

Essay #3

**Luther's Three Essays from 1520:  
From Roman Captivity to Christian Liberty**

**Andrés San Martín**  
Colombia

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To begin, it is important we remember that last year (2020) we commemorated two fundamental events in our beloved church: the five-hundredth anniversary of the writing of Luther's most clearly anti-Catholic works, and particularly the definitive break between Luther and the Vatican which occurred when he burned the papal Bull *Exsurge Domine* on December 10<sup>th</sup> of 1520.

In the year 1517—even within the Ninety-five Theses themselves—we find a Luther who is still a devout priest, yearning to find God through the “Holy Mother Church.” By 1520, however, Luther has openly broken from that very church. Let's remember that in twenty of the Ninety-five Theses, Luther declares his continuing faithfulness to his vows and obedience to the pope. He honestly believed that the spiritual and material fraud being carried out in the cities of Saxony with the sale of indulgences was done without the knowledge or permission of Leo X in Rome.

But with his three written works of 1520, Luther demonstrated that, without a doubt, he had now lost all hope of changing the situation “inside” the church. Therefore, there remained no other remedy than to distance himself from Romanist heresy. All of this is ratified later, when on July 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, Luther received the Papal Bull *Exsurge Domine* (“Rise, O Lord!<sup>1</sup>”) in which he was given a definitive deadline. By the end of the year, the bull stated, he must retract his writings or be excommunicated, with all that excommunication entailed in the sixteenth century.

In fact, the principal motivation for the existence of said bull was the three texts which we will now study *and not* the Ninety-five Theses. Luther, for his part, did not wait until the deadline, and on December 10, 1520, he burned the papal bull in front of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, sealing his excommunication.

Now we can properly talk about Luther the rebel, at war with Rome and its heresy. We can most definitely affirm that as the true beginning: the day the church was forged outside of Rome and its heresy, *and not* before. Until the composition of those three texts, Luther's works were academic, pastoral, analytic, and, unlike the three in question, they were not openly polemical. His earlier writings obviously were also not considered as rebellious, seditious, or heretical in the eyes of the Vatican.

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<sup>1</sup> Written June 15, 1520.

Luther's prodigious activity began in earnest in that year, and he became ever clearer in his doctrine. We now have a Luther speaking of the "papal jackass" and the "friar cow," among other colorful monikers. Evidently, but not formally, there was no turning back in the rupture with Rome. It is notable that the printing press aided in the spread of Luther's ideas and of the Bible itself, thereby contributing to the numerical increase in adherents to Luther's work.

However, why are Luther's three written works from that year—*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, *The Freedom of a Christian*, and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*—so important? Collectively these three texts are referred to as "The Scriptures of the Reformation."<sup>2</sup> But to understand their importance, we need to dig deeper into each one.

### ***To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation***

It can be said, in summary, that this text was a treatise for national reform, written for German laypeople. It is composed in a forthright style, worded to be easily understood by the average German. It is evident that his intention was to win the German people over to the Reformation cause. It had an original print run of four thousand copies—astoundingly large for the day—but sold out in less than a week.

In this writing, Luther proposes a great panorama of possible reforms for his country, presenting twenty-seven proposed reforms in great detail which he considered good to carry out. Just as God had helped Joshua's cause at Jericho, he should help the cause of the German people so they might throw off the chains of that distant people called Rome and its curia.

Luther describes three types of walls the Romanists were defending: 1) The arrogant papal claim of having jurisdiction over the temporal powers of kings and princes. According to Luther, their authority should be limited to only the spiritual life of the faithful and of nobody else. 2) The likewise heretical papal claim of not only having the exclusive authority to interpret the Holy Scriptures, but also to be *over them*. What's more, if the pope was the only authority allowed to interpret Scripture, what need would there be of Scripture? If this papal claim were true, his word would suffice. Nothing more would be needed. 3) The papal claim of being the only authority allowed to convene a general council of the church. In other words, a council is the patrimony of the pope, not of the Christian Church. This wall was easy to tear down since there is no historical basis for such a claim. The authority lay within the church, as is shown in Acts 15. Even an emperor could convene a council, as occurred in the case of the Council of Nicaea in 325. Clearly, the call for an ecumenical council never had been a prerogative of the papacy.

