Here I Stand: Human Conscience and Ecclesiastical Authority

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Introduction

> Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason … I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience … May God help me, Amen.[1]

On April 18, 1521, Martin Luther appeared before Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and protector of the Holy Catholic Church, at the Diet of Worms, and uttered these words of defiance against Rome's charges of heresy. Originally summoned to Rome for trial, Luther's protector, Duke Frederick of Saxony, had prevailed upon the Emperor to intervene and conduct the proceeding in the German city of Worms.[2] But in appearing before Charles V, it was ultimately to the Pope, Leo X, that the Wittenberg monk answered; for the central issue did not concern authority over man, but over man's faith. And by refusing to submit to the church as the ultimate authority, Luther dramatically illustrated the operative principle of the Reformation that a believer's conscience is bound to Scripture alone: a principle that effectively turned the emerging medieval society of the early 16th century upside-down.[3]

Although the reformer's stand at Worms has at times been styled a precursor to modern concepts of religious liberty of conscience and toleration of religion, such views were entirely foreign to Luther. By declaring independence from Rome's spiritual bondage, Luther was not rejecting the Holy Catholic Church's authority to declare – and enforce – what the Scriptures taught. What Luther did seek was a fundamental reconfiguration of the church's hierarchy – where pope, bishop, and priest maintained their offices but answered equally to the rule of

[1] Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer II*, vol. 32 of *Luther's Works*, ed. George W. Forell, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 112. In this volume, the words "Here I stand" do appear in the accounting of the trial. However, these words do not appear in the multiple transcripts from the trial. They do appear, however, in the Wittenberg pamphlet about the proceedings – possibly an editorial flourish to provide a more conclusive ending. The phrase has been popularized for over two generations in Roland Bainton's work, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2016). Bainton suggests that the words overwhelmed those recording the event. Regardless, it was quickly assimilated into the popular understanding as symbolic both of Luther's work and the Reformation's trajectory. For more on this, see James Atkinson, *The Trial of Luther, Historic Trial Series*, ed. J.P. Kenyon, (London: Batsford LTD, 1971).

[2] Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, (Oxford: OUP, 2017), 165-170.

[3] James Atkinson, *The Trial of Luther*, 9-10.

Scripture in exercising spiritual authority and oversight. In this sense, Luther ushered the late medieval Christian into a radically new relationship with church rule, one established not by fiat, but by a liberated conscience that brought a willing obedience to the church through service. Commenting on this new relationship, historian Heiko Oberman remarks that at Worms, "Luther liberated the Christian conscience, liberated it from papal decree and canon law, but he also took it captive by the word of God and imposed on it the responsibility to render service to the world." [4] Luther, with his penchant for paradox, described the mutual obligation of this liberty and service in this way:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.[5]

Such a paradox, however, is readily explained by fallen man's deliverance from sin through faith in Christ. The sinner is liberated from the dominion of Satan and self and bound to Christ. Therefore, the Christian must "empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant … as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him." This service the believer renders freely, out of conscience, "having regard for nothing but divine approval." [6] For Luther, true peace of conscience meant that the believer experienced in his heart the approval of God for true obedience to Christ and his Word.[7]

The Crisis of Conscience: "'peace, peace' but there is no peace."

By the time of Luther's birth near the end of the 15th century, the meaning of conscience had long been altered. The church claimed to be the only interpreter of Scripture, a claim that gave the church final authority over conscience. Further, the very acts by which conscience judged a Christian's obedience to God had been dramatically altered, with works expressing faith being replaced by works demanding righteousness. These changes left the common saint with a conscience which, although unable to speak peace, could clamor loudly of guilt and judgment. Luther himself suffered the terrors of such a conscience, and despite his best efforts to seek reconciliation with God through all the means the church offered, his conscience spoke only

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[4] Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 204.

[5] Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer I,* vol. 31 of *Luther's Works,* eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 344.

[6] Ibid., 366.

