

Excerpts from the Writings of Martin Luther

Edited by Robert Freeman

Introduction

Martin Luther was born to a middle class mining entrepreneur in the town of Eisleben, Germany in 1483. Luther received the highest quality education and aspired to enter the field of Law. But a traumatic experience during a thunderstorm convinced him to change his life's pursuit to religion. He entered the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt and was ordained as a priest in 1507.

During a trip to Rome on church-related business in 1510, Luther was revolted by the materialism of the papacy and the indifference of ecclesiastical officials to the practice of Christianity. His upset was compounded by the papal practice of selling "indulgences" for the remission of sin, a practice he believed led Christians astray from the true path of salvation. He wrote his famous "95 Theses" and posted them on the Church door in Wittenberg in 1517. Thus began a process that would lead to the rupture of Catholic unity in Europe.

In 1519, Luther had what he later called his "Tower Experience" in which the meaning of Justification (salvation) came to him. In 1520, he wrote three pamphlets that would irreparably seal his separation from the Church. "An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," decried Rome's milking of wealth from the German nation. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," attacked what he saw as the Church's misuse of sacraments. And in "The Freedom of a Christian Man," he stated his position on Faith as the cornerstone of salvation.

Luther was ordered to repudiate these works at the Diet of Worms in 1521. He refused and was ex-communicated, thrown out of the Church. But his teachings resonated with the German nobility and many of the German peasants who wished to achieve political independence from Rome and the Catholic-dominated Holy Roman Empire. In 1522, Luther published the first New Testament in German, democratizing access to scriptures and furthering the breach with the Church. Breaking further with Catholic doctrine, he married a former nun in 1525.

Luther went on to write new catechisms, hymnals, and other aids to religious practice, all based on his new conception of the relation between man and God, a relation that had no place for Church intermediaries. He published a German translation of the Old Testament in 1536, and the consummate statement of his theology, The Smalcald Articles in 1538. Luther died in 1546, already aware of the revolutionary changes his new religious practices had wrought on Europe.

Selections from "Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" (95 Theses, 1517)

In the Name our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said "Repent Ye," willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.

3. Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work divers mortifications of the flesh.
4. The penalty [of sin], therefore, continues so long as hatred of self continues; for this is the true inward repentance, and continues until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
5. The pope does not intend to remit, and cannot remit any penalties other than those which he has imposed either by his own authority or by that of the Canons.
6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by assenting to God's remission.
7. God remits guilt to no one whom He does not, at the same time, humble in all things and bring into subjection to His vicar, the priest...
10. Ignorant and wicked are the doings of those priests who, in the case of the dying, reserve canonical penances for purgatory...
20. By "full remission of all penalties" the pope means not actually "of all," but only of those imposed by himself.
21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope's indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved...
24. It must needs be, therefore, that the greater part of the people are deceived by that indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of release from penalty...
28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the Church is in the power of God alone...
32. They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.
33. Men must be on their guard against those who say that the pope's pardons are that inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to Him;
34. For these "graces of pardon" concern only the penalties of sacramental satisfaction, and these are appointed by man...
36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon...
39. It is most difficult, even for the very keenest theologians, at one and the same time to commend to the people the abundance of pardons and [the need of] true contrition.
40. True contrition seeks and loves penalties, but liberal pardons only relax penalties and cause them to be hated, or at least, furnish an occasion [for hating them]...
43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons...

45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a man in need, and passes him by, and gives [his money] for pardons, purchases not the indulgences of the pope, but the indignation of God...
49. Christians are to be taught that the pope's pardons are useful, if they do not put their trust in them; but altogether harmful, if through them they lose their fear of God.
50. Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew the exactions of the pardon-preachers, he would rather that St. Peter's church should go to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep...
54. Injury is done the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on pardons than on this Word...
56. The "treasures of the Church," out of which the pope grants indulgences, are not sufficiently named or known among the people of Christ...
62. The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God...
65. Therefore the treasures of the Gospel are nets with which they formerly were wont to fish for men of riches.
66. The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the riches of men...
72. He who guards against the lust and license of the pardon-preachers, let him be blessed...
75. To think the papal pardons so great that they could absolve a man even if he had committed an impossible sin and violated the Mother of God -- this is madness.
76. We say, on the contrary, that the papal pardons are not able to remove the very least of venial sins, so far as its guilt is concerned...
79. To say that the cross, emblazoned with the papal arms, which is set up [by the preachers of indulgences], is of equal worth with the Cross of Christ, is blasphemy.
82. To wit: -- "Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial..."
86. Again: -- "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is to-day greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?..."
90. To repress these arguments and scruples of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving reasons, is to expose the Church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies, and to make Christians unhappy...

94. Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell;

95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven rather through many tribulations, than through the assurance of peace.