This wall could also be torn down by tearing down the anti-biblical differentiation between Christian laity and Christian clergy. This may be the first example of Luther expounding the universal priesthood of all believers, which he so strongly emphasized throughout his career. The church was not a puppet in the hands of the clergy, but rather, the clergy was a servant of the church.

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<sup>2</sup> "Die Reformationsschriften."

It also should be mentioned that this is the first of Luther's writings in which he refers to the pope as the Antichrist, speaks of the separation of political and clerical power, and expounds the universal priesthood of all believers which emanates from Baptism and the Christian faith and places all believers on equal footing, be it layperson or presbyter, bishop or cardinal. If that was not enough, *for the first time Luther speaks of the reformation of the Christian Church.*

Here he throws out papal authority, puts in doubt the authority of councils, and proposes something which today seems obvious (but at the time was absolutely revolutionary), namely, that work—any work—if it is carried out in an honest way, was just as sacred as the office of the priest. Luther calls on the princes, nobles, and magistrates to fight against the tyranny of Rome and, because they were such influential members of God's people, to work toward living a more Christian life. Luther highlights the doctrine of the universal priesthood.

Why was the universal priesthood of all believers so important to the great reformer? Because, as a fruit of Baptism and of the Christian faith, it places *all* Christians on an equal footing before God. That is why 1 Peter 2:9 declares us kings and priests. It leaves by the wayside the idea that there is only a small group of kings and only one priest, the pope.

Luther even asserts that the pope should not allow the founding of new clerical orders and that monasteries should not exist unless they are led by competent and spiritual men. What's more, he lays aside obligatory priestly vows of celibacy, leaving it simply as an option which brings no additional spiritual blessing to the priest.

Luther's fiercest attacks on the papacy, however, are in his assertion that there is absolutely nothing of spiritual benefit for the Christian, neither in the papacy nor in Canon Law. Both simply crave money and imprison true believers. Luther even declares that for a Christian, Baptism, the Eucharist, the preaching of the Word, and love for neighbor are more important than all the saints in heaven, especially considering that many of those saints were popes, which in the end were the blind leading the blind.

### ***The Freedom of a Christian***

This is probably the most beautiful writing about Christian spirituality written by Luther. Ironically, it was written as a show of courtesy to Pope Leo X himself, as a fruit of the meeting between Luther and the papal legate Karl von Miltitz on October 11, 1520. In the preamble, Luther still refers to the pope using terms like the High Pontiff, Father, and Most Blessed. Of the three writings analyzed in this paper, it is by far the most serene and cordial.

Luther's great interest in this treatise is evidenced by the fact that he wrote it simultaneously in German and Latin. On one hand, he wanted it read by the German people, but he also wanted it read by the clergy, scholars, and humanists.

This treatise highlights a theme which runs throughout Luther's writings from 1520: *freedom*. This is not a spiritual freedom from the Vatican, mind you, nor much less a political freedom, but an internal, spiritual freedom by virtue of the faith given us through the merits of Christ.

Luther declared that the Christian is a free man, the master of all things. He is subject to no one. Yet the Christian is also an obedient servant. He submits to all. The soul, illumined by grace, has the certainty that it has been set free from everyone and everything except God, no matter what happens to the “outward man.” God has become the stronghold of the soul.

The fortress of the soul, however, is threatened by natural man’s selfishness and inherent sin. That’s why the Christian should remain alert and seek a higher level of sanctification, but without thinking that such ascetic exercises (which each person is free to choose according to their own personality) will lead to salvation. Salvation is given first; good works naturally follow. God, who is love, inspires a selfless love to him and to our neighbor. God’s faithful people will submit without reservation, just as Jesus did.

