

Lesson Plan: Martin Luther's *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520)



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Duration

One or two class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Teacher's commentary



2. Discussion questions



3. Student handout



4. Short-answer homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To identify some of Martin Luther's specific criticisms of the Catholic Church as well as his new Protestant doctrines
- To read a historical source with speaker, audience, and context in mind
- To practice the short-answer free-response question format

College Board Objectives from the 2019-20 CED

- **Topic 2.2:** Luther and the Protestant Reformation (p. 64)
- **Learning Objective 2.B:** "Explain how and why religious belief and practices changed from 1450 to 1648."
- **Key Concept 1.2.I.B:** "Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin criticized Catholic abuses and established new interpretations of Christian doctrine and practice..."

Relevant Course Theme

Theme 3—Cultural and Intellectual Developments (CID): "The creation and transmission of knowledge, including the relationship between traditional sources of authority and the development of differing world views, had significant political, intellectual, economic, cultural, and social effects on European and world societies."

Student Activities

- Close reading of a historical source (either in class or for homework)
- Class discussion of Luther's argument and rhetorical techniques
- Writing practice for short-answer essays

How to Use This Lesson

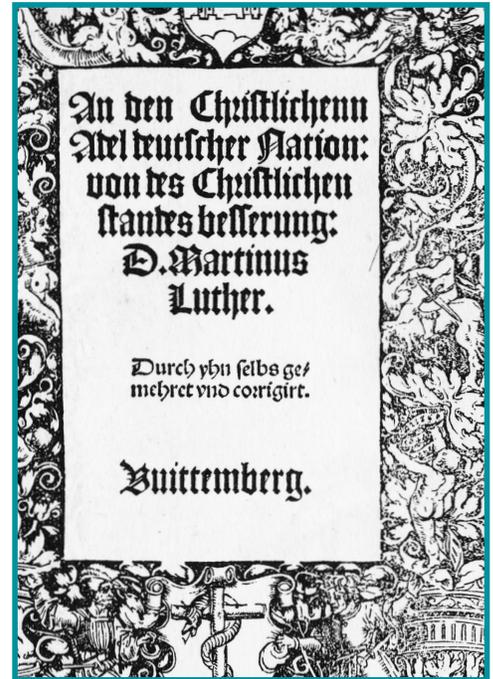
This lesson is organized around a close reading of a historical source. This excerpt of Luther's 1520 letter to the German princes is an excellent way of getting students to understand both Luther's criticisms of the Catholic Church and his "new interpretations of Christian doctrine and practice." While some of the ecclesiastical vocabulary is challenging, the source is relatively easy to understand for many students. The excerpt provided here is brief enough to read in class together if you do not assign it for homework before class.

We have provided a teacher commentary with questions designed to get the discussion going and some suggestions for board work to structure the conversation. There is also a separate list of questions you can use to lead discussion. The fact that Luther divides his argument into three clear sections (i.e., the "three walls" the Catholic Church had built around itself) allows for a natural flow and structure to your class discussion.

You can conclude with a short writing assignment to help students practice short-answer questions. The sample short-answer questions provided are not meant to perfectly align with the exam but are offered instead as an exercise in which students can practice writing precise, concise answers to specific questions.

Historical Context

Martin Luther published his famous *95 Theses* in 1517 in an effort to change the Catholic Church from within. By the time of this tract, though, Pope Leo X had threatened Luther with excommunication if he did not renounce his views. Luther became convinced that a serious break with the Catholic Church was both necessary and inevitable. At the heart of Luther's discussion in this source is the topic of authority in every sense of the word. What is the difference between spiritual and temporal authority? What should leadership (i.e., human authority) look like inside Christian churches? What is the ultimate authority for Christian truth? It is in this tract—the first of three that published in 1520—that Luther first explained his doctrines of the “priesthood of all believers” and the “two kingdoms.”



*This is the title page of the original printing of the tract, which appears on the student handout. It is worth reminding students that this tract was printed on a printing press in the city of Wittenberg. They should also note that the title and language of the tract was in the vernacular German rather than the Greek and Latin used by Erasmus in his *The Praise of Folly* (1511).*

Passage

Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, 1520

Dr. Martin Luther, to his Most Serene and Mighty Imperial Majesty, and to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: ①

The grace and strength of God be with you, Most Serene Majesty! And you, most gracious and well-beloved lords!

