

More Reasonable

With 500 years of hindsight, the Protestant Reformation can be objectively examined with respect to its motives and results. Although it makes little sense to go back in time and place oneself in anyone’s shoes, only to claim the opposite choice would have been made in the moment, it is fair to ask: why was this or that action taken? Who made similar decisions? And why? Two central Reformation-era figures—Saint Thomas More and Martin Luther—obeyed their consciences, stood before authority without compromise, and boldly declared their allegiance to the Lord. However, their stances—although seemingly equal—dramatically differed in practice, due to each man’s understanding of obedience and reform. Concerning reform, I posit that one cannot rebuild the walls of a church one no longer occupies. One either works on the original or attempts to build another—and I would argue the former favors reason and the latter emotion. By way of coercion, More was pressed to help build another church but refused; Luther, some would say, felt forced to build another church and willingly obliged. Therefore, More serves as an archetype for reform *from within* (concluded with his statement from the scaffold: “I die the king's good servant, but God's first”), while Luther serves as an archetype for rebellion, under the guise of reform, *from without* (commenced with his statement at the Diet of Worms: “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen”).

I will spend a large part of this essay framing several of Luther’s core points and highlighting their futility. Alongside this, I will show these points being engaged in various writings, including More’s tract titled *Responsio ad Lutherum*. Beforehand, however, I wish to consider a line found in *The Life of Martin Luther*. In it, authors M. Michelet and G. H. Smith write: “All his words, too, were greedily garnered by his disciples; good, bad, insignificant, nothing escaped them.... A man so

closely watched and followed must have been constantly letting fall words which he would have wished to recall.”¹ In view of this, I seek to avoid polemics and *ad hominem* in my brief comparison of Luther and More. While Luther’s caustic, troubling comments may hold weight in certain discussions, the aim here is to dissect logic, not personal sins. Because human sins were a major—albeit erroneous and emotional—reason to justify the Reformation, it makes little sense to attempt to reverse such a movement by doing the same. From a modern vantage point, it is wiser to critique the consequences of actions, rather than actions alone.

Before considering many of Luther’s positions in response to Church corruption and a “mishandling” of Scripture, I ask myself: apart from the indulgence-abuse fire starter in Saxony and resulting whistleblowers, were other Catholics aware of the times? Were others aware of widespread immorality? The answer is yes. John Colet, in the same humanist circle as Thomas More, said in 1512: “Never was there more necessity of your endeavors for the Church—the Spouse of Christ—which he wished to be without spot or wrinkle is become foul and deformed...nothing has so disfigured the face of the Church as the secular and worldly way of living on the part of clergy.”² Here is just one striking example of exposing such rampant Church corruption before Luther’s fame. Sadly, however, there exists a narrative which paints the 16th century Church as unaware, dismissive, or even flaunting of her mistakes; therefore, the arrival of Luther—who often compared himself to Saint Paul—attains superhero status. A very complicated story is often reduced to abject failure, necessary rebuke, and perpetually justified church splintering.

¹ Jules Michelet and G. H. Smith, *The Life of Luther Gathered from His Own Writings* (London: Whittaker and Co, 1846): x.

² Jerome K. Williams, *True Reformers: Saints of the Catholic Reformation* (Greenwood Village, CO: Augustine Institute, 2017): 48.

When revisiting clerical immorality and the justification of new articles of faith, however, one must consider the motive, personality, and mental state of any whistleblower—not for the sake of dismissing their claims (for they certainly shed light on issues), but to understand if the story has some missing chapters. Although I will not spend much time on this topic, it is worth noting that Luther and many others in his time had trouble with scrupulosity: an incessant, harassing difficulty which manifests in many ways, including mentally escalating venial to mortal sin or idiosyncrasy to venial sin, never feeling absolved, never performing enough good works, etc. However incomplete, the following statements—highlighted by Protestant historian Roland H. Bainton—paint a picture of scrupulosity and related trials:

- “...although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him.”³
- “Luther was too obsessed with the picture of Christ the avenger to be consoled with the thought of Christ the Redeemer.”⁴
- “When, then, his confessor said that he was magnifying his misdemeanors, Luther could only conclude that the consultant did not understand the case and that none of the proffered consolations was of any avail.”⁵
- “Staupitz [Luther’s confessor] tried to bring Luther to see that *he* [emphasis added] was making religion altogether too difficult.”⁶

These statements and many more like them showcase a very real cross for Luther: mental torment, coupled with intense doubt and despair. However, when an abbreviated history highlights

³ Roland Herbert Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950): 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

clerical shortcomings, then conflates Luther’s struggles with Catholicism, the Church—not a man’s psyche—is entirely viewed as the culprit, taking the collective view off the best examples of the same period: the Saints. Instead, this approach to history says, if not shouts, that Luther’s malady was purely religious—purely driven by a “system.” This sentiment undoubtedly stems from statements such as: “Instead of a meeting-place with God, sacred and spiritual occasions, gifts from a loving God, the sacraments are treated pharisaically, as legal obligations, the prescribed rituals of an autocratic pagan god.”⁷ It is crucial to slow down here and reread such a statement. If one so chooses, the word “sacrament” could be replaced with any religious belief and attributed to any religious group. In other words, any element of religion can be lazily or ritually approached with no concern for the Lord. Only God knows whether the person is acting in love. Furthermore, as Luther set new terms on how to interpret Scripture, if the sacraments—which were taken too rigidly in his view—were not explicitly laid out according to his lens, they were to be removed. As a result of his statements, halfhearted Christians were let off the hook and doctrine became the scapegoat. Therefore, Luther is commonly portrayed as both victim and herald.

All this said, if one imagines being Luther in such a time and place in history, he can fathom feeling victimized. He can fathom taking similar steps. He can fathom standing up for apparent freedom, for right theology and the like. Independent of Luther’s shaky vow, tormented conscience, and rampant fear of God’s wrath, one realizes the selling of indulgences and other abuses are gravely immoral and should be exposed. However, for these abuses to pave a road toward new doctrine and a denial of sacred Tradition is gravely immoral as well. Though not taught explicitly by Luther, Johann Tetzel’s actions became a microcosm for the entire Church. For abuses—those not taught dogmatically, but simply the result of corrupt Church members—to mark an entire religious belief

⁷ Ibid, 12.

system is common, but not logical. Even if appealing to personal conscience, throwing out the baby, the bathwater, and the house itself sets an earth-shattering precedent.

When comparing the moral and spiritual approaches of More and Luther, author Jerome K. Williams states, in *True Reformers: Saints of the Catholic Reformation*, “Thomas More died [...] a martyr for the rights of personal conscience. He was ‘true to himself.’ More held [...] that an authentic human personality was not a self-generated concoction, and that conscience did not simply coincide with personal opinion. An adequate understanding of oneself and a rightly formed conscience needed to be founded on truth; they needed to accord with reason and revelation [...] He pointed to the whole of the Christian tradition as his witness, and he took his stand, not on private opinion, but on the universal testimony of the Church. He conformed his conscience to that testimony.”⁸ Unsurprisingly, More knew Luther was operating with a one-legged stool: Scripture alone. And frankly, without the support of Tradition and the Magisterium—both of which represent a collective, historic approach—Scripture cannot form a leg in the proverbial stool. It does not interpret itself.

Luther, however, contrarily declared:

- “...the pope might err and a council might err and that only Scripture is the final authority.”⁹
- “...I teach nothing save what is in Scripture.”¹⁰
- “I am not so audacious that for the sake of a single obscure and ambiguous decretal of a human pope I would recede from so many and such clear testimonies of divine Scripture.”¹¹
- “...but God and God’s word are above all men.”¹²

⁸ Williams and Blum, 55.

⁹ Roland Herbert Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950): 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 85.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 83.

¹² *Ibid*, 58.

In response to these types of comments, German theologian Johann Eck asked the following at the 1519 Leipzig Debate: “Are you the only one that knows anything? Except for you is all the Church in error?” In response, Luther said, “...I want to believe freely and be a slave to the authority of no one, whether council, university, or pope. I will confidently confess *what appears to me to be true* [emphasis added], whether it has been asserted by a Catholic or a heretic, whether it has been approved or reproved by a council.”¹³ In a word, this dilemma did not come down to Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, or the like, but rather *personal interpretation alone*.

