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LUTHER ON LIFE WITHOUT DICHOTOMY

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The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was a fundamental belief of all the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century, but none gave it greater emphasis than Martin Luther. The great German father of the Reformation regarded this doctrine as the basis for a proper understanding of the Christian life. His teaching on this subject stressed the wholeness of the believer's life as a priest before God regardless of his occupation. Luther believed that this doctrine demolished the sacred/secular dichotomy of the medieval church, a false dichotomy which undermined the entire biblical teaching about salvation and its implications for the Christian in the discharge of his social responsibilities. The true Christian life, in Luther's understanding, is the life of service rendered eagerly to one's neighbors, for true faith is always active in love.

* * *

WRITING to Christians in the first century, the Apostle Peter admonished them to recognize that they composed "a spiritual house, . . . a holy priesthood, offering sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Believers, Peter said, "are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that [they] may declare the praises of him who has called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:5, 9 NIV).

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to which Peter referred is an indispensable distinctive of biblical faith, and without it true Christianity cannot endure. The church was, however, still in its infancy when professional priests rose to prominence and assumed the role of necessary mediators between God and men. A sharp cleavage consequently developed between the clergy and the laity, and Christians were instructed to regard the priests and monks as members of a *sacred* estate and to view themselves as the *secular* estate. Medieval teaching depicted the church as a ship sailing toward heaven with priests and monks aboard. Laymen had to swim or be towed by ropes attached to the ship. Many people, of course, drowned in a vain effort to pursue the vessel of salvation. In the medieval view *secular*

occupations were regarded as spiritually inferior to the *sacred calling* of the priesthood. Laymen were taught to depend upon the clergymen as those who dispensed saving and sanctifying graces of which the institutional church was the fountain.¹

In the Middle Ages the Christian life was construed in terms of a sacred/secular dichotomy, and salvation was believed to be a reward for good works made possible by an infused grace which was imparted principally by the sacraments. Human merit became the central concern in soteriology, and the monastery was viewed as the ideal place for the practice of Christian piety. The medieval conception of the Christian life was egocentric and sacerdotal. The Pauline declaration of freedom from the law (Rom 8:1-4) evidently was eclipsed by a rigorous legalism which imposed a type of spiritual bondage through the teaching of works-righteousness. This may have been the darkest feature of the so-called Dark Ages.

Although the wonderful light of the gospel was dimmed badly in the Middle Ages, it was not extinguished, and in the 16th century it burst forth again in all its radiant brilliance when God called Martin Luther into the service of the truth. Luther, himself a priest and monk, through patient exegesis of the scripture, learned the truth of justification through faith alone, a discovery which led him to renounce the sacred/secular dichotomy and to reclaim the NT teaching of the priesthood of all believers. Through faith, Luther found in the gospel the joy of Christian freedom experienced in a life without dichotomy.

As a believer liberated through faith in Christ, Luther never ceased to extol the unity and wholeness of the Christian priesthood. He contended that all of God's people belong to a single *sacred* estate in which all have equal access to the Father through Christ. Every form of honest toil performed for God's glory is therefore a divine calling. Luther spoke at times about a *weltlicher Beruf* (worldly calling), but he meant thereby a place in the world where one could fulfill his divinely ordained vocation. In Luther's understanding, one should serve gladly in the station where God has placed him, and that is to be determined mainly by the gifts of providence. To some God has granted the gifts for the gospel ministry; to others he has imparted talents for ruling principalities, mending shoes, or raising potatoes.

In a letter of 1520 addressed to the princes of Germany Luther called upon the rulers to exercise their Christian priesthood by leading the reform of church and society. In this treatise the great reformer

¹See the excellent article by Otto Pfeleiderer, "Luther as Founder of Protestant Morals," *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (1888) 31-53.

expressed abhorrence for the dichotomous view of the Christian life in which he had been schooled.

It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the *spiritual* estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the *temporal* estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office.²

It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, and are truly priests, bishops, and popes. . . . We are all one body of Christ the Head, and all members one of another. Christ does not have two different bodies, one temporal, and the other spiritual. There is but one Head and one body.³

In arguing that all Christians are members of the spiritual estate and discharge a sacred calling, Luther recognized no distinctive call to the ministry as opposed to a call to any other vocation. He believed that God works through men, so the church could appraise one's gifts and extend the call to preach accordingly.⁴ Contrary to the medieval view, which extolled the monastic life as the highest calling, Luther affirmed the sacredness of every station in life as a place where Christians may exercise their gifts in the ministry of their priesthood.

