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CLASSICS

*The Freedom  
of a Christian:  
A New Translation*

MARTIN LUTHER

*Foreword by  
Carl R. Trueman*

## *The Freedom of a Christian*

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THE FREEDOM OF  
A CHRISTIAN

*A New Translation*

MARTIN LUTHER

*Translated by Robert Kolb*

 **CROSSWAY®**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*The Freedom of a Christian: A New Translation*

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jordan Singer

Cover image: Bridgeman Images

First printing 2023

Printed in China

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-8226-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-8229-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-8227-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-8228-8

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Luther, Martin, 1483-1546, author. | Kolb, Robert, 1941- translator.

Title: The freedom of a Christian : a new translation / Martin Luther ; translated by Robert Kolb. Other titles: Tractatus de libertate Christiana. English

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2023. | Series: Crossway short classics series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022012723 (print) | LCCN 2022012724 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433582264 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433582271 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433582288 (mobipocket) | ISBN 9781433582295 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Liberty—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BR332.S6 L88 2023 (print) | LCC BR332.S6 (ebook) | DDC 233/.7—dc23/eng/20220714

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022012723>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022012724>

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRDS 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23  
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Foreword

THE YEAR 1520 WAS REMARKABLE for Martin Luther. With the issuing of the papal bull against him, it was becoming clear that there would be no easy and peaceful end to the crisis in Electoral Saxony. And in this context, Luther began to look in two directions. He still hoped against hope that some understanding with Pope Leo X might be possible; and he began to prepare the intellectual framework for a new type of theology. With regard to the latter, he produced three great treatises: *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *An Address to the German Nobility*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*. Taken together, they offer a thoroughgoing manifesto of reform.

## Foreword

*The Babylonian Captivity* critiqued the medieval sacramental system and proposed an approach that reconfigured baptism and the Mass in clear relation to the prior preached word. The word of God and the believer's grasping of it by faith were the decisive factors in sacramental efficacy. *The Appeal to the German Nobility* offered an ambitious revision of the relationship between church and state, and laid the groundwork for understanding the social and cultural outworking of Luther's approach to salvation. And *The Freedom of a Christian* presented a revised form of Christian ethics—revised, that is, in light of Luther's emerging concept of justification, church, sacraments, culture, politics, and ethics. Luther presented a thoroughgoing example of what reformation in the Saxon key might sound like.

It is the *Freedom* that you have before you. It is a vital text in the Luther canon because it makes clear

both how practically different good works are in a Lutheran context—the fruit of forgiveness, not a basis for forgiveness—and the fact that works are still necessary for the believer, a point on which Catholics then and now challenge Protestants. To be forgiven, Luther argues, is to be freed from the law; and the response to freedom from the law is to do good works for one's neighbor as a matter of spontaneous, grateful response. As Christ worked for us, not for his benefit but for ours, so we are called to be “little Christs” to our neighbors—not in the unique, salvific sense that applies only and exclusively to Jesus, but in the sense that our grace toward our neighbors is analogous to his grace toward us. Like Jesus, we do works for our neighbors motivated by love, not by law.

This is something the church must never forget. The Christian life is motivated by the gospel, not by the law. It is the promises of God, and love

for God and neighbor, that provide the dynamic for good works. As soon as Christians start to rely on their good works for their standing before God, as soon as they start to do them in order to be right with God, then the character of the Christian life starts to degenerate from that of sons and daughters pleasing their Father to that of servants or employees earning a wage from their boss. And on this, Luther's little essay is excellent, as it is on the importance of the word preached. As Luther makes clear, the conscience is free for good works when the word of promise comes from outside, in its declaration by the preacher. Christians need to be reminded of the promise continually, and that is why we need to be in church and hearing that promise proclaimed.

Readers should remember, of course, that this is an early text from the Reformation Luther. He himself was to discover that a simple focus on

the unconditional promise of God could lead to professing Christians, remaining sinful as they do, twisting the very gospel itself into an excuse for evil and then acting in any way they pleased. And to be motivated by love does not necessarily make the content of an action godly or good. That is even truer today, when the concept of love has become little more than a sentiment with little or no moral shape at all. And thus in the late 1520s, Luther wrote his Small Catechism that fleshed out in more detail what works of love might actually look like. But the basic dynamic of Lutheran ethics is here in the 1520 treatise: good works flow from a life justified by faith in the promises of God. And that remains a solid rock on which to build today.

