Some have referred to him as ‘the hero of the reformation’ others have crowned him ‘the king of the reformation’, still others the ‘the superstar of the reformation.’ Clearly an image of faultlessness has been attributed to the Martin Luther. In part this image found success because of the profound hate that the Protestants developed towards Catholic in the sixteenth century. The contributions of Martin Luther as a result of his advance studies of Holy Scriptures cannot be denied. [Webmaster’s note: I would have to disagree with that statement. What is believed today by the majority of the masses, whether they profess to be Christian or not, does not come from Scripture inspired by God, but from men who were involved in philosophy, passing on the traditional teachings of man and redefining the word of God and making a total mess where it concerns major doctrines on the matters of Sin, Repentance, Depravity, Guilt, Salvation, Mercy, and Judgment, Reconciliation, the Nature of God, etc.. Such men built upon the foundation of each other rather than upon the word of God plainly stated. Such men in history were Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Anicius Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, John Calvin, Martin Luther and many more after them. ] The world of Biblical studies, which opened up to him after his ordination in 1507, orchestrated by Johann von Staupitz, vicar-general of the Augustinians, became the territory in which Luther left his mark.

However very early on, Luther became a controversial figure. The tenacity with which he held on to his beliefs led him to produce his Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517.[1] The disturbance that resulted from these ‘Theses’ and rapidly circulated the streets of Wittenberg, made him the target of Emperor Charles V who summons Luther to the Diet of Worms in April 1521. During the session, the reformer’s irrevocability of his published beliefs ignited a spark that even Luther was unable to control. That spark provoked in the minds of many—the German peasants in particular, who were seeking a leader, the idea that they had found their champion who would do battle against the forces of oppression. This paper will present several arguments demonstrating the inconsistencies in the ideas and actions of Martin Luther. I will argue that Martin Luthers intemperate demeanor and his quest for power, as he sought to remain on the pedestal of success, led him to belittle and backstab those for whom he seemed to have been fighting for.

The great social revolution in Germany, which began in 1525, was known as the ‘Peasant War’. Its importance in the history of the Reformation deserves special attention due to its unique relationship to the religious movement. It is quite intriguing that during the same years that the rights of the individual conscience against medieval tradition succeeded, the German peasantry’s quest for liberation from oppression failed miserably.[2] This failure was complete and final. The movement, which erupted with enthusiasm and optimism, seemed promising at first but was promptly crushed. Over one hundred thousand peasants were butchered in cold blood by the ruling elites.[3] All hopes for freedom or even a mere improvement of harsh conditions amongst the poor, and the oppressed classes of Germany were fully crushed.[4] Contrary to popular belief, this oppressed group was not restricted to the peasants. It included all classes—from the impoverished knights, the poor priest, the escaped monk, the traveling scholar, to unemployed mercenary soldier, the poor handicraftsman, as well as the beggar.[5]
What caused Luther to refrain from using the same words that he had voiced at the Diet of Worms? “I am convinced by those passages adduced and introduced by me, and my conscience is bound in God’s word, I can or will recant nothing, since it is neither safe nor advisable to do aught against conscience”[6] When the time came for him to choose whether or not he would stand on the side of the peasants he clearly sided with the German elite. Why was he so worried about conscience in one case and not at all in the other? In light of the events that transpired after the Diet of Worms, apparently the reformer’s backstabbing of the peasants demonstrates that under certain circumstances forced Luther to become unfaithful to his own set of beliefs.

Some are convinced that Luther’s dilemmas are undergirded in “the abnormal physical and mental equipment with which...” he “…was endowed by nature.” [7] Thus, he had the tendency to view things in a darker prospective.[8] If that were to be the case, the reformer would then be unable to both reason and discern right from wrong. I detect that Luther was basically a hot-tempered individual who refused to accept that his revolutionary theology directly impacted the ‘Peasant War of Germany.’ Early in his monastic career, Luther clearly demonstrated an inclination towards quarrelosomeness, a constant desire for controversy leading to a series of consequences. One can deduce that his personality exhibited abnormalities and irrational peculiarities that, if omitted from the reformation equation, would make it impossible to solve his inconsistencies.[9]