The medieval Catholic view of the Christian life stressed renunciation of the world and its pleasures as the most meritorious endeavor possible. Luther, however, espoused a joyous affirmation of life lived in society. He regarded the created world as the proper place for the practice of godliness, because the Christian is a subject (citizen) of two kingdoms, and to each kingdom he has responsibilities. He should not withdraw from the kingdom of earth in order to seek the kingdom of heaven, for the Christian life is one of service to be rendered here and now in Jesus' name.

²Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," tr. C. M. Jacobs, rev. James Atkinson, *Luther's Works*, 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 127.

³*Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁴The implication of Luther's teaching should be clear—no profession or occupation is more "reverend" than another. The godly farmer is just as reverend as the clergyman. There should therefore be no talk about "full-time Christian service." It is significant that the reformers placed far less emphasis on the rite of clerical ordination than is the case today. Neither Philip Melancthon nor John Calvin was formally ordained. This is, of course, not an argument against ordination as such, but it does reflect the reformers' position on the priesthood.

Luther taught that all true Christians have been called into the kingdom of heaven by saving grace, and all are equal in that kingdom. It is a kingdom of *receiving* the benevolence of the King. The kingdom of earth, on the other hand, is a state of social (but not spiritual) inequalities. In this kingdom the Christian lives for *giving* by serving others.⁵ As the Christian discharges the duties of his priesthood, he demonstrates a faith which is active in love. No station in life is intended for the exaltation of him who holds it. Even the prince, who enjoys authority to rule lands and peoples, should recognize that God has called him to serve those he governs, "for those who punish evil and protect the good, are God's servants and workmen."⁶

Although Luther regarded justification *sola fide* as the heart of the Christian faith and therefore emphasized the believer's relationship with God, it is evident that he had a keen sense of the Christian's social responsibility as well. He believed that God's saving grace sets one free from the penalty due to sin and from the legalism of works-righteousness which had kept people in bondage for so long. In his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520) Luther stated, "a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."⁷

At first glance the above propositions may appear to be irreconcilable, but Luther found them fully harmonious—correlative truths. He explained by citing the dictum of St. Paul, "though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone" (1 Cor 9:19 NIV). Luther held that genuine Christian faith always produces love, for faith must be active in love. Faith ascends to God, and Christian love descends to one's neighbor and renders service to him as a fulfillment of the believer's calling. The Christian does not need to work for his salvation, as the Romanists contended, so he is free to invest his life in the service of his fellow men. In the ultimate sense, one can do nothing for God, for he is utterly self-sufficient. Man, however, who has been created in the image of God, is constantly in need of spiritual and material assistance. Let the saints then follow the example of Christ, who came to earth in both the form of God and the form of a servant (Phil 2:5-11).⁸

As Christ is priest and king, so his disciples are priests and kings (1 Pet 2:9). Luther exclaimed,

⁵See Philip S. Watson, "Luther's Doctrine of Vocation," *SJT* 11 (1949) 364-77.

⁶Luther, "Temporal Authority, to What Extent It should be Obeyed," tr. J. J. Schindel, rev. W. I. Brandt, *Luther's Works*, 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962) 100.

⁷Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," tr. W. A. Lambert, rev. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther's Works*, 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 344.

⁸*Ibid.*

Not only are we [Christians] the freest of kings, we are also priests forever, which is far more excellent than being kings, for as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things. . . . Christ has made it possible for us . . . to be not only his brethren, co-heirs, and fellow kings, but also his fellow priests.⁹

The believer's kingship and priesthood testify to his spiritual freedom. "From this anyone can clearly see how a Christian is free from all things and over all things, so that he needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone . . . confers all these things."¹⁰ The faith which confers these benefits is a gift from God, and those who receive it demonstrate its reality by good works. As Luther stated it beautifully,

Faith is truly active through love. That is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fulness and wealth of his faith.¹¹

