

Primary Source

Martin Luther's Appeal to the Ruling Class

In 1520, Martin Luther called on the nobility of Germany to reform the Catholic Church since the Church. In this letter, Luther argued that the Church set up “walls” to hold on to its power and prevent reform. The excerpt below explains one of these walls. He calls those who want to maintain the pope’s power “Romanists.”

“The Romanists . . . [claim] to be the only interpreters of Scripture, even though they never learn anything contained in it their lives long. They claim authority for themselves alone, juggle with words shamelessly before our eyes, saying that the pope cannot err as to the faith, whether he be bad or good; although they cannot quote a single letter of Scripture to support their claim. Thus it comes about that so many heretical, unchristian, and even unnatural laws are contained in the canon [Church] law. . . . Just because the Romanists . . . [claim] to believe that the Holy Spirit has not abandoned them, no matter if they are as ignorant and bad as they could be, they presume to assert whatever they please. In such a case, what is the need or the value of Holy Scripture? Let it be burned, and let us be content with the ignorant gentlemen at Rome who “possess the Holy Spirit within”. . . .

Therefore it is a wicked, base invention, for which they cannot . . . [produce any] evidence in support, to aver that it is the function of the pope alone to interpret Scripture, or to confirm any particular interpretation. . . .

Think it over for yourself. You must acknowledge that there are good Christians among us who have the true faith, spirit, understanding, word, and mind of Christ. Why ever should one reject their opinion and judgment, and accept those of the pope, who has neither that faith nor that spirit? . . .

In addition, as I have already said . . . we all have the one faith, the one gospel, one and the same sacrament; why then should we not be entitled to taste or test, and to judge what is right or wrong in the faith? . . . We ought to march boldly forward, and test everything the Romanists do or leave undone. We ought to apply that understanding of the Scriptures which we possess as believers, and constrain the Romanists to follow, not their own interpretation, but that which is in fact the better.”

Martin Luther from “An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality as to the Amelioration of the State of Christendom.” *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*. John Dillenberger, ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961. Pages 412–414.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS

1. What is Luther’s attitude towards the pope?

2. **Drawing Conclusions** According to Luther, why does the fact that all Christians have the same “faith,” “gospel,” and “sacrament” make ordinary people just as able to judge religious issues as the pope?