

LUTHER'S
THREE TREATISES

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CHRISTIAN NOBILITY,
THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH
& THE FREEDOM OF THE CHRISTIAN

MARTIN LUTHER

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INTRODUCTION

by Steven Wedgworth

Martin Luther is justly celebrated as the father of the Protestant Reformation, and laymen in Reformed and Evangelical churches are familiar with his general life story. His posting of the 95 Theses and heroic stance at the Diet of Worms are identity-forming narratives for even the broadest of evangelical traditions. And yet, for this same broad evangelical tradition, nearly all of Luther's books go unread. Even members of Reformed churches tend to read only *The Bondage of the Will*, being scared off from going any further by the later dogmatic controversies that separated Calvinists from Lutherans. When compared to the books by Calvin or the Puritans which line our shelves, Luther can hardly be found! It is therefore with eagerness and gratitude that I can introduce to you a small correction to this unfortunate state of affairs, a new edition of his famous "Three Treatises." This trilogy, made up of Luther's *Letter to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of the Christian*, contains the heart of the Reformation. The themes and arguments found in these treatises are not the peculiar marks of one denominational tradition but are indeed the common possession of all magisterial Protestants.

These treatises were written in short succession, respectively in August, October, and November of 1520. This energetic season

AN OPEN LETTER
TO THE CHRISTIAN
NOBILITY

OF THE GERMAN NATION
CONCERNING THE REFORM
OF THE CHRISTIAN ESTATE

Translated by C.M. Jacobs

LUTHER'S INTRODUCTION

To the esteemed and Reverend Master Nicholas Von Amsdorf, Licentiate of Holy Scripture and Canon at Wittenberg, my special and kind friend; Doctor Martin Luther.

The grace and peace of God be with thee, esteemed and reverend dear sir and friend.

The time to keep silence has passed and the time to speak is come, as saith Ecclesiastes (3:7). I have followed out our intention and brought together some matters touching the reform of the Christian Estate, to be laid before the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, in the hope that God may deign to help His Church through the efforts of the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent. I am sending the whole thing to your Reverence, that you may pass judgment on it and, if necessary, improve it.

I know full well that I shall not escape the charge of presumption in that I, a despised monk, venture to address such high and great estates on matters of such moment, and to give advice to people of such high intelligence. I shall offer no apologies, no matter who may chide me. Perchance I owe my God and the world another piece of folly, and I have now made up my mind honestly to pay that debt, if I can do so, and for once to become court-jester; if I fail, I still have

one advantage—no one need buy me a cap or cut me my comb. It is a question which one will put the bells on the other. I must fulfill the proverb, “Whatever the world does, a monk must be in it, even if he has to be painted in.” More than once a fool has spoken wisely, and wise men often have been arrant fools, as Paul says, “If any one will be wise, let him become a fool” (1 Cor. 3:18). Moreover since I am not only a fool, but also a sworn doctor of Holy Scripture, I am glad for the chance to fulfill my doctor’s oath in this fool’s way.

I pray you, make my excuses to the moderately intelligent, for I know not how to earn the grace and favor of the immoderately intelligent, though I have often sought to do so with great pains. Henceforth I neither desire nor regard their favor. God help us to seek not our own glory, but His alone! Amen.

Wittenberg, in the house of the Augustinians, on the Eve of St. John the Baptist (June 23rd), in the year fifteen hundred and twenty.

To His Most Illustrious and Mighty Imperial Majesty, and to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, Doctor Martin Luther.

Grace and power from God, Most Illustrious Majesty, and most gracious and dear Lords.

It is not out of sheer frowardness or rashness that I, a single, poor man, have undertaken to address your worships. The distress and oppression which weigh down all the Estates of Christendom, especially of Germany, and which move not me alone, but everyone to cry out time and again, and to pray for help, have forced me even now to cry aloud that God may inspire someone with His Spirit to lend this suffering nation a helping hand. Ofttimes the councils have made some pretense at reformation, but their attempts have been cleverly hindered by the guile of certain men and things have gone from bad to worse. I now intend, by the help of God, to throw some light upon the wiles and wickedness of these men, to the end that when they are known, they may not henceforth be so hurtful and so great a hindrance. God has given us a noble youth to be our

head and thereby has awakened great hopes of good in many hearts; wherefore it is meet that we should do our part and profitably use this time of grace.

