

seek the same with earnest and heartfelt prayers to God.¹⁴ I nearly started to despise and declare victory over those who up to now have tried to frighten me with the majesty of your authority and name, except I see that there remains one thing which I cannot despise and which has been the reason for my writing to Your Holiness for a second time.^g That is, I realize that I am accused of impertinence, now twisted into my greatest vice,¹⁵ because I am judged to have attacked your person.¹⁶

[Part One: Luther's Defense]

¹⁷However, so that I may confess this matter openly,¹⁸ whenever your person has been mentioned, I am aware of having only said the greatest and best things. But if I had done otherwise, I could under no circumstances condone it; I would vote in favor of their judgment against me every time, and I would recant nothing more freely than this my impertinence and godlessness. I have called you a Daniel in Babylon, and every one of my readers knows fully well how, with extraordinary zeal, I have defended your remarkable innocence against your defiler, Sylvester [Prierias].¹⁹ Your reputation and the fame of your blameless life, chanted in the writings of so many men the world over, are too well known and dignified to be possibly assailed in any way by anyone, no matter how great. Nor am I so foolish to attack someone whom absolutely everyone praises. As a matter of fact, I have even tried and will always try not to attack even those whom public opinion dishonors. For I take pleasure in no one's faults, since I myself am conscious enough of the log in my own eye.^h Nor do I want to be the first who throws a stone at the adulteress.ⁱ

^g The first time was the preface to the *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* of 1518. See WA 1:527-29.

^h Matt. 7:3.

ⁱ John 8:1-11.

14. The heightened rhetoric here and throughout this letter, addressed to a Renaissance pope, indicates the care with which Luther wrote it. None of the headings in this letter come from the original.

15. Luther's opponents often construed his highly charged language as impudence and exaggeration. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) nicknamed him *doctor hyperbolicus*, "the exaggerating teacher."

16. Personal attacks of governmental or ecclesiastical rulers were viewed as especially inappropriate.

17. Answering Three Questions in His Defense

1. Whether He Committed the Offense

18. Luther answers the charges according to the three questions of the judicial genre of speech: whether he committed the offense; what he actually did; whether he acted rightly.

19. Luther stated this in his 1518 tract, *Response to the Dialogue of Sylvester Prierias concerning the Power of the Pope* (WA 1:679, 5-7). Sylvester (Mazzolini) Prierias (1456-1523) was named after the city of his birth (Prierio). A Dominican (as was Johann Tetzel [1460-1519]), he strongly defended papal authority and infallibility in matters of teaching and practice. Luther viewed this as an insult to the pope because it exalted him over Christ and the Scriptures.

20. 2. *What Luther Actually Did and Whether This Was Proper*

²⁰ Now, generally I have sharply attacked ungodly teachings, and I have been quick to snap at my opponents not because of their bad morals but because of their godlessness. I do not repent of this in the least, as I have resolved in my soul, despite the contempt of others, to persist in this fervent zeal, following the example of Christ, who in his zeal called his adversaries “a brood of vipers,” “blind,” “hypocrites,” and “children of the devil.”^j And Paul branded the Magician [Elymas] a “son of the devil . . . full of deceit and villainy.”^k Others he ridiculed as “dogs,” “deceivers,” and “adulterators.”^l If you consider any sensitive audience, no one will seem more biting and unrestrained than Paul. What is more biting than the prophets? The mad multitude of flatterers imitates the ever so sensitive ears of our rational age, so that, as soon as we sense disapproval of our ideas, we cry that we are bitten. As long as we can rebuff the truth by labeling it something else, we flee from it under the pretext of its being snappish, impatient, and unrestrained. What good is salt if it has lost its bite?^m What use is the edge of a sword if it does not cut? “Accursed is the one who does the Lord’s work deceitfully.”ⁿ

21. 3. *Summary Conclusion*

²¹ For this reason, most excellent Leo, I beg you to admit that this letter vindicates me. And I beg you to convince yourself that I have never thought ill of your person and, moreover, that I am the kind of person who eternally wishes the very best things happen to you and that for me this strife is not with any person over morals but over the Word of truth alone. In everything else I will yield to anyone. I cannot and

j See Matt. 23:33, 13, 17; and John 8:44, respectively.

k Acts 13:10.

l Phil. 3:2; 2 Cor. 11:13; 2:17 (following the Latin; NRSV: “peddlers”).

m Classical Latin authors often compared salt (especial “black salt”) with sharpness (e.g., Pliny [the Elder] (23–79), *Historia naturalis*, 10, 72, 93, par. 198) and sarcasm (e.g., Catullus [c. 84–54 BCE], 13, 5). See also Matt. 5:13.

n Jer. 48:10 (Vulgate).

will not yield or deny the Word. If a person has thought something else about me or otherwise interpreted my positions, then that one is not thinking straight nor interpreting my true positions.

²² However, I have rightly cursed your see, called the Roman Curia,²³ which neither you nor any human being can deny is more corrupt than Babylon or Sodom²⁴ and, as far as I can tell, is composed of depraved, desperate, and notorious godlessness. And I have made known that, under your name and under the cover of the Roman Church, the people of Christ are being undeservedly deceived. Indeed, I have thus resisted and will continue to resist [the Curia], as long as the Spirit of faith lives in me—not that I would strive for the impossible or that I would hope that, given the furious opposition of so many flatterers, my works alone would improve anything in that chaotic Babylon, but I do acknowledge the debt owed to my fellow Christians,^o whom I must warn so that fewer may perish or at least have milder symptoms from that Roman plague. Indeed, as you yourself know, for many years nothing else has been flooding the world from Rome than the devastation of possessions, bodies, and souls, and the worst examples of the worst possible things. All this is clearer than day to everyone. Moreover, out of the Roman Church, once the holiest of all, has been fashioned a completely licentious den of thieves, the most shameless of all brothels, the kingdom of sin, death, and hell, so that were the Antichrist to come, he could hardly think of anything that would add to its wickedness.²⁵

^o Literally, “brothers.”