In this writing, we find Luther’s famous phrases, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” and “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (*Luther’s Works* 31:344). As a spiritual being, the Christian is, regarding sin, free, not by his own merits or doing, but by the Word of God preached by Christ, which requires faith and confidence in the divine promises. It is necessary, however, to be clear that the freedom to which Luther refers is exclusively an internal and spiritual freedom and not a socio-political or economic freedom. Such outward freedom is what the liberation theology of the twentieth century proposed and what is still adamantly defended and generously financed by the Lutheran World Federation today.

Therefore, in order that this freedom be effective, Luther leaves no place for passivity or inactivity. We need to act! Thus, we return to the paradox: the Christian, being free, needs no works, but by being a servant, he must work. This is surprising considering this writing is so laid back and serene compared to Luther’s other writings. What isn’t surprising is that the Holy Scriptures—especially Paul’s letters—are once again the spring from which our reformer drinks. As Luther himself points out:

Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing. (*Luther’s Works* 31:345)

In reading *The Freedom of a Christian*, we might wonder whether Luther, at the time he wrote it, knew that the pope—to whom he writes so respectfully—had already begun the process of his excommunication. But beyond this, at least in what we see in his writings, this letter was the reformer’s last attempt at achieving an improbable reconciliation with Rome. After this letter, all diplomacy between Luther and Rome and vice versa had come to an end.

So, what is the purpose of the rites and ceremonies mentioned in Scripture which can be summarized in the law? Simply to convince man of his sin and of his inability to do what God not only demands but deserves. In this way, by being made aware of his sinful state, the believer, yearning for justification, enters into the other phase: that of the gospel. In the gospel, faith in Christ worked by grace gives us justification, peace, and Christian liberty. It is not the believer,

however, who earns the merit of these gifts, but rather Christ, who has fulfilled the law's demands.

Therefore, faith not only frees us from the works of the law which cover us with sin, but it also transforms us. The Christian not only receives forgiveness, justification, and faith, but also the right to be called king and priest with all that such titles imply. If, for Luther, there truly is no place for complacency or the setting aside of works, then we must understand that, for Luther, they are not *for* obtaining faith, but rather *because* we have been blessed with it. What this means is that works—the action in the believer—give no merit and therefore have no place in earning salvation, but simply are thanksgiving brought about by the faith given us and the testimony which offers to the world our fruits of faith.

This text, because it asserts that good works are not necessary, has lent itself to many false accusations against Luther and the Reformation as a whole. A simple review of the second part of Luther's text quickly obliterates such accusations. For, if we as Lutherans truly speak of salvation being "by faith alone," then this writing clearly establishes that the Christian, by being a slave, also should act in conjunction with his faith.

### ***The Babylonian Captivity of the Church***

In one paragraph, our great reformer summarizes the content of this entire treatise: "To begin with, I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and for the present maintain that there are but three: baptism, penance, and the bread. All three have been subjected to a miserable captivity by the Roman curia, and the church has been robbed of all her liberty" (*Luther's Works* 36:18).

Announced on August 31 and published on October 6, this is the strongest of Luther's three writings from that year in its criticism of the Vatican and the pope. It was written in Latin, directed primarily to the Roman clergy, and then translated into German. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* pulls no punches against the abuses of papal authority, calling its teachings "sophistries and superstitions." Without a doubt, it is the first literary document of the incipient Reformation. It is evident that Luther's intent in this text is to throw out one of the most basic and yet fundamental of Rome's heresies: the unbiblical existence of seven sacraments. Even if they could in some way be considered healthful rites, the Roman Church, instead of giving us freedom through them, enslaves us. Romanism has clearly perverted even the ones which are undeniably biblical (Baptism and the Eucharist). The idea is evident in the very title of the work. Just as the people of Israel were kept in physical captivity in Babylon, the center of worldly idolatry of the day (2 Kings 24), the Christian Church was now physically and spiritually enslaved in the powerful hands of Romanist idolatry. And if that were not enough, our reformer also declares transubstantiation in the Eucharist and the infused grace of Baptism to be human inventions taught by the Vatican.

