

To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate

1520

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INTRODUCTION

This treatise is Luther's first appeal to secular authorities for help with the reform of the church. For more than two years, starting with the *95 Theses* in 1517, Luther's appeals for reform had been addressed to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose divinely imposed responsibility for such things he took for granted. By the early months of 1520, however, Luther had come to the conclusion that nothing could be expected from Rome but intransigent opposition to reform of any sort.^a It was only at this point that he began to write of the need for secular rulers to intervene with measures that would clear the way for ecclesiastical reform. In the *Treatise on Good Works* (in print by 8 June 1520), Luther argued that the abuses of "the spiritual authorities" were causing "Christendom to go to ruin," and that, in this emergency, anyone who was able to do so should help in whatever way possible. Specifically, "The best and indeed the only remaining remedy would be for kings, princes, the nobility, cities, and communities

^a See James M. Estes, *Peace, Order, and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon, 1518–1559* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 7–17. See also Brecht 1:369–79.

1. The Dominican, Silvestro Mazzolini, known as Sylvester Prierias (after his birthplace Priero in Piedmont), was “master of the sacred palace” at the Roman Curia, which meant that he was the pope’s theological adviser and censor of books. Given charge of the Luther case in 1518, he became Luther’s first Italian literary opponent, publishing four polemical treatises against him in the years 1518–1520. The third of these, the *Epitome*, was published at Perugia in 1519.

2. See below, p. 376. Offers of support, including armed protection, received in the early months of 1520 from the imperial knights Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523), Franz von Sickingen (1481–1523), and Silvester von Schaumberg (c. 1466–1534) appear to have given Luther a sense of political support outside Saxony that encouraged him to hope that an appeal to the nobility might well produce a positive response; see Brecht 1:369–70.

to take the first step in the matter so that the bishops and clergy, who are now fearful, would have cause to follow.”^b He made the same point in the treatise *On the Papacy in Rome* (in print by 26 June 1520), asserting that “the horrible disgrace of Christendom” has gone so far “that there is no more hope on earth except with secular authority.”^c

Meanwhile, just as the *Treatise on Good Works* was coming off the presses, Luther received a copy of the *Epitome of a Response to Martin Luther* (*Epitoma responsionis ad Martinum Lutherum*) by the papal theologian Silvester Prierias (c. 1426–1523).¹ The *Epitome* was a bold assertion of papal absolutism, insisting that papal authority was superior to that of a council and even to Scripture itself. To Luther, this “hellish book” was conclusive evidence that the Antichrist was reigning in Rome and that there was no possibility of a reform initiated or approved by it. It was therefore necessary to abandon “unhappy, hopeless, blasphemous Rome” and seek reform elsewhere.^d

It was in this frame of mind that on 7 June 1520 Luther announced to Georg Spalatin (1484–1545) his intention “to issue a broadside to [Emperor] Charles and the nobility of Germany against the tyranny and baseness of the Roman Curia.”^e By 23 June, the “broadside” had grown into a major treatise, the manuscript of which Luther sent to his friend Nicholas von Amsdorf (1483–1565), together with the letter that became the preface to the treatise when it was published in mid-August.^f In the letter, Luther describes the treatise as “a few points on the matter of the improvement of the state of Christendom, to be laid before the Christian nobility of the German nation, in the hope that God may help his church through the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite irresponsible.”² What could the laity do to remedy the failure of the clergy?

^b See above, p. 342.

^c LW 39:102–3.

^d WA 6:328–29 (Luther’s preface to the annotated edition of the *Epitome* that he published in mid-June 1520).

^e WA Br 2:120.

^f See below, pp. 376–78.

Luther's answer was that the leaders of the lay community could summon a church council.^g But how could that be done against the will of the pope? Luther's answer to that question was a fundamental contribution to the thought of the Reformation.

The treatise itself is divided into three sections. In the first, Luther attacks the "three walls" behind which the "Romanists" have shielded themselves from reform: (1) the claim that spiritual authority is higher than secular authority and therefore not subject to secular jurisdiction; (2) the claim that the pope alone has the authority to interpret the Scriptures; and (3) the claim that only the pope can summon a council. The second section is a brief discussion of measures to be discussed at councils to curb the "thievery, trickery, and tyranny" of Rome. The third and by far the longest of the three sections, which appears to have been tacked on at the last moment, is a set of twenty-seven proposals for action by either secular authority or a council (as appropriate) for improving "the dreadful state of affairs" in Christendom. In these last two sections, Luther denounces a long list of ecclesiastical abuses, particularly those of the Roman Curia, which would have been familiar to his readers. Many of them are taken directly from the lists of "*Gravamina* [grievances] of the German Nation Against Rome" that had been brought forward at virtually every meeting of the imperial diet since the middle of the fifteenth century, most recently at the Diet of Augsburg in 1518.^h In so doing, Luther identified himself with the conciliarist, patriotically German, anti-Roman sentiment that pervaded German ecclesiastical and political life at the time. This was well calculated to secure widespread popular approval for the treatise, but

^g For Luther's suspicions about church councils, see p. 341 above.

