

From f to faith: the threat of lutheranism



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From F to Faith: The Threat of Lutheranism The end of the fifteenth century had left Christendom with a Church in great need of reform. The Church had been greatly weakened by the events of the past few centuries. The fourteenth century's Great Famine and Black Death had battered the public's trust in the Church, as had the Papal Schism spanning from 1378-1417. When the ideas of Martin Luther began to spread in the early 1500s, the Church became afraid for its power, its reputation, and its finances. Luther was promising people that they would be saved through their faith alone—what place did that leave for the Church and its teachings? In any other time in human history, Luther's ideas likely would have been quietly beaten down and buried, but a very unique set of circumstances allowed the ideas of a small-town monk and professor to take on the immense power of the Catholic Church. While others' ideas could be ignored, the Church was intensely threatened by Luther because his ideas questioned the role and necessity of their already-weakened institution, called for an end to indulgences, endangered social stability, and exposed the failings of the Church by returning to the Bible as the only source of God's truth. Two hundred years before Luther came onto the Church's radar, the Catholic Church was enjoying great power and success. The Church leaders wielded considerable influence on all matters in Christendom. Even those who felt discontent with the Church were too afraid to rebel against its order, fearing the loss of their salvation. The despair of the Great Famine and Black Death, however, greatly destabilized the Church's position. The people of Europe had placed so much faith in the Church, yet what could they think when their priests and monks proved susceptible to the plague, dying in higher numbers than the common people? Should not the Pope, with his power bestowed by

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God, be able to stop this famine and disease from ravaging the continent? Should God not save His people? The doubts of the people caused the first real murmurings of religious upheaval, made even worse by the Papal Schism. The schism caused people to not only question the power of the Church, but to wonder who was really in charge and from what source his authority came. The weakness of the Church in the wake of the famine and plague led to the prominence of potential reformers in the late 1300s and early 1400s. John Wycliffe and Jan Hus preached the desire for the Church to return to a humbler form, one bereft of extreme wealth and grandeur. Both men hailed the importance of putting the Vulgate into the vernacular so the common man could understand it. Though they both lived many years before Luther, their teachings caused great anxiety in the Church, and their actions helped to lay the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation. One of the greatest reasons the Church was already feeling so threatened and vulnerable when Luther started preaching was because of the discoveries of Lorenzo Valla. Valla, a student of Petrarch's humanist schools, had spent time studying the Donation of Constantine, the document from the Emperor Constantine giving the Catholic Church authority over the entire Roman Empire. After examining the document, Valla came to the conclusion that it was a forgery and, thus, completely voided. His essay revealing the forgery was circulated for many years and finally officially published in 1517. The Church, having using the Donation of Constantine for centuries to validate its power over Christendom, flatly rejected Valla's logic. After the blows of the last century, the delicate Church could not afford for people to start questioning its authority. The combination of the effects of the Great Famine, the Black Death, the teachings of Wycliffe and Hus, and the discovery of

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Valla left the Church in a very vulnerable position. When Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses up on the door of a Wittenberg Church, the Church leaders were understandably threatened. The last thing they needed were more attacks on their teachings and influence. By challenging the people of Wittenberg to a debate on his theses, Luther made himself even more of a threat because he was forcing the people to think. People who had complacently followed church teachings all their lives were now being told to question the things they had taken for granted. The Church had even more reasons to be threatened by Luther. The availability of the printing press at this time allowed for Luther and his friends to disseminate his teachings throughout all of Germany. Once Luther's ideas had spread, the Church ran into even more problems with Luther. Luther refused to back down from his ideas, even after Pope Leo X sent a cardinal to reason with him. Despite their frustration, the Church was unable to put Luther to death because of protection from Friedrich the Wise, the ruler of Luther's district. Friedrich, quite pleased with the attention that is coming to his district, refuses to hand over Luther to church authorities. The Church leaders were always threatened by voices of dissent against them, but could, under normal circumstances, quickly put the dissenter to death for heresy. Luther proved a great threat because Friedrich's protection allowed him to remain unharmed and able to write and distribute his teachings. While the circumstances leading to Luther's rise to prominence had already put the Church on high alert, it was also the content of Luther's teachings that caused them great panic. The cornerstone of Luther's teachings was that " whoever has faith will have everything" (Luther 13). He preached that faith in God was the only thing required for salvation. Luther's teachings stood in stark contrast to