And a final postscript: Let me add that this is not simply a work by my favorite Lutheran theologian of the past. It here appears in an edition produced by my favorite Lutheran theologian and

## Foreword

historian of the present, my friend and erstwhile coauthor, Robert Kolb. Bob has trained generations of Lutheran pastors and written books and articles that represent major contributions to our understanding of Luther and his successors. He combines both a profound scholarly knowledge of Lutheran theology and a deep pastoral sensitivity to the needs of Christians today. The reader is in good hands here—that of the dream team of Drs. Luther and Kolb, separated by centuries but united in their common faith. It is a pleasure to commend this edition of a classic to a new generation of Christian readers.

Carl R. Trueman  
Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies  
Grove City College

## Series Preface

JOHN PIPER ONCE WROTE that books do not change people, but paragraphs do. This pithy statement gets close to the idea at the heart of the Crossway Short Classics series: some of the greatest and most powerful Christian messages are also some of the shortest and most accessible. The broad stream of confessional Christianity contains an astonishing wealth of timeless sermons, essays, lectures, and other short pieces of writing. These pieces have challenged, inspired, and borne fruit in the lives of millions of believers across church history and around the globe.



## Series Preface

The Crossway Short Classics series seeks to serve two purposes. First, it aims to beautifully preserve these short historic pieces of writing through new high-quality physical editions. Second, it aims to transmit them to a new generation of readers, especially readers who may not be inclined or able to access a larger volume. Short-form content is especially valuable today, as the challenge of focusing in a distracting, constantly moving world becomes more intense. The volumes in the Short Classics series present incisive, gospel-centered grace and truth through a concise, memorable medium. By connecting readers with these accessible works, the Short Classics series hopes to introduce Christians to those great heroes of the faith who wrote them, providing readers with representative works that both nourish the soul and inspire further study.

## *Series Preface*

Readers should note that the spelling and punctuation of these works have been lightly updated where applicable. Scripture references and other citations have also been added where appropriate. Language that reflects a work's origin as a sermon or public address has been retained. Our goal is to preserve as much as possible the authentic text of these classic works. Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use these short works to arrest your attention, preach the gospel to your soul, and motivate you to continue exploring the treasure chest of church history, to the praise and glory of God in Christ.



# Biography of Martin Luther

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546) was born in Germany. As a young adult, he was trained for a theological career within the Roman Catholic Church. After being caught in a terrifying thunderstorm, Luther vowed to God to become a monk. During his study of the Bible, he plunged into a period of depression and despair over his sins. However, everything changed for Luther when he saw in the Scriptures the doctrine of justification by faith. Reading “the righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17), Luther was freed from his paralyzing

guilt and fear of judgment. “Here I felt that I was altogether born again,” he later wrote, “and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”<sup>1</sup>

The brilliant Luther committed himself to purifying the medieval church. On October 31, 1517, Luther wrote a letter containing ninety-five theses, or arguments, against various beliefs and practices of the Roman church. Luther insisted that church officials must recover the gospel of grace against ritualistic requirements. The publication of this letter led to the start of the Protestant Reformation, one of the most significant religious movements in world history. Luther’s stand for the biblical gospel became a crucial turning point in the story of Western Christianity.

1 Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings in Career of the Reformer IV*, vol. 34 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 337.

As the elements of the core of his evangelical theology were coming together, Luther issued a number of treatises in the years 1519 and 1520. Although Luther did not state this, it is likely that he planned to complete the series of treatises calling for reform that he was publishing in those years with a treatise such as *The Freedom of a Christian*. In June 1520, his *On Good Works* set about the reconstruction of the pious life with a treatment of the Ten Commandments that anchored the Christian life in the trust in Christ. That life, he believed, grows out of the first commandment, as he would later paraphrase it in his *Small Catechism*: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”<sup>2</sup> *On Good Works* was

2 Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 351.

followed by two works. In the first of these, his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* (August 1520), he deconstructed many ritual practices of medieval piety. Then he critiqued the theological system of dependence on ritual and hierarchy in his *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (October 1520). That *Prelude* probably pointed to a constructive proposal for Christian life, and that is what he formulated in his *The Freedom of a Christian*, which appeared the next month. He used its Latin version as a plea for understanding to Pope Leo X in the midst of the papal court's preparation of his excommunication. The German is cast in a homiletical form; the Latin takes a formal academic form.