Good works performed in faith do not bring benefit to God or to one's self. They bring benefits to one's neighbor. Although believers and unbelievers may perform exactly the same outward deeds, the works of the latter are not truly good. Unless one performs works from a motive of sincere love for God, his works are not pleasing to God despite the relative earthly benefits they may confer. For this reason Luther scorned the monastic view of good works. The monks declared their intention to imitate the example of Christ, and some of them became renowned for their charity. Luther contended, nevertheless, that their works were not good because they were motivated by a selfish desire for reward, and the monks trusted in their imitation of Christ to save them. True morality is present only when one performs good works lovingly and eagerly without regard for any personal gain to be realized.¹² As Luther related, "our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works."¹³

In the medieval church enormous emphasis was placed on the meritorious character of celibacy, to which all clergymen were committed by vows. Although marriage was regarded as a sacrament and

⁹Ibid., 355.

¹⁰Ibid., 356.

¹¹Ibid., 365.

¹²See Gustaf Wingren, "The Christian's Calling According to Luther," *Augustana Quarterly* 21 (1942) 3-16; Martin J. Heineken, "Luther and the 'Orders of Creation' in Relation to a Doctrine of Work and Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1952) 393-414.

¹³Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 372-73.

therefore a means of grace, celibacy, which was not a sacrament, was considered a far superior spiritual state. Luther denied its sacramental character, but he extolled marriage as the ideal context in which believers may put faith to work in active love. He argued that God created man and woman for each other, and he assailed Rome for exalting celibacy over this divine institution. He lamented that canon law had contaminated what God had declared clean and holy. Luther regarded celibacy as unnatural. He complained that the “papal rabble, priests, monks, and nuns resist God’s . . . commandment when they despise . . . marriage and vow that they will maintain perpetual chastity while they deceive the common people with lying words and wrong impressions.”¹⁴ In praising marriage Luther said that it excels all positions of earthly honor. “It is not an estate to be placed on a level with the others; it precedes and surpasses them all, whether those of emperor, princes, bishops, or anyone else.”¹⁵

In hailing marriage as an excellent relationship in which faith may be active in love, Luther contended that even menial tasks are good works pleasing to God when performed in faith. Speaking about a godly husband, he wrote, “cutting wood or heating a room is just as holy for him as praying . . . is for a monk, for all works of a pious man are good because of the Holy Spirit and his faith.”¹⁶ The same is true of a devout wife and mother. Tending to the needs of crying children, washing diapers, and making beds are forms of Christian service which no one should denigrate.¹⁷ So fervent was Luther in advocating marriage that he branded the Roman stress on celibacy a mark of Anti-Christ.¹⁸ Luther then directed people away from monasteries populated by celibates to the Christian home where father, mother, and children served God through serving one another and therefore enjoyed life without dichotomy.

One reason why Luther found monasticism so distasteful was because it encouraged the belief that begging was an especially pious expression of Christian humility. During the Middle Ages beggars were very common, and the church admonished its members to give alms generously. Many people were poverty-stricken due to circumstances they could not control, and for such people Luther had a tender heart, and to them he gave lavishly. The monks, however, assumed poverty voluntarily because they regarded it as a means of

¹⁴Luther, *The Sixth Commandment, Large Catechism* in *Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert, *et. al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1952) 392.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 393.

¹⁶Quoted by William H. Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 146.

¹⁷*What Luther Says*, II, ed. E. M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) #2766.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, #2779.

acquiring merit in heaven, a view which Luther came to abhor. The German reformer emphasized the dignity of work as a calling, a service of love for one's neighbors.

When the gifts of one's calling are employed faithfully in loving service the Christian performs works which are truly good. They please God, benefit one's neighbors, and give joy to those who do them.

If this truth could be impressed upon the poor people, a servant girl would dance for joy and praise and thank God; and with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would gain a treasure such as all who pass for the greatest saints do not have.¹⁹

Such a servant girl would find satisfaction in her work, her work in the *sacred* estate, and she would experience the joy of life without dichotomy.