Line

5 It is not out of mere arrogance and perversity that I, an individual, poor and insignificant, have taken it upon me to address your lordships. The distress and misery which oppress all ranks of Christendom, especially in Germany, have moved not me alone, but everybody, to cry aloud for help; this it is that now compels me to cry out and call upon God to send down his Spirit upon 10 someone who will reach out a hand to this wretched people. Councils have often put about some remedy, which has always been promptly frustrated by the cunning of certain men, so that the evils have only grown worse; which malice and wickedness I now intend, God helping me, to expose, so that, being known, they may cease to effect such scandal and injury. God has given 15 us a young and noble sovereign for our leader, thereby stirring up fresh hope in our hearts; our duty is to do our best to help him and to avail ourselves to the full of this opportunity and his gracious favor.

The Romanists have, with great adroitness, drawn three walls round themselves, with which they have hitherto protected themselves, so that no 20 one could reform them, whereby all Christendom has suffered terribly.

First, if pressed by the temporal power, they have affirmed and maintained that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the contrary, that the spiritual power is above the temporal. ②

Secondly, if it were proposed to admonish them with the Scriptures, they 25 objected that no one may interpret the Scriptures but the Pope. ③

Thirdly, if they are threatened with a council, they invented the notion that no one may call a council but the Pope. ④

Thus they have privily stolen from us our three sticks, so that they may not be beaten. And they have dug themselves in securely behind their three walls, so 30 that they can carry on all the knavish tricks which we now observe. . . ⑤

Now may God help us, and give us one of those trumpets that overthrew the walls of Jericho, so that we may blow down these walls of straw and paper, and that we may have a chance to use Christian rods for the chastisement of sin, and expose the craft and deceit of the devil; thus we may amend ourselves 35 by punishment and again obtain God's favor. ⑥

Let us, in the first place, attack the first wall.

There has been a fiction by which the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the "spiritual estate"; princes, lords, artisans, and peasants are the "temporal estate." This is an artful lie and hypocritical invention, but let no 40 one be made afraid by it, and that for this reason: that all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office. As St Paul says (1 Cor. 12), we are all one body, though each member does its own work so as to serve the others. This is because we have one baptism, one ⑦

Commentary

1 Questions for Discussion

The letter is first addressed to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and then to the German princes. Right in these first few lines, you could ask students:

1. Who is Luther's audience?
2. Does this audience change the way Luther makes his argument?
3. If so, how?

① The year before Luther published this tract, Charles V was declared Holy Roman Emperor at the young age of 19.

② "Romanist" does not refer to all Catholics, but specifically to all those who have argued for the supreme power of the pope in Rome.

③ Christendom is an important word in medieval and early modern thinking. It refers to all the Christians in the world—the "body of Christ."

2 Question for Discussion

For the purposes of structuring in-class discussion, it could be useful to put these three points on the board at the beginning:

1. First Wall: Spiritual Power over Temporal Power
2. Second Wall: Power to Interpret Scripture
3. Third Wall: Power to Call a Council

3 Question for Discussion

How does Luther argue against each of these "three walls"?

④ This is a biblical allusion to the story of the Israelites blowing down the walls of Jericho with trumpets (from Joshua 6:1-27). Luther compares the walls around the Canaanite city of Jericho to the "walls" around the Catholic Church and compares himself and his followers to the Israelites.

⑤ This notion of dividing the world into a "spiritual estate" and a "temporal estate" had deep roots in medieval Catholic thought.

Passage

Gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, Gospel, and faith,
45 these alone make spiritual and Christian people.

As for the unction by a pope or a bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration,
and clothes differing from those of laymen—all this may make a hypocrite or
an anointed puppet, but never a Christian or a spiritual man. Thus we are all
consecrated as priests by baptism, as St Peter says: “Ye are a royal priesthood,
50 a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2.9); and in the Book of Revelation: “and hast made us
unto our God (by Thy blood) kings and priests” (Rev. 5.10). For, if we had not
a higher consecration in us than pope or bishop can give, no priest could ever
be made by the consecration of pope or bishop, nor could he say the mass or
preach or absolve...