[7] While Luther never examined the subject systematically, he wrote frequently about conscience, seeing it as a faculty of the soul, which when bereft of Scripture as the final measure of service and of faith as the true motive to good works was left wholly unable to speak a true and sustaining peace. Luther derived his understanding of conscience from centuries of medieval scholastic thought, notably by Aquinas, then later by Ockham and Gabriel Biel. Even in his declaration at Worms, that "to go against conscience was neither safe nor right," he evidenced standard medieval piety where it was advisable never to go against conscience. For more on this matter, see Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 88 and Michael Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 119-156.

condemnation.[8] Only after experiencing the true meaning of Christ's sufficient work did the troubled monk understand the source of true peace of conscience. This experience, combined with his relentless questioning as a university professor and pastor at Wittenberg, made Luther uniquely qualified to challenge the church, calling on it to make known the grace and peace of Christ to troubled consciences.[9] But what coalesced Luther's theological and pastoral concerns into a moment of action was not a theological thunderbolt. Instead, it came through a relatively mundane church practice: the sale of indulgences.

Indulgences disturbing the peace

Indulgences had become central in early 16th-century piety. Indulgences promised simple Christians access to the overabundant merit left by great saints through the ages, a treasury deposited for the church to dispense. Through indulgences, the common saint hoped to lessen the seemingly insurmountable debt of suffering owed in purgatory for venial sins, a debt which remained even after the sacrament of penance. As an act of devotion, the practice had come to provide the church with a source of revenue which, despite administrative abuses, often supported useful services such as charities. Luther, however, found the promise of forgiveness offered in indulgences as theologically and pastorally bankrupt. Indeed, indulgences represented a church unable to offer the penitent sinner peace of conscience.[10] Thus, Luther saw indulgences as not only theologically flawed but also pastorally misguided since a believer's suffering served to strengthen peace of conscience, for "a Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay penalties for his sin."[11]

Although by 1517 Luther had not yet reached the point of condemning all indulgences, such as those which supported charities, he found the tone of the plenary papal indulgence of 1515 particularly dissonant, especially as it was being touted by John Tetzel with great success to his own Wittenberg parishioners.[12] Issued to help build the church of St. Peter's in Rome, the papal indulgence distilled much of what was wrong with the church theologically, pastorally, and ecclesiastically. For Luther, the practice epitomized the church's control over conscience as it offered assurance of God's forgiveness apart from immediate faith in Christ. For the more

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[8] David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 7-11.

[9] Timothy Wengert, *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology,* ed. Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 1-29.

[10] Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 20.

[11] Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings,* ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 25. This quotation comes from Thesis 40 of the 95 Theses. Similarly, Luther addresses those who seek to avoid suffering as those who prefer, "works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil". See: Gerald O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 82.

[12] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 120.

extreme indulgence sellers, even repentance or confession was not required for forgiveness to be granted to one buying the indulgence.[13]

Central to the "power and efficacy of indulgences"[14] was the church's claim to establish the terms by which punishment was pardoned. The pope, as the direct apostolic successor of Peter, held the apostolic keys of the Kingdom to "bind" and "loose." These keys applied to not only the binding and loosing of men's souls but also to unlocking the articles of faith and declaring what works were worthy of merit.[15] The church had largely come to endorse a theology of works righteousness where good works stood as the means of righteousness rather than the evidence of faith. This school of teaching adopted a style of neo-Pelagianism, in which man's best efforts were graciously accepted by God as meritorious. Man, on his part, was disposed to offer "the best that was within him," having both free will and a nature inclined to good.[16] Yet, although able to do good and receive merit, man still sinned and required some token of God's approval to quiet conscience. This pastoral provision came in the form of the sacrament of penance where the sinner, by offering contrition, confession, and penance, received from the priest forgiveness in the form of absolution. Yet such peace was momentary and soon the cycle of penance with its demand for good works was repeated. Of the futility of these efforts by the church to offer the saint hope or peace, Luther exclaimed, "Oh unhappy Christians, who for their salvation can trust neither in their good works or in their good conscience."[17]