Luther was a prolific writer, authoring hundreds of books, treatises, biblical commentaries, sermons, hymns, and other material. His works have endured for over five hundred years, and

many of them are still read widely throughout the Christian world. Throughout his life, Luther emphasized the priesthood of every believer and the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death on the cross to forgive sin and make a person righteous before God. Luther's legacy exists today not only through his timeless writings but also through the hundreds of thousands of Protestant churches throughout the last five centuries.

The text before you is a new translation of the German included and edited in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 7:20–38. All content in brackets and footnotes are supplied by the translator. For further comment on the Latin text of the treatise that Luther developed at the same time to his formulating the German text, see Robert Kolb, *Luther's Treatise On Christian Freedom and Its Legacy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press/Fortress Academic, 2019).





THE FREEDOM OF  
A CHRISTIAN

Martin Luther



## I

TO THE PERCEPTIVE, wise Hieronymus Mühlphort, electoral administrator of Zwickau,<sup>1</sup> I, Martin Luther, an Augustinian, freely place myself at your service, sir, and wish you all blessings, my special dear friend and patron.<sup>2</sup>

Honorable, wise sir and dear friend:

The worthy Magister Johann Egran, your so praiseworthy municipal preacher,<sup>3</sup> has praised your love and enthusiasm for the Holy Scripture,

- 1 Zwickau was a prominent mining town and commercial center in which the Reformation took hold in the 1520s.
- 2 This greeting follows the typical form of greeting used by those involved in the educational reform movement labeled “biblical humanism.”
- 3 As was the case with many late medieval towns, the town council paid a municipal preacher since many parish priests were not able to compose sermons.

which you vigorously confess and continually are commending to the people. Therefore, he wanted me to make your acquaintance, and he was able to talk me into doing that; I am most willingly and gladly prepared to do so. For it is a special joy for me to hear that someone loves divine truth since regrettably there are so many, even the majority, who boast about the official title they hold, but who resist the truth with deception and force. As it just is inevitable that many will take offense at Christ, who has been set as a stumbling block and sign for the fall and rising of many [Luke 2:34, Rom. 9:33, 1 Pet. 2:8]. Therefore, in order to launch our relationship and friendship, I have decided to dedicate this little tract and treatise in German to you, which I have written for the pope in Latin, so that for everyone my teaching and writing on the papacy will appear based on something for which

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I could not be reproached. I commend myself to you and wish you every kind of divine grace.

Wittenberg, 1520

J E S U S

Point 1. I want to set forth two theses so that we may have a fundamental understanding of what a Christian is and what was done [to attain] this freedom that Christ has won for him and given to him, about which Saint Paul has written a good deal:

A Christian is a free lord of everything and subject to no one.

A Christian is a willing servant of everything and subject to everyone.

These two theses are clearly in Saint Paul, 1 Corinthians 9[:19], “I am free in all things and have made myself a servant of everyone,” and

Romans 13[:8], “You are to be obligated to no one apart from that you love each other.” Love serves and subjects itself to that which it loves. Thus, Paul said also of Christ, Galatians 4[:4], “God sent his Son, born of a woman and made him subject to the law.”

Point 2. To take these two contradictory aphorisms regarding freedom and servitude in hand, we should remember that every Christian has two natures, a spiritual nature and a bodily nature. In regard to the soul, a person is called a spiritual, new, inner person, and in regard to flesh and blood is he<sup>4</sup> called a bodily, old, and outward person. And because of the differences between the two, it is said of the Christian in Scripture that

4 This translation follows Luther’s German literally and refers to all Christians with the singular pronoun in the masculine gender. Luther regarded all Christians, male and female, as equal in God’s sight as recipients of his grace and called to the same life of worship and witness.

there are these two opposites, as I said, freedom and servitude.

Point 3. Let us then consider the inner spiritual human being, what his characteristics are, that he is and is called upright, free, a Christian. Thus, it is clear that no outward thing makes him free, or upright, or however it be described, for his uprightness and freedom, likewise his wickedness and bondage, are not external, a matter of the body. What good does it do the soul if the body is not bound, is vigorous and healthy, eats, drinks, lives as it wants to. On the other hand, what does it harm the soul if the body is bound, sick, and exhausted, or is hungry or thirsty or suffering—what no one wants under any conditions. These things do not touch the soul in any way, either to make it free or to make it captive, either to make it upright or to make it wicked.



