

Ministering to God's Free People

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Luther's Treatise on The Freedom of a Christian Applied to Our Ministry

1520 was a year of action. 1520 was a year of polemics. It was a year of climaxes. Eck was stirring the fire in Rome. On June 15th the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, was completed, calling for a recantation on the part of Luther within 60 days or excommunication. Returning to Germany, armed with this bull, militant Eck was going to solve the Lutheran problem in quite a different way from mild, mediating Miltitz.

Luther, too, was active. The debate with Eck in 1519 had forced him to greater clarity concerning the papacy. Aggressive Eck forced Luther on his part to speak out. Although Luther had earlier promised to remain silent if his opponents would do the same, that time was past. His most virulent attacks upon the papacy and the papal system came in two powerful writings in 1520, two of the three famous reformatory writings. His *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* was a frontal attack against the three walls behind which the papacy was entrenched, its sole right to interpret Scripture, its claim for the dominance of the state by the church, its claim for the sole right to call a church council. Soon a second writing was aimed at Rome's entire sacramental system in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Both of these writings were nothing less than polemical. Luther was engaged in a holy war for the souls of men. The church, Christians, must be set free from the papal bondage.

But Miltitz was still trying to mediate, although neither the papists nor Luther shared his confidence in his efforts. He attended a chapter meeting of the Augustinians on August 28 at Eisleben. The monks promised that Luther would be asked to write a letter to Leo, assuring Leo that he had never meant to attack the pope in person. When Miltitz met with Luther himself at Lichtenberg on October 12th, Luther promised to send the letter to the pope within twelve days. He also agreed that the letter should be dated September 6 so that the appearance of intimidation by the papal bull might be avoided.

Luther wrote the letter. With it he sent a gift to the pope. The gift was the third of the reformatory writings of 1520, his treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*.

If the first two reformatory writings were polemical in the fullest sense, this one was almost completely lacking in polemics. Luther himself recognized this. In his letter to Leo he had this to say of his treatise:

Finally, that I may not approach you empty-handed, blessed father, I am sending you this little treatise dedicated to you as a token of peace and good hope. From this book you may judge with what studies I should prefer to be more profitably occupied, as I could be, provided your godless flatterers would permit me and had permitted me in the past (p. 343).¹

Thus the Latin text of this important treatise was dedicated to the pope, a peace offering to a pope who may never have read it.

Historians have showered encomiums on this little book. Kolde calls it "perhaps the most beautiful of Luther's writings,"² Koehler similarly *eins seiner allerbesten Werke*.³ Grimm says that it is "one of the finest

¹ All references to Luther's treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian* are quoted from *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), vol. 31, pp. 327-377.

² Quoted in *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), vol. II, p. 300.

³ Joh. Ph. Koehler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1917), p. 354.

passages on Christian service in religious literature.”⁴ Ida Walz Blaney in her *The Age of Luther* is most profuse with her praise. She calls it “a Christian canticle, composed as an ode, intense, lofty, ecstatic in its lyricism. With unwonted acumen a searching mind here penetrates to a new perception of the Christian.”⁵ Most recently, Bergendoff calls it “this devotional classic of Christendom.”⁶ Schaff, the great church historian, says: “It is full of heroic faith and childlike simplicity. It takes rank with the best books of Luther, and rises far above the angry controversies of his age, during which he composed it, in the full possession of the positive truth and peace of the religion of Christ.” He points out, “This *Irenicon* must meet with the approval of every true Christian, whether Catholic or Protestant.”⁷ Not all Catholics agree with Schaff. Grisar, a Catholic historian of a polemical age, surprisingly calls this “the most mischievous” of all three reformatory writings. Could that be because of its simple, Scriptural approach, which can be powerfully convincing? At any rate, it deserves the attention of every Lutheran Christian, particularly of every Lutheran pastor. It deserves to be read, studied, applied also particularly on this year of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation.

It is called a treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*. Luther in his letter to Pope Leo spoke of its contents as follows: “Unless I am mistaken, however, it contains the whole of Christian life in a brief form” (p. 343). When we think of its contents we cannot help being reminded of the two propositions, seemingly contradictory, with which Luther introduces his treatise and which form its two parts. “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (p. 344). If we don’t remember much else about this treatise from reading it in college, these two propositions have stuck.

We shall in our study not attempt a detailed analysis and outline of this treatise on the basis of these two propositions. We shall not attempt to prove the Scripturalness of what Luther presents in this treatise. This will be patently evident to every Scripturally informed Christian. We shall take certain important truths Luther presents, hear what he has to say on them, and apply them to our ministry today. We have therefore entitled this paper: “Ministering to God’s Free People,” with the subtitle: “Luther’s Treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian* Applied to Our Ministry.” Three points will occupy our special attention:

- I. We must in our ministry remember the dual nature of the Christian.
- II. We must bear in mind the wondrous freedom that is ours by faith.
- III. We must never forget the proper role of works.

