

A Protestant View of Christianity



15 ▼ *Martin Luther, TABLE TALK*

The Protestant Reformation had many voices, but its first prophet was Martin Luther (1483–1546), whose Ninety-Five Theses of 1517 initiated the momentous anti-Catholic rebellion. Born into the family of a German miner and educated at the University of Erfurt, the young Luther was preparing for a career as a lawyer when suddenly in 1505 he changed course and became an Augustinian friar. Luther's decision resulted from his dissatisfaction over his relationship with God and doubts about his personal salvation. He hoped that life as an Augustinian would protect him from the world's temptations and allow him to win God's favor by devoting himself to prayer, study, and the sacraments. His spiritual anxieties soon returned, however. Intensely conscious of his own inadequacies and failings, he became convinced that he could never earn his salvation or live up to the high standards of selflessness, charity, and purity prescribed by Jesus' teachings and the Catholic Church. He despaired of ever satisfying an angry, judging God and was terrorized by the prospect of eternal damnation in Hell.

During the 1510s, however, while teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg, Luther found spiritual peace through his reflections on the scriptures. He concluded that human beings, burdened as they were by weakness and sin, could never earn salvation by leading a blameless life and performing in the proper spirit the pious acts enjoined by the Catholic Church. Rather, salvation was an unmerited divine gift, resulting from God-implanted faith in Jesus, especially in the redemptive power of his death and resurrection. This fundamental Protestant doctrine of "justification by faith alone" inspired the Ninety-Five Theses, in which Luther attacked contemporary Catholic teaching. In particular he sought to discredit the doctrine of indulgences, which taught that people could atone for their sins and ensure their own and loved ones' salvation by contributing money to the Church. Within five years Luther was the recognized leader of a religious movement — Protestantism — that broke with the Catholic Church not just over salvation but also a host of other fundamental issues concerning Christianity and the Christian life.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. According to Luther, what role should the Bible play in a Christian's life? How in his view does the Roman Catholic Church obscure the meaning and message of the Bible?
2. What does Luther mean by "good works"? Why does he believe that the Roman Church distorts the role of good works in a Christian's life?
3. What role does faith play in a Christian's life, according to Luther? Why is faith superior to external acts of devotion?
4. What criticisms does Luther offer of the papacy and other high officials of the Catholic Church?
5. How does Luther view marriage, in particular a woman's role in marriage?
6. Why does Luther single out monks and members of religious orders for special criticism? What are their shortcomings?

SALVATION AND DAMNATION

Because as the everlasting, merciful God, through his Word¹ and Sacraments,² talks and deals with us, all other creatures excluded, not of temporal things which pertain to this vanishing life . . . but as to where we shall go when we depart from here, and gives unto us his Son for a Savior, delivering us from sin and death, and purchasing for us everlasting righteousness, life, and salvation, therefore it is most certain, that we do not die away like the beasts that have no understanding; but so many of us . . . shall through him be raised again to life everlasting at the last day, and the ungodly to everlasting destruction.

¹The *Word* is God's message, especially as revealed through Jesus' life.

²Sacraments are sacred rites or ceremonies that are signs or symbols of a spiritual reality. Of the seven Catholic sacraments, Luther retained two, baptism and the eucharist. Affirming Catholic tradition, he believed that these sacraments were a means of grace through which God bestows spiritual gifts.

FAITH VERSUS GOOD WORKS

He that goes from the gospel to the law,³ thinking to be saved by good works,⁴ falls as uneasily as he who falls from the true service of God to idolatry; for, without Christ, all is idolatry and fictitious imaginings of God, whether of the Turkish Quran, of the pope's decrees, or Moses' laws; if a man think thereby to be justified and saved before God, he is undone.

The gospel preaches nothing of the merit of works; he that says the gospel requires works for salvation, I say, flat and plain, is a liar.

Nothing that is properly good proceeds out of the works of the law, unless grace be present; for

³By *law* Luther meant religious rules and regulations; he believed that futile human efforts to live strictly according to the dictates of the law undermined true faith.

⁴All the ceremonies and pious activities such as pilgrimages, relic veneration, and attendance at Mass that the Catholic Church promoted as vehicles of God's grace and eternal salvation.

unable to speak, replied by a nod of the head, whereupon the monk, turning to the gentleman's son, said: You see, your father makes us this bequest. The son said to the father: Sir, is it your pleasure that I kick this monk down the stairs? The dying man nodded as before, and the son immediately drove the monk out of doors.

The papists took the invocation of saints from the pagans, who divided God into numberless images and idols, and ordained to each its particular office and work. . . .

The invocation of saints is a most abominable blindness and heresy; yet the papists will not give it up. The pope's greatest profit arises from the dead; for the calling on dead saints brings him infinite sums of money and riches, far more than he gets from the living. . . .

In Italy, the monasteries are very wealthy. There are but three or four monks to each; the surplus of their revenues goes to the pope and his cardinals.

The fasting of the friars is more easy to them than our eating to us. For one day of fasting there are three of feasting. Every friar for his supper has two quarts of beer, a quart of wine, and spice-cakes, or bread prepared with spice and salt, the better to relish their drink. Thus go on these poor fasting brethren; getting so pale and wan, they are like the fiery angels.

