AN BRIEF EXAMINATION OF MARTIN LUTHER'S

"*ON THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN*"

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Introduction

The Reformation was a period of substantial change occurring in a fairly short time span (historically speaking). Traditional ideologies in all aspects of society were being challenged and new concepts/ideas were being developed at an unprecedented rate. Individuals normally not usually considered to be "power-players" suddenly emerged at the forefront of these changes – often questioning the agenda and intent of those in positions of leadership and/or power.

It is the intent of this short paper to briefly examine one such individual – Martin Luther – and more specifically, his dialogue with Pope Leo X as contained in his missive entitled "*On the Freedom of a Christian*". Preliminary background information will be provided on both individuals followed by a brief examination of Luther's letter. Additionally, a short listing of bibliographical references will also be provided for additional reading and research.

Preliminary Background Information on Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Saxony on November 10, 1483 to Hans and Margarethe Luder. His father was a proponent of education and wanting Martin to become a lawyer, sent him to multiple Latin education institutions that concentrated on grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Martin eventually attended the University of Erfurt where he obtained his Master's degree in 1505.

Originally attending law school (per his father's wishes), Martin became dissatisfied and turned toward philosophy and theology. It was at this point that two tutors of his – Bartholomaeus Arnoldi von Usingen and Jodocus Trutfetter – influenced him to be suspicious of even the greatest thinkers and to test himself by experience. When philosophy failed to give Martin the answers he was looking for; he began to concentrate solely on religious topics. It was at this point the Martin joined St. Augustine's Monastery on July 17, 1505 and began his life as a monk.

On April 3, 1507 Martin was ordained in Erfurt Cathedral and called to teach theology in 1508 at the University of Wittenberg. While there, he obtained two additional bachelor's degrees – one in Biblical Studies and the other in *Sentences* (a theology book by Peter Lombard). On October 19, 1512 Martin was awarded a Doctorate of Theology and two days later installed as the Chair of Theology. Finally, in 1515 Martin was designated provincial vicar of Saxony and Thuringia thus becoming responsible for eleven monasteries located within his province.

It was at this point that the Reformation began.

Preliminary Background Information on Pope Leo X

Pope Leo X (also known as Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici) was born in the Republic of Florence on December 11, 1475. Son to Lorenzo the Magnificent, Giovanni was soon elevated to the position of cardinal-deacon at the age of 13 at the Minor Basilica of St. Mary in Domnica alla Navicella due to his father's influence. Simultaneously, Giovanni received an education under the auspices of the great scholars Poliziano, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, and Bernardo Dovizi.

Giovanni was admitted into the Sacred College of Cardinals on March 23, 1492 and moved to Rome. Upon the death of his father, Giovanni returned home to Florence where he participated in the Conclave of 1492 and unsuccessfully opposed the election of Cardinal Borgia to the position of Pope.

After the Medici family was expelled from Florence, Giovanni spent time traveling through Germany, France, and the Netherlands until he returned to Rome in 1500. Appointed as papal legate of Bologna and the Romagna in 1511, Giovanni attended his duties until being elected Pope on March 9, 1513. Initially, the new Pope Leo X was consumed by the War of Urbino and plans for a crusade against the Ottoman sultan, Selim I who was threatening western Europe.

It was at this point that the Reformation began.

Examination of "*On the Freedom of a Christian*"

On the Freedom of a Christian was a treatise written by Martin Luther in November 1520. This pamphlet explored the concepts of forgiveness and service in relation to Christian believers. Specifically, Luthor addressed the concept of *Sola fide* – justification by faith alone. In the following pages, a brief analysis of the material will be presented:

Luther begins by addressing the Pope, stating that he often looks to him when considering his current state-of-affairs. Distressed over the growing distance between himself and the Pope, he admits that he has grown to dislike the Pope's representatives and takes personal blame for the lack of communication between the two. Luther is quick to bring attention to the fact that he had never spoken ill of the Pope instead makes reference to his own failings which would have made it improper to do so. He then goes on to lament the sensitivities of modern society whenever bad conduct is called out or a new idea is introduced which may upset the status quo. Luther end his introduction beseeching the Pope to understand he has no ill will toward him but is unwilling to yield his convictions.