I

In ministering to God’s free people we must remember the dual nature of the Christian. To this Luther directs our attention at the very beginning of the treatise. This dual nature is involved in the two parts of his treatise and forms the basis for the two seemingly contradictory assertions already referred to. Luther writes:

Man has a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which men refer to as the soul, he is called a spiritual, inner, or new man. According to the bodily nature, which men refer to as flesh, he is called a carnal, outward, or old man, of whom the Apostle writes in II Corinthians 4, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.” (p. 344)

Although the Latin text makes this assertion of “man,” *homo*, it is evident from the German that Luther is speaking, not of natural man, not of man in general, but of the *Christian* man. In German he wrote that *ein jeglicher Christenmensch ist zweierlei Natur*.⁸

⁴ Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 135.

⁵ Ida Walz Blaney, *The Age of Luther* (New York: Vantage Press, 1957), p. 173.

⁶ Conrad Bergendoff, *The Church and the Lutheran Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), p. 45.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), vol. VII, p. 224.

⁸ St. L., XIX, 989.

This twofold nature of the Christian Luther speaks of as something “obvious.” Every Christian sees it in himself, even as did St. Paul. The Christian is saint and sinner, *simul iustus et peccator*, spirit and flesh.

When Luther speaks of a spiritual nature and a bodily nature and says that one is called the soul and the other flesh, one might gain the impression that he is reiterating the dualistic view of man which saw man as soul and body, the soul being good, the body evil. The early church rejected this dualism, found in Manichaeism, in Gnosticism, and stemming from Plato. It is unscriptural.

Luther does not simply identify the new man with the soul in the sense of the nonmaterial part of man. The new man, the inner man, he says, “by faith is created in the image of God” (p. 359) and so is not a natural part of man after the fall. He speaks of this new man as spiritual because faith is a thing of the spirit, not of the body. It is something inward. What happens to the body cannot really affect the soul. He writes:

What can it profit the soul if the body is well, free, and active, and eats, drinks and does as it pleases? ... How will poor health or imprisonment or hunger or thirst or any other external misfortune harm the soul? (p. 345).

Luther points out that these external things do not “produce Christian righteousness or freedom.” “The righteousness and the freedom of the soul require something far different since the things which have been mentioned could be done by any wicked person” (p. 345). So if Luther distinguishes the new man from the body, it is to show that the new man is not produced by what happens to the body, by outward works.

On the other hand, it is evident that when Luther speaks of the bodily nature and flesh, he is not speaking simply of man’s material being, as did the dualists. Luther speaks of “the contrary WILL in his own flesh” (p. 359). The will is not something that is simply bodily, in the sense of material, but is something inward. Yet Luther recognized, as did St. Paul that the body was the instrument of this contrary will, so that he, quoting St. Paul, speaks of “another law in his members,” and says that he “pommels his body and subdues it.” So although the old man is not identified with the body as such, he is closely associated with the body. Flesh, however, is a broader term, used by Luther as it is used by St. Paul, of man’s sinful nature. Otherwise he could hardly speak of a will in the flesh. Luther simply uses the terminology of Scripture. The Christian is both spiritual and carnal, both new and old man, both inner and outer man. The new man is Spirit-wrought, created by faith; the old man is the perverted will of natural flesh. Both make up the one man we call a Christian.

Luther considered it of great importance to recognize this dual nature of the Christian. He writes:

Because of this diversity of nature the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same man, since these two men in the same man contradict each other, “for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh,” according to Gal. 5 (p. 344).

If this twofold nature is not recognized in the Christian, one will not understand Scripture and apply it properly to the Christian. One will confuse justification and sanctification. In speaking about these distinctions, Luther also points to the distinction of Law and Gospel. He says: “Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises” (p. 348). He then points out the function of each, which again involves the two natures of the Christian.

How important it is for us in our ministry to recognize that the two exist side by side. The Christian is never either totally new man or totally old man, sometimes one, sometimes the other. But he is both at all times while he is still in this world of sin. To understand this is vital for our ministry and for an understanding of Scripture and its proper application. And it will be well for us to let God’s free people also recognize this. Then they will better understand themselves as Christians.

How can our Savior say to Peter in one moment, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona,” (Matt. 16:17), and only shortly thereafter say to this same Peter, “Get thee behind me, Satan” (16:23)? Was Peter in the one instance a believer, in the other a total unbeliever? We can understand this only when we recognize the dual nature that Peter, as a Christian man, had. When Jesus called Peter blessed, He did so after his faithful

confession: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This confession was Spirit-wrought; it was Peter’s new man speaking. Jesus Himself told Peter: “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” On the other hand, when Peter was rebuked as Satan, he had spoken against Jesus’ revelation that he must “go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.” When Peter said: “Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee,” it was Peter’s flesh and blood speaking, not his faith. It was Satan speaking and tempting Christ through Peter. Peter at the time did not realize this. He may have thought that he was speaking because of a deep love for his master. He did not want to see Him suffer and die. He did not want his Lord rejected by the leaders of the Jews. This must never happen. And yet, it was not faith, but flesh that was speaking these things. Christ makes that evident.