In Luther's understanding of the Christian life the believer's self-image as a servant is a fundamental motif. In the reformer's words, "a Christian lives not in himself but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love."²⁰

To those who claimed to possess saving faith but failed to demonstrate an active concern for their neighbors' needs Luther issued a warning about the "illusion of faith." He insisted that emotional responses to the gospel are not necessarily evidences of genuine faith. Active love, expressing itself in good works, is the only reliable external index of faith. Such love, Luther held, would extend to sharing one's earthly goods with a neighbor in need. Just as Christ emptied himself when he left heaven to become man (Phil 2:5), believers should sacrifice their possessions for the benefit of those in need. When illness strikes Christians should aid the sick, even at the risk of contagion to themselves. Luther did so himself by remaining in Wittenberg to minister to the sick and dying during an epidemic of bubonic plague.²¹

In rejecting the sacred/secular, clergy/laity dichotomy of the medieval church Luther denied that the Christian life should be ascetic in character. He believed that God had created the world for his own glory, but also for the enjoyment of his people. Luther therefore encouraged Christians to engage in, for example, the visual and musical arts, and to enjoy the excitement of athletic contests. For

¹⁹Luther, *Large Catechism*, 385.

²⁰Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 371.

²¹See the discussion of Luther's social ethics in Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. R. C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 294ff.

music he had a particular love, and his contribution to Christian hymnody was immense.

Luther appreciated greatly the aesthetic value of music, so he did not react against Catholic ceremonialism as strongly as did, for example, Zwingli and Calvin. Luther believed that music is a gift from God, an ideal means by which believers can express their loving adoration. He found devotional music a weapon with which to fight against temptation, and in order to promote Christian piety through music he composed thirty-seven hymns, all in the German language for use by entire congregations. No longer would Gregorian chants sung in Latin by monastic choirs dominate the services of the church. Worship became a corporate experience in the Reformation, and bodies of the faithful joined in singing such Lutheran compositions as "Jesus Christ Our God and Savior," "Lord, Keep us Steadfast in Thy Love," "From Trouble Deep I Cry to Thee," and, of course, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Luther said, "I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise."²²

In the late Middle Ages, as in modern times, the divine gift of music was often employed for perverse uses, a practice which caused Luther great dismay. His insight into the character and proper role of music offers valuable guidance for the church in all ages.

That it is good and pleasing to God to sing spiritual songs is, I think, not hidden to any Christian The kings and prophets of the Old Testament . . . praised God with singing and playing, with poetry and all kinds of string music. . . . St. Paul too instituted this in I Corinthians 14:15 and bids the Colossians (3:16) heartily to sing spiritual songs and psalms unto the Lord in order that thereby God's Word and Christian doctrine might be used and practiced in diverse ways

I greatly desire that youth . . . be trained in music and other proper arts, . . . whereby it might be weaned from the love ballads and sex songs and learn something beneficial and take up the good with relish, as befits youth. Nor am I at all of the opinion that all the arts are to be overthrown by the Gospel, as some superspiritual people protest, but I would gladly see all the arts, especially music, in the service of Him who has given and created them.²³

Contrary to Zwingli and Calvin, who feared that music might distract people from giving attention to the sermon, Luther became the father of the singing Protestant Church. Calvin eliminated all but congregational singing of psalms in unison, and Zwingli forbade the use of musical instruments in services of worship. Luther, however,

²² *What Luther Says*, II, #3091.

²³ *Ibid.*, #3095.

avored the use of instruments, and the German Lutheran Churches went on to excel all other Protestant bodies of the sixteenth century in the development of their hymnody. J. S. Bach is a fine example of Luther's enduring influence. Bach employed music as a vehicle by which to proclaim the great themes of Reformation theology by composing to correspond with the doctrines of Luther's catechisms. He was guided by biblical principles in both the words and the form of his music. Bach wrote, "all music [should] have as its sole aim the glory of God and the recreation of the soul. Where this rule is not observed there is no real music, but only a devilish blubbering and whining."²⁴

Luther rejected the contention that the Christian life should be one of asceticism. He issued a ringing affirmation of God's good gifts, the enjoyment of which is a wholesome pleasure to be desired, and the Jesuits in the Counter-Reformation charged that more people had been damned by Luther's hymns than by his sermons and books.

From Luther the church has received a rich legacy in doctrine and practice. In the providence of God it was he who led the way to demolish the dichotomy which had kept people from harmony with God and fellowship with one another, and from enjoying the Christian life in its wholeness, a wholeness which is realized by those who, though they are kings and priests, find their deepest satisfaction in being servants.

²⁴Quoted by Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967) 149; *Luther's Works*, 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) contains all of Luther's hymns with helpful editorial comments.