At this point, Luthor begins to level accusations of corruption within the Court of Rome and states unequivocally his opposition toward such activity. Additionally, Luther states that the Pope has been unable to prevent this corruption from continuing and that despite this, there is no animosity toward him on the part of Luther. Rather, Luther admits initially he saw this corruption taking place and ignored it, concentrating on his studies of the sacred literature instead.

It was during these studies that Luther maintains he was brought back into the middle of things by John Eccius who attempted to capitalize on remarks he made concerning the primacy of the Church of Rome. These remarks concerned Thraso – an individual ambitious to promote himself among theologians. Luther then goes on to describe the negative response he received from Cardinal Cajetan when he proposed a compromise in the differing viewpoints between himself and Rome stating that Cajetan became openly hostile toward him.

This was followed up by a description of the actions of Charles Miltitz – a representative of the Pope who managed to secure an additional meeting with Luther after the disaster with Thraso. Negotiations were preceding well when John Eccius interrupted and caused them to collapse. Luther maintains that certain corruptions of Rome were made public at this point but through no fault of his - rather it was due to the actions of Eccius. Consequently, the public outing of these corruptions and the problems associated with it occurring in Rome were his fault alone.

Regardless, Charles Miltitz made a third attempt to compromise by calling together numerous religious leaders. These leaders all made multiple attempts to convince Luther of his errors and were finally successful in gaining Luther's word to correspond directly with the Pope.

At this point in the letter, Luther moves to beseech the Pope to refrain from utilizing individuals only interested in furthering their own agenda as representatives. Additionally, he states the lack of necessity for a recantation on his part as it would cause confusion in the matters being debated and discussed. Luther then chastises the Pope to remember he is not partly a god but rather a servant to the Lord. He goes on to state it is his duty to reprimand corruption

whenever he sees it and that he is indeed a friend of the Pope. It is at this point that Luther submits a token of his goodwill through a "little treatise" entitled "**Concerning Christian Liberty**".

Luther's work begins by stating that although appearing easy, Christian faith was a difficult concept to understand. However, once an individual truly discovered it they found themselves constantly wanting to understand it better. He immediately then lists two propositions: 1. A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and 2. A Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one. Although these two statement appear contradictory, Luther utilizes scripture to demonstrate their ability to coincide.

Luther begins discussing the subject of the inward man and by what means he could become a justified, free, and true Christian. Luther questions what impact issues with the body could possibly have on a man's spiritual soul. Furthermore, what possible impact could worldly qualifications (I.E. possessions, ceremonial practices, etc.) have? In contrast, what impact could profane activities have on one's soul either? At this point, Luther stresses his main tenet: "*One thing, and one alone, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty; and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ…".*

Luther goes on the state that the soul can exist without everything except for the word of God. In the next section he continues by defining what exactly constitutes the word of God, quoting the Apostle Paul. This faith cannot be obtained through works as it is contained within therefore no outward work or labor can make an individual justified. It therefore becomes imperative that one must strengthen his faith alone "more and more".

In the next section Luther attempts to answer the contradiction between having faith alone and participating in good works as prescribed in the scriptures. In this, Luther divides the scriptures into two parts: precepts and promises. He explains that the precepts teach what actions are good but not how to do them; they show man to himself and are called the Old Testament. This demonstrates man's inability to find in himself no resource for justification and salvation. The second part – promises – declares the glory of God and states that if an individual believes in Christ he will be rewarded with "grace, justification, peace, and liberty". Luther states that "the promises of God give that which the precepts exact, and fulfill what the law commands; so that all is of God alone." These promises are the New Testament. Luther believes that it then becomes easy to understand the power of faith and recognize that no amount of good works can compare to it. Furthermore, if there was no need of works then there was no need of the law; and if there was no need of the law then certainly an individual was free from the law. It is then a apparent that no one should need the law or works for justification and salvation.

The next aspect Luther discusses deals with the honor and reputation of the office as it is supposed to emulate those qualities as found through faith in Christ. Also, there is no higher worship of God than to truly believe in his truth and righteousness and as such, there is no commandment or fulfillment more powerful or worthy. Luther then questions how works could possibly achieve salvation when, by doing them instead of simply believing God's promises and having faith, implies either God is a liar, or the individual has doubts. Only by having faith can an individual obtain truth and righteousness.

