

Reformation Reflections

Have you ever tried to explain what it means to be a Christian?

Dr. Martin Luther, in November of 1520, did it with two seemingly contradictory statements:

- ***A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.***
- ***A Christian is a dutiful servant of all, subject to all.***

The year 1520 was a challenging one for Luther. He had kicked over the veritable hornets' nest with the posting of his 95 Theses back in 1517 and opposition had only grown in intensity since.



By June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X had had enough. He issued the papal bull or edict, *Exsurge Domine*, threatening Luther with excommunication unless he backed down.

Luther's response? He wrote three tracts: the first two loudly and strongly challenged various forms of Papal authority and abuse, while the third was a relatively quiet one on Christian faith.

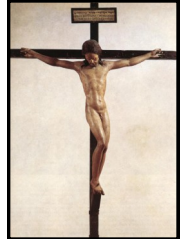
This last one — *On the Freedom of a Christian* — was, in some ways, the most subversive of the three. Intended as a bit of an “olive branch” to Pope Leo, it provided the ultimate reason why Luther would not back down.

Since faith alone suffices for salvation, I need nothing except faith exercising the power and dominion of its own liberty. Lo, this is the inestimable power and liberty of Christians.

The Christian, according to Luther, is perfectly free by faith in Christ. Free to stand before God blameless due, not to one's works, but strictly by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. As Jesus says in John 8:38: “If the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.”

A Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law.

But what of Luther's second statement about being a dutiful servant? The connection of the two is simply this: A Christian while perfectly free by faith in Christ is also bound to his neighbor by love — just as Christ, though Lord of all, made himself nothing and took on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6-7) out of love for us.



Each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.

On December 10th, Luther gathered in Wittenberg with numerous colleagues and students and publicly burned the papal edict. In January, Pope Leo X made good on his threat and excommunicated him. It mattered not to Luther, for in Christ he was already free.

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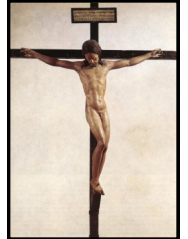
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