

Luther's Place in European Intellectual History
(Revised)

Mariel Dela Cruz
21G.059
Spring 2008
Professor T. Nolden

Without question, Martin Luther's works transformed Christendom. However, the influence of his theology extended beyond the issues that plagued the Catholic Church. Indeed, Luther and his teachings affected the intellectual discourse in European history. The Ninety-Five Theses, which propelled Luther into the frontlines of the Reformation Movement, was not only a scathing critique of the Catholic Church. It was also an introduction of a new way of critical thinking through a different manner of interpretation. He used this new perspective to question the Catholic interpretation of the Bible, the only source of knowledge and thus, placed doubt on the intellectual authority of the Church. In the process of condemning Church control, Luther also elucidated on the vast disparity among the laity and Church officials and called for the need to abolish such a hierarchical system. A new political consciousness emerged from this that inspired revolts and revolutions across Europe. The renewed importance on interpretation and the critique of the Church's intellectual and political authority both created perhaps the most important development – the emphasis on the individual's intellectual capacity. Individualism proved to be a crucial component to the philosophical and political developments that followed. Thus, the effects of Luther and his insurgent theology revolutionize more than just Christian thought; they transformed the progression of European thought.

When Martin Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the cathedral doors at Wittenberg in 1517, his purpose was to draw attention to the apparent transgressions of Church practices. He starts with a statement declaring, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying 'Repent ye' (*poenitentiam agite*), etc., intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence (*poenitentia*)."¹ He quickly follows it with a searing criticism proclaiming, "this word cannot be understood as sacramental penance (*poenitentia*), that is, of the confession and satisfaction which

¹ M. Luther, "The Ninety-Five Theses," ed. E. Weber, *The Western Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present*, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 58.

are performed under the ministry of priests.”² Luther elaborates his argument and directly attacks the validity of the practice of indulgences and of the sacraments. He claims, “the grace conveyed by these pardons has respect only to the penalties of sacramental satisfaction, which are of human appointment. [These indulgences] are in reality most insignificant when compared to the grace of God and the piety of the cross.”³ Evidently, Luther saw a disparity between what he believes the Word of God conveys and how the Church applied it into action. It seemed to him that Church officials misunderstood the Scripture and thus employed impious practices. How then could the gap between faith and practice be reconciled?

Martin Luther suggested that there was only one way to read the Scripture correctly; it must be read and understood in the literal sense. The Church’s reading of the Bible at that time utilized the kind of hermeneutics that focused on the fourth sense – the eschatological meaning.⁴ Popularized by St. Augustine, the fourth sense was believed to contain the metaphysical meaning of the text, something that could only be discovered by a trained scholar. Only the learned clergy could have access to this metaphysical interpretation. But Luther had seen the consequences resulting from this metaphysical understanding. It led Church leaders to implement practices that caused widespread corruption within the Church, avarice and other impieties. Thus, for Luther, the observable evidences determined that this particular way of reading the Bible was wrong. Luther justified his new theory of hermeneutics by saying that men, who are inclined to sin, should not try to understand the Scripture according to what they think its meaning was supposed to be. One must refer back to the fundamental text because whatever the Lord Almighty intended to convey in his Word would be made evident on the

² Ibid.

³ M. Luther, “The Ninety-Five Theses,” 60, 62.

⁴ S. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 98.

surface. Clearly, this development of new hermeneutics was crucial to the progression of European intellectual history as it introduced an entirely different method of understanding the written word.

However, Luther did not only oppose the Church's interpretation of Scripture. He also challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. His "Ninety-Five Theses" exposed the clergy's misinterpretation of the Bible and his enumerated offenses of the Church only corroborated the grave errors that the Catholic clergy made. Luther's critiques delivered a terrific blow to the Church because it created doubt on its authority on theological thinking. If the most educated of all people – the clergy – could not correctly understand the Word of God and could only spread religious falsities, how can the masses ever trust this institution as the one source for knowledge? Thus, Luther not only created a new method of critical thinking; he also destroyed the notion of the Church's monopoly on knowledge.