In this whole matter the first and most important thing is that we take earnest heed not to enter on it trusting in great might or in human reason, even though all power in the world were ours; for God cannot and will not suffer a good work to be begun with trust in our own power or reason. Such works He crushes ruthlessly to earth, as it is written in the 33rd Psalm, "There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength" (v. 16). On this account, I fear, it came to pass of old that the good Emperors Frederick I and II, and many other German emperors were shamefully oppressed and trodden underfoot by the popes, although all the world feared them. It may be that they relied on their own might more than on God, and therefore they had to fall. In our own times, too, what was it that raised the bloodthirsty Pope Julius II to such heights? Nothing else, I fear, except that France, the Germans, and Venice relied upon themselves. The children of Benjamin slew 42,000 Israelites because the latter relied on their own strength.

That it may not so fare with us and our noble young Emperor Charles, we must be sure that in this matter we are dealing not with men, but with the princes of Hell, who can fill the world with war and bloodshed, but whom war and bloodshed do not overcome. We must go at this work despairing of physical force and humbly trusting God; we must seek God's help with earnest prayer, and fix our minds on nothing else than the misery and distress of suffering Christendom, without regard to the deserts of evil men. Otherwise we may start the game with great prospect of success, but when we get well into it the evil spirits will stir up such confusion that the whole world will swim in blood, and yet nothing will come of it. Let us act wisely, therefore, and in the fear of God. The more force we use, the greater our disaster if we do not act humbly and in God's fear. The popes and the Romans

have hitherto been able, by the devil's help, to set kings at odds with one another, and they may well be able to do it again, if we proceed by our own might and cunning, without God's help.

I. THE THREE WALLS OF THE ROMANISTS

The Romanists, with great adroitness, have built three walls about them, behind which they have hitherto defended themselves in such wise that no one has been able to reform them; and this has been the cause of terrible corruption throughout all Christendom.

First, when pressed by the temporal power, they have made decrees and said that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the other hand, that the spiritual is above the temporal power. Second, when the attempt is made to reprove them out of the Scriptures, they raise the objection that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to no one except the pope. Third, if threatened with a council, they answer with the fable that no one can call a council but the pope.

In this wise they have slyly stolen from us our three rods,¹ that they may go unpunished, and have ensconced themselves within the safe stronghold of these three walls, that they may practice all the knavery and wickedness which we now see. Even when they have been compelled to hold a council they have weakened its power in advance by previously binding the princes with an oath to let them

1. The three rods for the punishment of an evil pope.

remain as they are. Moreover, they have given the pope full authority over all the decisions of the council, so that it is all one whether there are many councils or no councils—except that they deceive us with puppet-shows and sham-battles. So terribly do they fear for their skin in a really free council! And they have intimidated kings and princes by making them believe it would be an offense against God not to obey them in all these knavish, crafty deceptions. Now God help us, and give us one of the trumpets with which the walls of Jericho were overthrown (Josh. 6:20), that we may blow down these walls of straw and paper, and may set free the Christian rods or the punishment of sin, bringing to light the craft and deceit of the devil, to the end that through punishment we may reform ourselves, and once more attain God's favor.

Against the first wall we will direct our first attack. It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the "spiritual estate"; princes, lords, artisans, and farmers the temporal estate. That is indeed a fine bit of lying and hypocrisy. Yet no one should be frightened by it, and for this reason—namely, that all Christians are truly of the "spiritual estate," and there is among them no difference at all but that of office, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12. We are all one body, yet every member has its own work, whereby it serves every other, all because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all alike Christians (1 Cor. 12:12ff), for baptism, Gospel and faith alone make us "spiritual" and a Christian people.

But that a pope or a bishop anoints, confers tonsures, ordains, consecrates, or prescribes dress unlike that of the laity—this may make hypocrites and graven images,² but it never makes a Christian or "spiritual" man. Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood, as St. Peter says in 1 Peter 2, "Ye are a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom," (1 Pet. 2:9) and the book of Revelation says, "Thou

2. Blockheads.

hast made us by thy blood to be priests and kings” (Rev. 5:10). For if we had no higher consecration than pope or bishop gives, the consecration by pope or bishop would never make a priest, nor might anyone either say Mass or preach a sermon or give absolution. Therefore when the bishop consecrates, it is the same thing as if he, in the place and stead of the whole congregation, all of whom have like power, were to take one out of their number and charge him to use this power for the others; just as though ten brothers, all king’s sons and equal heirs, were to choose one of themselves to rule the inheritance or them all—they would all be kings and equal in power, though one of them would be charged with the duty of ruling.