More, who had been tasked by King Henry VIII to refute Luther’s tract titled *Against Henry, King of the English*, gladly obliged. In *Responsio ad Lutherum*, More dealt extensively with Luther’s personal exegetical approach—for example, saying, “I marvel, Luther, that you who want to seem the only one who has read the Scriptures, or at least, the New Testament. Don’t you agree that a figurative word may sometimes apply to different things? I ask you: weren’t the giants in holy Scripture pictured as proud and violent to a fault, and yet Christ Himself is called a ‘Giant?’”¹⁴

More was onto something crucial. How does one know if their interpretation, which can be taken in a multitude of ways, is correct? When is something literal or figurative? If apart from apostolic continuity and Magisterial teaching, does such an exercise lead to trusting oneself under the guise of “the Holy Spirit”? Apart from sacred Tradition, is an individual not starting their own tradition—a tradition of chasing the “true” understanding of Scripture? If such leeway is available when members of the Catholic Church err, would not the same be available when members of any subsequent church err? Or—equally pointless and endlessly subjective—when any mishandling of Scripture is declared?

¹³ Ibid, 109.

¹⁴ Thomas More and Gertrude Joseph Donnelly, *A Translation of St. Thomas More's Responsio Ad Lutherum* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1962): 160.

These types of discoveries confounded and worried More. “More was dismayed by the teaching of Martin Luther, not because Luther called for reform, but because he thought Luther to be engaged in something other than reform.”¹⁵ Though few would admit the parallel, Luther communicated as authoritatively as the Pope speaking *ex cathedra*—another major reason why his cause appeared to transition away from historic reform and instead leaned toward uprising. This proved that power did not leave the earth and return to heaven, as the reformers inferred; rather, it simply switched human hands. One authority was the Vicar of Christ—the Bishop of Rome—whose Chair could be traced to the time of Jesus; the other, with the Bible interpreted in isolation, could be viewed as the Bishop of Tome, whose chair could be traced to the early 16th century.

Just like Saint Peter became the point from which all other popes would govern in succession, Luther became the point from which all subsequent church founders would branch. What the Catholic Church’s proximity was to Christ, the Protestant church’s proximity was to Luther. As specified by Bainton: “[Luther’s] movement gave the impetus which sometimes launched and sometimes helped to establish the other varieties of Protestantism. They all stem in some measure from him. And what he did for his own people to a degree, he did also for others.”¹⁶ This is certainly true. For example, if a member of a modern Protestant movement goes upstream, seeking to understand his denomination’s genesis, he will directly or indirectly—with intellectual honesty, that is—find Luther as the foundational source of such theology.

With Luther as a theological arbiter, this marked another stark difference between him and More. More had allegiance to King Henry, but not above the Church; Luther had allegiance to the Church, but not above Scripture. Both understood the need for an ultimate authority. Luther chose

¹⁵ Williams and Blum, 49.

¹⁶ Bainton, 399.

himself under the guise of Scripture; More—citing 1 Timothy 3:15—chose God under the mantle of Christ’s Church.

To be fair, Luther did not foresee many of the points I’ve made thus far. He was simply doing what he felt was right, regardless of the cost. Over time, however, the Reformation that he did much to get underway, and its call toward freedom, right doctrine, and Christian unity, resulted in chaos. And as time progressed, it appears Luther recognized its futility—even if he could not (or would not) express it objectively.

From the onset of the Reformation, it only took Andreas Karlstadt—a former Luther contemporary—four years before he performed an abridged church service and seven years before he called Luther and his followers “new papists,”¹⁷ as if to say, *the pioneers are not reformed enough! They should be aligned with my thoughts! And who are they to carry authority?!*

A year later, in 1525, Huldrych Zwingli replaced the Catholic Mass with his new Communion service in the Swiss city of Zürich. That same year, Anabaptist Konrad Grebel rejected infant baptism and only performed adult baptisms. In 1534, by declaring the Act of Supremacy, King Henry VIII became the head of a new church: the Church of England. In 1541, only twenty-four years removed from Luther’s initial actions in Wittenberg that sparked the Reformation, John Calvin introduced an entirely new church order, included in his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*.