Luther's “Tower Experience”

Luther Recounts the Experience That Defined His Future

...Meanwhile in that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way that one word which is in chapter one: "The justice of God is revealed in it." I hated that word, "justice of God," i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners...

I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners...I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?..."

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel...All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word, "the justice of God," with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise. Afterward I read Augustine's "On the Spirit and the Letter," in which I found what I had not dared hope for. I discovered that he too interpreted "the justice of God" in a similar way, namely, as that with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although Augustine had said it imperfectly and did not explain in detail how God imputes justice to us, still it pleased me that he taught the justice of God by which we are justified...

From “An Open Letter to The Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate” (1520)

...We shall now look at the matters which should be discussed in the councils, and with which popes, cardinals, bishops and all the scholars ought properly to be occupied day and night if they loved Christ and His Church.

It is a horrible and frightful thing that the ruler of Christendom, who boasts himself vicar of Christ and successor of St. Peter, lives in such worldly splendor that in this regard no king nor

emperor can equal or approach him, and that he who claims the title of "most holy" and "most spiritual" is more worldly than the world itself. He wears a triple crown, when the greatest kings wear but a single crown; when a word is said against it, they cry out "Heresy!" but that is because they do not wish to hear how unchristian and ungodly such a practice is...

However that may be, the pope should lay it aside, because St. Paul says, I Thess. 5:21: "Abstain from all outward shows, which give offense." An ordinary bishop's crown would be enough for the pope; he should be greater than others in wisdom and holiness, and leave the crown of pride to Antichrist... They have maintained that the pope is above the angels in heaven and has authority over them. These are indeed the very words of the very Antichrist.

...Italy and Germany have many rich monasteries, foundations, benefices, and livings. No better way has been discovered to bring all these to Rome than by creating cardinals and giving them the bishoprics, monasteries and prelacies, and so overthrowing the worship of God. For this reason we now see Italy a very wilderness -- monasteries in ruins, bishoprics devoured, the prelacies and the revenues of all the churches drawn to Rome, cities decayed, land and people laid waste, because there is no more worship or preaching... No Turk could have so devastated Italy and suppressed the worship of God...

Now that Italy is sucked dry, they come into Germany, and begin oh, so gently. But let us beware, or Germany will soon become like Italy... Antichrist must take the treasures of the earth, as it was prophesied. So it goes on. They skim the cream off the bishoprics, monasteries and benefices... in order that a cardinal might live at Rome like a rich king.

How comes it that we Germans must put up with such robbery and such extortion of our property, at the hands of the pope? If the Kingdom of France has prevented it, why do we Germans let them make such fools and apes of us? It would all be more bearable if in this way they only stole our property; but they lay waste the churches and rob Christ's sheep of their pious shepherds, and destroy the worship and the Word of God... As it is they do nothing for the good of Christendom; they only wrangle about the incomes of bishoprics and prelacies, and that any robber could do.

We here come to the heart of the matter... In former times German emperors and princes permitted the pope to receive the benefices of the German nation... This permission was given, however, that the pope might accumulate a treasure for fighting against the Turks and infidels in defense of Christendom... This single-hearted devotion of the German nation the popes have so used, that they have received this money for more than a hundred years, have now made of it a binding tax and tribute... for they think the mad Germans are forever to remain utter and arrant fools, give them money without end, and satisfy their unspeakable greed but all of it goes into the bottomless bag.

The German nation, bishops and princes, should consider that they too are Christians, and should protect the people, whom they are set to rule and guard in things temporal and spiritual, against these ravening wolves who, in sheep's clothing, pretend to be shepherds and rulers; and, since the annates are so shamefully abused and the stipulated conditions are not fulfilled, they should not permit their land and people to be so sadly robbed and ruined, against all justice...

From “On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520)

Prelude

Like it or not, I am compelled to learn more every day, with so many and such able masters vying with one another to improve my mind. Some two years ago I wrote a little book on indulgences which I now deeply regret having published. For at the time I still clung to the Roman tyranny with great superstition and held that indulgences should not be altogether rejected, seeing they were approved by the common consent of men. Since then, however...I have come to see that they are nothing but a fraud of the Roman flatterers by which they rob people of their faith and fortunes...

Next, Eck and Emser, with their fellows, undertook to instruct me concerning the primacy of the pope. Here too, I acknowledge how greatly I have profited by their labors. For, while denying the divine authority of the papacy, I still admitted its human authority. But after hearing and reading the subtle subtleties of these pretentious and conceited men, with which they skillfully prop their idol I now know of a certainty that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon...for our Leipzig professor must be permitted to prove anything he pleases...For he is an Aristotelian theologian, for whom nouns and verbs, interchanged, mean the same thing and any thing...All his quotations are as apt as this one would be, and the "wise man" imagines he is adorning his drivel with the multitude of his quotations. The rest I pass over, lest you should smother in the filth of this vile toilet...