Restoring Conscience within the Church: The Reformation of Grace, Christian Living, and the Church

Living the life of freedom in Christ means becoming one in Christ through the church. Paul, Luther explains, "describes the church as one body, one bread … altogether in Christ, members one of another." [18] Thus, the obedience that comes through freedom in Christ is powerfully expressed through submission to his church and the community of saints it represents. But such submission involves the urging and approval of conscience. It is the approval of God in obedience to Christ alone that compels the believer to serve the body of Christ. But in order for Christians in Luther's day to again sense the direct approval of conscience in serving the church, a redefinition of grace and good works – and how they operate within a different model of church authority – was necessary.

The Reformation of Grace

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[13] E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 306-311.

[14] Luther's 95 Theses were formally titled as the "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences."

[15] Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry II,* vol. 40 of *Luther's Works*, eds. and. trans. Earl Beyer and Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 324.

[16] Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 72-73.

[17] Luther, *Works*, 31:180.

[18] Ibid., 31:190.

In restoring a biblical understanding of conscience, Luther, first of all, sought to promote a biblical doctrine of grace. This effort began in earnest in 1517 when Luther quietly set in motion the work of reform by opposing the practice of indulgences and the theology which supported it. The first volley came in the early fall when the professor of theology offered 97 theses for disputation, targeting the church's popular neo-Pelagian teachings, and stressing "we do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds, but, having become righteous, we do righteous deeds."[19] Over thirty times, Luther affirmed the Augustinian doctrines of grace "in opposition to" a litany of presumed authorities including "common opinion," "Cardinals," "dialecticians" and "scholastics."[20] Luther was quite familiar with this form of scholastic theology. This familiarity undoubtedly contributed to the assured tone with which he focused on the core issue of man's inability to do any good work apart from the grace of God. He declared, "Grace as a mediator is necessary to reconcile the law with the will."[21]

Shortly after the 97 theses, Luther followed with the 95 Theses where he addressed the pastoral implications of the scholastics' erroneous theology. Here Luther sought to protect Christians from the false assurances of the church illustrated by indulgences. Instead, Luther affirmed true repentance and looking to Christ alone. Only in service to Christ can the believer be made "confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace [Acts 14:22]." [22]Such restoration of the doctrine of grace was the first step toward restoring the biblical view of conscience away from the snares of indulgences.

The Reformation of the Christian Life

Luther's doctrine of the Christian life also drew people toward a more biblical view of conscience. In the three years following the 95 Theses, Luther issued a flood of publications that consolidated and advanced the work started in 1517. He focused on basic themes of Christian living, such as good works, confession, penance, prayer, proper obedience, and Christian freedom. His commentaries on the Psalms and Galatians further presented eminently practical expositions of the Christian life.[23] To keep up with the reformer's quill, three printers were needed to feed the eager market, which often required multiple editions of each title.[24] Many of

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[19] Martin Luther, *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. James Atkinson, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 269. This quotation comes from Thesis 40 of the *Disputation against Scholastic Authority*.

[20] Luther, *Works,* 31:266-273.

[21] Ibid., 31:272; Luther was trained in the *via moderna* theology of Ockham and Biel at Erfurt. See William Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 114.

[22] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church,* vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 166.

[23] Examples in 1519 include *Lectures on Galatians, The Sacrament of Penance, A Sermon on Preparing to Die* and *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*. For 1520, examples include *Fourteen Consolations, Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made, Treatise on Good Works, To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, The Babylonian Captivity of the* Church, and The *Freedom of a Christian*.

[24] Martin Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther,* ed. and trans. Margaret Currie (Toronto: MacMillan, 1908), 66.

these works were written in German, rather than the Latin expected of an academic. Luther preferred to address the troubled believer rather than the recalcitrant cleric.