Most European peasants were kept in a systematic bondage that was headed by the feudal lords who in turn were legally authorized to govern the lands and systematically control the revenues and resources of the peasantry. The peasants’ situation was so brutal that the electoral princes themselves admitted that the common people were overloaded with feudal services, taxes, ecclesiastical courts which would become unbearable sooner or later.[10] From time to time, the forceful tactics of the lords imposed upon the peasants were extremely irritating.[11] The majority of the peasants were free to marry only under the approval of their lords. A peasant family was hit the hardest at the death of the head of the household. The lord of the estate would claim the ‘heriot’[12], the best cow or horse, which was often led away by force.[13] The peasants were gradually deprived of ancient rights and customs and if these ‘old traditions’ were ever enacted, usually on verbal basis, they were now annulled by severe exploitations whenever agents would pose as tax collectors. These poor peasants, unable to read and write, were further taken advantage of every time complex paragraphs were added to the rigid demands they had to adhere to whether they liked it or not.[14]

That alone would be sufficient for peasants to retaliate full force against their oppressor, but they tolerated the abuse. They were strictly forbidden from all activities of hunting, fishing, and pasturing within the vicinities of the lords’ properties. Out of the three, fishing was the most important. It opened the door to the enjoyment of a more succulent menu beside the usual daily diet of bread and pulse.[15] Due to the financial pressure that they were threatened with, the German nobles of the fifteenth century felt the need to tighten the rules which in turn elevated the rigidity of their legal domains.

The peasants’ resentfulness grew stronger and stronger the more they were exploited by prince-bishops. These daily atrocities, intertwined with the promotion of freedman by Luther, widely opened the road that led the peasants to disbelieve that social demands could be separated from religious
beliefs.[16] The Peasant War can then be viewed as a politico-social insurrection on a grand scale. The Romanists[17] were persuaded that Luther, alongside the Reformation, authored this gruesome revolt.[18]

When the peasants came in contact with Luther’s The Freedom of a Christian it became more convincing to them that the reformer was destined to be their liberator from feudal obligations. They were further strengthened when they also heard that in the Babylonian Captivity Luther himself declared that no Christian was under the obligation to comply with any law which was enacted upon him by another man.[19] If these two documents did not produce sufficient sparking power for the revolt, the following radical statements must have:

“I believe that no man can be redeemed who does not belong to this community, who does not walk single-mindedly in it in one faith, word, [belief in the] sacraments, hope, and love and that no Jew, heretic, heathen, or sinner will be redeemed with it, for it must be that he becomes reconciled, united, and like-minded with it in all things.

I believe that in this community or Christendom, all things are common, and all the goods of one belong to the other and that no one owns anything entirely of his own so that to me and to every single believer every prayer and good work comes to the aid of the whole community to confirm and strengthen it for all times, in life and in death, and also that everyone must bear the burdens of one another as St. Paul teaches.”[20]

As the reformation progressed, the poor class was awaiting for a better future and the interruption of the repressive force of law and order. The Reformation facilitated both “and the new gospel of Divine justice for the oppressed set the volcanic flood in motion, and strife between Catholic and Protestant authorities gave it a vent.”[21] The knight’s war and the peasant revolt grew directly out of the spirit of the Reformation.[22] The appeal to Christian doctrine and Biblical sentiments was no mere external ornament, but shaped part of the essence of the movement.[23]

In the absence of On the Freedom of a Christian and the Babylonian Captivity of the Church it would have been impossible for the radicals to have led the peasants into the revolt. These extremists—Thomas Müntzer in particular—pushed the teachings about equality within these abstracts while pairing them with biblical scriptures to further support their eagerness for freedom. Müntzer’s enthusiasm caused him to view that the equality of which Luther referred to couldn’t be attached exclusively to religious affairs but to the civil and political arena as well.[24] If we carefully analyze Luther’s statements, no exception whatsoever was made in the process of achieving equality within communities. Having said that, how does one reconcile Luther’s contrasting statements that followed? On May 1525, the reformer’s published tract Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants permitted all authorities or anyone else to “smite, slay, and stab the rebels and to show no mercy until the rebels had been put down.”[25] Two months later, Luther distributed An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants where he apologized for his heated language and for having sided with the lords and princes.[26] We must also understand that Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants had a dual role. Not only that its first role authorized the slandering of the peasants but when
Luther had detected that its heroic program for the recovery of the gospel was on the line his uncontrolled anger caused him to lash this article at them.[27]

