

Excerpts from
Martin Luther's
Open Letter to the German Nobility

Although his 95 Theses are more heard of, Luther's Open Letter to the German Nobility is actually more systematic as a manifesto of what Luther was so strongly protesting, and what should be done about it. I have ignored much of the material dealing with theology and the Bible, focusing instead on the more "worldly" problems that Luther had with Rome. One caveat: brace yourself—Luther is a very abrasive writer. He didn't mind chewing you up one side and down the other if he disagreed with you.

What is the use in Christendom of those people who are called the cardinals? I shall tell you. Italy and Germany have many rich monasteries, foundations, benefices, and livings. No better way has been discovered to bring all these to Rome than by creating cardinals and giving them the bishoprics, monasteries and prelacies, and so overthrowing the worship of God. For this reason we now see Italy a very wilderness -- monasteries in ruins, bishoprics devoured, the prelacies and the revenues of all the churches drawn to Rome, cities decayed, land and people laid waste, because there is no more worship or preaching. Why? The cardinals must have the income. No Turk could have so devastated Italy and suppressed the worship of God.

I believe that Germany now gives much more to the pope at Rome than it gave in former times to the emperors. Indeed, some estimate that every year more than three hundred thousand silver coins¹ find their way from Germany to Rome, quite uselessly and fruitlessly; we get nothing for it but scorn and contempt. And yet we wonder that princes, nobles, cities, endowments, land and people are impoverished! We should rather wonder that we still have anything to eat!

Above all, we should drive out of German lands the papal legates with their special powers, which they sell us for large sums of money, though that is sheer knavery. For example, in return for money they legalize unjust gains, dissolve oaths, vows and agreements, break and teach men to break the faith and fealty which they have pledged to one another; and they say the pope has the authority to do this. It is the evil Spirit who bids them say this. Thus they sell us a doctrine of devils, and take money for teaching us sin and leading us to hell...²

An imperial law should be issued, that no bishop's cloak and no confirmation of any high office whatsoever shall henceforth be secured from Rome, but that the ordinance of the most holy and most famous Council of Nicaea shall be restored, in

¹ Literally, the guilder, a common German silver coin that weighed about an ounce.

² Elsewhere in this treatise, Luther cites the examples of Wladislav, whom the Pope had given permission to void a treaty that he (Wladislav) had signed with the Turks, in 1444; of John Hus, who had criticized many Roman Catholic abuses, and was promised safe passage when meeting church officials, but was killed on his way home; and of the treaty between HRE Maximilian and Louis of France, which was nullified by Pope Julius.

which it is decreed that a bishop shall be confirmed by the two nearest bishops or by the archbishop [i.e., a new bishop should be appointed by bishops of nearby areas, and not by the Pope]. If the pope will break the statutes of this and of all other councils, what is the use of hiding councils; or who has given him the authority thus to despise and break the rules of councils? ³

The pope should restrain himself, take his fingers out of the pie, and claim no title to the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily. He has exactly as much right to that kingdom as I have, and yet he wishes to be its overlord.

The kissing of the pope's feet should take place no more. It is an unchristian, nay, an anti-Christian thing for a poor sinful man to let his feet be kissed by one who is a hundred times better than himself. If it is done in honor of his authority, why does not the pope do the same to others in honor of their holiness? Compare the two -- Christ and the pope! John 13:1 ff., Christ washed His disciples' feet and dried them, and the disciples never washed His feet; the pope, as though he were higher than Christ, turns things around and, as a great favor, allows people to kiss his feet, though he ought properly to use all his power to prevent it, if anyone wished to do it; like Paul and Barnabas, who would not let the people of Lystra pay them divine honor, but said, Acts 14:11-16, "We are men like you."

The ban⁴ is to be used in no case except where the Scriptures prescribe its use, i.e., against those who do not hold the true faith, or who live in open sin; it is not to be used for the sake of temporal possessions. But now it is the other way around. Everyone believes and lives as he pleases, most of all those who use the ban to plunder and defame other people, and all the bans are now laid only on account of temporal possessions, for which we have no one to thank but the holy "spiritual lawlessness."

My advice is this: If such fool's-work cannot be abolished, then every pious Christian man should open his eyes, and not be misled by the hypocritical Roman bulls and seals, stay at home in his own church and be content with his baptism, his Gospel, his faith, his Christ and with God, Who is everywhere the same; and let the pope remain a blind leader of the blind. (Matt. 15:4) Neither angel nor pope can give you as much as God gives you in your parish-church.

³ The Council of Nicea was a historic council convened in 325 AD, the first in which bishops from every part of Christendom attended, which has been adhered to by Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox alike.

⁴ People under the ban lost all legal rights and possessions. Anyone could seize any of their property with impunity