As we minister to Christ’s free people, to Christians, we need to encourage the fruits of faith and reprove the works produced by the flesh. This is a simple and self-evident statement, but it is not always easy to carry out in practice. In our preaching, it must be evident when we are addressing the new man and when the old man, even though we do not necessarily announce this to the hearers directly. We must preach the Gospel in such a way that it will give comfort and strengthening to the new man but not become license for the old man. We must preach the law in such a way that it will crucify the flesh, reprove sin, but not discourage the new man. We must reprove sin, reprove the old man, even when he seemingly has good intentions, as did Peter. We must not let the glittering vices of the old man deceive us.

Recognizing the dual nature of the Christian will also prevent us from expecting perfection in the lives of our Christian members, will prevent us from being unduly shocked when the old man does give evidence of himself. It will prevent us from immediately denying the Christianity of someone whose old man has proved his presence. It will keep us from immediately condemning as an unbeliever someone who has fallen into sin, someone in whose life the new man is not quite as evident as we should like it. Luther to us may seem to have been unduly indulgent at times toward imperfections in Christian living. We are amazed at his attitude toward Philip of Hesse’s inability to control his sexual life. On the other hand, in matters of doctrine, that involve the Christian faith, Luther could not yield a single truth revealed in Scripture. In doing this, Luther was not granting license to sin, or thinking lightly of sin. But he did realize that no Christian would in his Christian living be able to divest himself of his old man. The dual nature is always there. What we will look for is not perfection, but warfare. We will look for this that there is at least a struggle against the flesh, against sin. And even while we will recognize that the dual nature of man will ever lead to this that sin is still present in the lives of God’s free people, we will never give the impression of granting it license, of thinking lightly of it. Sometimes this looks like a contradiction. But this is one of those seeming contradictions of which Luther speaks that we find also in Scripture when seemingly contradictory things are said of the same person.

One further thought. It is well that we also teach the Christians under our care about their dual nature. This will help them to understand themselves better and can be an asset in pastoral counseling.

William E. Hulm in his *Counseling and Theology*⁹ speaks of four basic needs that man has psychologically. One of these is the need for understanding. He points out that the counselee must understand his problem in terms of himself and others involved. This Paul does for himself in Romans 7:18–25. He shows an understanding of his dual nature: the new man, who desires what is godly; his flesh, in which dwells no good thing. He sees himself delighting in the law of God after the inward man. He sees also another law in his members, bringing him into captivity to the law of sin. He has examined himself and has gained understanding of his inner being and the warfare going on there. The new man is made wretched by the presence of the old man. But he recognizes that the old man is no longer his real self. “It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” And he knows that a grand deliverance is his through Jesus Christ His Lord.

It is well for our Christians to understand themselves, to examine their lives and understand what they do in relationship to their true nature as Christians. A man may give a sizeable gift to the church. This was an act of his faith, a fruit of faith. Yet as he looks at himself he says: But I’m proud of what I did; I’m patting

⁹ William E. Hulme, *Counseling and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1956).

myself on the back for doing more than others. Soon he realizes that much sin was connected with his generous gift. He begins to wonder whether he performed a good work at all.

It will be well for him to understand that he is saint and sinner at the same time and that he is both in everything he does. His gift was indeed a fruit of his faith. But in this world he still because of his sinful nature besmirches everything he does with sin. This will disturb him. He too will cry out: O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death? But this will not drive him to despair. His faith will look to Christ to cleanse what is still amiss, to help him in his struggle against the ever-present man of sin. To understand that he is engaged in this struggle, to understand himself in his dual nature will be helpful toward preventing despair, helpful in his struggle between the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in him. Recognizing the continuing presence of the old man in him will lead him to recognize the continuing need of the grace of God in Christ, of forgiveness, of strengthening. Daily he needs to repent; daily he needs forgiveness.

II

As we minister to God's free people, we must ever bear in mind the wondrous freedom that is ours by faith. We must bear it in mind and of course not fail to lead our people to that freedom, to have it, to rejoice in it. We cannot take up everything that Luther says about this. This covers the greater portion of the first part of his treatise. But let us look at what he says about faith and the Word, about faith and God, about faith and the believer.

As we consider faith and the Word, we are considering the source of faith and freedom in the Christian.

