since they contradicted the Bible in two instances: first, Jesus shed his blood for everyone; and second, Christ never commanded the use of either bread or wine but left it to everyone's free option.[23] Luther specifically made the points that the Eucharist belonged to Christians everywhere, not just to the priests, and that the clerics were duty bound to administer both species to those who wanted them.

The second captivity of the Mass was the doctrine of transubstantiation. Although theologians debated this matter during the ninth through the thirteenth centuries, the Catholic Church taught that the priests turned the bread and wine into the living body and blood of Christ, while only the appearance of bread and wine remained.[24] Within the body and blood lay the divine grace necessary for salvation. The word transubstantiation is a scholastic term that did not come into being until 1215 with the fourth Lateran Council. But the Church always maintained that transubstantiation had taken place since biblical times. For support, Rome referred to a peculiar yet revealing passage in a work of St. Justin's which read:

> . . . but just as, through the word of God our savior Jesus Christ became incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation so we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His words and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.[25]

Transubstantiation is implied in this statement. This was Catholic doctrine; if anyone denied its existence, he was viewed as a heretic.[26]

Martin Luther attacked transubstantiation because he found the rite theologically unappealing and he deplored the role of the priests; yet, his position on the doctrine of real presence was almost identical with that of the Church. Luther detested the use of scholasticism in describing the transformation of the bread and wine into the divine body and blood; he said that it was ". . . an absurd and unheard of juggling with words, to understand 'bread' to mean 'the form, or accidents of bread' and 'wine' to mean 'the form or accidents of wine.'"[27] Luther believed that scholastic terminology inhibited the true meaning of the Mass, and he maintained that Christ always desired to keep his words simple and that they should be understood in their grammatical and literal sense.[28] More importantly, Martin Luther loathed the belief that the priests actually possessed the power to change the bread and wine into the body and blood. He contended that the bread and wine did not transubstantiate as the Church claimed; instead, the real body and blood of Christ remained present in the

Eucharist through the faith of the Christian as indicated in this statement:

> In order that the Godhead may dwell in Him, it is not necessary that the human nature be transubstantiated and the Godhead be contained under its accidents; but both natures are there in their entirety . . . Even though philosophy cannot grasp this, faith grasps it, and the authority of God's Word is greater than the grasp of our intellect.[29]

Nevertheless, the body and blood remained present either through the faith of the Christian or through transubstantiation. Luther did not label transubstantiation a heresy; he concluded that it was merely a human invention and that the Church had no right to force Christians to believe in this tradition.

The last captivity dealt with the sacrificial mass. The Roman Catholic Church taught that God sent His son so that he might sacrifice his flesh and blood for the life of mankind; the nature of this offering would be communicated to man primarily through the Eucharist, where he ate Christ's flesh and drank his blood. The Christian, when he partook of the Mass, imitated Christ's sacrifice, thereby giving himself to God in return for grace. The idea of sacrifice had become firmly entrenched in Catholic doctrine and tradition since the third century.[30]

Luther emphatically denied the sacrificial character of the Mass. He believed that Jesus instituted the sacrament, not to sacrifice himself to the Heavenly Father, nor

to perform a good work, but to offer all Christians a commemoration of his impending death. Christians should drink the wine and eat the bread in remembrance of Jesus who made the true sacrifice of dying on the Cross for the sins of mankind.[31] If the Eucharist was not a ritualistic offering, then the Christians receiving the sacrament could not give themselves as a sacrifice to God in order to obtain divine grace. Luther repeatedly stressed that God only granted His grace through the recipient's faith in the promise. The Mass, in its pure and simple biblical form, consisted of ". . . nothing else than the divine promise or testament of Christ, sealed with the sacrament of His body and blood."[32] Luther repudiated the sacrificial nature of the sacrament and he attempted to return it to its scriptural origins.

Baptism became the second legitimate Lutheran sacrament, and it consisted of a divine promise with an attached sign.[33] The Church maintained that the sacrament was man's initiation rite into God's kingdom; but Luther radically altered this view by stating that baptism gained the Christian membership into the revolutionary priesthood of all believers. The doctrine of the priesthood was revolutionary because it called for spiritual equality among all men -- an idea that removed the religious barriers that existed between the medieval estates of priests, knights, and peasants. By immersing in and raising one up from the water, and through faith in the divine promise, man began

his spiritual journey toward everlasting life, as Martin Luther indicated in this passage: "For all our life should be baptism, and the fulfilling of the sign. . . we have been set free from all else and wholly given over to baptism alone, that is to the death and resurrection."[34] By belonging to the priesthood of all believers, all men were spiritually equal before God. Baptism stood as the single, unique characteristic that all members of the priesthood shared.