Luther’s anger at the pope’s self-proclaimed authority over the Bible, church, and the Christian conscience led him to burn the canon. On the day following this incident, Luther convinced his students that he acted this way because he firmly believed that “salvation was impossible for those submitting to the rule of the pope...” He also persuaded himself that “unless a man fight with all his might, and if need be unto death, against the statutes and laws of the pope and bishops, he cannot be saved.”[28] Luther’s opponents choked him with his own words by quoting his doctrine that says that “one must be saved without works by faith alone.” But during the Peasant War, Luther went as far as not only giving his blessings to works, but to the monstrous work of bloodshed. Having been constantly in the spotlight, it is hard to miss Luther’s inconsistency or to even pretend that it doesn’t exist.[29] Such pattern clearly demonstrates a lack of self-control whenever Luther felt threatened by his powerlessness over any incident that was not resolved his way.

As early as January 1525, the German peasants turned into a movement stretching from the Black Forest into Saxony. The peasants convinced that Luther was on their side sought help.[30] A moderate party amongst the peasants put forth their demands in twelve notable articles. They also stood their ground on the avoidance of war. The peasants knew that their requests did not exceed the laws and precepts of the gospel. They sought deliverance from the God of Israel knowing He would release them from the bondage of their oppressors as He did for Israel from the hand of Pharaoh. This is the content of the Twelve Articles:

(1) The whole congregation to have power to elect their minister, and, if he was found unworthy, to dismiss him; (2) the great tithe, i.e., the legal tithe of corn, to be still payable for the maintenance of the pastor, and what is over to go to support the poor; the small tithes to be no longer payable; (3) serfdom[31] abolished, since Christ has redeemed us all by his precious blood; (4) game, fish, and fowl to be free as God created them; (5) the rich have appropriated the forests, — this to be rearranged; (6) compulsory service to be abolished, — wages for work; (7) peasant service to be limited by contract, and work done above contract to be paid for; (8) fair rents; (9) arbitrary punishment abolished; (10) the commons restored; (11) the right of heriot, i.e., the right of the lord to take the vassal’s best chattel, to be abolished; (12) all these propositions to be tested by Scripture, and what cannot stand be tested.[32]

The obvious influence of the Reformation stands out of each article which persistently alludes to scriptures.[33] Luther not only supported the requests of the peasants but he also felt that they were just.[34] He boldly stood before the lords and told them that the social demands of the peasants were not reasonable.

To further support the demands of the peasants, Martin Luther sought peace from the oppressors when he released his Exhortation to Peace Respecting the Twelve Articles. In it he rebuked the princes and the nobility for having been misusing their power. The princes and the lords of the land are, affirms Luther, solely responsible for the current dilemma because they relentlessly fight against the Gospel while oppressing the common people until they can no longer bear it.[35] Luther shouted at the lords: “Your
exactions are intolerable, you take away from the peasant the fruit of his labour in order to spend his labour upon your finery and luxury.“[36] However, this initial disposition of Luther shifted when the peasants did not contain their peace. Martin Luther did an about face with the release of his pamphlet Against the Murdering Robbing Rats of Peasants. In it, he provoked and encouraged the nobles to shed blood in order to suppress the revolt, “stab, kill, and strangle.”[37] Luther publicly exhorted the princes to exterminate the peasants.[38] He went as far as publicly proclaiming that the princes were not only ‘God’s swords’ but that it was also their sacred duty to preserve law and order on earth by punishing these most heinous and atrocious criminals [the peasants]. He believed that perjury, rebellion and hypocrisy called for harsh punishment. [39]

His pamphlet contained, not even an inch of justice. It is reported that the peasant majority, on the day of the engagement itself addressed the following to the princes: “We are not here to harm anyone, but to obtain divine justice. Nor are we here to shed blood. If this is your wish also, we have no desire to harm you. Each side must hold to this.” The princes’ next move after their request of a voluntary capture of Müntzer—the peasantry’s leader—was catastrophic. They aimed their cannon directly at the peasants’ encampment into which they heartlessly fired. The peasants divided themselves and fled the scene at the very first shots.[40] This immediate scattering is evidence that the camp of the peasantry was no match for the mercenaries of the rulers; it was no real battle, but rather a cold blooded massacre of over one hundred thousand peasants on May 15, 1525.[41] How do we then justify the words that proceeded out the mouth of Martin Luther during the engagement? He himself witnessed the imbalanced of artillery between both parties. If Luther’s words did not spontaneously fly out of his lips as a result of his lack of reason or good sense, we then must reconsider what defines an ‘insane person.’