Furthermore, Luther's theology condemned the hierarchy of power within the Church and gave rise to a new political consciousness. In fact, his writings motivated peasants to revolt, causing chaos across Europe. Although Luther himself denounced these revolts as "godless and criminal,"⁵ there is good reason why so many people took political inspiration from his theology. Indeed, Luther's writings were very sympathetic towards the plight of the poor. For instance, his condemnation of indulgences often highlighted how it disadvantaged the less fortunate. In his "Ninety-Five Theses," Luther sarcastically declares "the treasure of indulgences is deservedly most acceptable, because it makes the last to be first."⁶ He even encouraged the poor to be reasonable when buying indulgences, asserting "that, unless they have superfluous wealth, they are bound to keep what is necessary for the use of their own households, and by no means to

⁵ M. Luther, "The Twelve Articles of the Peasants," ed. E. Weber, *The Western Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present*, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 66.

⁶ M. Luther, "The Ninety-Five Theses," 62.

lavish it on pardons”⁷ and reminded them that they are at the bottom of the Church’s power hierarchy, which rendered them powerless.

How then did Martin Luther inspire a new kind of political thinking among the laity? He gave importance to the role of the laity in reading theology, a crucial part in interpreting Church doctrine. He elaborated on the special role of laymen as ministers of the Word in his essay “On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church.” He began with a sharp criticism of the Sacrament of Orders (the sacrament which ordained priests and nuns). Luther concluded “[the Scripture] not only has no promise of grace, anywhere declared, but not a word is said about it in the whole of the New Testament.”⁸ In addition, he blamed the institution of priesthood as the “admirable engine for the establishment of all those monstrous evils which have hitherto been wrought...in the Church.”⁹ Luther pointed out that fundamentally, those who have been baptized into Christianity were all priests. As priests, laymen would have the same legitimacy in preaching and interpreting the Word of God as and clergy; they no longer needed to serve under the Church officials and suffer unjust abuses. Once again, Luther’s theology became the transformative element that equipped the common man with the political rational and thought needed to justify the opposition against the Church.

This political empowerment, moreover, developed further into arguably the most important consequence of Luther’s theology – the increased emphasis on the significance of the individual. He advocated for the importance of individualism through the notion of *sole fides* and *sole scriptura*. *Sole fides* dictates that a person’s faith alone brings his salvation. Reliance on the Church becomes unnecessary. The diminished role of the clergy and the increased

⁷ M. Luther, “The Ninety-Five Theses,” 61.

⁸ M. Luther, “On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church,” ed. E. Weber, *The Western Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present*, (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 64.

⁹ M. Luther, “On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church,” 65.

authority of the common layman on Christian theology are further reinforced through *sole scriptura*. *Sole scriptura* asserts that the only source of theological knowledge is the Bible; all other interpretations are of equal value and importance. Although this might not mean much on the surface, it essentially equated the teachings and writings of venerated Church writers like St. Augustine were no better and were no more of an authority on Church doctrine than the understanding of the peasant who, guided by his faith, interpreted the Word of God himself. This demonstrated Luther's radical commitment to restructure hierarchy of authority within the Church through his unwavering belief in the capabilities and authority of each person. He further advocated for individualism in his insistence that the Bible must be translated in the vernacular. (Indeed, he successfully translated the Bible into German in 1534). Through this way, each person could access to Scripture and therefore have the opportunity to interpret it, exercising his own intellectual capacities for spiritual enlightenment.

Martin Luther's momentous proclamation of his new theology with the Ninety-Five Theses reverberated across all of Europe. His new way of critical thinking shifted hermeneutics and thus, influenced the works of future Europeans scholars. His opposition against the Church demolished its intellectual monopoly on Scripture interpretation and encouraged laymen to claim their rightful part in shaping Christian theology. It was also because of this challenged that the concept of individualism gain emphasis and importance, an idea that influenced the emergence of capitalism and liberalism, crucial intellectual movements in Europe centuries after Luther's time. Perhaps Luther never intended to cause such progress and change to stem from his grievances. Nonetheless, Martin Luther and his theology revolutionized European intellectual history.

Works Cited

- Luther, Martin. "The Ninety-Five Theses," ed. E. Weber, *The Western Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present*, Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995.
- Luther, Martin. "On the Babylonish Captivity of the Church," ed. E. Weber, *The Western Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present*, Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995.
- Luther, Martin. "The Twelve Articles of the Peasants," ed. E. Weber, *The Western Tradition: From the Renaissance to the Present*, Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995.
- Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21G.059 European Thought and Culture
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.