Luther argued that the laws, ceremonies, and vows of the Roman Catholic Church impeded the true significance of baptism. He used baptism to denounce religious vows. For instance, a man who entered a monastery promised to live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience; Martin Luther viewed the monastic vow as a human law or requirement that obscured Christian liberty by extinguishing the faith in baptism. To rectify the situation, Luther wanted to

> . . . abolish or avoid all vows, be they vows to enter religious orders, to make pilgrimages or to do any works whatsoever, that we may remain in the liberty of our baptism, which is the most religious and rich in works.[35]

There existed only one vow, that of baptism. Since an infant could not take the baptismal vow or have faith in the divine promise, the faith of others, namely the parents, was enough to cleanse the infant's soul and guarantee him membership in the priesthood. Once the Christian entered the priesthood of all believers he became totally committed

to completing his baptismal vows, a task which would take a lifetime.[36] As with the Mass, Luther attempted to purify baptism and bring forth its true meaning.

Of the seven Roman Catholic sacraments, Luther probably despised ordination most of all. This sacrament had great significance, for it allowed one to enter the spiritual estate. The ritual also enabled the priests to administer the other six sacraments, and it gave them the power to dispense God's grace; once ordained, the clerics became the mysterious mediators between God and man.[37] Luther believed that the priest, through ordination, had:

> . . . set up a nursery of implacable discord, whereby clerics and laymen should be separated from each other further than heaven from earth, to the incredible injury of baptism and the confusion of our fellowship in the Gospel.[38]

Martin Luther abhorred ordination because it was the basis for the priest's religious control over the laity.

Luther reduced ordination to the status of a man-made rite in an effort to destroy the caste system of medieval clericalism. First, he denied the presence of a divine promise:

> of this sacrament the Church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the Church of the pope. Not only is there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not the least mention of it in the whole New Testament.[39]

Then Luther employed his priesthood of all believers. Since all baptized Christians were spiritually equal, they could

discharge the duties of baptizing, preaching, and administering the Mass. According to Martin Luther, by baptism, not by ordination, a man became a priest; therefore the Roman clergy had no right to impose their laws and traditions on men unless they received the approval of the congregation. But Luther never abolished the priestly caste system; the authority of the priests and the sacramental significance of ordination continued. However, the priesthood of all believers enabled the protestant laity to perform the sacred ceremonies of administering the Mass and baptizing. Martin Luther's dimunition of ordination to a human ritual was revolutionary because he changed the source of the priest's spiritual control over other members of society.

The term religious freedom is mentioned throughout The Captivity. Luther wrote this pamphlet in an attempt to free the Christian from the control of the priest and their use of the sacraments. As seen in To The Christian Nobility, spiritual freedom meant the Christian's emancipation from human laws and traditions; besides temporal authority, Luther believed that the Bible was the only other authority man remained bound to obey. Martin Luther would provide a complete explanation of religious liberty and how the concept related to his movement against the Church in The Freedom of A Christian.

After Desiderius Erasmus read The Captivity, he exclaimed, "The malady is incurable."[40] Erasmus no longer

defended Luther because he realized that his savage attack on the sacraments threatened to disrupt the religious unity that existed in sixteenth-century Europe. Luther and Erasmus had strikingly similar theologies. For instance, both deplored the abuse of indulgences, both hated the scholastic terminology which they believed polluted the true meaning of religion, and both believed that man received divine grace through faith. But Erasmus, unlike his counterpart, wanted to reform Christendom with the peaceful dissemination of classical Christian literature. He strongly desired reform within the traditional structure of the Roman Catholic Church and he wished to keep Western Europe united under one faith and one Bible; to attack papal and priestly authority, and to denounce the sacraments, would cause religious dissension and tumult, concepts that were repulsive to the Dutch reformer and to all Christian humanity who sought peace above all else.[41] Martin Luther shattered Christian unity and order. Beyond any doubt, The Captivity made reconciliation between Luther and Rome impossible. Desiderius Erasmus foresaw the violence, bloodshed, and religious factionalism that would soon result from Luther's break with the Church. Thus, Erasmus, with his reform program in ruins, withdrew the minimal support he had given Luther following the publication of the Ninety-Five Theses.

Even Johann von Staupitz, who privately agreed with Luther on many theological points concerning faith,

indulgences, and the papacy, refused to support publicly his former student.[42] Staupitz disliked the way in which Luther undertook his plan of reforming Christendom. Respectfully to suggest peaceful change was one thing, but to openly assault the pope and the sacramental system was another, and Staupitz felt that Martin Luther threatened the unity of Christendom with both To The Christian Nobility and The Captivity. By the end of 1520, the vicar general virtually ceased all correspondence with Luther; also, the Church forced him to sign a document stating that his former pupil's teachings were heretical.[43] Johann von Staupitz, like Desiderius Erasmus, was a true reformer and traditionalist who abhorred the thought of violent religious change.