The more we adjust our lens of understanding the actions and reactions of Luther the more we discover confusing the reformers actions become. It is impossible to dismiss that “Luther’s vacillation, his abusive language, and a certain exuberance of overstatement which grieved even his friends completely obscured his greatness in the eyes of his enemies.”[42] It has been concluded by some that Luther made no use of discernment in his judgments, he judged emotionally.[43]

Beyond all doubt, the social activists amongst the oppressed and abused peasants viewed Luther not only as one of themselves, but also the Lutheran movement as an opportunity for progress on the road to democracy and social justice. They felt secured by the leader of the Reformation because they knew that he was a peasant by birth and that he had disapproved the greed of the lords while approving the content of the ‘Twelve Articles.’[44] Luther’s lack of reasoning and patience forced him to conclude that both sides were wrong. However, when the war ignited the same Martin Luther who had pledged to stand by the peasants took the side of the princes and by doing so he quickly ignited the insurrection. Prior to the revolt, Luther had made it clear to the princes that God was not pleased with their acts of violence.[45] Nonetheless, after the war unfolded, Luther, bit his tongue when he said, “what is more ill-mannered than a foolish peasant or a common man when he has enough and is full, and gets power in his hands? An ass must be beaten and the rabble governed by force. God knew this well, and therefore He gave the rulers not a fox’s tail but a sword.”[46] Once again, it is evident that Luther repeatedly used the name of God as a way to untangle the knots that he himself had tied.
Erasmus, who was attentive to all the inconsistent and inexplicable conclusions of the reformer, did not hesitate to address Luther in person. He made it clear to Luther that the bloody outcome of the revolt was caused by the books he published against the monks and bishops in favor of evangelical freedom, especially those books written in German. Erasmus further demonstrated his disapproval of Luther’s Christianity when he affirmed that the Reformation was unenlightened intellectually, socially, or morally.

The common people alienated themselves from the Reformation because they no longer saw Luther as a trustworthy leader. Luther’s raging and ranting persona caused him to lose the sympathy of not only the peasants but of other classes as well. The movement of the Reformation lost substantial popular support not only because Luther resorted to an offensive language and controversial stand, but also because it became clearer during the uprising that his ideology of a reform was restricted solely to religion and did not make room for societal issues. This great loss of the masses forced Luther to seek approval elsewhere—the camp of the Princes. It is quite evident that Luther’s alliance with the princes was vital to the success of the reformation or else he would have been crushed. His association to the princes expresses another inconsistency of Luther. He maintained time and time again that the princes are the most unintelligent persons and the wickedest rascals that walked the earth. They not only possess ‘hearts of stone and heads of brass’, but it was also imperative in the eyes of Luther for them to go to hell. He also quoted the psalmist’s words: “Put not your trust in princes.” However, when everything he fought for was crumbling he did not hesitate to place the reformation movement upon the hands of these princes he once called ‘sons of the devil.’

The reformer’s inability to favor and reconcile the peasants’ demands obliged him to receive much criticism. It is here that one discovers the weaknesses of Luther’s reformation. In his concerning with the spiritual and neglected the social and economic flaws of the system. He aggravated his stand by associating himself with the German Princess rather than with thelower classes of society. It was bone crushing when Lutheranism felt compelled to seek the support and protection of territorial princes. Such move incited many opinions. Sebastian Franck spoke of the dictatorship side of Luther when he detected “in the new Lutheran Church there was less freedom of speech and belief than among the Turks and heathen...” Leo Jud paralleled Luther with the Pope because of his imbalanced spirit which would vocally destine some people to hell while rewarding others with heaven. What happened to the ‘Luther’ who had a warm heart for the common people? What happened to the ‘Luther’ who had formerly sympathized and worked to alleviate the unbearable conditions of the poor class including the peasants?