The third grace of faith that Luther describes unites the soul to Christ. This unification allows for the sin, death, and condemnation of the soul to be replaced by grace, life, and salvation while Christ takes on these burdens. Additionally, since an individual has neither sinned, died, or have been condemned and since his righteousness, life, and salvation are invincible, eternal, and almighty; his life is more powerful than death and his salvation is more unconquerable than all hell. Luther maintains that this is why "so much importance has been attributed to faith, so that it alone can fulfill the law, and justify without any works."

In the next section Luther explores the God's sanctification to himself of every first-born male in the Old Testament. He explains the value of this birthright by providing examples of the first-born's superiority over the rest by the double honor or priesthood and kingship. This was manifested in Christ whose kingdom was not of this world and whose priesthood does not consist in the outward display of vestments and gestures. Luther explains that regarding kingship "…every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things, that, in spiritual power, he is completely lord of all things; so that nothing whatever can do him any hurt; yea, all things are subject to him, and are compelled to be subservient to his salvation." In regard to priesthood, individuals who have faith are "…worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another mutually the things which are of God."

At this point Luther begins explaining the error of utilizing labels such as "priest", "clergy", "spiritual person", and "ecclesiastic" stating that Holy Scripture makes no distinction between them other than it calls these individuals "ministers", "servants", and "stewards". Also, he laments the current system as a perversion of things which has resulted in the knowledge of Christian grace, faith, liberty, and altogether Christ having perished; being replaced with an "intolerable bondage" to human works and law.

Luther admonishes the practice of preaching the works, life, and words of Christ in a historic manner but instead emphasizing that preaching should promote faith in him. This is accomplished by understanding "why Christ came, what He has brought and given to us, and to what profit and advantage He is to be received."

Continuing, Luther begins to explore the outward man and why good works are commanded. He explains the necessity of an individual to "continue exercising his body by fastings, watchings, labor, and other moderate discipline". This is to counter the desires of the flesh which is "striving to serve the world, and to seek its own gratification". However, Luther is careful to emphasize these works cannot help an individual achieve salvation. He compares an individual of faith to be regarded in the same light "as would have been those of Adam and Eve in paradise", therefore their works were done with the sole object of pleasing God. Luther maintains that just as a bishop is not consecrated by his works, neither should a Christian be made more sacred by his works. It is necessary that the substance of a person should be good before any good works can be done.

Luther continues to explain that an individual must be assessed not by their works but rather by looking deeper within their character. If the works were performed due to an individual's faith, then they can be considered "good". However, if the works were completed without faith and only to gain salvation, then they can be considered "bad". And finally, Luther explores works an individual performs towards his neighbor. Utilizing the concept of united souls espoused above, Luther states that man has always interacted with one another to the

benefit of all. This originates from the concept of Christ sharing our sins, death, and condemnation in exchange for grace, life, and salvation. In this case, by performing good works men become thoughtful and busy one for another and bear one another's burdens thus fulfilling the law of Christ. These actions also show a heartfelt appreciation for all of the blessings given through Christ.

Luther then comes full-circle to again criticize the Church's demands for specific works to achieve salvation. Specifically, he calls into question the actions and motives of certain colleges, monasteries, and priests. Luther concludes this criticism by stating that "…a Christian man does not live in himself, but in Christ, and in his neighbor, or else is no Christian; in Christ by faith, in his neighbor by love".

Wrapping up his pamphlet, Luther warns against groups who would go to extremes just to denounce the Church – even to the point of ignoring "matters which are of weight and necessary for salvation". Instead, he makes refence to walking a middle path as taught by the Apostle Paul. He also reiterates the responsibility of the Church to preach the true way to salvation via faith alone while understanding the needs of the temporal world.

Luther end with a call for prayer and guidance for all involved to gain a better understanding of the requirement of faith alone as a way to gain salvation.

Conclusion

The Reformation was an event unprecedented in history occurring during a period of substantial change. Ceremonies and traditions that had been in existence for numerous years were suddenly being questioned and challenged. Individuals of seemingly little importance suddenly came to the forefront as proponents of change regarding the questionable agendas and intent of those in positions of leadership and/or power.

It was the intent of this short paper to briefly examine one such individual – Martin Luther – and more specifically, his dialogue with Pope Leo X as contained in his missive entitled "*On the Freedom of a Christian*". Preliminary background information was provided on both individuals followed by a brief examination of Luther's letter to the Pope. Additionally, a short listing of bibliographical references was also provided for additional reading and research.

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