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Three Walls

Writing Process

This essay is in response to Martin Luther's Three Walls and his argument as to why Catholicism is flawed. This essay includes a summary of the three walls as well as the reasons as to why I think his logic is erred.

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Three Walls

In *The Three Walls of the Romanists*, Martin Luther presents three walls, or undisputed beliefs, of Christianity at the time. He points out the flaws in all three points and presents arguments as to why these beliefs need serious reform. He thinks that the way Christianity believes that spiritual power is always above temporal power, how the pope is the only one who can interpret scripture, and how the pope is the only one who can call a council, are all major weaknesses within the church. Luther's argument is flawed not only in his logic, but also because he undermines the value of an over-arching figure in the Church and discredits the value of members of religious life.

Luther begins this letter by addressing that the Romanists have defended these walls so well that no one has been able to reform them, causing corruption. Luther wishes to change this and begins his attacks. His first attack challenges the concept that temporal power has no jurisdiction over the spiritual estate. Luther claims that the entire concept itself of the spiritual estate and the temporal state is a pure invention of the pope, bishops, priests and monks that make up the spiritual estate. Luther says that in reality, the only difference between princes, lords, artisans, farmers and popes, bishops, priests and monks is the office in which people in these categories holds. In other words, there is no difference between the baptism of a lay person and the baptism of a layman. In Christ, each Christian holds the same status. As evidence for this, Luther describes a hypothetical situation in which pious laymen stranded in a forest would

be able to celebrate mass, baptize, and forgive sins in this emergency situation, but somehow cannot in non-emergency situations. Luther also gives evidence from scripture to support this claim. Everyone is of the same spiritual estate (9-10).

At this point in the argument, Luther clarifies that he recognizes that the office of members of the spiritual estate have a proper and useful place within Christianity. This claim is important because Luther does not think that every baptized person should claim a priestly office, for there should be the consent of the whole community for a person to exercise the power that is in all of us. Luther says that this does not mean that the pope, bishops, and priests are superior to anyone else. Rather, Luther describes the priesthood as a job similar to how being a cobbler or a smith is a job. Both types of occupations better the community by benefiting from each other's skills, but no job is above another because all members of the body of Christ serve one another. Just as Christ does not have two governing bodies, one temporal and one spiritual, neither should the Christian community (10-11).

Luther goes on to say that the concept that temporal power cannot punish the spiritual estate is unchristian. He says that God gave the temporal power the authority to punish evildoers and no priest is above the law. Luther presents scriptural evidence that God did not intend for any pope, bishop or priest to be above the law. His reasoning stems from the fact that anyone with temporal power who is a member of Christendom is also a part of the spiritual estate, and therefore the power to seek justice should extend to anyone without hindrance (11-12).

Luther also expresses frustration in that Christians are all alike in baptism and faith, yet when a priest dies it is more honorable than when a peasant dies. He stresses that no person is more Christian than the other, and therefore each person should be treated equally. No one in the

Christian faith should follow papal authority blindly because that suggests that priests, bishops, and the pope are not human and above other laymen (12).

Luther then presents his next attack against the concept that the only person who can interpret scripture is the pope. According to Luther, the flaw in this trust in the pope is that the pope is also human, and the Church is expected to follow his interpretation blindly regardless of whether he is a good or bad man. Also, Luther says that if the pope were infallible because he allegedly possesses the Holy Spirit, then there would be no need for scripture at all, and Christians would just cling to the words of the pope. He also asks the reader to recall a time when the pope has erred as supplement evidence to the pope's fallibility (13-14).

Luther thinks that the infallibility of the pope in interpreting scripture is a fable, but he recognizes that popes think that God gave the keys of the kingdom to Peter and therefore all of his successors. Using scriptural evidence, Luther counters this by saying that the keys were given to the entire Christian community. Luther also challenges opposition, saying that Christians of today cannot produce any evidence at all of the pope having sole interpretation of scripture. He also quotes The Creed, which says that Christians believe in one holy Christian Church, but if individuals place so much power in the pope, it should say that Christians believe solely in the pope. Because Luther thinks that all Christians have the power of priests, and the pope is a priest, everyone should have the power to judge correct and incorrect interpretations. He relates to his audience, saying that there are plenty of pious Christians who possess true faith and are perfectly capable of interpreting scripture, yet Christians still defer this power to the pope. Luther ends this attack saying every Christian should take it upon himself to understand and defend scripture but also rebuke errors. This must be done according to each individual's interpretation of scripture

and to not blindly follow one's own interpretation, but compare to other Christians and decide which is better (14-15).