Confessions, creeds, or catechisms were then developed, all professing core tenets of each *true or doctrinally pure* church—each as binding as their founders decreed. The whistleblowers had become lawmakers, summarizing the futility of reform outside the walls of the Catholic Church.

¹⁷ August Lawrence Graebner and Waldemar O. Loescher, *Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546* (Milwaukee, WI: George Brumder Publishing House, 1883): 250.

As Bainton echoed: “And then came the next blow, vastly more stunning than the first. Those who had broken with Rome were not themselves united.”¹⁸ I find it surprising that this was a stunning development, considering the history of mankind and the complexities of Scripture. Of course those who broke with Rome were not united! And of course those who broke from Lutheranism or Anabaptism or Calvinism were not united. Man—left with a Bible and an opinion—has innumerable theological permutations at his disposal. He can justify, refute, or affirm anything he wants.

Luther himself became frustrated with those who departed from his interpretations, saying, for example: “I believe Zwingli to be worthy of a holy hate for his rash and criminal handling of God’s word.” And later he said: “I reject, and condemn mere error, all doctrine which assumes the will to be free.”¹⁹ As the pioneer, Luther *had* to rebuke others and make definitive claims. Yet, by doing so, he became what he despised. This, in part, summarizes the Reformation.

But nothing captures the Reformation’s crux better than the following quote from Luther in his letter to the Christians of Antwerp. Even though the devil, not *sola Scriptura*, is portrayed as the problem, this letter exemplifies the dangers of autonomy without God-ordained authority.

He said:

The devil...has devised a new [disturbance]; and begins to rage in his members, I mean in the ungodly, through whom he makes his way in all sorts of chimerical follies and extravagant doctrines. This won’t have baptism, that denies the efficacy of the Lord’s supper; a third, puts a world between this and the last judgment; others teach

¹⁸ Bainton, 259.

¹⁹ Michelet and Smith, 124.

that Jesus Christ is not God; some say this, others that; and there are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads.

I must cite one instance, by way of exemplification, for I have plenty to do with these sorts of spirits. There is not one of them that does think himself more learned than Luther; they all try to win their spurs against me; and would to heaven that they were all such as they think themselves, and that I were nothing!²⁰

At such a point, it was irrelevant if Luther blamed demons, fellow reformers, or the Catholic Church for such a spontaneous combustion. The pressure had been released—with extreme consequences. With Scripture viewed in isolation, any conscience could see what it wanted (or needed) to see in the Holy Word. Any doctrine could be affirmed; likewise, any doctrine could be disputed. It all depended on men’s convictions, their claims of being inspired by the Holy Spirit, and their motives—which, by the way, could change at a moment’s notice. In the process of trying to stifle the Papacy, dozens of mini papacies were erected in its place.

Interestingly, at another time, Luther was quite optimistic about such a possibility. He stated that by denying the Papacy, he was not advocating a “withdrawal of obedience” when he said: “Even if there were ten popes or a thousand popes there would be no schism. The unity of Christendom could be preserved under numerous heads just as the separated nations under different sovereigns dwell in concord.”²¹ I would argue, however, that concord is great, but where would one find objective teachings? Concord does not necessitate one truth. What if two popes disagree about the most fundamental component of humanity: soteriology? Concord would lead to what? Men, of vastly differing viewpoints, stating what they believe the “truth” to be? And furthermore, I would

²⁰ Michelet and Smith, 268.

²¹ Bainton, 104.

ask Luther: at what point does a group of believers become a sect? Who determines what a sect is or is not? Certainly, if Luther could declare where there was “no schism,” he could also declare the opposite, again making him a facsimile of the type of authority he abhorred.

Despite some good intentions at the onset, Luther’s blind spots led him to make some rather bold, emotionally-charged comments about “holy Fathers,” “ancient interpreters,” and “learned Doctors.” As More pointed out, Luther claimed “...they have all erred as men do.”²² But this begs several questions: as a man himself, why did Luther believe he had the answer? Was he not a fallible conduit like everyone else in history, according to his statements? And if this is so, why should anyone believe Christianity? Who can declare “the plain Gospel” or “such clear testimonies” of Scripture if the person next to them reads the same Scripture and comes to a different understanding?

