

The Freedom of a Christian

1520

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INTRODUCTION

The movement within Western Christianity that began in 1517 with the posting of Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, now known as the Reformation, was by no means a foregone conclusion in its earliest stages. Starting with the papal legate, Cardinal Cajetan's (1469–1534) interview of Luther in October 1518,¹ various attempts were made first to avoid or mitigate Luther's impending condemnation by the pope and, later, to find ways around the papal condemnation and the impending judgment of the imperial diet (parliament) that finally met in Worms in April 1521. One such embassy fell on the shoulders of Karl von Miltitz (c. 1490–1529), who throughout 1520 tried to find ways around the impasse between Luther and his supporters (along with his protector prince, the Elector Frederick of Saxony [1463–1525]) on the one side and the papal court and its defenders on the other.²

Luther left the final meeting with von Miltitz with instructions to write a reconciliation-minded letter to Pope Leo X (1475–1521), which he did in the weeks that followed and to which he appended a nonpolemical tract describing the heart of his beliefs. (Indeed, compared to other major tracts he produced in 1520, *The Freedom of a Christian* has

1. See above, pp. 121–65.

2. For the details of the historical record, see Brecht 1:400–415, and Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 172–89.

3. These tracts include two others in this volume, *Sermon on Good Works* and *Address to the Christian Nobility*, and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in LW 36:3–126.

4. Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 172–89.

5. For a translation of the German preface, see LW 31:333. For a translation of the entire German tract, see Philip Krey and Peter Krey, eds., *Luther's Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2007), 69–90.

a remarkably temperate tone.)³ The dedicatory letter to Leo X represents what might be called a “case study” in the proposal found in *The Freedom of a Christian*, where Luther shows both his deep respect for the pope and his surprising freedom in proclaiming the gospel. While it is clear that these two documents should, therefore, be read in tandem, several accidents of history allowed for their own separate existence.⁴

In September 1520, probably working from a detailed Latin outline, Luther first completed the German version of *The Freedom of a Christian* and its epistle dedicatory to Leo X. Because the letter to Leo X arrived first at the printer, however, Johann Grüenberg (d. c. 1525)—knowing a bestseller when he saw one—printed it separately, forcing Luther to write a second, perfunctory preface for the German version to Hermann Mühlpfort (c. 1486–1534), mayor of Zwickau. Thus, some copies of the German version of *The Freedom of a Christian* circulated with both prefaces.⁵ At nearly the same time and working off the same outline (so that many sections of the German and Latin correspond closely but were never quite word-for-word translations of each other), Luther then completed the Latin version, adding an introduction and a lengthy appendix not found in the German. The differences between the two tracts also arose in part out of the slightly different audiences for them: the one addressed to theologians, clerics, and church leaders (for whom Latin was the common language), and one addressed to the German-speaking public, which included the nobility, townsfolk, many from the lesser clergy, and others who could read (or have Luther's writings read to them).

Printing History

The Freedom of a Christian was a bestseller. Including the original Latin and German versions published in Wittenberg, there were between 1520 and 1526 thirty printings: nineteen in German, one in the dialect of the German lowlands, and eight in Latin, along with translations of the Latin into German (!) and English. It now appears that Luther sent a

corrected copy to a cathedral canon in Augsburg, who forwarded it to Beatus Rhenanus, a famous humanist and early supporter in Basel (Switzerland), who added his own marginal headings and sent it on to the printer Adam Petri in Basel. The latter corrected typographical errors and probably in March 1521, published this corrected version in time for the Frankfurt book fair, titling it *A Discourse on Christian Freedom Revised by the Author*.⁶ Later in the same year, Melchior Lotter reprinted this version, simply noting that it was “revised in Wittenberg.” With the few exceptions mentioned in the footnotes, all of the subheadings used in the following translation have been taken from Petri’s edition^a

The Letter to Leo X

The letter to Leo has all of the characteristics of polished Renaissance Latin prose expected for a writing that addresses the pope. Not only is the Latin itself among Luther’s best writings, but the letter’s argument also bears the marks of typical Latin style. Thus, Luther prosecutes two separate arguments, according to the painstaking analysis of the German linguist Birgit Stolt.^b Her analysis is reflected in the headings of this translation. The Renaissance context of this letter, like that to Archbishop Albrecht von Brandenburg of Mainz (1490–1545), helps explain the tone of the