The reason to remove the term "sacrament" from these rites is simple: The Bible does not declare them as such. Apart from being such a strong criticism by Luther of Romanist doctrine, the most revolutionary part of this work is his stance regarding priestly authority. This was to be expected, though, considering how Roman clergy had become so blinded by power, regardless of what doctrine the people maintained. What was important to the clergy was not doctrine, but hoarding

for themselves political, military, social, and, of course, economic power. Luther therefore asserts that papal authority was the product of ecclesiastical tradition alone and not the revelation of Holy Scripture. In fact, we can assert that by declaring we are all kings, Luther places the first brick in what would, in the eighteenth century, come to be known as democracy. For him, the leaders of the church, including bishops, should be elected by members of the church.

Luther affirms in this work that the Holy Scriptures should be the foundation, not only for the life of a believer, but also for the life of the church. The church owes its very life to the Word and its promises. Therefore, God's promises are what give the church its place and not the other way around. The church does not give legitimacy to the promises of Christ and his Word.

From the content of this text, we can clearly take away that the church needs a ministry which is led by the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Luther saw this as a direct consequence of the gospel as the promise of salvation and the word of grace.

Regarding the sacraments, Luther says that through them Rome subjects the entire Christian life to the control of a hierarchy. The means of grace have been converted into a means of domination. The church cannot through Baptism erase original sin, because the sacrament does not possess such magical power. Baptism means the free grace of the Lord, the Father's blessing over his creatures.

Regarding the mass, Luther laments and condemns the fact that the cup was denied to the faithful. The logic is that if they deny one of the elements of the eucharistic sacrament, they could just as easily deny the water in Baptism, which is an essential part of the sacrament. He also points out that when the mass is conducted in Latin, the majority of those attending are unable to understand. He also rejects transubstantiation. For when the priest consecrates the mass, he is not carrying out again the sacrifice of the cross which took place once and for all at Calvary. Christ told us clearly from the cross, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). The Sacrament of the Altar is not a sacrifice we are making to God through which we can exercise some sort of influence over him. Thus Luther writes, "The mass is a divine promise, which can benefit no one, be applied to no one, intercede for no one, and be communicated to no one, except only to him who believes with a faith of his own" (*Luther's Works* 36:48). Luther then continues by rejecting suffrages,<sup>3</sup> masses for the anniversary of the dead, and other rites, as well as the supposed spiritual means through which the church robbed money from the people.

The rest of the so-called sacraments are clearly rejected. They are mere inventions with no real foundation. That's why Luther particularly rebukes Rome for making aural confession a fearful weapon of extortion and threat to God's faithful people. For Luther, once they have received the grace of faith, they have been made free. Any attempt to subvert this "glorious freedom of God's children" is contrary to the freedom which Christ has given his church.

*The Babylonian Captivity* was released on October 6, 1520. For Luther this appears to have simply been a prelude and Rome effectively heard nothing more than the first notes of what was

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<sup>3</sup> The prayers prescribed or promised for specific intentions. More particularly, suffrages are the Masses, prayers, or acts of piety offered for the repose of the souls of the faithful departed.

to come. By making the distinction between the church and the ravenous beast, Luther plants the possibility of liberating the church and of reorganizing it.

In a sarcastic tone, Luther says that being attacked has led him to reflect on several points which he would never have considered otherwise. Indulgences were simply a pretext. Time has shown that everything they produced had no value. His conclusion is summarized in one rock solid statement, written in all capital letters: “INDULGENCES ARE WICKED DEVICES OF THE FLATTERERS OF ROME” (*Luther’s Works* 36:12).