On the Sacrament of the Eucharist (Holy Communion)

Now, about the Sacrament of the Bread, the most important of all sacraments... There are two passages that do clearly bear upon this matter — the Gospel narratives and Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Let us examine these. Matthew, Mark and Luke agree that Christ gave the whole sacrament to all the disciples, and it is certain that Paul delivered both kinds...Christ says, not by way of permission but of command, "All of you, drink from it." For if all are to drink, and the words cannot be understood as addressed to the priests alone, then it is certainly an impious act to withhold the cup from laymen who desire it...so the Sacrament must be given in its entirety to all laymen, if they desire it...

Come here then, popish flatterers, one and all! Fall in line and defend yourselves against the charge of godlessness, tyranny, and treason... You decry as heretics those who will not be wise after the vaporings of your own brains, in the face of such patent and potent words of Scripture. But you Romans are the heretics, for you presume upon your own fictions and fly in the face of the clear Scriptures of God. Parry that stroke, if you can!

On the Sacrament of Baptism

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has preserved in His Church this sacrament, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men, and has made it free to all nations and every estate of mankind...For He desired that by it little children, might be initiated and sanctified in the simple faith of His Word. Even today baptism's chief blessing is for them...

Now, the first thing in baptism to be considered is the divine promise, which says: "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." This promise must be set far above all the glitter of

works, vows, religious orders, and whatever man has added to it. For on it all our salvation depends. We must consider this promise, exercise our faith in it and never doubt that we are saved when we are baptized. For unless this faith be present or be conferred in baptism, we gain nothing from baptism...

On the Sacrament of Penance

We come in the third place to the sacrament of penance...I must unmask the tyranny that is rampant here no less than in the sacrament of the bread. For because these two sacraments furnish opportunity for gain and profit, the greed of the shepherds rages in them with incredible zeal against the flock...

This is the first and chief abuse of this sacrament: They have utterly abolished the sacrament itself, so that there is not a vestige of it left. For they have overthrown both the word of divine promise and our faith, in which this as well as other sacraments consists...In all their writing, teaching and preaching their sole concern has been, not to teach Christians what is promised, or what they ought to believe and what great comfort they might find in them, but only to extend their own tyranny far and wide...

Thus they say nothing of the saving faith of the people, but babble only of the despotic power of the pontiffs, while Christ speaks not at all of power, but only of faith...this Babylon of ours has so completely extinguished faith that it insolently denies its necessity in this sacrament; no, with the wickedness of Antichrist: it calls it heresy if any one should assert its necessity. What more could this tyranny do that it has not done?

On the Sacrament of Confirmation

I wonder what could have possessed them to make a sacrament of confirmation out of the laying on of hands which Christ employed when He blessed young children, (Mark 10:16) and the apostles when they imparted the Holy Spirit, ordained elders and cured the sick...Why have they not also turned the sacrament of the bread into confirmation? I do not say this because I condemn the seven sacraments, but because I deny that they can be proved from the Scriptures...Hence it is sufficient to regard confirmation as a certain churchly rite similar to other ceremonies, such as the blessing of holy water and the like. These things cannot be called sacraments of faith, because there is no divine promise connected with them, neither do they save; but sacraments do save those who believe the divine promise.

On the Sacrament of Marriage

Not only is marriage regarded as a sacrament without the least warrant of Scripture, but the very traditions which extol it as a sacrament have turned it into a farce. Let me explain....We said that there is in every sacrament a word of divine promise, to be believed by whoever receives the sign..Now we read nowhere that the man who marries a wife receives any grace of God. There is not even a divinely instituted sign in marriage...

Furthermore, since marriage existed from the beginning of the world and is still found among unbelievers, it cannot possibly be called a sacrament of the New Law and the exclusive possession of the Church. The marriages of the ancients were no less sacred than are ours, nor are those of unbelievers less true marriages than those of believers, and yet they are not regarded, as sacraments. Why should marriage be called a sacrament in their case and not among the

heathen... Therefore we grant that marriage is... invented by men in the Church, carried away by their ignorance both of the word and of the thing.

On the Sacrament of Ordination

Of this sacrament the Church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the pope's church. 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. Now it is ridiculous to put forth as a sacrament of God that which cannot be proved to have been instituted by God. I do not hold that this rite, which has been observed for so many centuries, should be condemned; but in sacred things I am opposed to the invention of human fictions, nor is it right to give out as divinely instituted what was not divinely instituted, lest we become a laughing-stock to our opponents. We ought to see to it that every article of faith of which we boast be certain, pure, and based on clear passages of Scripture. But that we are utterly unable to do in the case of the sacrament under consideration.