Rome's efforts to silence the writings of the "drunken German" helped advance Luther's teaching on the Christian life while highlighting his opposition to papal authority. The Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 failed to silence Luther, but instead won him supporters, including the future reformer of Strasbourg, Martin Bucer.[25] Further attempts to intimidate and refute Luther in Augsburg (1518) and Leipzig (1519) only pushed Luther to openly deny papal authority and eventually declare the pope as antichrist. Finally, in June 1520, Rome issued a papal bull demanding, upon threat of excommunication, that Luther retract his attack on "the holy pontiff" and on the Holy Catholic Church's "true interpretation of Sacred Scripture." Thirty-four of the forty-one charges of heresy detailed in the papal bull targeted the reformer's views on the authority of the church in the life of the saint. They addressed Luther's teachings against the sacraments, contrition, confession, absolution, indulgences and good works, as well as the doctrine of purgatory and the authority of the pope to pardon. Quite simply, the church saw that Luther's reformation of conscience in the Christian life was indeed a direct affront to papal authority.

The direct confrontation with the papacy drove Luther to press more assertively for a reformation of the view of the Christian life. Writing for simple believers for whom the Christian walk had become something to be inventoried, weighed and measured, Luther recast good works as limitless opportunities for expressing faith through self-denial and true submission to Christ and his church. In 1520, he published *A Treatise on Good Works*, which was an immediate best seller.[26] Essentially a pastoral theology, the treatise unfolded the true nature of service in the Christian life by expositing the Ten Commandments as a means to not only show sin but also to sound out the depths of a life of faith – both to God and neighbor.

To help the faithful in negotiating this change in the Christian life, Luther published a brief pamphlet just before leaving for the 1521 Diet of Worms. In the pamphlet, he offered instruction to believers as they moved from a life rooted in blind obedience to ecclesiastical rule to one rooted in obedience to Christ by faith.[27] This change involved not only an understanding of faith and works but of conscience as well. Luther described this mix of faith and conscience as occurring in three levels, which he compares to the familiar layout of a church building. The first level is the "churchyard" Christian, who beholds the church from the outside and remains tied to the external actions of the church for gaining peace. Such saints Luther described as only five cubits high, for their conscience is weak and guided primarily by their senses. Second, the "nave" Christians are those saints who have entered the church's interior aisle. These saints are near God and possess sufficient faith to perform daily acts of service to please Him, but their consciences remain prone to doubt and fear. Third, Luther spoke of the "sanctuary" Christian,

[25] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 63.

[26] Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Timothy Wengert, *The Annotated Luther Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 261.

[27] The pamphlet was entitled *A sermon on the three kinds of good life for the instruction of consciences*. See Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, vol. 44 of *Luther's Works,* ed. and trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 232-242.

whose strong faith stands wholly outside self and is placed firmly in Christ. These believers appear before God with a conscience that finds peace even in the midst of great suffering.[28]

The Reformation of the Church

Ecclesiastical authority was Luther third focal point for reframing human conscience. In the *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther's exposition of the fourth commandment provided him a valuable opportunity to introduce the boundaries of ecclesiastical authority.[29] The injunction to honor father and mother required that the church, as "spiritual mother," is to be honored and obeyed, and that "we must conform" to what its leaders "command, forbid, appoint, ordain, bind, and loose." In short, "we must honor, fear, and love the spiritual authorities as we do our natural parents, and yield to them in all things that are not contrary to the first three commandments."[30] Thus, obedience to the church assumes the level of moral obligation, except when it conflicts with another commandment of God. In that event, no one, "neither bishop, pope, nor angel – has the right to command or dictate anything that contradicts, hinders, or fails to promote those three commandments with their works … We commit sin if we obey or follow such things or just stand by and allow it."[31]