As More pointed out, another key question would necessarily follow: “If you contend that God is now making known to you so many, such useful, and necessary truths, why do you think He hid them for so long from such holy men, to the great detriment of His entire Church?”²³ If in fact such truths were hidden—and if all men err—to whom shall we go? Over time, as the thought of Petrine primacy gets disregarded or mocked, and private interpretation explodes, Christianity perpetually fractures—and heresy is left to cytokinesis. With a singular Chair, it is hard enough to maintain unity, but when chairs of Luther and Calvin and Knox and Wesley and Williams and Joe and Jane are conjured, it is increasingly impossible.

This reality, although not as blatantly clear as seen today, led More to address Luther with the following: “For, whatever the true Church has been for so many centuries: whether she was the

²² More and Donnelly, 153.

²³ Ibid, 184.

Church of the mixed multitude of good or bad, or the number only of the good; whether she was in those countries which obey the Roman Pope; or anywhere else on earth, she always held opinions contrary to your insane teachings.”²⁴ This statement can be appended to that of Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman—made 300 years later—in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*: “[W]hatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this.”²⁵ As Catholics, both More and Newman affirmed a foundation which Protestantism could not usurp. The Reformation, regardless of its enormity, could not rewrite 1,500 years of history. To be sure, it has tried and will continue to try.

One of the strongest attempts at rewriting history relates to personal sin. As Luther said: “For as soon as you do not show us a holy Pope, you have not shown us the Rock, nor the Church, but the dregs of sin and the synagogue of Satan.”²⁶ To this, More replied: “What especially moves me is this: that if according to Luther’s idea the vices of men are to be imputed to the offices they hold, not only will the Papacy fall, but royalty, and dictatorship, and consulate, and every other kind of magistracy, and the people will be rulers, without law, and without order.”²⁷ Even though the reformers endeavored to maintain order and adherence to certain tenets of the Christian faith, the Reformation removed boundaries, which set a dramatic, unmistakable pattern: if authority sins, or someone “incorrectly” interprets Scripture, throw out the whole system and start a new one. And if subsequent authority does the same, rinse and repeat. After a short while, to repeat what Luther said,

²⁴ Ibid, 189.

²⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007): 12.

²⁶ More and Donnelly, 164.

²⁷ Ibid, 162.

“there are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads.” Fast forward several centuries and man simply says: “just me and Jesus” or, much worse, “just me.”

Despite the insane splintering already occurring for many years, Luther wrote this: “Should the papists by their devouring, biting, tearing help me to put off this sinful carcass and should the Lord not wish this time to deliver me as he has so often done before, then may he be praised and thanked. I have lived long enough. Not until I am gone will they feel Luther’s full weight.” Bainton concludes on this point: “He was right; his ideas were matured; his church was established; his associates could carry on...”²⁸ Yes, Luther’s church was established, his associates could carry on, but so could everyone who followed other reformers—or resulting offshoots. It is seen to this day: Lutherans, Anabaptists, Calvinists, and thousands of other groups and subgroups—most of which contradict each other. Though the intent was the pursuit of freedom, right doctrine, and Christian unity, the results showcase overcorrection, futility, and pride.

To be sure, five centuries removed from the Protestant Reformation, it does little to argue about who started or exacerbated it. What matters is reason—not reason alone, but that which is inseparable from revelation. Such truth attests to 1,500 years of Tradition before the notion of *sola Scriptura* and other solas; a continuous succession of popes from Saint Peter onward; a series of conciliar pillars whereby the canon of Scripture was declared, the Trinity was articulated and dogmatized, and numerous heresies were condemned; and a litany of Saints who, through obedience, surrendered to Christ’s love, regardless of what other members of the Body were doing. In the end, Saint Thomas More stayed home, obeying his conscience; Martin Luther left home, also obeying his conscience. However, one was led by reason and one by emotion.

²⁸ Bainton, 387.

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