In Popedom they make priests, not to preach and teach God's Word, but only to celebrate mass, and to roam about with the sacrament. For, when a bishop ordains a man, he says: Take the power to celebrate mass, and to offer it for

*Two of the many changes that Protestants demanded were allowing all Christians to receive the sacrament of the eucharist in the forms of bread and wine (in medieval Roman Catholic practice, only the priest drank the

MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY

Who can sufficiently admire the state of conjugal union, which God has instituted and founded, and from which all human creatures, indeed, all states proceed. Where would we be if it did not exist? But neither God's ordinance, nor the gracious presence of children, the fruit of matrimony, moves the ungodly world, which sees only the temporal difficulties and troubles of matrimony, but sees not the great treasure that is hidden in it. We were all born of women — emperors, kings, princes, yea, Christ himself, the Son of God, did not disdain to be born of a virgin. Let the scoffers and rejecters of matrimony

the living and the dead. But we ordain priests according to the command of Christ and St. Paul, namely, to preach the pure gospel and God's Word. The papists in their ordinations make no mention of preaching and teaching God's Word, therefore their consecrating and ordaining is false and wrong, for all worshiping which is not ordained of God, or erected by God's Word and command, is worthless, yea, mere idolatry.

THE REFORM OF THE CHURCH

The pope and his crew can in no way endure the idea of reformation; the mere word creates more alarm at Rome than thunderbolts from heaven or the day of judgment. A cardinal said the other day: Let them eat, and drink, and do what they will; but as to reforming us, we think that is a vain idea; we will not endure it. Neither will we Protestants be satisfied, though they administer the sacrament in both kinds, and permit priests to marry;⁸ we will also have the doctrine of the faith pure and unfalsified, and the righteousness that justifies and saves before God, and which expels and drives away all idolatry and false-worshiping; with these gone and banished, the foundation on which Popedom is built also falls.

The chief cause that I fell out with the pope was this: the pope boasted that he was the head of the church, and condemned all that would not be under his power and authority; . . . Further, he took upon him power, rule, and authority over the Christian church, and over the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God; no man must presume to expound the Scriptures, but only he, and according to his ridiculous conceits; this was not to be endured. They who, against God's word, boast of the church's authority, are mere idiots.

eucharistic wine) and allowing priests to marry. The principle behind both changes was Luther's teaching that all Christians are priests — that is, responsible for their own religious faith.

go hang, . . . and the papists, who reject married life, and yet have mistresses; if they need to scoff at matrimony, let them be consistent, and keep no concubines.

Marrying cannot be without women, nor can the world subsist without them. To marry is medicine against unchastity. A woman is, or at least should be, a friendly, courteous, and merry companion in life; this is why they are named house-honors, the honor and ornament of the house, and inclined to tenderness; for this reason are they chiefly created, to bear children, and be the pleasure, joy, and solace of their husbands.

what we are forced to do, goes not from the heart, nor is acceptable.

▼▼▼

A Capuchin⁵ says: wear a grey coat and a hood, a rope round thy body, and sandals on thy feet. A Cordelier says: put on a black hood; an ordinary papist says: do this or that work, hear mass, pray, fast, give alms, etc. But a true Christian says: I am justified and saved only by faith in Christ, without any works or merits of my own; compare these together, and judge which is the true righteousness.

▼▼▼

I have often been resolved to live uprightly, and to lead a true godly life, and to set everything aside that would hinder this, but it was far from being put in execution; even as it was with Peter,⁶ when he swore he would lay down his life for Christ.

▼▼▼

I will not lie or dissemble before my God, but will freely confess, I am not able to effect that good which I intend, but await the happy hour when God shall be pleased to meet me with his grace.

▼▼▼

A Christian's worshiping is not the external, hypocritical mask that our friars wear, when they chastise their bodies, torment and make themselves faint, with ostentatious fasting, watching, singing, wearing hair shirts, scourging themselves, etc. Such worshiping God does not desire.

THE BIBLE

Great is the strength of the divine Word. In the epistle to the Hebrews,⁷ it is called "a two-edged

⁵The Capuchins and Cordeliers were both branches of the Franciscan order noted for their austerity and strict poverty. A distinctive feature of the Capuchins' dress was their peaked hood, or *capuche*.

⁶One of Jesus' twelve apostles; following Jesus' arrest by Roman soldiers before his crucifixion, Peter three times

denied any relationship with Jesus, despite having vowed shortly before to lay down his life for his teacher. Eventually, Peter died a martyr in Rome.

sword." But we have neglected and scorned the pure and clear Word, and have drunk not of the fresh and cool spring; we are gone from the clear fountain to the foul puddle, and drunk its filthy water; that is, we have sedulously read old writers and teachers, who went about with speculative reasonings, like the monks and friars.

▼▼▼

THE PAPACY AND THE MONASTIC ORDERS

How does it happen that the popes pretend that they form the Church, when, all the while, they are bitter enemies of the Church, and have no knowledge, certainly no comprehension, of the holy gospel? Pope, cardinals, bishops, not a soul of them has read the Bible; it is a book unknown to them. They are a pack of guzzling, gluttonous wretches, rich, wallowing in wealth and laziness, resting secure in their power, and never, for a moment, thinking of accomplishing God's will.

▼▼▼

Kings and princes coin money only out of metals, but the pope coins money out of everything — indulgences, ceremonies, dispensations, pardons; all fish come to his net. . . .

▼▼▼

A gentleman being at the point of death, a monk from the next convent came to see what he could pick up, and said to the gentleman: Sir, will you give so and so to our monastery? The dying man,

denied any relationship with Jesus, despite having vowed shortly before to lay down his life for his teacher. Eventually, Peter died a martyr in Rome.

⁷Paul's Letter to the Hebrews, a part of the Christian bible, or New Testament.