On the Sacrament of Extreme Unction

To the rite of anointing the sick our theologians call it a sacrament, and they make it the last sacrament which may be administered only to such as are at the point of death... For does not James say: (James 5:14 f.) "Is any man sick among you? Let them pray over him in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall raise him up: and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him." There, say they, you have the promise of the forgiveness of sins... But I reply: If ever there was a mad conceit, here is one indeed... for 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... and we read nowhere in the Gospel of this sacrament of extreme unction...

But what follows is still better. The Apostle's promise expressly declares that the prayer of faith shall save the sick man, and the Lord shall raise him up, that is, that he may not die, and that it may not be an extreme unction. But they say, on the contrary, that the unction must be administered to none but the dying; that is, that they may not be healed and raised up. If it were not so serious a matter, who could help laughing? Is not the folly of the sophists, here shown in its true colors? As here, so in many other places, they affirm what the Scriptures deny, and deny what they affirm...

Conclusion

Hence there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the Church of God — baptism and bread; for only in these two do we find both the divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins... Herewith I conclude this prelude, and freely and gladly offer it to all pious souls who desire to know the genuine sense of the Scriptures and the proper use of the sacraments.

Luther's Testimony at the Diet of Worms (1521)

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was given the chance to recant the teachings in his collected works. His response was perhaps the singular statement of individualism leading to the modern world:

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships: I ask you to observe that my books are not all of the same kind. There are some in which I have dealt with piety in faith and morals with such simplicity and so agreeably with the Gospels that my adversaries themselves are compelled to admit them useful, harmless, and clearly worth reading by a Christian...If I should begin to recant here, what, I beseech you, would I be doing but condemning that truth which is admitted by friends and foes alike?...

The second kind consists in those writings leveled against the papacy and those who, by their wicked doctrines and precedents, have laid waste Christendom by doing harm to the souls and the bodies of men. No one can either deny or conceal this, for universal experience and world-wide grievances are witnesses to the fact that through the Pope's laws and through man-made teachings the consciences of the faithful have been most pitifully ensnared, troubled, and racked in torment, and also that their possessions have been devoured (especially amongst this famous German nation) by unbelievable tyranny...If then I recant these, the only effect will be to add strength to such tyranny...

The third kind consists of those books which I have written against private individuals, that is, who have exerted themselves in defense of the Roman tyranny...I confess that I have been more harsh against them than befits my religious vows and my profession. For I do not make myself out to be any kind of saint...But recantation would give that tyranny and blasphemy occasion to lord it over those whom I defend...

I cannot provide my writings with any other defense than that which my Lord Jesus Christ provided for His teaching. When He had been interrogated concerning His teaching He said: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil." ...I seek and wait for any who may wish to bear witness against my teaching...I ask anyone of any degree, to defeat them by the writings of the Prophets or by the Gospels; for I shall be most ready, if I be better instructed, to recant any error...

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted [convinced] of error by the testimony of Scripture or by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted [convinced] by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.

On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.

Luther's Definition of Faith

An excerpt from "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans" (1522)

Faith is not what some people think it is. Their human dream is a delusion. Because they observe that faith is not followed by good works or a better life, they fall into error, even though they speak and hear much about faith. "Faith is not enough," they say, "You must do good works, you must be pious to be saved." They think that, when you hear the gospel, you start working, creating by your own strength a thankful heart which says, "I believe." That is what they think true faith is. But, because this is a human idea, a dream, the heart never learns anything from it, so it does nothing and reform doesn't come...

Instead, faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives new birth. It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing.

Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. It is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire! Ask God to work faith in you, or you will remain forever without faith, no matter what you wish, say or can do.

From “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants” (1525)

The peasants have betook themselves to violence, and rob and rage and act like mad dogs...It is the devil's work that they are at ...The peasants have taken on themselves the burden of three terrible sins against God and man...In the first place they have sworn to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers, as Christ commands, when He says, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.” Because they are breaking this obedience, and are setting themselves against the higher powers..

In the second place, they are starting a rebellion, and violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs...Any man who is a maker of sedition is outside the law of God and Empire, so that the first who can slay him is doing right and well. For just as when a fire starts, the first to put it out is the best man...Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay, and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful, or devilish than a rebel.

In the third place, they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the Gospel, call themselves “Christian brethren.” Thus they become the greatest of all blasphemers of God and slanderers of His holy Name, serving the devil, under the outward appearance of the Gospel, thus earning death in body and soul ten times over. I have never heard of more hideous sin...

Therefore, I must instruct the worldly governors how they are to act in the matter with a clear conscience...Any ruler who will smite and punish these peasants is within his rights...it is their duty to punish them, for it is just for this purpose that they bear the sword, and are “the ministers of God upon him that doeth evil...” Stab, smite, slay, whoever can...To this let every pious Christian say Amen!