those of the Church, which emphasized ceremonies, indulgences, and the seven Sacraments. The followers of the Church had been told that money and good works could get them into heaven, only now to be told that " if a man were not first a believer and a Christian, all his works would amount to nothing and would be truly wicked and damnable sins" (Luther 39). If people were to believe that salvation were to only be gained through their own personal faith, then what role would the Church play? According to Luther, they no longer needed the Church to administer the Sacraments, to intercede on their behalf, or to use indulgences to free themselves and loved ones from Purgatory. The Church, for so many centuries in a position of political and religious authority, could not stand for these teachings, teachings that devalued them to nothing. While the Church was greatly threatened by the effect of Luther's ideas on its own power, there was also concern for their effect on social stability. At this time period, politics and religion were intricately linked. Political leaders and church leaders all came from wealthy families. High-ranking parents were able to pay church leaders to secure their sons a role such as bishop or pope. People who were born peasants were peasants for their whole lives. The stability of this system was deeply rooted in religion. Traditional church teachings were needed because they " legitimized social hierarchies and political authority" (Diefendorf 4). To avoid discontent among the peasants and to retain their positions, Church leaders taught that people were born into the roles that God desired for them. Peasants were meant to be peasants, and kings were meant to be kings. People were taught that trying to change their station in life was akin to rebelling against God and would surely warrant eternal damnation. When Luther began teaching the idea of " justification by faith alone, " it called this

system into question. How would social mobility forfeit salvation if faith was all that was required to be saved? The teachings of Luther alarmed all political leaders, not just those affiliated with the Church, because of the fear that these new ideas would disrupt the social order and their place within it. Despite the panic of the religious and political leaders, Luther's ideas continued to spread throughout Christendom, gaining followers and driving people away from the Church. The Church would have had nothing to fear from Luther if they had not strayed so far from the Bible and its teachings. They viewed Luther as the threat, but his ideas were largely based in their own wrongdoing. The Church had become arrogant, greedy, and manipulative. In their desire to build grand basilicas and seize political power, they became consumed by the "completely depraved, hopeless, and notorious godlessness" that Luther detected (Luther 79). They were using fear to motivate their followers and had sunk so low as to sell salvation. I think the biggest reason the Church was so fearful of Luther's teachings was because they sensed how much truth they contained, and they knew that the common people sensed it too. The Church had chosen to ignore its fallibility and had started writing rules in God's place. They were out of line, and Luther drew attention to it. I think the Church knew how much they had strayed, knew they had wandered down a dark and evil path, but felt they were too far-gone. The Church was a powerful entity, and its leaders knew they had to keep being viewed that way. They could not be seen as weak or indecisive, or the common people would seize on that failing. When Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses onto a Wittenberg church door in 1517, no one could have predicted the enormous effect his ideas would have. His ideas were thrown into the world at the exact right time and were heard by the

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exact right ears. His idea of "justification of faith alone" was enough to rouse a whole continent, enough to provoke battles and bloodshed in town after town. Despite being a single man, his ideas were enough to draw the interest, and ire, of the Pope and the Emperor. The Church was so intensely threatened by Luther because of their already-weakened state, his promise of salvation through faith alone, his insistence on the end of indulgences, his danger to social stability, and their own possible realizations that there was truth in his words. The truth of it is, though, that the Church was threatened not by a common monk in a small town, but by the strength of an idea that was strong enough to move millions.