The Babylonian Captivity of The Church was revolutionary because Luther attacked the Church's means of controlling the spiritual lives of Christians. He wanted to restructure the entire Roman Catholic sacramental system, beginning with the removal of confirmation, marriage, and extreme unction. Luther maintained that these Roman Catholic sacraments lacked the necessary divine promise; therefore he reduced them to the status of human instituted rites. Penance was once a sacrament, but he abolished it because he thought that human traditions had completely obliterated its original meaning. As for the Mass and baptism, they qualified as legitimate Lutheran sacraments, but Luther transformed their meaning. He denounced the

withholding of the cup from the laity, transubstantiation, and the sacrificial mass, since he contended that these human beliefs impeded the recipient's faith in the divine promise. Luther made baptism the chief sacrament and it enabled the Christian to enter the priesthood of all believers; he also repudiated all monastic vows by emphasizing the baptismal vow as the only oath a Christian needed to take. Finally, Martin Luther reintroduced the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in an attempt to demolish ordination and the caste system of medieval clericalism. Like confirmation, marriage, and extreme unction, ordination was a man-made ritual. Luther insisted that spiritual control lay in the Holy Scriptures, not in the laws of men, and he pointed out, once again, that the Christian obtained grace through faith in the promise of salvation. Every aspect of _The Captivity_ was revolutionary, for Luther moved against established authority and tradition with the implications of sweeping, radical change.

ENDNOTES

[1]For information on the Roman Catholic version of sacraments and the sacramental system, see Bernard Piault, What Is a Sacrament? (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1963), and C. C. Martindale, "The Sacramental System," in The Teachings of The Catholic Church, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:733-766; also see Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 3:204-214.

[2]Martin Luther, Works of Martin Luther, vol. 2: The Babylonian Captivity of The Church, trans. A.T.W. Steinhauser (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1915), p.195.

[3]Ibid, pp.195-197.

[4]Ibid, p.203.

[5]The sacrament of confirmation is the perfection of baptism. According to the Roman Church, baptism brought man membership in God's kingdom, and confirmation bestowed on man the responsibility of being a Christian. Through confirmation, the Christian became an officially credited citizen of the Catholic Church. Confirmation was rich in tradition: Tertullian, St. Cyprian, and St. Jerome each implied the use of the sacrament. See George D. Smith, "The Sacrament of Confirmation," in The Teachings of The Catholic

Church (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:803-838.

[6]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.256.

[7]Ibid, p.256.

[8]For information on marriage as a sacrament, See E.J. Mahoney, "Christian Marriage," in The Teachings of The Catholic Church, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:1062-1100.

[9]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, pp.261-266, 267; also see Matthew 19:6.

[10]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, pp.267-268.

[11]For information on extreme unction, see J.P. Arendzen, "Extreme Unction," in The Teachings of The Catholic Church, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), pp.990-1021.

[12]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.285.

[13]Ibid, pp.286-289.

[14]Ibid, p.288.

[15]Ibid, p.286.

[16]"At the outset I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and hold for the present, to but three - baptism, penance, and the bread." Later, Luther changes his mind and decides that two sacraments exist. Quoted from Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.245.

[17]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.245.

[18]For a general discussion of the sacrament of penance, see H. Harrington, "The Sacrament of Penance," in

The Teachings of The Catholic Church, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:955-989.

[19]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.248; also see Jonah 3:5.

[20]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, pp.253-254.

[21]There exists several reasons why wine was not distributed to the laity: first, the rarity of wine in certain districts; second, the problem of reserving wine for the Mass; third, the practicality of professing faith in the presence of Christ whole and entire under either species; and fourth, the fear of spilling the wine. See George D. Smith, "The Sacrament of The Eucharist," in The Teachings of The Catholic Church (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:871.

[22]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.182.

[23]Ibid, pp.182, 186; also see Matthew 26:28.

[24]Smith, "The Sacrament of The Eucharist," 2:843, 861.

[25]Rudolph Arbermann ed. et al., The Fathers of The Church, vol. 6: The First Apology, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1948; reprint ed., 1969), pp.105-106; also see Smith, "The Sacrament of The Eucharist," 2:858.

[26]John Wyclif denied transubstantiation and was declared a heretic by the Church. See Denys Hay, The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, p.322.

[27]Luther, The Babylonian Captivity, p.190.

[28]Ibid, pp.189-190.

[29]Ibid, pp.193-194.

[30]B.V. Miller, "The Eucharistic Sacrifice," in _The Teachings of The Catholic Church_, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:881-883, 886-887, 905-912; Smith, "The Sacrament of The Eucharist," 2:846.

[31]Luther, _The Babylonian Captivity_, p.212.

[32]Ibid, p.207.

[33]For a general discussion on Roman Catholic baptism, see John P. Murphy, "The Sacrament of Baptism," in _The Teachings of The Catholic Church_, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:767-802; Arthur McCormack, _Christian Initiation_ (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1969), also see Mark 16:16.

[34]Luther, _The Babylonian Captivity_, p.218.

