

# Bad for Business: Luther Against the Papacy

Alisa Cotter\*

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences/Department of Religion

**Abstract.** This paper analyzes Martin Luther's criticism of increasingly corrupt church practices, including, the papacy's granting of indulgences, the promotion of pilgrimage, the preservation and exploitation of relics, the cult of saints, and the belief in saintly intercession. I will examine how Luther's critiques of these practices were expressed in the religious propaganda that circulated during this period by looking at the interplay between image and text found in the polemical pamphlet, the *Passional Christi und Antichristi*, which was jointly produced by Martin Luther and the artist Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1521. The *Passional* presents thirteen pairs of contrasting images which comment upon events in the life of Christ and compare them to the perceived abuses of the papacy. These visual dialogues illustrate the extent and nature of the opposition to the papacy during the Protestant Reformation.

## 1. Introduction

Scholars who write on the Reformation have almost exclusively focused on Martin Luther's attitude against the church's abuse of indulgences. However, there are additional doctrines that Luther adamantly spoke out against throughout his life. Luther's stance against all these practices, is especially evident in the polemical pamphlet known as the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* which circulated widely around Wittenberg during the early part of the sixteenth century [1]. This pamphlet, authored by Martin Luther and produced in the workshop of Lucas Cranach is composed of contrasting images, one set showing familiar scenes from the life of Jesus, while the other shows the pope acting in ways that are in stark contradiction to the life and teachings of Jesus, thus characterizing the pope as the antichrist. Little attention has been given to this pamphlet and the way in which it conveyed important anti-papal sentiments.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

While contemporaries of Martin Luther were focusing primarily on the devotion paid to images, Luther sought to reform other doctrines which were not supported by Scripture and which he believed, were leading Christians away from a foundational faith in Christ. For instance, Luther spoke out against what he believed to be a perilous veneration of the saints and the unfounded belief in saintly intercession. The cult of the Christian saints and martyrs, to Luther, had begun to more closely resemble the polytheistic religions of the Graeco-Roman world. Luther believed that the veneration paid to a saint's relics was inherently dangerous to true believers, because it caused the faithful to stray from a focus on Christ. He believed the same was also true concerning belief in the intercession of the saints, calling it "a dangerous and offensive way of worship, because people are so easily accustomed to turning from Christ; they quickly learn to put more confidence in the saints than in Christ himself." [2]

The plates of the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* that I have selected to discuss here are #1-6, which comment on the pope's abuse of authority, #19-20, which illustrate the church's greed, and #23-24, which highlight the church's promotion of the sale of indulgences. Plates 1 and 2 illustrate a pope claiming authority over the emperor in contrast to Jesus, who denounces any role as king over an earthly kingdom. While Jesus is shown running from those attempting to proclaim him as king, the pope is shown proudly wearing a crown on his head. It is Jesus' proclamation in Luke 22:26 that exemplifies the message being represented in these plates, namely the concept of greatness that Jesus wishes his apostles to model after his death. Although Jesus is the leader of his followers he occupies a place as their equal at the Last Supper. The pope, on the other hand (as will be especially seen in the other plates), has gone to great lengths in order to secure his authority and aura of superiority over the rest of mankind.

Plates 3 and 4 of the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* illustrate the document, known during the Middle Ages as the *Donation of Constantine*. In plate 3, Christ is shown being crowned with thorns and mocked by the soldiers prior to his crucifixion. In contrast, plate 4 shows a pope being crowned as a king and honored by those in attendance. The *Donation of Constantine* is based upon a legend believed to have originated in the fifth century which helped to promote Constantine's image as a devout believer in the teachings of Christianity. By the eighth

century this legend had developed further to include this emperor's alleged donation of a substantial amount of authority to the office of the bishop in addition to numerous allotments of land and property [3].

Plates 5 and 6 of the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* demonstrate the magnitude of error with which the papacy came to be viewed throughout the Middle Ages. Plate 5 shows Jesus washing the feet of his disciples prior to the Last Supper, whereas, in plate 6, an emperor has knelt to kiss the foot of the pope. These plates are understood to illustrate the *Dictatus Papae*, believed to have been written by Gregory VII (1073-85 C.E.) at the end of the eleventh century [4]. The *Dictatus Papae* expresses the complete, unquestionable authority of the pope. Luther was appalled by the aura of superiority with which the pope exhibited. Gregory's affirmation of papal authority was upheld by Boniface VIII (1294-1303 C.E.) in his papal bull, *Unum Sanctam* (1302) and was confirmed at three of the twelve sessions of the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17 C.E.) [5].

Plates 19 and 20 illustrate the church's greed and abuse of authority. Plate 19 depicts Christ ordering his followers to rid themselves of all their worldly possessions. In the text accompanying this image reference is made to Matthew 10:8-10, in which Jesus commands, "Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep." However, in plate 20, a pope has commanded that bishops should not be placed in a town so small that the position would be of little gain or benefit.

Plates 23 and 24 describe the abuses involved in the selling of indulgences and highlight the perceived corruption of the church's marketing of indulgences. In plate 23, Christ is shown driving the moneylenders from the temple and overturning the merchandise tables. In the text below the image, John 2:15 is given, which states, "So he [Jesus] made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables." On the right, in plate 24, however, a pope is shown selling indulgences on a table inside a church.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that during the Middle Ages the papacy, according to Luther, had allowed itself to become increasingly corrupt. This is most certainly because they had been able to generate a great deal of income for themselves from the pilgrims that flooded into the city of Rome and other pilgrimage destinations scattered throughout Europe. In addition to promoting the cult of the Christian saints and martyrs the papacy had seemingly encouraged idolatry by emphasizing both, the primacy of holy relics, and the intercessory powers of the saints and martyrs. No longer did the pious need to hold complete faith in Christ when many different saints could be called upon in times of need and distress. Martin Luther's ideas of church reform found expression in the polemical pamphlet the *Passional Christi und Antichristi*. This pamphlet mixed together a perfect combination of text and picture which aided it in its popularity.

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[1] Bacich states, "five German editions preceded the first Latin version in the first year of its publication." Dan Joseph Bacich, "Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Passional Christi und Antichristi*: A Reformation Pamphlet in the Reformation Style" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1983), 29.

[2] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vols. 1-55, Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan, eds. (St. Louis and Philadelphia), 1955-1986, vol. 35, 199.

[3] Ernest F. Henderson, ed. *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1905), 319-329.

[4] For an English translation of the *Dictatus Papae*, see: Henderson, *Select Historical Documents*, 366-367.

[5] William R. Russell, "Martin Luther's Understanding of the Pope as the Antichrist," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 85 (1994): 38.