Fundamental to restoring this proper understanding of authority in the church was denying Rome's claim to the keys of the kingdom as described in Matthew 18. Luther offered an interpretation of the church where the keys of the kingdom no longer resided with the privileged center of spiritual authority. On the contrary, the keys bound the church's rulers, as they did all believers, to a life of obedience. For, as Luther wrote, "The keys or the authority of St. Peter is not an authority at all but a service; and the keys have not been given to St. Peter but to you and me."[32] Thus, it belonged to all believers to understand the Scriptures and admonish their brother when necessary as part of the "priesthood of believers." Since all members of the church were spiritually equal, rulers claimed oversight only by common consent. No longer viewed as the spiritual elite, church leaders served by having an obligation to those under them. Luther asked, "What, then, are the priests and bishops?" To this question, he answered, "Their government is not a matter of authority or power, but a service and an office, for they are neither higher nor better than other Christians." He continued, "Their ruling is rather nothing more than the inculcating of God's word, by which they guide Christians and overcome heresy."[33]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] The 5th commandment of the Protestant Church is the 4th commandment in the medieval Holy Catholic Church.

[30] Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, 337-338.

[31] Ibid., 340.

[32] Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 of *Luther's Works,* ed. and trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 16. Here Luther sees the power of the keys for believers as described in the Matthew 18 call to correct a brother.

[33] Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed, 1523" in *The Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Walther I. Brandt, trans. J. J. Schindel (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 117.

The principal means by which the church inculcated the Word was preaching. Luther more often described the church as a community of believers than as an institution, and what united the saints in the church was the leading of the Holy Spirit "through the preaching of the Gospel."[34] The Holy Spirit builds up the communion of the saints through the church. Luther drew this definition from the Apostle's Creed, writing, "It is this that we confess in the Creed: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy, catholic church.' What else is it to believe in the holy church but to believe in the communion of saints?"[35] By preaching, therefore, the Holy Spirit guided believers, as a community of saints, to see Christ and his perfect example of service and their need to follow that image in selfless service to God and the body. To this call to service, for Luther, is the conscience truly bound.

The True Liberty of Conscience

Although Luther proclaimed freedom of conscience at Worms, his view differed vastly from modern cultural and ecclesiastical conceptions of freedom, liberty, and toleration. Rather than promoting a liberty of conscience that constituted a natural freedom to choose and believe, Luther advocated a bondage of the conscience to willing obedience to Christ. This bondage obliges the believer by faith to follow the Savior's example, seeking only the approval of God in a life of service to God and others. Thus, freedom in Christ is the ability to serve Christ, with good works displaying the fruit of faith in the life of the believer who serves the society of the church and the world at large.

Further, Luther was not displaying any tendency toward toleration of religion. Instead, for Luther, the conscience is bound to accept the Word of God as it unfolds a plan of faith and life meant for all mankind. Christians, as the priesthood of believers, are individually called to examine and understand Scripture as it contains this plan. Nevertheless, it is the church's exposition and application of the Word through preaching that advances this design and unites the church in a single understanding of faith and life. Luther observed, "The church should be united in a single expression of faith. Accordingly, regardless of whether a thousand miles separates them physically, they are still called one assembly in spirit, as long as each one preaches, believes, hopes, loves, and lives like the other."[36]

Thus, from Luther's stand at Worms, the 21st-century believer is reminded that true liberty of conscience is not found individually, but corporately within the church as it proclaims the example of Christ and instructs the body in service and unity. Luther reminds the church that Christ demands that believer's lives must give tangible evidence of love toward neighbor. Luther asserts that it is Christ who says:

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[34] Martin Luther, *Devotional Writings I*, vol. 42 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Martin O. Dietrich, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 162.

[35] Martin Luther, *Sermons I*, vol. 51 of *Luther's Works,* ed. and trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 167.

[36]Martin Luther, "On the Papacy in Rome, Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig, 1520" in *Church and Ministry I,* vol. 39 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 65. Moreover, Luther saw the church as a parent administering spiritual correctives when necessary to protect believers from error and disunity.

> It would please Me, and I would be satisfied, if you, as members of one body under one Head, show one another fidelity and benevolence, friendship, service, and assistance; if you do not stir up factions and schisms among one another and thus destroy love ... And although the works of love do not justify and save, they should follow as fruits and signs of faith.[37]

[37] Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St.* John, vol. 24 of *Luther's Works,* eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 251-252.