Luther inquires, "how a righteous, free, and pious Christian, that is, a spiritual, new, and inner man, becomes what he is" (p. 344). He points out that "no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom" (p. 344f.). What happens to the body, one's dress, food, location does not affect the soul, does not produce inner freedom. Here he directs us to the only source of spiritual blessings when he says: "One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ" (p. 345). And what is that word that brings freedom to the soul? "The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies" (p. 346). Luther recognized that Scripture contains also commandments, the law. Although to us what Luther says of the commandments is quite obvious, that they are "intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability" (p. 348), and that the Gospel or promises of God give what the law demands, this distinction was quite a revelation in Luther's day. Rome's confusion of law and Gospel placed a veil over God's Word. Luther points to the Gospel alone as the means whereby righteousness and freedom can come. The Gospel makes us God's free men.

Luther raises a further question about the Gospel. How should it be used? To this he answers: "Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God, according to Rom 10" (p. 346). Again he says: "The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith" (p. 346). Works cannot bring one into any kind of relationship to the Word of God. The very nature of the Word is that its proper use requires faith. This truth is patently evident. What I wear, whether I have eaten or fasted, the way I wear my hair, the time I get up, the manner in which I earn my livelihood does not bring me into any particular relationship to the Word of God. In all these things there often is no difference between the Christian and the hypocrite. But faith does bring one into the direct relationship to the Word, faith that trusts, believes, accepts, embraces the Word.

And what is the result when the Word is thus used, when faith believes it? "The Word imparts its qualities to the soul" (p. 349). Luther expands on this as follows:

Since these promises of God are holy, true, righteous, free, and peaceful words, full of goodness, the soul which clings to them with a firm faith will be so closely united with them and altogether absorbed by them that it not only will share in all their power but will be saturated and

intoxicated by them. If a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word (p. 349).

From all of this Luther draws the conclusion that the soul is justified by the Word of God, sanctified, made true, peaceful, and free, filled with every blessing and truly made a child of God and that this happens not by works, but by faith alone.

This presentation of Luther keeps faith in the proper sphere. When he asks the question: How do we become God's free people, he does not first answer: by faith. He rather directs us to the Word. Then faith is brought in as the proper use of the Word. This very correctly shows that the cleansing, freeing power is not in faith as a virtue, but lies alone in God's Word. But neither does this Word exert its power and grace except through the proper use. The Word of God does not work on us mechanically. The proper use involves faith, trusting the Word. Thus Luther always directs us away from what we do, and from something outward, to that which is inward and to what God does as proclaimed in His Word.

How important in our dealing with God's free people to keep the Word and faith in the proper relationship lest faith become a form of work righteousness. This can happen if we keep on stressing, you must believe, you must believe! Rather we must begin by speaking the Word, by showing Christ and His atonement to the people, and then point to faith as the proper use of it. To speak of faith and call for faith apart from its object, the Gospel will not bring righteousness and freedom. Through the truth of God's Word we become free children of God by faith.

We next see what Luther says about faith and God, that is, the relationship that faith establishes between the believer and God.

Faith "unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom" (p. 351). By means of this analogy Luther beautifully shows the close bond with Christ that is ours by faith and the blessed results of that "marriage" with our bridegroom. He says: "It follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil" (p. 351). What does Christ have? "Christ is full of grace, life and salvation." But what about the human soul? "The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation." Then he goes on to say: "Now let faith come between them [he also speaks of the "wedding ring of faith"] and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's" (p. 351). We cannot refrain from reading a longer quotation from Luther where he describes this wonderful marriage of the soul with Christ by faith. How beautifully this presents what we in dogmatics call the vicarious atonement.

Who then can fully appreciate what this royal marriage means? Who can understand the riches of the glory of this grace? Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, "If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his," as the bride in the Song of Solomon (2:16) says, "My beloved is mine and I am his." (p. 352)

What a wondrous freedom is ours through this faith! Luther says: "Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ" (p. 352).

This is the freedom that above all else we must bring to our people. We must above all in its complete fullness and richness present to them the liberty from sin and hell that is theirs through faith in Christ. What an example *par excellence* is Luther in this! Here is the heart of the Gospel applied enticingly, warmly, and masterfully. This is preaching relevantly, not by changing the message, but by presenting it so clearly, so invitingly that it draws the heart and soul to that blessed, wondrous liberty that Christ brings. We must not let the message of the vicarious atonement become a cold, dogmatic thing for ourselves nor for others. We must

not ourselves grow weary of it as the same thing we've always been talking about in our preaching. We must not cease looking for varied, appealing ways of presenting these truths in a living way. We must use comparisons, illustrations, and personal appeals to bring the message of freedom in Christ in a refreshing manner to our people. Only if we ourselves do not cease marveling at Christ, our bridegroom, and our marriage to Him by faith and all that it means, will we be able to keep our people marveling and rejoicing in it. God grant us a living, fresh, continuing joy in the Gospel that we may radiate it to our people, as Luther was able to do.

In speaking of faith and God, Luther also shows that faith is the perfect obedience to God, renders Him the honor that is due Him. Not works, but faith is the true obedience to God.