^h See Martin Luther, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Johann Georg Walch et al., 2d ed., vol. 15: *Reformations-Schriften, erste Abtheilung, zur Reformationshistorie gehörige Documente: A. Wider die Papisten aus den Jahren 1517 bis 1524*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1899), 453–71. For the more extensive list presented at the Diet of Worms in 1521, see RTA 2:661–718.

it is Luther's attack on the three walls that accounts for the enduring importance of the treatise. In that attack he redefines the relationship between clergy and laity and elaborates the view of the role of secular government in church reform to which he would adhere virtually without change for the remainder of the 1520s, before adapting it to new circumstances in the 1530s.

To the Christian Nobility has often been described as the work in which Luther called upon the German princes to assume responsibility for the reform of the church.ⁱ In fact, however, the most striking feature of the treatise is Luther's refusal to attribute to secular rulers any authority at all in matters of faith or church governance. Although the classical formulation of what is sometimes labeled the "Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms" was still three years in the future,^j Luther was already clearly committed to the view that secular authority extends only to the secular realm of human affairs and that it has no jurisdiction in the spiritual realm. As he put it in the *Treatise on Good Works*, secular jurisdiction is limited to matters covered by the Second Table of the Decalogue (the commandments regulating the conduct of human beings toward one another), and that it has nothing to do with the First Table (the commandments regulating the duties of human beings toward God).^k How, then, could Luther justify any role at all for secular government in the reform of the church? The answer, already prefigured in the *Treatise on Good Works* and *The Papacy at Rome* and now fully elaborated in *To the Christian Nobility*, was necessarily somewhat complicated.

ⁱ See, e.g., John Dillenberger's introduction to the treatise in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Random House, 1961), 403: "In this work of 1520 . . . Luther calls upon the ruling class to reform the Church, since the Church will not reform itself." See also Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 152: "[B]y what right, the modern reader might well inquire, might Luther call upon [the German nobility] to reform the Church?"

^j In the treatise *On Secular Authority, To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (LW 45:75-129).

^k See above, pp. 342-44.

First of all, many of the most glaring ecclesiastical abuses in need of correction fell into the category of secular crimes (robbery and theft) committed by “spiritual” persons (the clergy and monks). Thus defined, such abuses (e.g., raising money by peddling indulgences) could be viewed as the direct responsibility of secular rulers, to whom God had assigned the duty of protecting the goods and property of their subjects. One had only to dispose of the claimed exemption of “spiritual” persons from secular jurisdiction. “Spiritual” crimes, on the other hand, were a more difficult matter. Given his definition of the limits of secular authority, Luther could not appeal to secular rulers *as such* to deal with such matters. He could, however, argue that, *as baptized Christians*, secular rulers shared in the right and duty of all Christians to interpret Scripture and to adhere to the correct interpretation if the pope errs. This meant that in an emergency with which the pope could not or would not deal, they shared in the right and duty of all baptized Christians to do what they could to restore ecclesiastical authority to its proper function. It meant further that, *because of their commanding position in society*, they had a special obligation to do so. On this basis, Luther could appeal to the emperor and the German princes to serve their fellow Christians in an emergency by summoning a church council, in which “bishops and clergy,” hitherto intimidated and frustrated by papal opposition to reform, would be free to do their duty to provide reform. The aim, in other words, was to restore the proper functioning of established ecclesiastical authority, not to transfer it to secular rulers.¹

The response to Luther’s appeal to “the Christian nobility of the German nation” came at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Instead of summoning a reform council, the assembled princes outlawed Luther and his followers. But the reform movement continued to spread rapidly, particularly in cities and towns, and Luther defended the right of such communities to reform themselves despite the objections of

¹ See Estes, *Peace, Order, and the Glory of God*, 17–30.



Luther is shown as an Augustinian monk debating the pope, a cardinal, a bishop, and another monk.

ecclesiastical authority.^m When, moreover, hostile Catholic governments tried to suppress these reform efforts, Luther angrily denounced them for arrogating to themselves a power in spiritual matters that was not theirs by right.ⁿ By the late 1520s, however, the spontaneous spread of the Reformation in Saxony had reached the point at which church life urgently needed to be regulated in the interest of unity and good order. But Saxony had no bishop to provide the

^m See LW 39:305–14 (*That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture*, 1523).

ⁿ *On Secular Authority* (1523).

necessary leadership. In this emergency, Luther once again appealed to secular authority for help with ecclesiastical reform, using essentially the same arguments that he had advanced in 1520. He called on the elector, in his capacity as Christian brother, to serve his fellow Christians by appointing an ecclesiastical visitation commission that would establish uniformity of doctrine and practice on the churches in his domains.^o Since, however, Luther expected the elector *as prince* to enforce the established uniformity, it was clear that his distinction between the prince *as prince* (secular authority *as such*), without authority in spiritual matters, and the prince as Christian brother, entitled to intervene only in emergencies, no longer fit the situation as well as it had at the beginning of the decade. Luther himself was aware of this and, starting in 1530, he rethought his position in conversation with Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560). By 1534 he and Melanchthon were in agreement that, the necessary distinction between secular and spiritual authority notwithstanding, it was the duty of a Christian prince to establish and maintain true religion among his subjects.^p



^o LW 40:263–320.

^p See Estes, *Peace, Order, and the Glory of God*, ch. 5. In Luther's case, the key texts are his commentaries on Psalms 82 (1530) and 101 (1534–35), particularly the latter; see LW 13:51–60, 166–201.