[35]Ibid, p.237.

[36]Ibid, pp.236-238.

[37]For information on ordination, see C. Cronin, "The Sacrament of Ordination," in _The Teachings of The Catholic Church_, ed. George D. Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949; reprint ed., 1962), 2:1022-1061; Luther, _The Babylonian Captivity_, p.279.

[38]Luther, _The Babylonian Captivity_, p.278.

[39]Ibid, p.273.

[40]Quoted from Roland Bainton, Erasmus of Christendom, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1969; reprint ed., 1982), p.165.

[41]Ibid, pp.177-178.

[42]John Todd, p.193.

[43]Sallaberger, "Johann von Staupitz - Luther's Vorgesetzter und Freund," pp.183-184; also see Todd, Luther: A Life, p.193.

CHAPTER V

BY FAITH ALONE

Martin Luther's third great revolutionary manifesto of 1520 was The Freedom of A Christian. This small, beautifully written pamphlet differed from the preceding two in that Luther wrote it as a goodwill offering to Pope Leo X; but the work contained no recantations, and it proved to be a continuation of his revolutionary thought.[1] The Freedom of A Christian represented Martin Luther's conception of religious life based solely on the Holy Scriptures. In this treatise, he presented a mature version of his revolutionary doctrine of justification by faith alone, he explained how the Christian should behave while on earth, and he defined Christian liberty. The Freedom of A Christian concluded Luther's attack on the Roman Catholic Church.

The Word of God and faith became the two primary ingredients of the Lutheran idea of religious life. Luther interpreted the Word as "the gospel of God concerning his son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies."[2] The only way to understand and use God's Word was through faith. Justification by faith was nothing new for Martin Luther; he had personally discovered what he considered to be Paul's

doctrine in 1515, which brought a temporary end to years of spiritual oppression and turmoil. From 1515 through 1520, Luther developed the doctrine into a complex concept he called *theologia crucis*. Theology of the Cross meant that man could know God only through Christ's suffering on the Cross; Luther believed that *theologia crucis* was true theology.[3] Man obtained the grace necessary for salvation, gained spiritual freedom, achieved good works, and lived a morally correct Christian life by having faith in the Word. For Luther, faith and the divine promise had become the essential elements of religious life, and no other work better illustrated this point than *The Freedom of A Christian*.

A firm belief in the Word brought several advantages to the Christian; but before the individual began to enjoy these benefits, he had to experience the process of justification. Luther partially defined justification as man recognizing his inability to do good. Like many others before him, the professor from Wittenberg thought that man had a double nature consisting of inner and outer halves. The inner being was man's soul or spirit; the outer being meant his flesh or carnal self.[4] Because of Adam's fall from grace, Martin Luther viewed man's outer nature as corrupt; thus he could not accomplish any worthwhile act. But man, ignorant of his sinful nature, always attempted to do good works, whether he performed them to gain divine favor or to fulfill the laws of God. In order to explain

justification Luther divided the Holy Scriptures into commandments and promises. The Ten Commandments demanded the impossible from the Christian; man could never satisfy these laws with his works.[5] After being thoroughly humbled before God, the Christian turned to the promise of salvation found in the New Testament. Luther knew that faith satisfied the Commandments and the demands of God. Luther described justification as man realizing his own unworthiness and clinging to the Word through faith. Once justified, the individual began to live the Lutheran version of a Christian life.[6]

The most important result of faith was spiritual freedom. Justification by faith acted as a doctrine of emancipation that liberated the Christian from sin, the law, and the need of works. Luther defined religious freedom as the individual's personal faith in Christ:

> It is clear, then, that a Christian had all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if had no need to the law, surely he is free from the law. . . This is the Christian liberty, our faith which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation.[7]

Faith meant that the Christian required nothing but the Word to live out the remainder of his life. Because of man's faith, Christ assumed his burdens and forgave his sins, thereby liberating him from sin, the law, and good works.[8]

From a different but familiar perspective, faith freed man from all temporal religious laws and traditions by making him a priest and a king. In To The Christian Nobility, Luther introduced his priesthood of all believers, a doctrine which stated that all baptized Christians were spiritually equal. The very essence of the priesthood was faith in the divine promise. Faith enabled the Christian to perform religious acts once traditionally reserved for the pope and the priests. As a member of the priesthood, man could summon an ecumenical council, interpret the Scriptures, and administer the sacraments.[9] Luther also believed that because of faith the Christian became a spiritual lord:

> The nature of this priesthood and kingship is something like this: First, with respect to kingship, every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of spiritual power, he is lord of all things without exception. . .[10]

Through faith the Christian inherited the Christ-like characteristics of priesthood and kingship that liberated him from the power of papal decrees and the laws of the Roman Catholic Church. The only spiritual authority the Christian remained subject to was that of God. In The Freedom of A Christian Luther presented his justification by faith alone as a doctrine of emancipation.

