

Was Martin Luther a conservative or revolutionary leader in the 16th century?
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The resounding call of the Protestant Reformation was freedom. Freedom for Christians, freedom for the Church from the tyrannical whims of the pope, freedom of the conscience from canon law, and freedom of Germany from foreign rule. Martin Luther's call for freedom was summarized in his eponymous work, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."¹ This radical notion -- that all Christians, "laymen or priest, prince or bishop," regardless of their "dignity or lack of dignity"² were equal in the eyes of God, began in a document nailed to All Saint's Church in Wittenberg: the 95 Theses.

The 95 Theses are widely regarded as the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation.³ Throughout the Middle Ages, Catholicism had been the sole unifying force to Europe. The Church was both a political organization and a religious organization that superseded the powers of national kings, growing extremely wealthy through relics, corruption, and indulgences.

Prior to the publishing of the Theses, penance for sins had become a mere financial transaction between those who could pay and the clergy. These were known as "indulgences", the sale of salvation. Indulgences were sold by the Roman Catholic Church to enrich the levels of bureaucracy within the Church from priest to pope. Relics were used by corrupt church officials in the same manner: in return for money, people could venerate relics to provide insurance against purgatory.⁴

The Church's size and power had always made it a haven for corruption, drawing calls for reform since the twelfth century Waldensians. Martin Luther seemed to be yet another in a long line of reformers, were it not for Luther's methods. Luther attacked the theological roots of the Church as corrupt. Luther held that the Roman Catholic Church itself, not only certain members of the clergy, had corrupted the Bible's original doctrine of grace and salvation. Luther prescribed a reactionary return to the *Holy Bible's* origins. Although Martin Luther's ideas were fundamentally conservative in respect to doctrine, the Protestant Reformation led to a revolutionary liberalization of sociopolitical institutions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Luther believed that the path to reform was a conservative return to the roots of Christianity. Luther condemned current church corruption through indulgences in the 95 Theses:

"27. They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.

28. It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone."⁵

¹Luther, Martin. *On the Freedom of a Christian*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 9. Print.

²Ibid, 8.

³"Martin Luther: Ninety-Five Theses (1517)." *World History: The Modern Era*. ABC-CLIO, 2013. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

⁴Donegan, Devillier, dir. *Martin Luther: Driven to Defiance*. PBS, 2003. Film.

⁵Luther, Martin. *95 Theses*. Wittenberg, 1517. Print.

In Theses 27 and 28, Luther refutes Johann Tetzel's adage used to sell indulgences: "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther dismisses the sale of indulgences as a contrivance used by the Church to increase their wealth at the expense of the people. Moreover, Luther maintains that salvation is through personal faith in God, rather than empty gestures and earthly matters. In the 95 Theses, Luther restores Christianity to a "priesthood of all believers,"⁶ directly contrasting with strict Catholic hierarchy and ritual.

Luther continued his reforms of the Roman Catholic Church by restoring worship to its traditional roots. In his work *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, Luther creates a framework for the conservative restoration of worship.

"The service now in common use everywhere [Mass] goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching. But as the latter has been perverted by the spiritual tyrants, so the former has been corrupted by the hypocrites. As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but restore it again to its rightful use."⁷

Again, Luther does not seek to create a new order to the Church, but to restore Christianity to its roots of personal faith as outlined in the *Holy Bible* and in Scripture. This central conservatism in Luther's doctrine spread fundamental social conservatism. The German Peasants' War was an uprising of Protestant German peasants against the Catholic aristocracy, who brutally slaughtered 100,000 peasants in retaliation.

It was as much a religious war as a pecuniary brawl. The bulk of taxation from the Roman Catholic Church originated from the peasantry, while simultaneous labor shortages caused the peasants to gain power economically. Both the *Book of One Hundred Chapters* and Luther's idea of universal priesthood seemed to promote religious and economic liberty.⁸ The Protestant peasants continued to radicalize Lutheranism. The "Twelve Articles" became their "95 Theses", and violence became their tool. The peasants called for elected preachers, the right to hunt on private property, the right to fair leases, and overall the right to be equal.⁹

Luther condemned the peasants in his pamphlet, *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, writing:

"The peasants have taken upon themselves the burden of three terrible sins against God and man; by this they have merited death in body and soul. They have sworn to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers, now deliberately and violently breaking this oath. They are starting a rebellion, and are violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs. They cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel, thus they become the worst blasphemers of God and slanderers

⁶Galchutt, Kathryn, Ph.D. Personal interview. 26 Nov. 2013.