What faith does is that it "honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy" (p. 350). Applying this to our faith over against God Luther says:

The very highest worship of God is this that we ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever else should be ascribed to one who is trusted. When this is done, the soul consents to his will. Then it hallows his name and allows itself to be treated according to God's good pleasure for, clinging to God's promises, it does not doubt that he who is true, just, and wise will do, dispose, and provide all things well. (p. 350)

Such faith fulfills the commandments of God. Luther says:

Is not such a soul most obedient to God in all things by this faith? What commandment is there that such obedience has not completely fulfilled? What more complete fulfillment is there than obedience in all things? This obedience, however, is not rendered by works, but by faith alone. (p. 350)

On the other hand, Luther also shows how unbelief dishonors God. He sees unbelief for what it is, rebellion against God. He asks: "What greater wickedness, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing his promise?" (p. 350). "What is this but to make God a liar ...?" "Does not a man who does this deny God and set himself up as an idol in his heart?" Luther sees unbelief in its full wickedness. He points out that it is unbelief that condemns those "who imagine that they are fulfilling the law by doing the works of chastity and mercy required by the law (the civil and human virtues)" (p. 350).

God's free people need to be reminded that faith in God, taking God at His Word, is the highest honor we can render God and is the highest obedience. In the activist atmosphere in which we live today, we want to do great things for God, we want to honor Him and obey Him with mighty, pretentious, evident acts. It seems like such a little thing simply to believe Him, to accept His Word, to rely upon what He says. The world today is only too ready to make that of little importance, as long as you are doing something, as long as you are busy. We do not mean to say that activity should not also be there and should not of necessity follow. The highest honor we can show to God is to take him at his word. To take God at his word is the very beginning of obedience. We also need to remind ourselves and our people that nothing does God more dishonor and is more damning than unbelief, calling God a liar when He speaks, considering our own thoughts and opinions more reliable than God's revelation. This involves our whole approach to, attitude toward, and use of the Holy Scriptures.

We must indeed use our mind and reason, use the best scholarship, and use every help to search out the true meaning of the words of Scripture. But when we have recognized what God says, then the questioning stops. Then faith simply says: So it is and so I believe.

In our times, we are experiencing a rebellion of fearful proportions against the authority of God's Word. The doctrine of Scripture is questioned; the moral standards of Scripture are considered outdated. Everything in our day is considered relative. There are no absolutes. That is because man wants to set himself up as the authority. We have absolutes only if God is the authority. How we need to impress upon men, upon God's free people, that they will be truly free, not by attempting to throw off the authority of Scripture and making a god of

man, but through the very truth of God, and that as His free people they can render God no higher honor than to accept His every Word as He gave it. This is why the present-day struggle against the modern approaches to Scripture is such a vital one. We do not want to be enslaved by the whims of human theories, interpretations, and reasoning. We will want to cling in faith to the one Word that is our only source of true freedom, the freedom that we have through Christ as promised in the Gospel.

Luther points to the wondrous freedom of the Christian, to his lofty dignity, also by directing our attention to a further blessing we have through faith in Christ. Through it we share with Christ in the prerogative of his birthright. Referring to the birthright of the firstborn in the Old Testament as a type of Christ, Luther calls Jesus “the true and only first-born of God the Father and the Virgin Mary and true king and priest” (p. 353). The prerogative of Jesus as the firstborn of the Father was that “he reigns in heavenly and spiritual things and consecrates them” (p. 353). Then He also functions as priest. His priesthood consists in interceding for us, sacrificing Himself for man, “in teaching us inwardly through the living instruction of his Spirit” (p. 354).

Through faith the Christian now also shares in this, is a king and priest, even as is Christ. As a king, the Christian “by virtue of a spiritual power, ... is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him any harm. As a matter of fact, all things are made subject to him and are compelled to serve him in obtaining salvation” (p. 354). This does not mean that the Christian has physical power over all things. Such power belongs to earthly kings. But the Christian now rules all things so that, quoting from Romans 8, all things must work together for good to the elect. Luther also quotes I Cor. 3: “All things are yours whether ... life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ’s ...” He says: “In all things I can find profit toward salvation (Rom. 8:28), so that the cross and death itself are compelled to serve me and to work together with me for my salvation” (p. 355). “This is a splendid privilege and hard to attain, a truly omnipotent power, a spiritual dominion in which there is nothing so good and nothing so evil but it shall work together for good to me, if only I believe” (p. 355). Thus as a Christian I am lord of all. Even that which seems to be evil in life must serve me for good. Luther concludes the thought with the words: “Lo, this is the inestimable power and liberty of Christians” (p. 355). And what a wondrous liberty it is! There no more is true harm, injury, evil; all must serve me for good. Yes, even death cannot any longer be for me the wages of sin, but is the means whereby I leave this world of sin to go to the place of my true citizenship, heaven.