Luther’s inconsistencies began to bloom even prior to the Peasants’ War. He stood firm against the ‘heavenly prophets’, leaders of the Catholic Church, with angry outbursts and brutal boldness especially when he believed and declared that church rituals were redundant; but soon after, he opposed that belief when he discovered that many were trying to make these ritual suggestions into a command. After his original plan to annul the ritual Luther had a change of heart “in order to defy and resist fanaticism for a little while longer.” This pattern was also shown, as I have mentioned earlier, when the reformer presented his Exhortation to Peace that contained an angry threat to the princes to which he did not adhere.
The puzzling outcome of the war disturbed all those who, convinced by the liberating philosophy of Luther and their particular understanding of Christian freedom, laid the label of the tragedy upon Luther for having deserted the cause of the common people. They also condemned him for his cowardly failure to stand by the principles he himself had pronounced in regards to the social and political arenas. The fact that the peasants were, in actuality, the outcasts made even more difficult for anyone to reconcile Luther’s change of attitude towards them. He were ridiculed, and labeled the peasants the worst of humankind. The reformer knew the oppressive conditions in which they lived still he lost all sensitivity towards them. On one occasion he demonstrated his insensitivity by quoting a German proverb: “A peasant is a pig; hit him, and he’s dead. He thinks nothing of the life to come.” Luther viewed the peasant as grasping, devious, stupid, and incorrigible, frequently quoting another common proverb, ‘A peasant is a peasant.’ It is somewhat puzzling to reconcile these statements that are coming out of one who was a peasant by birth from the line of peasantry. Luther explicitly testified: I am peasant’s son; my father, grandfather, and forefathers have all been peasants.

Martin Luther, the reformer, was without a doubt a sincere advocate of the principle of toleration prior to the Peasants’ Revolt. Everything that happened afterwards affected him so deeply that it became a question of opportunism instead of a belief. Forell believed that “Luther’s was too voluble and too prominent to escape inconsistency.” However, in addition to his inconsistencies in regards to this peasant war, he became inconsistent in other aspects. For example, even though Luther did not support the publication of Emser’s New Testament in 1529 because of its poisonous interpretations which could lead to extensive damages, he nonetheless approved and encouraged the publication of the Koran in 1542. Luther, as a whole, made himself more complex as a result of his irreconcilable contradictions.

Luther, never regretted nor took responsibility for the peasants’ massacre. He used a play of words to preserve his innocence: “I, Martin Luther, slew all the peasants in the rebellion, for I said they should be slain; all their blood is on my head. But I cast it on our Lord God, who commanded me to speak in this way.” That’s the type of cover up most frequently used by Luther that often reconciled his apparent discrepancies. At the end, Luther’s incessant contradictions gave him no option but to hand over the baton of the church organization to the princes and governments. Maybe if Luther had casted the load of his influence into the peasants’ side while bringing the middle class—who would have undoubtedly followed him—to the side of the peasants, a peaceful outcome and the avoidance of this horrible massacre may have been possible. But the same Luther who did not recant before the emperor and challenged the religious prescriptions of the pope never found the courage to withstand the authority of the German princes.

Not once did Luther relinquish his aggressive and inconsistent language nor did he ever admit that he was at fault whenever he sensed the possibility of defeat. Luther’s intemperate demeanor and his quest for power led him to belittle and backstab the peasants which he seemed to have been supporting.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.


[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Baron John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton Acton et al., The Cambridge modern history (The University press, 1918), 175.

[12] In feudal England, a tribute or gift, often a prized animal or a treasured possession, given by a tenant’s family to his Lord at the tenant’s death.


[14] Ibid., 407.

[15] An edible seed from a pod, e.g. a pea or bean, eaten fresh or dried.


[17] A student of or expert in ancient Roman history or law.

[18] Dau, Four Hundred Years, 123.


[20] Ibid.


[22] Richard Lodge, The student's modern Europe, a history, 1453 to 1878, 1885, 59.

[23] Bax, The Peasants War in Germany, 1525-1526, 33.


[26] Ibid.


[31] Enslavement.


[33] Lodge, The student's modern Europe, a history, 1453 to 1878, 61.
[34] Baynes, The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 79.

[35] John Louis Nuelsen, Luther, the leader (Jennings and Graham, 1906), 159.


[37] Ibid.

[38] Frederic Seebohm, The Era of the Protestant Revolution (Armstrong and co., 1874), 152.


[40] Friedenthal, Luther: His Life and Times, 423.


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[47] Ibid., 245.


[52] Edwin Doak Mead, Martin Luther: A Study of Reformation (G.H. Ellis, 1884), 142

[53] Ibid., 257.

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