To make it still clearer. If a little group of pious Christian laymen were taken captive and set down in a wilderness, and had among them no priest consecrated by a bishop, and if there in the wilderness they were to agree in choosing one of themselves, married or unmarried, and were to charge him with the office of baptizing, saying Mass, absolving and preaching, such a man would be as truly a priest as though all bishops and popes had consecrated him. That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution, which would be impossible unless we were all priests. This great grace and power of baptism and of the Christian Estate they have well-nigh destroyed and caused us to forget through the canon law.³ It was in the manner aforesaid that Christians in olden days chose from their number bishops and priests, who were afterwards confirmed by other bishops, without all the show which now obtains. It was thus that Saints Augustine, Ambrose, and Cyprian became bishops.

Since, then, the temporal authorities are baptized with same baptism and have the same faith and Gospel as we, we must grant that

3. The canon law, called by Luther throughout this treatise and elsewhere, the “spiritual law,” is a general name for the decrees of councils (“canons” in the strict sense) and decisions of the popes (“decretals,” “constitutions,” etc.), promulgated by authority of the popes, and collected in the so-called *Corpus juris canonici*.

they are priests and bishops, and count their office one which has a proper and a useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, though it is not seemly that every one should exercise the office. Nay, just because we are all in like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of all of us. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and the command of the community, and should it happen that one chosen for such an office were deposed for malfeasance, he would then be just what he was before he held office. Therefore a priest in Christendom is nothing else than an office-holder. While he is in office, he has precedence; holder when deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like the rest. Beyond all doubt, then, a priest is no longer a priest when he is deposed. But now they have invented indelible characters,⁴ and prate that a deposed priest is nevertheless something different from a mere layman. They even dream that a priest can never become a layman, or be anything else than a priest. All this is mere talk and man-made law.

From all this it follows that there is really no difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, “spirituals” and “temporals,” as they call them, except that of office and work, but not of “estate”; or they are all of the same estate⁵—true priests, bishops and popes—

4. The *character indelebilis*, or “indelible mark,” received authoritative statement in the bull *Exultate Deo* (1439). Eugenius IV, summing up the Decrees of the Council of Florence, says: “Among these sacraments there are three—baptism, confirmation, and orders—which indelibly impress upon the soul a character, i.e., a certain spiritual mark which distinguishes them from the rest” (Mirbt, *Quellen*, 2d ed., No. 150).

5. Medieval Christians divided people into three estates—the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. Luther here is denying a spiritual distinction between the clergy and the laity.

though they are not all engaged in the same work, just as all priests and monks have not the same work. This is the teaching of St. Paul in Romans 12 (Rom. 12:4ff) and 1 Corinthians 12 (1 Cor. 12:12ff), and of St. Peter (1 Pet. 2:9), as I have said above, namely, that we are all one body of Christ, the Head, all members one of another. Christ has not two different bodies, one “temporal,” the other “spiritual.” He is one Head, and He has one body.

Therefore, just as those who are now called “spiritual”—priests, bishops or popes—are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities—they bear sword and rod with which to punish the evil and to protect the good (Rom. 13:4). A cobbler, a smith, a farmer—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.

See now how Christian is the decree which says that the temporal power is not above the “spiritual estate” and may not punish it.⁶ That is as much as to say that the hand shall lend no aid when the eye is suffering. Is it not unnatural, not to say unchristian, that one member should not help another and prevent its destruction? Verily, the more honorable the member, the more should the others help. I say then, since the temporal power is ordained of God to punish evil-doers and to protect them that do well (Rom. 13), it should therefore be left free to perform its office without hindrance

6. The sharp distinction which the Roman Church drew between clergy and laity found practical application in the contention that the clergy should be exempt from the jurisdiction of the civil courts.

through the whole body of Christendom without respect of persons, whether it affect pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or anybody else. For if the mere act that the temporal power has a smaller place among the Christian offices than has the office of preachers or confessors, or of the clergy, then the tailors, cobblers, masons, carpenters, pot-boys, tapsters, farmers, and all the secular tradesmen, should also be prevented from providing pope, bishops, priests, and monks with shoes, clothing, houses, meat, and drink, and from paying them tribute. But if these laymen are allowed to do their work unhindered, what do the Roman scribes mean by their laws with which they withdraw themselves from the jurisdiction of the temporal Christian power, only so that they may be free to do evil and to fulfill what St. Peter has said: "There shall be false teachers among you, and through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you" (2 Pet. 2:1ff).