The Christian by faith in Christ also shares with Him in the priesthood. This Luther considers even far more excellent than being a king. He points out: “As priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things” (p. 355). Luther has an unusual statement concerning the power of intercession we as Christians have. The Christian “through his priestly glory is omnipotent with God because God does the things which he asks and desires, as it is written, ‘He will fulfill the desire of those who fear him; he also will hear their cry and save them’ ” (p. 355). Consider the expression, “to be omnipotent with God.” In German Luther put it this way: *Durch sein Priestertum ist er Gottes maechtig. Denn Gott tut, was er bittet und will.*¹⁰ The almighty God places Himself into our service, makes the Christian omnipotent with Him. As a priest the Christian has mastery over God (*ist Gottes maechtig*). No wonder Luther speaks so highly of the priesthood we share with Christ.

The question for us is whether we impress upon God’s free people in all their richness and glory what God has made of them, what it means that they are priests and kings. What a blessed liberty is ours when we truly believe that all things must serve our good. What a blessed liberty is ours when we truly believe that God will listen to our intercessions, that he has placed himself into the position of “taking orders” from us. How we should lead our people to appreciate their position as Christians, the prerogatives they share with Christ, their older brother, the birthright that is theirs now also by faith. Are we ruling as kings? Do we live as though all things are ours? Do we pray with the power and urgency that recognize that the almighty God has promised to do our bidding? Perhaps our people and we need to more fully appreciate what the words of Peter really mean for us: “Ye are a royal priesthood.”

¹⁰ St. L., XIX, 998.

Yes, the Gospel makes us free; we have liberty as we by faith embrace that Gospel. We are thereby married to Christ, sharing in his righteousness, cleansed from sin, justified. All of this without works and so we are free in every sense from the works of the law. We are free kings and priests. What a wondrous freedom is ours by faith!

We close this section with Luther's exhortation on how the Gospel then is to be preached. He points out that it is not enough to "preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts." He points out that some preach Christ to arouse sympathy with Him and anger against the Jews. He no doubt is thinking of the preaching of Christ's passion. All of this is not the proper preaching.

Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but also be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him. This is done when that Christian liberty which he bestows is rightly taught and we are told in what way we Christians are all kings and priests and therefore lords of all and may firmly believe that whatever we have done is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God, as I have already said. (p. 357)

Yes, the preaching of Christ must be personal, meaningful. It must apply His atonement to the individual. We must speak from faith to faith. We must use the Gospel as the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. Indeed, we must never forget the wondrous freedom that is ours by faith. We must ever lead our people to it, lead them to make it their own by faith, lead them to count it their most precious possession. Here is the new man, born of the Gospel by faith, with all the blessedness that is his.

III

A wondrous freedom is ours through Christ. Our flesh and Satan would like to turn that freedom into license. Luther therefore asks: "If faith does all things and is alone sufficient unto righteousness, why then are good works commanded? We will take our ease and do no works and be content with faith" (p. 358). The concerned unbeliever draws the same conclusion. He concludes: If you tell people that they are free through Christ, free from sin and its consequences, free from the law, then they will make no effort toward living a moral life. But Luther responds: "Not so, you wicked men." He reminds us that we are still in this world of sin and that we are still plagued with our flesh. We could forget all about works "if we were wholly inner and perfectly spiritual men." But that will not be until the last day when we shall rise unto perfection in heaven. Hence in this life, although we are free men, we are involved with works. But we must never forget the role they play. Hence, in ministering to God's free people in this world we must never forget the proper role of works. Unless this is done, the Gospel can be lost; true freedom can be lost.

A point Luther cannot stress sufficiently and one we in our ministry, if I judge our pastors correctly, stress with Luther is this: Works never justify us before God. Works do not make us good in the sight of God. Works do not save us. Luther does concede: "In the sight of men a man is made good or evil by his works" (p. 362). This however, is not being made good or evil in any other sense than that a man is "pointed out and known as such." But we must never "think that a man is justified before God by them" (p. 350).

If we pass over this point rather quickly, it is not because we would make it seem unimportant. But we believe that this is something that is being stressed in our ministry. Yet it will be well for us to do this not by simply repeating the phrase: Our works do not save us. This, too, must be said and illustrated in a variety of ways, as Luther does.

The question, however, still remains: "If we are not saved, or justified, by works, what role then do works have for us as God's free people? This role is twofold, since, as Luther says, "in this life he must control his own body and have dealings with men" (p. 358). So far as the Christian's own person is concerned, works

are to “reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its evil lusts” (p. 359). So far as the world is concerned, a Christian is concerned to “serve and benefit others in all that he does” (p. 365). We shall look at these two points more closely.

As a renewed child of God the Christian’s one occupation is, “to serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained” (p. 359). But “while he is doing this, behold, he meets a contrary will in his own flesh which strives to serve the world and seeks its own advantage” (p. 359). The flesh then must be crucified; the body must be pummeled. And works have the purpose of reducing the body to subjection and purifying it of its evil lusts. So Luther says: “Hence a man cannot be idle, for the need of his body drives him and he is compelled to do many good works to reduce it to subjection” (p. 359). Here he quotes I Corinthians 9:27: “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection,” and Galatians 5:24: “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.”