Luther doesn’t stop there, though. He reflects on the papacy, calling it the enclosed sanctuary of the Bishop of Rome. This bishop, however, does not limit himself to his own diocese. He has created a system of exclusive power and privilege which allows him to take advantage of the world in every arena: economic, political, or military. Nevertheless, this dominion is about to end because it is based on the theory of the sacraments which keeps the church in a state of servitude. Luther is going to show how they are not what Rome presents them to be.

The three authentic sacraments have been changed from their true sense by the papacy. Baptism, which in essence is the remission of sins, loses this meaning with the invention of other remedies against sin, like indulgences, which Luther had attacked in his Ninety-five Theses.

The Eucharist has fallen into an even worse servitude. It is spoken only in Latin, but the words should be heard and understood by every believer. They deny the cup to the laity. They invent the dogma of transubstantiation. In the end, they transform the sacrament into a sacrifice—the sacrifice of the mass—even though its profound meaning is offered only in Christ’s sacrifice as food for the faith of the faithful.

Grace, therefore, is reduced to a strengthening of faith through the announcement of the Savior’s death. The Roman Church has perverted and transformed this gift from God to men into a giving from man to God. In other words, instead of receiving, we are supposedly offering. An inevitable consequence of this is that grace ceases to be the origin of faith. Their intent is to extort God through the mass, which has devolved into several private offices, celebrated by priests who seem to have been ordained exclusively for this function.

The root of this evil is the love of money. Believers are to give money so that masses can be said and priests can celebrate them, without ever teaching the people. This just leads to more ignorance on the part of God’s people.

In regard to penance, Luther maintains his original position. Penance is disqualified as a sacrament since it lacks an outward sign such as the water in Baptism and the bread and wine in the Eucharist. Curiously, Luther does not advocate the abolition of the practices we have mentioned. What he deeply desires to change is the meaning Rome gives to them. In a radical way, he wants to open the door to a Christianity which breaks with all Roman tradition. His ultimate goal is to distance the Church from Rome in order to bring it closer to the Scriptures.

As far as the Romanist sacrament of confirmation, Luther simply considers it an “adornment of the episcopal office,” tying it to the fact that the mass is something to be *received* and not *offered*

in sacrifice. For this very reason, Christ did not establish in the church dominion, power, and tyranny, but rather ministry and service.

From a tactical point of view, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* takes away from our great reformer's enemies their most powerful weapon. For three years, Rome has accused Luther of straying from the Catholic truth, of which it has claimed itself the only judge and jury. This would serve to demonstrate that their supposed orthodoxy was nothing more than a pretense, a fraud, which cannot stand before the spirit or letter of the Holy Scriptures.

As we have seen, the entire contents of these three texts make it abundantly clear that the dispute between Luther and the Vatican was not simply a difference of opinion. It was a divorce which we rightfully and without a doubt can call schism and heresy. There was no going back, as became evident again in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, and even more so with Luther's translation of the Bible, published in 1534.

There is an underlying question within these three writings which we have analyzed. Considering the biblical content of these texts, was it necessary for Luther to be so harshly treated by Rome and finally excommunicated? The answer is a resounding *yes*. If the Vatican had not condemned Luther for heresy because of these and his other writings, it would have been for them a recognition that Luther was right. They would have had to renounce their eternal claim to being the source and owner of Christian truth. The Vatican's dilemma was simple. Either accept the Bible and recognize their own error, or stubbornly stand their ground in heresy. We know well that they have chosen the second option to this very day. For the Vatican to recognize their need for a true reformation was contrary to their principles, impractical in its means, and destructive in its possible consequences.