Martin Luther spoke of religious life in terms of freedom and bondage. He stated that "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and "A

Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[11] Luther had explained the first statement by referring to man's faith. Belief in the Word made man a spiritual lord over all religious matters, and it freed him from sin, the law, good works, and the human traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. But freedom remained only one aspect of religious life. Although everlasting life began with faith in the divine promise, the Christian could not enjoy complete salvation until death. During his time on earth he adhered to a code of religious conduct dictated by faith in the Word. These two seemingly contradictory statements of freedom and bondage were essential in understanding the Lutheran conception of Christian life.

Martin Luther asserted that "A man does not live for himself alone in this body to work for it alone but to live also for all men on earth; rather he lives only for others and not for himself."[12] The Christian remained bound to serve his neighbor. This obligation arose from the faith of the individual. The person who possessed a strong belief in God's Word inherited freedom, priesthood, kingship, and the Christ-like quality of servitude. Despite the fact that Jesus had vast religious powers and a rich supply of faith, he freely sacrificed himself to save mankind. As he walked among men, Christ became spiritually poor, assumed man's sins, and suffered like any other mortal human. Luther believed that the Christian should live in the image of Christ:

> Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in his liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be bound in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ had dealt and still deals with him.[13]

Luther never wanted man to live exactly as Christ did, for he realized the impossibility of such a feat. He meant that the individual should adopt some of the earthly characteristics of Jesus. Although this vision of the Christian living in the image of Christ was reminiscent of late medieval Catholicism, Luther believed that through faith in the divine promise the Christian gained spiritual freedom; and, out of faith, man was bound to serve and love his neighbor.[14]

Martin Luther's views on the nature of man, faith, and good works differed considerably from the Catholic teachings on the same subjects. Roman Catholicism of the Middle Ages and St. Augustine taught that man's outer being was basically good, despite his fall from grace; because of Adam human nature was wounded, but an evil nature had not been created.[15] Also, the Church mentioned that some men obtained a higher form of righteousness by living a strict life of obedience, poverty, and chasity. Even the Christian humanists, namely Desiderius Erasmus, supported the notion that man's nature was good. In <u>The Handbook of The Militant Christian</u>, Erasmus claimed that man accomplished good works if he performed them with sincerity and internal piety:

> If you come near to the Lord, He will come near to you; if you make a sincere effort to escape the chains of blindness with which the love of sensible things has bound you, He will come to you, and you, no longer chained to the things of earth, will be enveloped in the silence of God.[16]

This is not to say that Erasmus or Augustine thought that good works invited the reception of grace; however, men believed that the individual possessed the ability to strive for good.[17] On the other hand, Martin Luther had already argued that man had a corrupt nature. Luther proposed that morality lay within the faith of Christian; man achieved good works out of faith.[18] Thus, Luther's ideas on human nature, faith and ethics diametrically opposed the teachings of the Church, St. Augustine, and Erasmus.

According to Luther, works such as fasting, praying, and laboring played a very important role in the Christian's life. The individual performed these tasks to discipline the outer body and bring it under the control of the soul:

> The works of the believer are like this: Through faith he has been restored to Paradise and created anew, has no need of works that he may become or be righteous; but that he may not be idle and may provide for and keep his body, he must do such works freely to please God.[19]

Luther maintained that the inner man must dominate the outer being in order for the Christian to live a correct religious life. Man achieved good works out of faith. These tasks were done to curb carnal temptations and to prepare the

Christian for the ultimate Lutheran ethic -- serving other men.[20]

The Freedom of A Christian lacked the harsh language that characterized the previous two pamphlets; nevertheless, the work was revolutionary because Luther moved against an established authority with the implications of radical change. When Martin Luther defined religious freedom as man's faith in the divine promise, he theoretically achieved his goal of liberating the Christian from the control of the Roman Catholic Church. Once the Christian had faith, the Holy Scriptures became the only religious authority he remained bound to obey. Luther believed that justification by faith alone removed the notion that man performed good works for the sake of obtaining righteousness or fulfilling the laws of God. No matter how long the Christian prayed or fasted, or how hard he labored, he never met the demands of the Commandments. Only faith satisfied the rigorous requirements of God. Also, Luther stressed that goodness came from the faith of man and every Christian should adhere to one code of religious conduct. Despite its peaceful overtones, The Freedom of A Christian was a revolutionary pamphlet and a fitting conclusion to Luther's own personal movement against the Church.

ENDNOTES

[1]Luther sent a copy of The Freedom of A Christian along with another small tract entitled An Open Letter to Pope Leo X to the pope in Rome. In the latter treatise, Martin Luther did not hold the pope personally responsible for the current state of religious affairs in Western Europe; the former work was intended as a devotional booklet for the pope. If Luther hoped that these two pamphlets would pacify the pope, he was exceedingly naive. In An Open Letter he addressed Pope X as an equal and gave him advice on how to govern Christendom. Martin Luther sent these works to the pope, not because of his own initiative, but due to the prodding of Staupitz and certain officials of the Church. See Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 31: An Open Letter to Pope Leo X, trans. W.A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), pp.334-341.