Here a clear distinction between justification and sanctification is required. Luther brings this out so well. He writes: “Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God (this speaks of our justification which is perfect and complete), it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God” (p. 359). That is the sanctification of our life, which is a progressive thing. And this requires the pummeling of the body and the crucifying of the flesh.

Perhaps this point we do not stress sufficiently in our day. The spirit of our times is to indulge one’s flesh with its desires. This has almost become the religion of our times. Consider only two points by way of illustration. Our age of materialism makes a high standard of living, freedom from poverty, almost a natural, God-given right of all men. Our whole economy centers on providing as convenient and soft a life as possible for our flesh. To be deprived of anything at all is almost considered one of the gravest of modern “sins.”

Or consider how the “new morality” wants to make room for the satisfaction of the lusts of the flesh. Some would say that in any way to suppress and repress the normal desires that God has implanted in man’s nature can only lead to evil, to destructive complexes. These desires may be considered as something so natural that provision must be made for their satisfaction even as you make provision for the satisfaction of hunger and thirst. Only care must be taken that everything is done in love.

Can it be denied that we are living in an age of permissiveness? An age in which discipline, also self-discipline, is disappearing? This looks like freedom but in fact threatens our true freedom. All of this is an invitation on the part of the world to turn from our freedom in Christ to the slavery of our flesh and the world. We do need to ask ourselves, and our people must ever learn to ask themselves, whether in place of crucifying the flesh they are becoming its servants. Are we succumbing to the spirit of our times?

Luther is here not calling for the ascetic life as the goal of Christianity. He knew only too well that this was not true sanctification. What he is calling for is a valiant fight against the flesh, as St. Paul sees the struggle between spirit and flesh going on in the Christian. And discipline, restraint, crucifying, pummeling is called for in this. This discipline is not an end in itself. To what extent one must resort to castigation in controlling the flesh Luther does not determine. He rather writes: “Everyone will easily be able to learn for himself the limit and discretion, as they say, of his bodily castigations, for he will fast, watch, and labor as much as he finds sufficient to repress the lasciviousness and lust of his body” (p. 359). We may not fast in the sense of Roman Catholicism. But we do need to learn to “fast” to the degree necessary so that we are not making food and drink for our body a serving of our flesh. We are able to have comfortable homes and travel about in automobiles and airplanes, so long as these do not become a coddling of the flesh in opposition to the inner man.

Where shall we draw the line for our people? Luther doesn’t attempt it, and neither can we. But we need to call for an earnest, serious, all-out battle against the flesh. The freedom we have in Christ is at stake.

Just one further comment on this: It is not easy to present this to our people in a way that does not go into unhealthy extremes. A wrong emphasis could lead to a new type of asceticism. It could lead to being no longer able with Paul to know both how to be abased and how to abound. What we need to learn, and teach our people, is to say with Paul: “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Phil. 4:11).

After speaking about bringing the body into subjection, Luther points out that all a Christian does, he does for others, in the service of his neighbor. He writes: “A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal

body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself” (p. 364). In fact, even the subjection he imposes upon his body is done “that he may the more sincerely and freely serve others” (p. 364).

It is interesting to note the reason Luther gives why a Christian can devote himself so completely to the service of others. The reason is that he has everything he needs in Christ. The Christian needs no works for himself, for his own righteousness. Christ has done all for him. Luther writes: “Man, however, needs none of these things for his righteousness and salvation. Therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor” (p. 365). Referring to Philippians 2:14, Luther carries out the same thought: “Here we see clearly that the Apostle has prescribed this rule for the life of Christians, namely, that we should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor” (p. 365). One more quote from Luther in which he brings out this same thought: “I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all things in Christ” (p. 367). How conscious Luther was of the riches that were his through our Savior!

Do we, do our people appreciate these riches? Do we recognize how rich we are in Christ so that we realize that we cannot gain any greater riches for ourselves by anything we still do? Yes, even in a material way, when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, all these things shall be added unto us. Do we lead our people to appreciate the full riches they have in Christ? How well Luther impresses this upon us so that we then are free from serving ourselves and will give ourselves wholly to serving our neighbor, even as Christ so richly served us.

Here Luther does not hesitate to point to Christ’s example, as St. Paul also does in Philippians 2. He even speaks of the Christian becoming a Christ to his neighbor. He paraphrases Philippians 2, applying this to the Christian: “Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him” (p. 366). Indeed, Luther says: “I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me” (p. 367). In fact, that is why we bear the name of Christ. He writes: “Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us” (p. 368). Perhaps we do not often think of ourselves in such terms.