6. Rhenanus (1485–1547) was an important humanist who worked from 1511 to 1526 in Basel at the famous Froben press and was favorable toward Luther’s work. (In January 1520, Martin Bucer sent him a copy of Luther’s commentary on Galatians.) Philipp Melanchthon was also a great supporter of the tract. His letter from April 1521 to an unknown recipient in Schaffhausen reflects many of the themes of *The Freedom of a Christian* and even refers his correspondent to it. See *Melanchthons Briefwechsel*, vol. T1: *Texte 1–254 (1514–1522)*, ed. Richard Wetzell (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991), 276–78 (no. 137). Wetzell notes that in 1524 this letter was included with a Nuremberg printing of *The Freedom of a Christian*.

^a See WA 7:40, “E”: *Epistola Lutheriana ad Leonem Decimum summum pontificem. Liber de Christiana libertate, continens summam Christianae doctrinae, quo ad formandam mentem, & ad intelligendam Euangelii vim, nihil absolutius, nihil conducibilius neque a veteribus neque a recentioribus scriptoribus perditum est. Tu Christianae lector, relege iterum atque iterum, & Christum imbibe. Recognitus Wittembergae* (Wittenberg: Melchior Lotter, 1521). English: *A Lutheran Letter to Pope Leo X. A Book on Christian Freedom, Containing the Sum of Christian Teaching, Concerning Which Nothing More Absolute or More in Line with Either Ancient or More Recent Writers Has Been Produced for Forming the Mind and for Understanding the Power of the Gospel. You, Christian Reader, Reread This Again and Again and Drink in Christ. Reedited in Wittenberg*. For the publication, authorships, and dating of these printings, see James Hirstein’s article in *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* (forthcoming).

^b Birgit Stolt, *Studien zu Luthers Freiheitstraktat mit besonderer Rücksicht auf das Verhältnis der lateinischen und der deutschen Fassung zu einander und die Stilmittel der Rhetorik* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969).

piece—what to modern ears might appear stilted and even obsequious at times. *Not* to have addressed the pontiff with such respect would itself have been considered a shocking breach of etiquette and further proof of Luther's contempt for all authority in the church and government. To read this letter as if Luther were hiding his true feelings or even being deceitful imposes modern sensibilities on a very different age and with its very different expectations.

This letter also gives evidence of Luther's paradoxical view of the Christian's life as both free (in the gospel) and bound to the neighbor. To be sure, Luther was bound and determined to put to rest the (unfounded) rumor that he had attacked the pope's person. While he would insist that the papal court was to blame for the sorry state of the church in his day, he had no particular criticism of Leo X himself. Instead, he took direct aim at his bitterest opponent and one of the instigators of the papal bull of excommunication, Johann Eck (1486–1543). Thus, he expressed himself in the letter with remarkable freedom against his opponents—a freedom that arose for him from Christ himself. Luther could even call to mind the behavior of one of his favorite medieval theologians, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who had written sternly to Pope Eugene III (1383–1447). This appeal to Leo, however, went unanswered.

The Freedom of a Christian

As the letter to Leo already indicates, Luther was a child of the Renaissance. This meant that his Latin prose especially was carefully shaped according to the rhetorical rules and conventions of his day. In the case of *The Freedom of a Christian*, this means that the reader today can still detect the basic outline of his argument as it followed these conventions.^c Even the marginal notes added to the second edition often identify these various parts. Based upon classical writings on rhetoric by Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Quintilian (c. 35–c. 100), late medieval rhetorical handbooks divided a speech

^c Ibid.

or tract into six parts: exordium, division of the tract, the exposition of the theme, confirmation or proof of the theme, an answer to objections to the theme, and a peroration.

Observing closely how Luther develops the argument in *The Freedom of a Christian* can help the reader in understanding the document. Luther begins by talking about the nature of faith, a key subject of debate in his case with Rome. Thereby, he intends to arouse his readers' interest in the subject and to present himself as a reliable witness or authority concerning faith. This constitutes a proper exordium, which Luther uses to encourage readers to see the importance of understanding faith, now defined not as a virtue but as an experience of struggle and mercy.