Luther's last attack is against the notion that only the pope can call a council. He says not only is there is no basis for this claim anywhere in Scripture, but there is evidence in Scripture that if there is an issue within the Church, the person who recognizes the issue can bring it before the entire Church to be heard. In fact, Luther brings up the times in history in which the pope did not even summon a council himself, and Luther thinks these councils are the most important in all of history (15-16).

Luther then makes an analogy. He says that if a fire were to break out, would everyone just sit around and burn because only the mayor of their city has the highest authority? In the same way, according to Luther, if a fire-like dispute breaks out within the Church, it is the responsibility of any Christian to recognize the problem and gather those within the Church to discuss the problem and ultimately find a solution. Luther also says that no one in the Church has the power to hurt another person, and if the pope refuses to call a council when others might deem it necessary, then he is becoming a hindrance to potentially improving the Church. Luther states simply that there is no authority within Christianity that can do anything against Christ, and ignoring major problems within the Church is not what Christ wants. To act against Christ is to directly sin against him. Luther urges the reader to follow the words of God in Scripture rather than cling to the words and opinions of a fallible human being. Luther ends his attacks by saying that if the Pope continues to think he is above temporal authority, if he continues to be the sole interpreter of Scripture, and if he continues to be the only one to raise problems within the Church, then the only similarity between him and Christ is the name of his title (16-17).

I strongly disagree with Luther's arguments against the three walls of the Roman Catholic Church. When looking at the first wall, there are many questionable parts of Luther's logic. He claims that "the temporal authorities are baptized with the same baptism and have the same faith and Gospel as we," and although this is correct, the difference between the two lies in the definitive decision all those entering the priesthood make to devote their lives to Christ (10). Although a layman can do this in a similar manner, he or she has his or her own jobs to attend to, and cannot devote their time to Christ like priests can. Luther claims that every baptized Christian holds the power to become a priest, and if Luther truly held this thought to be true, that would include women. Luther rejects that women can be priests, and therefore the inconsistency of his reasoning is incredibly frustrating. Luther also compares a priest's occupation to that of a cobbler, which is an impossible comparison to make considering that the priest's employer is God himself. Every waking moment of a priest's life is dedicated to knowing Christ more and more, and Luther is minimizing the importance of priests in the Christian community.

There are also many flaws in logic in the second attack. Luther says that everyone should be able to interpret scripture and not simply the pope. However, Luther fails to recognize the grave danger in this suggestion. He does not address the fact that every person could interpret scripture a different way, and this would cause nothing but discord in the Christian community. This is like telling every citizen that they can interpret the laws whichever way they think is best. Crime would erupt and trials in court would be almost impossible. Luther does not recognize that there must be some overhead in deciphering what is the right and wrong interpretation of the word of God. The only person this job would make sense for would be a person who oversees the Church to begin with, hence Christianity defers this authority to the pope. Also, Luther says that the root of the authority of the Pope beginning with the passing of the keys to the kingdom

from Christ to Peter is a fable, because Christ gave the keys to the Christian community. The complete irony in this argument is that Luther is upset that someone interpreted that part of scripture wrong when his interpretation could also be incorrect. It almost seems like Luther sees his own interpretation as infallible, which is what he had just criticized about the Pope.

In the third attack, Luther criticizes that only a pope can call a council. Luther says that Scripture suggests that anyone in the Church with a concern can have their voice heard in front of the entire Church. The problem with this logic is that any small, petty, or insignificant problem could be heard in front of the entire Church. If councils were called very frequently, it would diminish the effectiveness of them. Also, if a pope decides to call a council it is because many people have called a problem or many problems to his attention. He enforces action, but the community decides what problem is worth having a council. The stress of the authority of the pope is incredibly necessary in order for decisions to get made efficiently and effectively in the Church.

I disagree with many of Luther's claims throughout the entirety of the argument. Although in the time of Luther there was much corruption within the Church, not all of Luther's claims are feasible or even logical. His claims all criticize the authority and fallibility of priests, bishops, and the pope, but he does not take into consideration that Luther himself is also fallible. There are many holes in his claims and his inconsistency in logic weakens his argument. Luther's reform ultimately dissipates into many churches for the simple reason that his refusal to recognize the importance of unity in understanding scripture under a type of authoritative figure results in chaos. Without an over-arching figure to lead and guide the Church, as Luther eludes to wanting in his reformation of Christianity, there would be a power-vacuum within the Church. Without authority, Church is anarchy.