

LUTHER AND THE SPLIT WITH THE CHURCH

Erasmus was surely right when he said that by 15³20 that there was no longer any possibility of reconciliation between Luther and the Catholic Church. When Luther first began to preach against certain church practices a few years earlier he was making, rhetorically, a call from within. Luther, an Augustinian monk, thought of himself as a Catholic, and at that time he did not challenge essential Catholic doctrines or the church's claims to authority. His main target in the Ninety-five Theses were local procedures --- the distribution of indulgences, the sermons of men like Tetzl who preached that with a little money one could buy a place in heaven. None of these matters was essential to the Catholic Church's sense of self, and if Catholic leaders of the time had had more foresight, or an institutional zealotry to purge their church of these abuses, it is quite possible that Luther could have been placated. Luther, in other words, did not begin as a "Lutheran". He became one, gradually, in the process of compiling scriptural arguments against the Catholic Church's condoning of these inessential procedural matters. Within a few years that call from within had become a hostile attack upon the very foundations of the Church.

When Luther first began to question church practices, he was well within the mainstream of modern Catholic thought. Although the practice of indulgences was widespread, it was hardly viewed positively, and many of Luther's opponents --- among them, John Eck --- were willing to grant that Luther's criticisms of the practice had merit (Bainton 91). The objections Luther had to granting indulgences could be held by any reasonable Catholic. "Indulgences," Luther said, "are positively harmful to the recipient

because they impede salvation by diverting charity and inducing a false sense of security.... Those persons are damned who think that letters of indulgence make them certain of salvation" (Bainton 63). By attacking indulgences, as Bainton says, Luther was striking "at the revenue of his own institution," but it is important to note that he was not striking at the core values of the church as a whole. He did not challenge the rights of the papacy, or clerical privilege; indeed, in 1517 he professed himself deferential to church dictates: "I am willing to reverse this judgment [that the pope has no jurisdiction over purgatory] if the Church so pronounces" (Bainton 62).

The Theses were in no sense a manifesto against the entire Catholic Church, challenging either its relationship to God or the Christian nature of its long-held practices. Instead, Luther was responding to what were relatively local, recent, and peripheral issues. According to Bainton, Luther "directed his attack solely against Tetzel's reputed sermon and Albert's printed instructions, which marked the apex of unbridled pretensions as to the efficacy of indulgences" (60). Although he questioned the pope's power to grant indulgences, he did not question the pope's basic right of authority, and in his public statements he paid deference to "the power of the keys" of St. Peter even while noting that they "cannot make attrition into contrition" (Bainton 61-62).

It was while trying to answer the opposition's arguments in favor of indulgences that Luther began to delve deeper into scripture and church history, an activity which gradually led him to a more radical viewpoint of where the Catholic Church stood in the cosmic struggle for salvation. The Church represented accumulated tradition; its doctrines were the product of centuries of church councils, papal decrees, and the commentaries of the Doctors. But what if such practices represented a misconstrual of

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✓ scripture? The Catholic sacrament of penance was founded on a verse which had been translated into Latin as “do penance,” while in the original Greek the phrase actually meant “be penitent” (Bainton 67). Luther was struck by this discrepancy when he discovered it, for to him it meant that the sacrament, by focusing on the (mistranslated) act rather than the (scriptural) change within, was actually leading people astray from salvation. Discoveries such as this emboldened him to broaden his criticism of church practices, and soon he was mounting a challenge against the very beliefs and doctrines which the Church saw as its foundation.

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 At first Luther did try to strike a moderate tone. He could not force himself to support things he did not believe in, such as the power of the pope to grant indulgences, but he professed obedience to the church in its basic values. He took pains to dilute utterances which might otherwise seem provocative: “Let it be understood that when I say the authority of the Roman pontiff rests on a human decree I am not counseling disobedience” (Bainton 83). Even while voicing cautious approval of many of the beliefs of John Hus~~s~~ and his followers, he made haste to add, “I have never approved of their schism. Even though they had divine right on their side, they ought not to have withdrawn from the Church, because the highest divine right is unity and charity” (Bainton 89). He only became more radicalized as his challenge to the Church hardened into a standoff between both parties. ✓ Luther was frustrated by the Church’s unwillingness, or inability, to refute his arguments on scriptural authority; a bull, he wrote, “condemns me from its own word without any proof from Scripture, whereas I back up all my assertions from the Bible” (Bainton 125). In espousing Sola Scriptura, ✓ Luther was denying the Church’s claim to special authority in communicating God’s will

to the people. Much of the Church's features --- ecclesiastical offices, manners of prayer, ✓
 ✓ veneration of the saints, and others --- had no clear scriptural foundation, but rested
 instead on later tradition and innovation. Sola Scriptura leaves no room for this kind of
 tradition, and hence from that point of view much of what the Catholic Church stood for
 rested on nothing. Indeed, Luther could argue --- and did --- that through its many
 ✓ unbiblical innovations the Catholic Church had corrupted Christ's message. To believe
 in what the Church taught was to risk salvation.

It was ultimately the sacraments which made the breach impassable. The
 ✓ Catholic Church at that time had seven sacraments: confirmation, marriage, ordination,
 ✓ penance, baptism, the Eucharist, and extreme unction. In *The Babylonian Captivity*,
 published in 1520, Luther stripped away all but baptism and the Lord's supper on the
 grounds that they lacked biblical authority. This was of immense significance; it was, in
 fact, the publication of this piece which provoked Erasmus to say there was no longer any
 possibility of reconciliation^{iation} between the Church and Luther (Bainton 105-6). The reason
 why Luther's abandonment of the five sacraments was so serious was, as Bainton
 explains, because:

the pretensions of the Roman Catholic Church rest so completely upon the
 sacraments as the exclusive channels of grace and upon the prerogatives of the
 clergy, by whom the sacraments are exclusively administered. If sacramentalism
 is undercut, then sacerdotalism is bound to fall. (Bainton 105-6)

Without the sacrament of ordination the special authority of the clergy was denied,
 providing a logical opening for the concept of the priesthood of all believers. As Luther
 discovered in the Biblical passage upon which the sacrament of penance was based, the ✓

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weight of church authority could be in error on some important doctrinal matters. One person who reads the Biblical text correctly therefore has more authority than an entire council of bishops and popes who read it wrongly. If most of the sacraments had no Biblical foundation, as Luther believed, then it was virtual sacrilege to condone the sacraments as the Catholic Church improperly conveyed them. "I may be wrong on indulgences," Luther allowed, "but as to the need for faith in the sacraments [as in "be penitent" rather than "do penance"] I will die before I will recant" (Bainton 107).

Symbolically, the total breach between Luther and what had once been his Church can be seen in his burning of the papal bull condemning his teachings. "No action," Bokenkotter says, "could have symbolized more appropriately Luther's irrevocable break with the papacy and the end of medieval Christendom" (219). It is a renunciation of all that the papacy stood for. By that time the rhetoric had also changed. At the start of his preaching against indulgences Luther was respectful of the Pope and councils, but by 1520 both sides were burning each other's publications and excommunicating one another "in the name of the sacred truth of God" (Bainton 126). Luther was unashamedly calling the Pope the Antichrist. Reconciliation is no longer possible when both sides have decided that you and he are on opposite sides of the cosmic struggle for salvation.

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 Very good essay.
 Extremely well-expressed & think you could have analyzed some issues more deeply eg. sacerdotalism. But all you say is accurate + convincing - & that is largely because you write so well.
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