As the marginal gloss from the 1521 text notes, Luther then states the "themes" (*themata*) of his writing about Christian freedom and servitude. Yet, according to late medieval rules of rhetoric, these "themes" are not, as modern readers might think, outlining the subject of his essay (which was faith), but instead announce the proper division of the overall argument into two nearly equal sections, the first on the freedom of a Christian and the second on a Christian's servitude. It is first in the brief exposition of the themes, the so-called *narratio* following the themes' statement, that the reader discovers Luther's actual subject: *not* to divide freedom and servitude but to explain how, given their relation to faith and their use by the Apostle Paul, they cohere.

The body of the first part, or "theme," of the work consists in the *confirmatio* where Luther attempts to prove his claim that freedom and servitude cohere in the Christian life. Luther insists that the whole human being may be viewed as both inner and outer and that not works but only God's word received in faith constitutes true Christian freedom. From this premise, Luther then introduces three benefits or fruits of faith, concentrating most of his efforts on the third fruit: the marriage of the soul and Christ by faith alone. With this "joyous exchange" (as he calls it in the German version) between human sin and Christ's righteousness, the believing person receives, in addition, Christ's priesthood

and kingship. Yet, by priesthood Luther does not mean having an office in the church but, rather, praying and proclaiming Christ's love; and by kingship Luther is not talking about power but the spiritual kingship of peace. Christian freedom then consists precisely in these gifts, fruits, and benefits of faith, so that Christians are lords over sin, death, the devil, and anything else that threatens them.

When Luther arrives at what he calls the second theme, that Christians are servants of all, he introduces it not as a separate theme at all but, rather, again following the rules of rhetoric, as an answer to the chief objections to the first section and its description of law and gospel, faith and its blessings. This standard component of good rhetoric since the time of Cicero, called the *confutatio*, anticipated opponents' arguments aimed at refuting the main point of a speech or writing. Here, the chief objection takes the form of derision. Opponents who were convinced that Luther's teaching on faith would lead to lawlessness and disorder, giving believers license to sin, had made exaggerated claims to that effect. Luther rebukes them ("Not so, you wicked people") and answers their objections using a series of examples from Scripture and experience that show how faith freely produces good works and, hence, serves the neighbor.⁷ Throughout this section of the tract, however, Luther also restates his basic point that Christian faith does not depend upon works but only on God's mercy. Running throughout this section is a criticism of Aristotelian ethics, which dominated late medieval thinking, that a person becomes virtuous (or righteous) by doing virtuous acts. Luther argues the opposite, namely that only the one declared righteous by Christ through faith alone can bear fruit of righteousness.

The close of any proper speech or writing was the peroration, which consisted either of a summary conclusion to the argument or an appeal to the reader or listener. Indeed, Luther even signals this transition with the words, "We conclude."⁸ In this case, Luther concludes that Christians live in Christ through faith and their neighbors through love. After his final "Amen," however, Luther adds a lengthy appendix that answers another misunderstanding of his argument by

7. See below, p. 510.

8. See below, p. 530.

ceremonialists, namely, that he really is supporting license and an abandonment of all good order among Christians.

His refusal to equate reform with abandoning past practices while still rebuking ceremonialists, coupled with his concern for the weak in faith, led Luther in 1522, upon returning from protective custody in the Wartburg Castle, to put the brakes on the reform movement that had arisen during his absence from Wittenberg—not on the basis of objections to the practices favored by these reform-minded colleagues (including not only Andreas Bodenstein from Karlstadt [1486–1541] but also Philip Melanchthon and Nicholas von Amsdorf [1483–1565], among others) but because such changes in practice would upset the faith of weak Christians who would not understand why they were taking place.⁹ This reticence about changing forms of worship—foreign to his Roman opponents and to other leaders of reform (for example, Ulrich Zwingli [1484–1531] in Zurich and early Anabaptists)—stands as a unique mark of Wittenberg’s brand of theology and may be traced to Luther’s comments in *The Freedom of a Christian*.



⁹. See Martin Luther, *Invocavit Sermons* (March 1522), in LW 51:67–100.