There is another pertinent question to our discussion: Was the Reformation inevitable? For any serious historian or analyst, including Catholic ones, there is no doubt that reformation was necessary. The answer, however, is a resounding *no*. It was not inevitable. The Vatican and its bureaucratic machine refused to admit that retaining Germany as a country loyal to them was as easy as it was necessary. Rather, they confronted Luther and his followers, completely underestimating his abilities, calling him a "simple drunk monk from Saxony."

The now cold and ancient rhetoric of the Vatican, which for a thousand years had perverted and hidden biblical Christianity, was spiritually, literally, and metaphorically bankrupt. Luther belonged to a Catholic Church that had held the same heresies for already a thousand years. The difference, however, was that in Luther's day, every type of greed, corruption, and immorality flowed from the Vatican—and most especially from the papacy—as from an open sewer, just as Luther pointed out in the three texts we have analyze.

After the writing of these texts and Luther's burning of the papal bull, *Exsurge Domini*, on that glorious December 10, 1520, Pope Leo X finally declared Luther's excommunication on January 3, 1521. The Apostolic Nuncio of Worms pronounced the condemnations of the Bull and compared our great reformer to the martyr John Huss.<sup>4</sup> Without a doubt, Luther would have considered that a great honor. The break was now here to stay. Then, the movement initiated by

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<sup>4</sup> Considered a pre-reformer, Huss was burned at the stake for heresy after the Council of Constance in 1415.



our reformer only consolidated and increased, with the spread of the Bible in German, the Confessions, the Catechisms, and other writings. We can add to that the stubbornness of the Vatican to not allow any form of reconciliation, which was made official at the Council of Trent beginning in 1545.<sup>5</sup>

After the publication of these writings and his excommunication, our great reformer lived another twenty-six years. He was called to the Lord's presence on February 18, 1546, in Eisleben, the same town where he was born. He was a German of refined sensibilities who had a strong personality and prideful tenacity. We can affirm with all certainty that the fruit of his ministry surpassed his highest and most positive expectations. The message of Christ's grace—of law and gospel—spread. He translated the Bible into the German language and created the modern German language: *Hochdeutsch*. He began a true cultural revolution without historical precedent. Most importantly, he returned the Bible to Christianity.

To summarize Luther's Christian life, you could say he was a man who loved Christ and despised everything which contradicted Christ as a work of the devil. In that love for Christ, Luther proved himself to be one of the most faithful of God's people. Our great reformer's firm conviction was his worship of Christ and faithfulness to God's Word. He recognized his own weakness, but at the same time trusted fully in God's mercy. It is for that very reason, we, as confessional Lutherans, should condemn the heresy of the past, avoid the heresy of the present, and prevent the heresy of the future.

Until Luther's time, the majority of the great religious and political leaders rose to and maintained power through the use of weapons and oppression. In that context, the works we have analyzed are even more powerful against the Romanist heresy, the heresy supported by the Inquisition and its *auto-da-fé*. Without a doubt, this heresy of the Vatican militarily defeated most of its enemies, but all of those "victories" were darkened by the cloak of oppression and death. That oppression not only was an example of the Vatican's heresy and cruelty, but most especially of its failure. It demonstrated that the only way it could keep its membership faithful was through fire and terror, far away from Christian love, the Bible, and evangelization.

The reformer Martin Luther, however, could on his last day, sit back, look to God with gratitude for his life and work, and remember that he had defeated the Vatican, the greatest empire of the Middle Ages, not with the iron sword, but with the sword of pen and paper, the Holy Scripture. Therefore, may our fervent prayer always be that this same sword guide our beloved church and lives, that with open Bibles—just as Luther—we understand that whatever is achievable with Christ should become reality from Christ's hand. May we say together with the great reformer what he said on April 18, 1521, as he confronted Emperor Charles V at Worms, "Our consciences are held captive by the Word of God!"

To God's glory and the edification of our beloved church.  
In memory of Rev. Manuel Arrizaga.  
Thank you and may God bless you.

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<sup>5</sup> The Council ended in 1563. It was also called the Counter-Reformation.

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