55 For whatever has undergone baptism may boast that it has been consecrated
priest, bishop, and pope, although it does not beseem everyone to exercise
these offices. For, since we are all priests alike, no man may put himself
forward, or take upon himself without our consent and election, to do that
which we have all alike power to do. For if a thing is common to all, no man
60 may take it to himself without the wish and command of the community.
And if it should happen that a man were appointed to one of these offices and
deposed for abuses, he would be just what he was before. Therefore, a priest
should be nothing in Christendom but a functionary; as long as he holds his
office, he has precedence; if he is deprived of it, he is a peasant or a citizen
65 like the rest. Therefore, a priest is verily no longer a priest after deposition.
But now they have invented *characteres indelibiles*, and pretend that a priest
after deprivation still differs from a mere layman. They even imagine that
a priest can never be anything but a priest—that is, he can never become a
layman. All this is nothing but mere talk and a figment of human invention.

70 It follows, then, that between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, or,
as they call it, between “spiritual” and “temporal” persons, the only real
difference is one of office and function, and not of estate...

But what kind of Christian doctrine is this, that the “temporal power” is not
above the “spiritual,” and therefore cannot punish it! As if the hand should
75 not help the eye, however much the eye be suffering... Nay, the nobler the
member the more bound the others are to help it... Therefore I say, forasmuch
as the temporal power has been ordained by God for the punishment of the
bad and the protection of the good, we must let it do its duty throughout the
whole Christian body, without respect of persons, whether it strike popes,
80 bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or whoever it may be...

Whatever the ecclesiastical law has said in opposition to this is merely the
invention of Romanist arrogance...

The second wall is even more tottering and weak: namely their claim to be
considered masters of the Scriptures... If the article of our faith is right, “I
85 believe in the holy Christian Church,” the Pope cannot alone be right; else we
must say, “I believe in the Pope of Rome,” and reduce the Christian Church
to one man, which is a devilish and damnable heresy. Besides that, we are all
priests, as I have said, and have all one faith, one Gospel, one Sacrament; how
then should we not have the power of discerning and judging what is right or
90 wrong in matters of faith?...

The third wall falls of itself, as soon as the first two have fallen; for if the
Pope acts contrary to the Scriptures, we are bound to stand by the Scriptures

Commentary

4 Question for Discussion

Explain the doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers.”

Luther’s doctrine of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ appears in the CED on page 64 as an illustrative example of “new Protestant interpretations of Christian doctrine and practice.”

5 Question for Discussion

According to Luther, what is the role of a leader in a Christian church?

6 A Latin expression literally meaning “indelible mark.”

In a papal bull from 1439, three of the seven Catholic sacraments (baptism, confirmation, and holy orders) were identified as leaving a permanent spiritual mark on the recipient.

6 Questions for Discussion

According to Luther, where does truth come from?

How is his answer different from that of the Catholic Church?

The ultimate authority of Christian truth is found in the Bible, not in “human invention” or Catholic law or tradition.

You could remind students that “sola scriptura” was an important Lutheran doctrine. “Only by Scripture” can Christians know the truth. Note that “primacy of Scripture” appears in the CED on page 64 as an illustrative example of “new Protestant interpretations of Christian doctrine and practice.”

7 This is another central feature of Lutheran thought: the Christian Church cannot be reduced to one man (i.e., the pope).

Passage

to punish and to constrain him, according to Christ's commandment . . . "tell it unto the Church" (Matt. 28.15-17) . . . Therefore, when need requires, and
95 the Pope is a cause of offense to Christendom, in these cases whoever can best do so, as a faithful member of the whole body, must do what he can to procure a true free council. This no one can do so well as the temporal authorities, especially since they are fellow-Christians, fellow-priests...

[Luther proceeds to treat of matters to be discussed at the Council.]

100 What is the use in Christendom of those who are called "cardinals"? I will tell you. In Italy and Germany there are many rich convents, endowments, holdings, and benefices; and as the best way of getting these into the hands of Rome they created cardinals, and gave to them the bishoprics, convents, and prelacies, and thus destroyed the service of God. That is why Italy is almost
105 a desert now: the convents are destroyed, the sees consumed, the revenues of the prelacies and of all the churches drawn to Rome; towns are decayed, and the country and the people ruined because there is no more any worship of God or preaching. Why? Because the cardinals must have all the wealth. The Turk himself could not have so desolated Italy and so overthrown the worship
110 of God.