[2]Martin Luther, Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehman and Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 31: The Freedom of A Christian, trans. W.A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), pp.346.

[3]Ebeling, Luther: An Introduction to His Thought, pp.226-228, Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 4:155-156.

[4]It is important to note that Luther did not create the double nature theory; he expounded the concept originated by Paul and St. Augustine. See Luther, The Freedom of A Christian, p.344.

[5]Luther used the example of coveting to make his point. No matter how hard the Christian tried, he would always covet his neighbor, thus breaking one of the Ten Commandments. The only way to satisfy this commandment was to admit unworthiness and have faith in the Word. See Luther, The Freedom of A Christian, p.348.

[6]Ibid, p.349.

[7]Ibid, pp.349-350.

[8]Ibid, pp.346-347.

[9]Ibid, p.355.

[10]Ibid, p.354.

[11]Ibid, p.344; also see Romans 13:8 and I Corinthians 9:19.

[12]Luther, The Freedom of A Christian, p.364; also see Romans 14:7-8.

[13]Ibid, p.366.

[14]Ibid, Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 3:118-129.

[15]Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 1:294-307.

[16]Desiderius Erasmus, The Essential Erasmus, ed. and trans. John P. Dolan: The Handbook of The Militant Christian (New York: New American Library Incorporated, 1964; reprint ed., 1983), p.7.

[17]Ibid, p.69; Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 4:140.

[18]Luther, The Freedom of A Christian, p.360.

[19]Ibid

[20]Ibid, pp.350-360.

CHAPTER VI

LUTHER'S SUCCESS

A revolution has been defined as any successful movement against an established authority that results in sudden, radical change. Martin Luther's campaign against the Church ended in the creation of a successful competing religious institution. He accomplished this feat when some of the spiritual concepts he suggested in his revolutionary manifestos became reality; at Wittenberg in 1521, three of Luther's followers carried out these proposed changes and established a form of religion that opposed Roman Catholicism. But Luther failed in two of his objectives: he never returned Christianity to the tranquility of its remote past and he did not destroy the authority of the medieval Church. Nevertheless, Luther's accomplishments and the disruption of spiritual unity proved that he was a religious revolutionary.

In *To The Christian Nobility*, *The Captivity*, and *The Freedom of A Christian*, Luther introduced his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and he reaffirmed an old belief that men could not create articles of faith, namely sacraments. According to the priesthood, all baptized Christians were spiritually equal. This doctrine enabled

Christians to interpret Scripture, summon an ecumenical council, and administer the sacraments. When Luther asserted that only Christ possessed the authority to institute a sacrament, he denied the existence of five of the seven traditional Roman Catholic sacraments; he reduced ordination, confirmation, extreme unction, and penance to the status of human rites. In these pamphlets, Luther theoretically abolished papal, priestly, and Roman Catholic authority and he presented his conception of religion based entirely on the Bible.

Theory turned into reality when three of Luther's followers implemented a few of their mentor's religious reforms at Wittenberg during the latter part of 1521. While Luther remained in exile at the Wartburg, Andreas Karlstadt, Philip Melanchthon, and Gabriel Zwilling carried out changes concerning marriage and the Mass.[1] All three men attacked celibacy and they encouraged priests, nuns, and monks to seek a spouse since, like Luther, they viewed marriage as a divinely ordained act; even Andreas Karlstadt, the Archdeacon of the Castle Church, married a sixteen year old country girl. Next, Karlstadt and Melanchthon celebrated the Lutheran version of the Mass by giving both species to the laity, omitting the word "sacrifice," using German instead of Latin, and performing the Eucharist without the traditional priestly garb. More importantly, these men literally established the priesthood of all believers. Even though they were not episcopally ordained Roman Catholic

priests, all three interpreted the Gospel and administered the sacraments. Overall, Luther seemed pleased with the changes at Wittenberg; at last his envisioned reformation of Christendom had begun.[2]

With the assistance of his loyal followers, Luther instituted a religious denomination that differed considerably from the operation, structure, and theology of the Catholic Church. At Wittenberg, the laity performed the Mass, preached God's Word, and interpreted the Bible. Also, priests, monks, and nuns began to marry; and Luther eventually practiced what he preached when he wed Katherine von Bora in 1525. More importantly, spiritual freedom was achieved; this version of religion was not subject to papal power or to the laws of the Roman Church. Basically, this is what Martin Luther desired -- religion founded on scriptural authority and free from what he perceived as human traditions. In a very short time Lutheranism would spread to the areas immediately surrounding Wittenberg and throughout Northern Germany.