22. Proof That Luther Acted Properly

1. The Corruption in the Roman Curia

23. The papal court (Latin: *curia*), consisting of cardinals, bishops, and other clerical functionaries.

24. Rev. 18:2-24 and 11:8, respectively names for the powers opposed to Christ and Christians during the end times.

25. Faced with what he perceived as the Roman Curia’s intransigence, Luther moved from granting the papacy human authority over the churches to condemning it (but not individual bishops of Rome) as in league with or identified with the Antichrist. By the late Middle Ages, many Christian thinkers assumed that at the world’s end an Antichrist would arise to do battle with God’s elect.

26. 2. *Luther's Compassion for the Pope*

27. An attempt to poison Leo X had indeed been made in 1517.

28. Luther was quoting Baptista Mantuanus (1447–1516), *Varia ad Falconem Sinibaldum epigrammata*, a collection of epigrams against corruption in Rome. Luther also quoted this text in *On the Bondage of the Will* (LW 33:53) and used Mantuanus's work in his 1545 tract *Against the Roman Papacy: An Institution of the Devil* (LW 41:257–376). Gout was considered an incurable disease.

29. 3. *What the Pope Should Do*

30. He was a member of the powerful de Medicis. From this point on, Luther uses the word *gloria* (glory or fame or boasting) to describe the situation in Rome and with his enemies.

²⁶In the meantime, you, Leo, sit as a lamb in the midst of wolves, as Daniel in the midst of lions, and you dwell with Ezekiel among the scorpions.^p How can you alone oppose these monsters? Add three or four of your best and most learned cardinals! “What are they among so many?”^q Before you had even begun setting up the remedy, you would have all been poisoned to death.²⁷ It is all over for the Roman Curia. The wrath of God has fallen upon it completely. It hates councils; it fears being reformed; it cannot allay its raging godlessness; and it fulfills the eulogy written for its “mother,” about whom is said, “We tried to heal Babylon, but she has not been healed. Let us forsake her.”^r To be sure, it was part of your office and that of your cardinals to heal these ills, but “this gout derided the physician’s hands,”²⁸ and neither horse “nor chariot responds to the reins.”^s Touched by deep affection, I have always been grieved, most excellent Leo, that you, who were worthy of far better times, became pope in this day and age. For the Roman Curia is not worthy of you or people like you but only Satan himself, who now actually rules in that Babylon more than you do.

²⁹O that, having cast aside the glory that your completely accursed enemies heap upon you, you would instead live on the small income of a parish priest or on your family’s inheritance.³⁰ Only the Iscariots, sons of perdition,^t are worthy of glorying in this kind of glory. For what are you accomplishing in the Curia, my Leo, except that the more wicked and accursed a person is, the more happily such a one uses your name and authority to destroy the wealth and souls of human beings, to increase wickedness, and to suppress faith and truth throughout the church of God? O truly most unhappy Leo, sitting on that most dangerous throne—I am telling you the truth, because I wish you well! For if Bernard

^p Matt. 10:16; Dan. 6:16; and Ezek. 2:6, respectively.

^q See John 6:9.

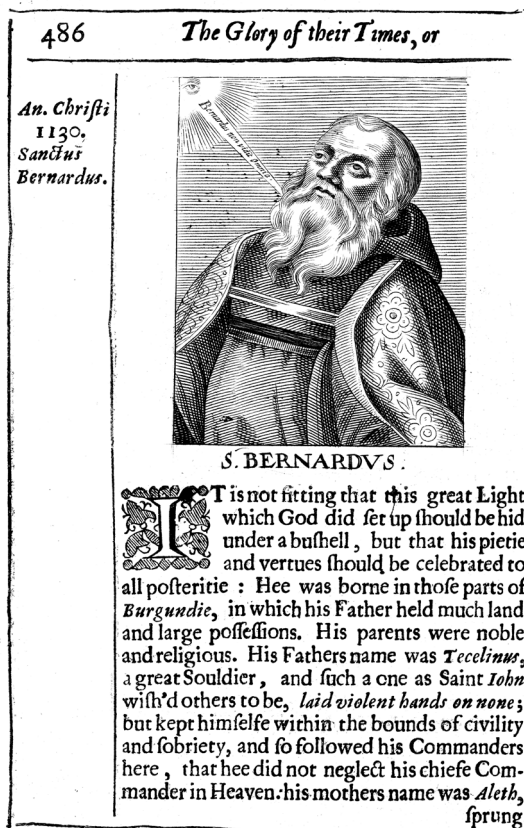
^r Jer. 51:9 (Vulgate).

^s Virgil (70–19 BCE), *Georgics*, 1, 514.

^t The family of Judas Iscariot, as he was labeled in John 17:12.

had compassion on Pope Eugenius,³¹ when the Holy See—although already then very corrupt—still governed with more hope [for improvement], why should we not complain about the three hundred years of corruption and ruin that has been added since then? Is it not true that under the great expanse of heaven nothing is more corrupt, pestilential, and despicable than the Roman Curia? For it even surpasses by any measure the godlessness of the Turks, so that, truth be told, what was once the gate of heaven is now the very gaping mouth of hell—such a mouth that because of the wrath of God cannot be blocked. This leaves only one option in these

31. Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk, wrote *On Consideration* (MPL 182:727–808), addressing it to Pope Eugene III (d. 1153) and warning about the dangers connected to the papal office.



A seventeenth-century depiction of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Cistercian monk and theologian.