

Excerpts from  
Martin Luther's  
Open Letter to the German Nobility<sup>1</sup>

*Although his 95 Theses are more heard of, Luther's Open Letter to the German Nobility is actually more systematic as a manifesto of what Luther was so strongly protesting, and what should be done about it. I have ignored much of the material dealing with theology and the Bible, focusing instead on the more "worldly" problems that Luther had with Rome. One last caveat: brace yourself—Luther is a very abrasive writer. He didn't mind chewing you up one side and down the other if he disagreed with you.*

*1. One of the problems Luther had with the Church of Rome was that it bled Germany of its money:*

What is the use in Christendom of those people who are called the cardinals? I shall tell you. 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. Why? The cardinals must have the income. No Turk could have so devastated Italy and suppressed the worship of God.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that Germany now gives much more to the pope at Rome than it gave in former times to the emperors. Indeed, some estimate that every year more than three hundred thousand silver coins<sup>3</sup> find their way from Germany to Rome, quite uselessly and fruitlessly; we get nothing for it but scorn and contempt. And yet we wonder that princes, nobles, cities, endowments, land and people are impoverished! We should rather wonder that we still have anything to eat!<sup>4</sup>

Above all, we should drive out of German lands the papal legates with their special powers,<sup>5</sup> which they sell us for large sums of money, though that is sheer knavery. For example, in return for money they legalize unjust gains, dissolve oaths, vows and

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<sup>1</sup> Hard copy edition: Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520, by Martin Luther. Introduction and Translation by C. M. Jacobs. *Works of Martin Luther With Introduction and Notes*, Vol. II. Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Co., 1915). Online: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-luther.html#sw-nobility>. I have only changed a few words (that are unintelligible to modern readers; in most of these cases I have indicated the original term used in a footnote.

<sup>2</sup> Part II: Abuses to Be Discussed in Councils, Section 1. Luther's point was that the Roman church had hurt Italy more than a Turkish invasion would have.

<sup>3</sup> Literally, *gulden*, which was a common German silver coin that weighed about an ounce.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, *faculties*. These are powers to absolve people from doing things they normally were under an obligation to undertake.

agreements, break and teach men to break the faith and fealty which they have pledged to one another; and they say the pope has the authority to do this. It is the evil Spirit who bids them say this. Thus they sell us a doctrine of devils, and take money for teaching us sin and leading us to hell....<sup>6</sup>

*2. Another problem that Luther had with the Roman Catholic Church was that the Pope, as Bishop of Rome, exercised much control over the church in Germany, instead of letting the German church, or German princes, make decisions about it. Luther also held that the Pope exercised an unnecessary amount of power in general.*

An imperial law should be issued, that no bishop's cloak and no confirmation of any high office whatsoever shall henceforth be secured from Rome, but that the ordinance of the most holy and most famous Council of Nicaea shall be restored, in which it is decreed that a bishop shall be confirmed by the two nearest bishops or by the archbishop [i.e., a new bishop should be appointed by bishops of nearby areas, and not by the Pope]. If the pope will break the statutes of this and of all other councils, what is the use of hiding councils; or who has given him the authority thus to despise and break the rules of councils?<sup>7</sup>

The pope should restrain himself, take his fingers out of the pie, and claim no title to the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily. He has exactly as much right to that kingdom as I have, and yet he wishes to be its overlord.<sup>8</sup>

The kissing of the pope's feet should take place no more. It is an unchristian, nay, an anti-Christian thing for a poor sinful man to let his feet be kissed by one who is a hundred times better than himself. If it is done in honor of his authority, why does not the pope do the same to others in honor of their holiness? Compare the two -- Christ and the pope! John 13:1 ff., Christ washed His disciples' feet and dried them, and the disciples never washed His feet; the pope, as though he were higher than Christ, turns things around and, as a great favor, allows people to kiss his feet, though he ought properly to use all his power to prevent it, if anyone wished to do it; like Paul and Barnabas, who would not let the people of Lystra pay them divine honor, but said, Acts 14:11-16, "We are men like you."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> From Part II of Proposals for Reform, Section 23. Elsewhere in this treatise, Luther cites the examples of Wladislav, slain by the Ottoman Turks after being defeated by the Turks in battle, after the Pope had given him permission to void a treaty that Wladislav had signed with the Turks, in 1444; of John Hus, who had criticized many Roman Catholic abuses, and was promised safe passage when meeting church officials, but was killed on his way home; and of the treaty between HRE Maximilian and Louis of France, which was nullified by Pope Julius.

<sup>7</sup> Proposals for Reform, Part I, Section 3. The Council of Nicaea was a historic council convened in 325 AD, the first in which bishops from every part of Christendom attended, which has been adhered to by Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox alike.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Section 10. The territory of this kingdom was in southern Italy. The Pope was attempting to determine who would rule that area.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Section 11.

The ban<sup>10</sup> is to be used in no case except where the Scriptures prescribe its use, i.e., against those who do not hold the true faith, or who live in open sin; it is not to be used for the sake of temporal possessions. But now it is the other way around. Everyone believes and lives as he pleases, most of all those who use the ban to plunder and defame other people, and all the bans are now laid only on account of temporal possessions, for which we have no one to thank but the holy "spiritual lawlessness."<sup>11</sup>

*3. It would be helpful to at least touch lightly on Luther's more theological reasons for protesting against Roman Catholicism. Here, we can see how he saw the priests of the Roman Church, and their authority, as unnecessarily getting in between the relationship between God and the individual believer:*

My advice is this: If such fool's-work cannot be abolished, then every pious Christian man should open his eyes, and not be misled by the hypocritical Roman bulls and seals, stay at home in his own church and be content with his baptism, his Gospel, his faith, his Christ and with God, Who is everywhere the same; and let the pope remain a blind leader of the blind. (Matt. 15:4) Neither angel nor pope can give you as much as God gives you in your parish-church.<sup>12</sup>

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10 People under the ban lost all legal rights and possessions. They could be despoiled of anything with impunity.

<sup>11</sup> Proposals for Reform, Part II, Section 17.

<sup>12</sup> Proposals for Reform, Part II, Section 20.

Reflection: identify three practices that Luther criticized in this essay, and explain how they hurt Germany, or why he disagreed with them.