On this account the Christian temporal power should exercise its office without let or hindrance, regardless whether it be pope, bishop, or priest whom it affects; whoever is guilty, let him suffer. All that the canon law has said to the contrary is sheer invention of Roman presumption. For thus saith St. Paul to all Christians, "Let every soul (I take that to mean the pope's soul also) be subject unto the higher powers; for they bear not the sword in vain, but are the ministers of God for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well" (Rom. 13:1, 4). St. Peter also says, "Submit yourselves unto every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, for so is the will of God" (1 Pet. 2:13, 15). He has also prophesied that such men shall come as will despise the temporal authorities (1 Pet. 2:10), and this has come to pass through the canon law.

So then, I think this first paper-wall is overthrown, since the temporal power has become a member of the body of Christendom, and is of the "spiritual estate," though its work is of a temporal nature. Therefore its work should extend freely and without hindrance to

all the members of the whole body; it should punish and use force whenever guilt deserves or necessity demands, without regard to pope, bishops and priests—let them hurl threats and bans as much as they will.

This is why guilty priests, if they are surrendered to the temporal law, are first deprived of their priestly dignities, which would not be right unless the temporal sword had previously had authority over them by divine right. Again, it is intolerable that in the canon law so much importance is attached to the freedom, life, and property of the clergy, as though the laity were not also as spiritual and as good Christians as they, or did not belong to the Church. Why are your life and limb, your property and honor so free, and mine not? We are all alike Christians, and have baptism, faith, Spirit, and all things alike. If a priest is killed, the land is laid under interdict⁷—why not when a peasant is killed? Whence comes this great distinction between those who are equally Christians? Only from human laws and inventions!

Moreover, it can be no good spirit who has invented such exceptions and granted to sin such license and impunity. For if we are bound to strive against the works and words of the evil spirit, and to drive him out in whatever way we can, as Christ commands and His apostles, ought we, then, to suffer it in silence when the pope or his underlings are bent on devilish words and works? Ought we for the sake of men to allow the suppression of divine commandments and truths which we have sworn in baptism to support with life and limb? Of a truth we should then have to answer for all the souls that would thereby be abandoned and led astray.

It must therefore have been the very prince of devils who said what is written in the canon law: “If the pope were so scandalously bad as

7. The interdict is the prohibition of the administration of the sacraments and of the other rites of the Church within the territory upon which the interdict is laid.

to lead souls in crowds to the devil, yet he could not be deposed.”⁸ On this accursed and devilish foundation they build at Rome, and think that we should let all the world go to the devil, rather than resist their knavery. If the act that one man is set over others were sufficient reason why he should escape punishment, then no Christian could punish another, since Christ commands that every man shall esteem himself the lowliest and the least (Matt. 18:4).

Where sin is, there is no escape from punishment, as St. Gregory also writes that we are indeed all equal, but guilt puts us in subjection one to another. Now we see how they whom God and the apostles have made subject to the temporal sword deal with Christendom, depriving it of its liberty by their own wickedness, without warrant of Scripture. It is to be feared that this is a game of antichrist or a sign that he is close at hand.⁹

The second wall is still more flimsy and worthless. They wish to be the only masters of the Holy Scriptures even though in all their lives they learn nothing from them. They assume for themselves sole authority, and with insolent juggling of words they would persuade us that the pope, whether he be a bad man or a good man, cannot err in matters of faith; and yet they cannot prove a single letter of it. Hence it comes that so many heretical and unchristian, nay, even unnatural ordinances have a place in the canon law, of which, however, there is no present need to speak. For since they think that the Holy Spirit never leaves them, be they never so unlearned and wicked, they make bold to decree whatever they will. And if it were true, where would be the need or use of the Holy Scriptures? Let us burn them, and be satisfied with the unlearned lords at Rome, who are possessed of the Holy Spirit—although He can possess only

8. Decretum of Gratian, *Dist. XL*, c.6.

9. Calling the Pope the antichrist actually has a long history among medieval Reformers, and was not unique to Luther and Protestants.

pious hearts! Unless I had read it myself, I could not have believed that the devil would make such clumsy pretensions at Rome, and find a following.