⁷Luther, Martin. *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*. 1523. Print.

⁸*Book of One Hundred Chapters*. N.p., 1513. Print.

⁹Gritsch, Eric. *A History of Lutheranism*. New York: Fortress. 2 ed. 2010.

of his holy name.”¹⁰

Luther did not wish to create a change in the social order. Instead, as in his doctrinal beliefs, he wanted a return to the oaths and responsibilities historically held by peasants and rulers. His retreat to the social and political norm during the Peasant’s Revolt was the result of his idealist historical fantasies of mutual respect between peasants and monarchs in times past.

Despite Luther’s fundamental theological and social conservatism, his actions prompted a liberalization of social, political, and religious institutions in Europe and America. Later Protestants saw Luther’s protest against church corruption as a precedent for greater reform of not just religious establishments, but also secular matters.¹¹ They transformed Luther’s ideas of “*simul justus et Peccator*” into a political platform.

These Protestants maintained Luther’s doctrine of universal priesthood and extended it. They believed that “to be righteous is to be human as God envisioned in creation, and again in redemption,”¹² and so all are equal and entitled to natural liberties to serve Him. Conversely, these Protestants also maintained that all people are sinners and required restraints, whether by law or by other believers, to rule him or her. Protestants refined the medieval Catholic practice of intertwining state and church. They reshaped church doctrine into political and social institutions that were necessary to rule the “two kingdoms.”¹³ Moral law became political law.

The Ten Commandments are the ten moral responsibilities one has to God and one has to a peaceful society. All Christians believed that the enforcement of these moral duties was the responsibility of the church, the state, and the family, but Protestants also held that the believer was the priest who was responsible for ensuring that these moral duties were followed throughout the church, state, and family.¹⁴

Later revolutionary Protestants translated these responsibilities into rights. Responsibilities to God became the right to worship freely, the right to be free from false gods, the right to honor God and God’s name. Responsibilities to society became the rights of others: the responsibility to not kill became another person’s right to life, the responsibility to not steal became another’s right to property. The God-given rights of one person became the God-given responsibility of his or her neighbor.

The relationship between God-given rights and God-given responsibilities was crucial in establishing democratic revolutions. Historian John Witte credits Protestant ideology as “the driving force behind the revolts of the French Huguenots, the Dutch pietists, and the Scottish Presbyterians against their monarchical oppressors.”¹⁵

¹⁰Luther, Martin. *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants*. Wittenberg: Martinus Luther, 1525. Print.

¹¹Galchutt, Kathryn, Ph.D. Personal interview. 26 Nov. 2013.

¹²Luther, Martin. *Epitome of the Formula of Concord*. Lutheran Church, 1517. Web. 17 Nov. 2013.

¹³Ibid, 15.

¹⁴Michelbach, Philip A. “Democracy as Vocation: Political Maturity in Luther and Hegel.” *Journal of Democratic Theory* 1.4 (2011): n. pag. *Journal of Democratic Theory*. Web. 12 Nov. 2013.

¹⁵Witte, John. “The Freedom of a Christian.” *Journal of the Historical Society* 2.3 (2001): 109-21. Print.

Protestantism also led to the American Revolution. The First Great Awakening was a period of spiritual revival and reform of the Protestant Church in Europe and America. Evangelical Protestant ministers such as George Whitefield preached that salvation could be found in faith rather than worship. They encouraged emotional involvement in religion. Awakening theology preached that the second coming of Christ would be accomplished by the infusion of Christ's redeeming love in all people. Class distinctions would dissolve, and people would be equal. These ideals were essential to the American Revolution as the development of democratic thought.¹⁶ Joseph Tracy, religious historian and preacher in the mid-1800s, saw the First Great Awakening as a precursor to the American Revolution.

Luther's Protestant Reformation was a clarion call of protest toward the corrupt dealings of Catholic Church officials and a conservative movement to return Christianity to its roots in the Bible. However, reformation expanded beyond Luther to create new eras of democracy in Holland, in Scotland, in France, and in America that Luther would surely be scandalized to behold. Luther's actions in Wittenberg in 1517 were a turning point in the history of the world, transforming the reign of medieval theocracy into the modern era of rights and reform.¹⁷ The Protestant Reformation did not achieve Luther's goals of conservative reform as much as it revolutionized all facets of modern day life. Luther created ripples in religion, in politics, in society, that became a tidal wave of revolution throughout the Western world.

¹⁶Tracy, Joseph. *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield*. New York City: Tappan and Dennet, 1842.

¹⁷ Taylor, Deric. Personal interview. 19 Nov. 2013.

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