Note how far Luther goes in comparing the Christian to Christ, in pointing out that we should become Christs to our neighbor. He writes: “From Christ the good things have flowed and are flowing into us. He has so ‘put on’ us and acted for us as if he had been what we are” (p. 371). This too he applies to the Christian. “From us they flow on to those who have need of them so that I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness that they may cover and intercede for the sins of my neighbor which I take upon myself and so labor and serve in them as if they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us” (p. 371).

Luther here is hardly saying that our righteousness can become the means of redemption for our neighbor. He knew too well that redemption for all men is alone in Christ. But he is speaking of serving our neighbor in heroic terms. I am to concern myself about my neighbor’s sins and make them my own so that I come before the throne of God with intercessions so earnest, so fervent as though I were pleading for my own sins. I must feel the needs of my neighbor as my own. The burden of my neighbor’s sins must become my burden as though I had committed those sins.

What a wealth and depth of meaning this has for us as pastors when we pray for our people, for the souls entrusted to our care! Do I plead for the delinquent member, for the unwed mother, for the disobedient son, for the broken family, for all the endangered souls as though it were my own soul that were thus endangered, as

though I were praying for myself? Or do I somewhat coldly pass the sins of my neighbor by, thanking God that I am not as other men are?

Very often ingratitude moves us to lessen our concern for others, to stop serving our neighbor. Luther addresses himself also to this. The kind of service Luther speaks of “takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss” (p. 367). He points out, “a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations” (p. 367). Nor is there respect of persons in this service. We do not first ask whether the person will respond with thankfulness. Luther writes: “He does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward” (p. 367). How ready we often are to withhold serving those who will respond with ingratitude! What a selfless service of others Luther here describes. Thus God serves us. Thus we are to serve as God’s children.

This selfless service of others is not something natural to man. This is a part of Christian sanctification in which our members and we need to grow. And our members will need constant encouraging in this. Think of the lack of concern that is so often evident in the world about us. We must ask ourselves the searching question: Has the fact that we as Christians are to be separate from the world, to be in the world but not of it, led us and our people to lose a feeling of concern for the world about us? Do we deplore the sin of the world about us without making that sin a deep personal concern, not in the sense of the moralizer, not in the sense of becoming a crusader, but from the viewpoint of the Gospel? Is the love we have for our neighbor too often more theory than practice? Does the size of our mission program and the zeal with which we pursue it show that our members have really made the burden of the sins of others their own? Are they being Christs to their neighbors in the world? Do they feel the unbelief of a neighbor as a weight upon their own soul? And are they ready to do something about it, to pray with tears, to speak to him with urgency, to beseech him with sincerity so that he may be saved from destruction? What greater service can they do for anyone than leading him to life in Christ? Indeed, it is our responsibility as pastors to lead God’s children to such selfless service of others.

This raises the further question: Do we as pastors always set a good example in this selfless service? There is a danger to which we as pastors are exposed; we can become accustomed to being served by others. We expect others to do favors for us. God does in Scripture call for this, in a sense. He bids those who hear the Gospel from our lips to respond by showing honor, by giving of their material blessings to those who have taught them the Word. But in practice, it so easily comes down to this that we expect people to do all kinds of things for the pastor, and we can even become quite demanding, easily offended when we do not receive our due. We even expect special consideration from the world. Rather, on our part, we must aim to serve, to serve without looking for gratitude, without concern for what the returns will be. We, ourselves, must be examples to our members in this selfless service, patterned after our Savior. How important that is!

So in ministering to God’s free people, we must encourage them, preach to them, and provoke them unto good works, but not in such a way that they lose their freedom.

We will not preach works simply as a duty of keeping the commandments. Luther would say: This is a waste of time. You are rich in the works of the law. Christ has kept the law for you. All you do adds nothing. We must never preach works as a duty we perform in fulfillment of the law. The law is not our master, we its slave. We shall not again enslave our people.

But we will preach works as a free expression of the new man, empowered by the Gospel to do God’s will. We will help this new man work in pummeling the flesh. We will help him give himself over to the dutiful, selfless service of others. Here is the true Christian life, not a moralistic keeping of commandments, but a life dedicated to God and our neighbor, a life that makes God’s free people little Christs to their neighbors.

We have not exhausted our subject. We have but begun in its practical application. We have not mined all the golden nuggets in Luther’s treatise. But we hope we have brought to light enough to encourage repeated study of this treasured treatise we have fallen heir to from the pen of Luther. We hope we have at least in a small way shown its value for us in our ministry. We hope we have increased our appreciation for the ministry that is ours as children of the Reformation, a ministry in which we lead people to a freedom in which they are subject to none, while at the same time we would make them dutiful servants, subject to all.

We close with a final word from Luther's treatise: "Enough now of freedom. As you see, it is a spiritual and true freedom and makes our hearts free from all sins, laws and commands, as Paul says I Tim. 1, 'The law is not laid down for the just.' It is more excellent than all other liberty, which is external, as heaven is more excellent than earth. May Christ give us this liberty both to understand and to preserve. Amen" (p. 371).