Since a large number of people remained loyal to Rome and to the pope, Luther had failed to totally abolish the authority of the Church. Even after the Lutheran revolution, the pontiff retained his power, grace continued to be administered through the sacraments of mass, baptism, penance, ordination, marriage, confirmation, and extreme unction, and the priests still carried out their roles as mediators between God and man. Roman Catholic authority

survived because the majority of the universal congregation refused to accept Martin Luther's version of religious truth; his conception of religion was not only biased, it was also heretical when compared to orthodox Catholic teachings. In fact, the theological positions of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, and many others forced the Church to redefine and reassert Catholic doctrine at the Council of Trent during the years 1545 through 1563.[3] Instead of destroying the Church's authority, Luther had offered Western Europe an alternative view of religion.

Unfortunately for Christendom, religious disunity resulted from Martin Luther's assault on the Church. He desperately wanted to return Christianity to the serenity of its distant past where Christians shared a common faith and spiritual equality; although this was a noble goal, it seemed too idealistic and it never materialized. Several religious sects arose, primarily due to Luther's concept of spiritual liberty. Once he and his disciples had freed themselves from the control of the Catholic Church, many other groups followed; denominations such as the Lutherans, the Zwinglians, the Calvinists, the Adamites, and the Mennonites all referred to the Bible as the only spiritual authority in Christendom. However, each group had their own interpretation of the Scriptures and each had their own theological beliefs. As for the Roman Church, it maintained unity and universality through the faith and consent of those who continued to call themselves Catholics. These

Protestant organizations definitely lacked the cohesiveness that characterized Catholicism.[4] Luther's revolutionary doctrine of spiritual freedom became one of the cornerstones for all reformed churches, and the source for religious disunity.

Despite the fact that Martin Luther failed to abolish the authority of the medieval Church, his movement against the Church ended in success. At Wittenberg during the latter half of 1521 Andreas Karlstadt, Philip Melanchthon, and Gabriel Zwilling implemented several of the spiritual reforms Luther proposed in his three revolutionary manifestos. These men established a form of religion that was free from the control of the Roman Catholich Church. Wittenberg was not the only example of radical change. The Lutheran revolution had a profound impact on the stability of Western Europe; when he assaulted the Church and instituted a new church, Luther disrupted spiritual unity, thus causing a multiplicity of denominations. There would no longer be a just one "religious truth" in Western Europe. Martin Luther's revolution ended with the successful creation of a new church and it abolished religious unity.

ENDNOTES

[1]On April 26, 1521, Luther and his party left Worms to return to Wittenberg. A few days later, robbers "kidnapped" Luther and brought him to the Wartburg, a great castle overlooking Eisenach. Martin Luther knew of this plot; Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony had planned to put him into protective custody. There, at the Wartburg, Luther assumed the name of Junker George, grew a beard, and began to translate the New Testament into German. Luther returned to Wittenberg in March of 1522. See Todd, Luther: A Life, pp.206-209.

[2]Gritsch, Martin-God's Court Jester, pp.48-49; Todd, Luther: A Life, pp.212-227; and Bainton, Here I Stand, pp.152-158.

[3]Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 4:235.

[4]Ibid, 4:246.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, any successful movement against an established authority that resulted in sudden, radical change has been characterized a revolution. This definition describes Martin Luther's assault on the Church in 1520. During that year, he wrote To The Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity, and The Freedom of A Christian, in which he angrily attacked the papacy, the sacramental system, and Catholic doctrine. The changes that Luther proposed in these pamphlets transcended the idea of reform since they called for the destruction of medieval Roman Catholic authority. Instead of a reformed Church, Luther established a type of Christianity not controlled by Rome; and his movement shattered Christian unity. Martin Luther was a religious revolutionary.

Prior to the Leipzig Debate, Luther was a reformer who remained unaware of the revolutionary nature of his theological convictions. Like Cisneros, Erasmus, and Staupitz, Martin Luther wanted to reform the Church and correct many of the abuses that had plagued the institution over the previous five hundred years. For instance, he wrote the Ninety-Five Theses in response to the blatant misuse of

indulgences. In this work, three main points were stressed: the object of expenditure concerning indulgence revenue, the pope's control over purgatory, and the spiritual welfare of the sinner. No where in the *Theses* did Luther attack or move against Roman Catholic authority. In fact, he expressed loyalty towards the pope and never held the Holy Father responsible for the abuse of indulgences; thus, for a brief time, Martin Luther was a reformer within the traditional ecclesiastical structure. But the Church construed the *Theses* as a direct assault on papal supremacy. Luther believed that the pope and the Church interpreted the Bible as he did; and he naively assumed that all spiritual authority rested within the Bible. Also, Luther's justification by faith had matured into *theologia crucis*. Now he believed that no church or pope possessed the authority to define religion. Despite his radical theology, Martin Luther exhibited the characteristics of a reformer who had the support of Johann von Staupitz and Desiderius Erasmus.