Now that Italy is sucked dry, they come to Germany. They begin in a quiet way, but we shall soon see Germany brought into the same state as Italy. We have a few cardinals already. What the Romanists really mean to do, the "drunken" Germans are not to see until they have lost everything...

115 Now this devilish state of things is not only open robbery and deceit and the prevailing of the gates of hell, but it is destroying the very life and soul of Christianity; therefore we are bound to use all our diligence to ward off this misery and destruction. If we want to fight Turks, let us begin here--we cannot find worse ones. If we rightly hang thieves and behead robbers, why do
120 we leave the greed of Rome unpunished? For Rome is the greatest thief and robber that has ever appeared on earth, or ever will; and all in the holy names of Church and St. Peter . . .

[Luther proceeds to outline "57 Articles for the Reformation of Christendom," including restrictions on the sending of contributions to Rome, reduction of
125 the number of monks and mendicants, and the reformation of schools and universities.]

. . . Poor Germans that we are—we have been deceived! We were born to be masters, and we have been compelled to bow the head beneath the yoke of our tyrants, and to become slaves. Name, title, outward signs of royalty, we
130 possess all these; force, power, right, liberty, all these have gone over to the popes, who have robbed us of them. They get the kernel, we get the husk...

It is time the glorious Teutonic people should cease to be the puppet of the Roman pontiff. Because the pope crowns the emperor, it does not follow that the pope is superior to the emperor. Samuel, who crowned Saul and David,
135 was not above these kings, nor Nathan above Solomon, whom he consecrated . . . Let the emperor then be a veritable emperor and no longer allow himself to be stripped of his sword or of his scepter! . . .

Source: Adapted from *Luther's Primary Works*, Wace and Buchheim, trans. (London, 1896) in: B.J. Kidd, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the Continental Reformation* (Oxford, 1911).

Commentary

- 8 You could mention to students that Erasmus of Rotterdam had criticized the wealth of the bishops in *The Praise of Folly* in 1511. His critique was from fully within the Catholic Church and was not part of an effort to challenge the fundamental doctrines of the Church.
- 9 The word "see" means "a seat of a bishop's office, power, or authority."

7 Question for Discussion

Why does Luther shift his critique from doctrinal problems with Catholic teachings to an appeal to German national pride?

- 10 This is a strong appeal directly to Charles V not to be "stripped" of his power by the Church.

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1. Who is Luther's audience? Does this audience change the way Luther makes his argument? If so, how?
2. According to Luther, what are the "three walls" the Catholic Church has built around itself?
3. How does Luther argue against each of these "three walls"?
4. Explain the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers."
5. According to Luther, what is the role of a leader in a Christian church?
6. According to Luther, where does truth come from? How is his answer different from that of the Catholic Church?
7. Why does Luther shift his critique from doctrinal problems with Catholic teachings to an appeal to German national pride?

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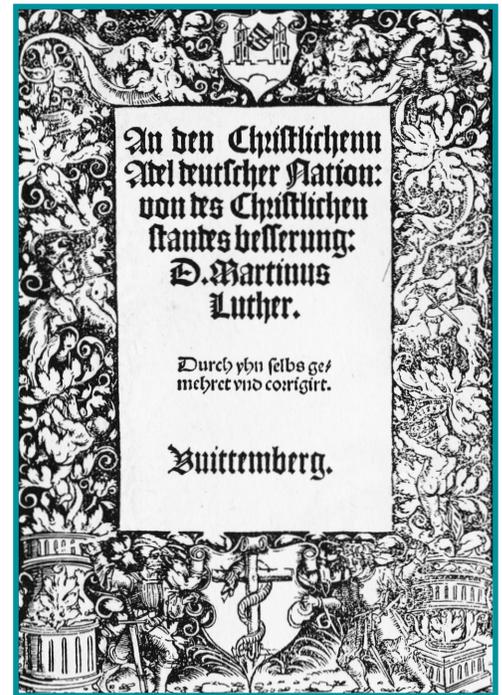
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The title page of the original tract, published in Wittenberg in 1520 as *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Standes Besserung*.

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Question 3

3. (a) Describe one criticism of the Catholic Church made by Martin Luther in the period from 1517–1530.
- (b) Describe one new interpretation of Christian doctrine and practice that emerged in the period from 1517–1530.
- (c) Explain one difference between the teachings of Martin Luther and those of another critic of the Catholic Church in the period from 1500–1550.