Point 4. Therefore, it does not help the soul at all if the body wears holy garments, as priests and others in holy orders do, nor does it help if the body is inside the church or in some holy places. Going about its tasks with holy objects provides no special benefit. It makes no difference, either, if a person devotes his body to praying, fasting, a pilgrimage, and all kinds of good works, which may happen through and in the body till the end of time. It must be something completely different that delivers and bestows uprightness and freedom on the soul. For all these things just named, these works and ways, may be performed by a wicked person, a hypocrite and dissembler. Again, it does the soul no harm at all if the body wears clothing that is not holy; is in places that are not holy; eats, drinks, goes on a pilgrimage, or prays, or refrains from all the works that the hypocrite just mentioned performs.

Point 5. The soul has nothing else, neither in heaven nor on earth, in which it lives and is upright, free, and Christian, other than the holy gospel, the word of God proclaimed by Christ. As he himself said in John 11[:25], “I am the life and the resurrection; whoever believes in me lives eternally.” So also in John 14[:6], “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Also in Matthew 4[:4], “A person does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.” Therefore, we must be assured that the soul can get along without everything except God’s Word, and it finds no help in anything apart from God’s word. But when it has the word, it needs nothing else. It has in the word all that it needs: nourishment, joy, peace, light, understanding, righteousness, truth, wisdom, freedom, and everything good in great abundance. Thus, we read in the Psalter, especially

in Psalm 119, that the prophet<sup>5</sup> does nothing else than cry out for the word of God. Furthermore, in Scripture the greatest plague and exhibition of God's wrath is considered to be when he withholds his word from human beings [Amos 8:11–12]. On the other hand, there is no greater grace than when he sends his word, as Psalm 107[:20] states, "He sent forth his word in order to provide help." And Christ has come to fulfill no other task than to proclaim the word of God. Also all apostles, bishops, priests, and the entire clerical walk of life are called and placed in office only because of the word, although things are moving rapidly in the opposite direction [in our time].

Point 6. You ask, "Which is this word that bestows such great grace, and how shall I use it?"

5 Luther regarded David not only as a king and a psalmist but also as a prophet, who with his psalms had proclaimed God's word to Israel.

Answer: It is nothing other than the proclamation that Christ delivered [sinners], as contained in the gospel, in which you are to hear your God speaking to you, what has to be and what has been done. [It tells you] that your entire life and all you do is nothing in God's sight but you on your own way to eternal ruin with everything in you. If you really believe that, that you are guilty, you must despair of yourself and confess that what Hosea said is true: "O Israel, in you is nothing other than ruin. Only in me is there any help for you" [Hos. 13:9]. In order for you to get away from yourself, that is, from your ruin, he places before you his dear Son Jesus Christ and has him say to you through his living word of comfort that you are to give yourself to him in firm faith and brashly trust in him. In this way, for the sake of this very faith, your sins are forgiven, your entire ruin is overcome, and you

are righteous, faithful, set at peace, upright, and have fulfilled all the commandments. You are free from all things. As Saint Paul says in Romans 1[:17], “A justified Christian lives only by faith,” and Romans 10[:4], “Christ is the end and the fulfillment of all the commandments for all who believe in him.”

Point 7. Therefore, it is proper that the only activity and effort of every Christian is to mold the image of the word and Christ into his heart, and continually practice and strengthen this faith. For no other activity produces a Christian. It is as Christ said to the Jews in John 6[:28–29], when they asked what kind of activity they should perform to be doing something godly and Christian. He said, “This is the only godly activity, that you believe in him whom God has sent,” the only one whom the Father has appointed. Therefore, it is indeed a treasure overflowing to have true

faith in Christ, for faith brings with it all blessing and takes away all misfortune. As it states in the last chapter of Mark [16:16], “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Whoever does not believe will be damned.” Therefore, the prophet in Isaiah 10[:22] saw what a treasure this faith is and said, “God will make a speedy reckoning on earth, and this reckoning will, like a deluge, gush out righteousness”—that is, faith, for therein all the commandments are simply fulfilled. It will bestow righteousness in abundance on all who have this faith so that they need nothing more to be righteous and upright. Thus Saint Paul says in Romans 10[:10] that the fact that “a person believes from the heart makes him righteous and upright.”

Point 8. How does it happen that faith alone makes a person upright and lavishly bestows riches when in Scripture there is so much prescribed by