At the Leipzig Debate, during June and July of 1519, the Dominican theologian John Eck made the professor from Wittenberg face the true implications of his theological beliefs. By using the example of John Hus, Eck forced his opponent to realize that Rome considered his version of religion to be heretical, since it elevated the Scriptures above the authority of the Church and the pope, the sacramental system and Catholic doctrine in an attempt to rid the Church of what he perceived to be human traditions.

More importantly, he wanted to restore the Bible as the only source of religious authority in Christendom. Luther left Leipzig a revolutionary, and he was acutely aware that he and the Church had uncompromising differences.

<u>To The Christian Nobility</u> was the first of Martin Luther's revolutionary manifestos. In this work, Luther hoped to return the pontiff to a position of spiritual leadership as seen in the example of Peter in the New Testament. He began by calling for the removal of the traditional ecclesiastical practices of papal reservation and the annate tax; next, he demanded that the pope withdraw from West European politics; and finally, Luther introduced his priesthood of all believers. According to the priesthood, all baptized Christians, regardless of their social position, were spiritually equal. This doctrine destroyed the medieval distinctions between the spiritual and temporal realms, and it devastated the papal claims of interpreting the Scriptures and summoning a council. In effect, Martin Luther attempted to free the Christian from papal control. The entire work was revolutionary because Luther's conception of the priesthood and of a purely spiritual pontiff were examples of radical change.

The most revolutionary of the three pamphlets was <u>The Babylonian Captivity</u>. Through the invention and misuse of certain sacraments, and through the use of clerical privilege, Luther maintained that the priests had asserted a tyrannical rule over the souls of Christians. He savagely

attacked the sacramental system in order to free the Christian from the control of the Roman Church. In confirmation, marriage, extreme unction, and penance Luther found no evidence of a divine promise with an attached sign; therefore, he reduced these four traditional sacraments to the status of human rites. Mass and baptism qualified as sacraments, but Luther altered their meaning. He denied the withholding of one specie from the laity, transubstantiation, and the sacrificial mass, since he contended that these human customs impeded the sinner's faith in the promise of salvation. As for baptism, Luther made it the preeminent sacrament, and he stressed the baptismal oath as the only vow a Christian needed to take. Finally, he attempted to destroy the caste system of medieval clericalism when he abolished ordination and reintroduced the priesthood of all believers. _The Babylonian Captivity_ was revolutionary because he assaulted the means by which the Church controlled the distribution of grace to Christians.

Although Luther continued to write for another twenty years, he concluded his movement against the Church with the publication of _The Freedom of A Christian_. In this work he defined spiritual freedom as being the Christian's faith; a firm belief in the divine promise liberated man from sin and the laws of the Roman Catholic Church. Also, he presented his revolutionary justification by faith alone, in which he attacked traditional Catholic doctrine concerning the nature

of man and good works. Luther firmly believed that man's nature was corrupt and incapable of good works unless he first had faith in the promise of salvation; because of faith man achieved works such as fasting and laboring in order to prepare himself for the tasks of serving his neighbors and living in Christ's image. The Freedom of A Christian represented a version of religious life based on faith, and the work proved to be a culmination of Luther's revolutionary thought.

In each of the three manifestoes, Luther moved against an established authority with the implications of sweeping change. But by the end of 1521, theory became reality when Andreas Karlstadt, Philip Melanchthon, and Gabriel Zwilling carred out a few of their leader's religious reforms at Wittenberg. There, they established a type of Christianity based solely on the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and free from Roman Catholic and papal control. Even though Luther never abolished the authority of the medieval Church, Wittenberg marked the success of his revolution. Instead of reforming the Catholic Church, Luther had created something new; this was the mark of a revolutionary.

Despite the fact that Luther's revolution disrupted the religious unity of Western Christendom, he made significant contributions to both Protestantism and Catholicism. Since Martin Luther successfully abjured the Roman Catholic Church, his example encouraged many other religious sects to do the same; and the Lutheran doctrine of

justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and spiritual liberty became the cornerstones for several reformed Churches. As for Catholicism, Luther and the other Protestant heretics forced Rome to come to grips with its theological position. At the Council of Trent, the Church reaffirmed, redefined, and reasserted Catholic doctrine and unity. Although Luther was a heretic, he contributed a great deal to the development of Christian thought.

This definition of revolution sufficiently described Luther. He moved against an established authority; the sweeping changes he suggested occurred with the successful formation of a new church at Wittenberg. Also, the destruction of Christian unity, which resulted in a multiplicity of religious denominations, was an example of radical change. Whether or not he returned Christianity to primitive biblical times remained difficult to determine, but he did create a religious institution that was not subject to the control of the Roman Church. The revolution was violent and it had a purely religious basis even though political, educational, and social changes occurred. Martin Luther, beyond any historical doubt, was a religious revolutionary.

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