

# Martin Luther: on christian liberty



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Martin Luther: On Christian Liberty Born in 1483, and subsequently a German monk and a scholarly theologian, Martin Luther contributed significantly to the meaning of Christianity and to the Reformation. Though his seminal work was addressed to Pope Leo X, Luther's purpose was to harmonize Christian values by making them accessible to people equally and by attacking religious hierarchies that corrupted what he viewed as the essential nature of Christianity. Indeed, as stated by Witte (2005), "Pope and prince, noble and pauper, man and woman, slave and free -- all persons in Christendom, Luther declared, share equally in a doubly paradoxical nature" (p. 2). A Christian, therefore, did not arise from social status or from ceremonial pomp; quite the contrary, Luther advocated a Christian status based on belief and good works. In this way, by removing the Pope as the sole arbiter on matters of faith and salvation, Luther liberalized and made Christianity more accessible to the masses.

### 1. 1 What a Christian Needs to Believe

As an initial matter, Luther began with the premise that all people were equal in God's eyes. Each person, whether Pope or peasant, was at the same time a sinner and a saint. These people were either saved or lost, they were free to choose their fate, and certain beliefs turned a person towards the path of Christianity and salvation. The break that Luther made from established theological doctrine, as noted by Wriedt, was the assertion that beliefs and fates rested exclusively within the province of the individual (2003). Belief, in this way, was severed from physical manifestations of faith such as worship in a church, public proclamations of piety, and ceremonial displays of religious conformity. A Christian, in Luther's view, needed simply to believe himself in the Word of God. More significantly, the individual was

designated the sole arbiter rather than a Pope or other religious figure in the institutionalized hierarchy. The issue of belief being vested in the individual, Luther turned his attention to the issue of salvation.

### 1. 2 Luther's View of Salvation

As mentioned above, Luther's view of salvation was highly decentralized and individualistic. As a result, the issues of forgiveness and salvation were vested ultimately in each person's faith and belief. A Pope could not intervene, institutional conditions such as attending a particular place of worship could not be required, and the issues rested ultimately in each individual mind or heart. In order to attain salvation, however, Luther cautioned that individuals had to control their depraved tendencies, they had to think of themselves as servants of the Lord, and as part of their Christian belief system they had to hope to conform their lives to the moral and spiritual standards espoused by the Word of God. Salvation, in short, was not easy; on the other hand, as Luther explained, salvation was within reach of everyone individually.

### 1. 3 The Role of " Good Works" in a Christian Lifestyle

Finally, Luther was very explicit and particular about the manner in which good Christian deeds attended to a legitimate Christian lifestyle. He termed these Christian deeds " good works", he distinguished between insincere displays and genuine charitable acts, and he again emphasized the point that everyone was capable of performing these " good works." Indeed, as stated by Witte (2005), " every Christian is a priest, who freely performs good works in service of his or her neighbor and in glorification of God" (p. 3). In effect, the act of serving others, rather than acting well in order to be saved from damnation, was the essence of Luther's view of good Christian

deeds or works. The people were to view themselves as servants of God, to pursue good deeds selflessly, and to admire the act rather than a perceived sense of earning merit in God's eyes.

#### 1. 4 Conclusion.

In conclusion, Martin Luther made Christianity more accessible and more humane without sacrificing its most fundamental moral and spiritual tenets. Belief was vested in the individual, salvation was possible through the control of our negative tendencies, and good works were encouraged as a means for living a genuine Christian lifestyle.

#### Works Cited

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