But not to fight them with mere words, we will quote the Scriptures. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14: "If to anyone something better is revealed, though he be sitting and listening to another in God's Word, then the first, who is speaking, shall hold his peace and give place" (1 Cor. 14:30). What would be the use of this commandment, if we were only to believe him who does the talking or who has the highest seat? Christ also says in John 6 that all Christians shall be taught of God (v. 45). Thus it may well happen that the pope and his followers are wicked men, and no true Christians, not taught of God, not having true understanding. On the other hand, an ordinary man may have true understanding. Why then should we not follow him? Has not the pope erred many times? Who would help Christendom when the pope errs, if we were not to believe another, who had the Scriptures on his side, more than the pope?

Therefore it is a wickedly invented fable, and they cannot produce a letter in defense of it, that the interpretation of Scripture or the confirmation of its interpretation belongs to the pope alone. They have themselves usurped this power, and although they allege that this power was given to Peter when the keys were given to him, it is plain enough that the keys were not given to Peter alone, but to the whole community. Moreover, the keys were not ordained for doctrine or government, but only for the binding and loosing of sin (John 20:22ff), and whatever further power of the keys they arrogate to themselves is mere invention. But Christ's word to Peter, "I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:32) cannot be applied to the pope, since the majority of the popes have been without faith, as they must themselves confess. Besides, it is not only for Peter that Christ prayed, but also for all apostles and Christians, as He says in John 17, "Father, I pray for those whom Thou hast given Me, and

not for these only, but for all who believe on Me through their word” (John 17:9, 20). Is not this clear enough?

Only think of it yourself! They must confess that there are pious Christians among us, who have the true faith, Spirit, understanding, word and mind of Christ. Why then should we reject their word and understanding and follow the pope, who has neither faith nor Spirit? That would be to deny the whole faith and the Christian Church. Moreover, it is not the pope alone who is always in the right, if the article of the Creed is correct: “I believe one holy Christian Church”; otherwise the prayer must run: “I believe in the pope at Rome,” and so reduce the Christian Church to one man—which would be nothing else than a devilish and hellish error.

Besides, if we are all priests, as was said above, and all have one faith, one Gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is correct or incorrect in matters of faith? What becomes of the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 2: “He that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man,” (1 Cor. 2:15) and 2 Corinthians 4: “We have all the same Spirit of faith” (2 Cor. 4:13)? Why, then, should not we perceive what squares with faith and what does not, as well as does an unbelieving pope?

All these and many other texts should make us bold and free, and we should not allow the Spirit of liberty, as Paul calls Him (2 Cor. 3:17), to be frightened off by the fabrications of the popes, but we ought to go boldly forward to test all that they do or leave undone, according to our interpretation of the Scriptures, which rests on faith, and compel them to follow not their own interpretation, but the one that is better. In the olden days Abraham had to listen to his Sarah, although she was in more complete subjection to him than we are to anyone on earth (Gen. 21:12). Balaam’s ass, also, was wiser than the prophet himself (Num. 22:28). If God then spoke by an ass against a prophet, why should He not be able even now to speak by a righteous

man against the pope? In like manner St. Paul rebukes St. Peter as a man in error (Gal. 2:11ff). Therefore it behooves every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to rebuke all errors.

The third wall falls of itself when the first two are down. For when the pope acts contrary to the Pope and Scriptures, it is our duty to stand by the Scriptures, to reprove him, and to constrain him, according to the word of Christ in Matthew 18: "If thy brother sin against thee, go and tell it him between thee and him alone; if he hear thee not, then take with thee one or two more; if he hear them not, tell it to the Church; if he hear not the Church, consider him a heathen" (Matt. 18:15). Here every member is commanded to care for every other. How much rather should we do this when the member that does evil is a ruling member, and by his evil-doing is the cause of much harm and offense to the rest! But if I am to accuse him before the Church, I must bring the Church together.

They have no basis in Scripture or their contention that it belongs to the pope alone to call a council or confirm its actions, for this is based merely upon their own laws, which are valid only insofar as they are not injurious to Christendom or contrary to the laws of God. When the pope deserves punishment, such laws go out of force, since it is injurious to Christendom not to punish him by means of a council.

Thus we read in Acts 15 that it was not St. Peter who called the apostolic council, but the apostles and elders (Acts 15:6). If, then, that right had belonged to St. Peter alone, the council would not have been a Christian council, but a mere heretical gathering. Even the council of Nicaea—the most famous of all—was neither called nor confirmed by the bishop of Rome, but by the Emperor Constantine, and many other emperors after him did the like, yet these councils were the most Christian of all. But if the pope alone had the right to call councils, then all these councils must have been heretical. Moreover,