

# Martin Luther

## The Necessity of Priesthood

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In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Martin Luther criticizes the Roman clergy's monopoly over spiritual authority by saying, "All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office."<sup>1</sup> This claim insinuates that all Christians, whether pope, priest, or laity, have authority over spiritual matters. The obvious question then arises: if there is no difference between a layman and a priest, is there no need for priests? It is not just in this passage that Luther makes a claim that may seem to lead to that conclusion, but in the end, Luther never claims that pastoral clergy is useless. Why is that so? In this paper, I will explore Martin Luther's theology and beliefs on the role of pastoral clergy, if it is necessary, and if it is, what its role would be, and how it would operate. To do this, I will first explain how Martin Luther criticizes the existing operation of the clergy, then explain why he still thinks a clergy is necessary, then explore what an ideal clergy would look like in Martin Luther's view.

Before delving into this subject, it is crucial to understand the perspective Luther is writing from and the purpose of his writings. The writings I will be looking at are Martin Luther's three treatises that he wrote in 1520. *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* was written in German for a general Christian audience in order to critique the Roman clergy. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was written in Latin for an educated audience to reassess the sacraments. Finally, *The Freedom of a Christian* was initially written in Latin and was attached to a letter written to pope Leo X, and then translated by Luther into German for a general audience to discuss the role of freedom, faith, and works in Christendom. The challenge with these works is that Luther is writing with the Roman Church

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," in *Three Treatises*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia, 1970), 12.

as his only opponent. As such, he predominantly writes criticizing the operation of the clergy under the Roman Church but not much directly defending the need for clergy. There is still much we can find about his views on the necessity of pastoral clergy through his criticisms and calls for reform.

Martin Luther criticizes the current operation of the clergy based on his belief that we are all priests. What does he mean by this? Luther's reasoning is that Christ was a priest, as he would "pray and intercede" and teach "inwardly through the living instruction of his spirit." And after his sacrifice, Christ shared this role of priesthood "with everyone who believes in him," so Luther argues, "All of us who believe in Christ are priests."<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther takes this to say that there is "no true basic difference between laymen and priests," that is, "except for the sake of office and work."<sup>3</sup> Luther claims that no one has any inherent authority over spiritual matters because of their position in the clergy and anyone with faith can perform all the functions of the priesthood.

It is this belief that we are all priests that Martin Luther uses to critique the operation of pastoral clergy. Luther takes issue with the Roman Church claiming ultimate authority on interpretation of scripture. He does not believe the power to interpret is solely the clergy's, as "if we are all priests," then why shouldn't everyone "have the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in matters of faith."<sup>4</sup> Luther believes the ability to interpret scripture is not exclusive and belongs to all Christians. Another problem he has is with the withholding of the sacraments. In particular when it comes to the Eucharist, he believes the blood and the body of Christ should never be withheld, and that "the sacrament does not belong to the priests, but all men."<sup>5</sup> Luther believes the Eucharist is the right of all Christians. Priests are not entitled to dictate when they should or should not be given. We are all priests!

This belief of universal priesthood stems from his greater idea that it is through faith alone and not works that we achieve salvation. This theology finds its origin in Augustine's view that we cannot win God's favor through actions, or as Luther puts it, works are "inanimate things" that "cannot glorify God."<sup>6</sup> Works are important, but good actions do not make us. Rather, good actions are a consequence of our faith, "good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works."<sup>7</sup> He criticizes the pastoral clergy for placing too great an emphasis on works and is angered that people are "taught by the doctrine of men to seek nothing but merits" and that priests are "never teaching faith."<sup>8</sup> The consequence of this works-

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2 Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia, 1970), 289.

3 Luther, "Christian Nobility," 14.

4 Luther, "Christian Nobility," 21.

5 Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Three Treatises*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia, 1970), 142.

6 Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 288.

7 Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 297.

8 Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 305.

emphasized theology, Luther observes, is that people believe they “have committed criminal offenses when they make some petty mistake.”<sup>9</sup> As Luther thinks people do not possess the tools to entirely abstain from sin, this overemphasis on works is creating guilt and not working to build faith.

Through this, it almost seems that Martin Luther is taking the leap and saying priests serve no purpose in Christianity. He claims that mass “cannot in any way be a work,” as it is “nothing else than the divine promise or testament of Christ”<sup>10</sup> and not necessary for salvation. Attending mass is not a work; it is unnecessary for salvation. What Luther seems to be saying is that one of the primary roles of a priest, giving mass, is not necessary. If the mass is not needed, anyone can interpret the scripture, and everyone is capable of the spiritual abilities of priests, then is there a need for priests? That seems to be where this argument leads, but Luther does not take it there. There is a passage in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* that gives some clarity on Luther’s position.

“Suppose a group of earnest Christian laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopal ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he was married or not, and charge him to baptize, sat mass, pronounce absolution, and preach the gospel. Such a man would be as truly a priest.”<sup>11</sup>

This passage goes along with his belief that anyone with faith can perform the functions of priesthood; interestingly though, he does not say that any of them could simply baptize or preach gospel, but would instead “elect” someone to perform their functions. This is how Luther still justifies the existence of a pastoral clergy despite his theology that may go against it. Luther acknowledges that priests play an important societal role, even if they are not needed spiritually. So how does Luther justify the continued existence of pastoral clergy if we are all priests?

Luther does not often directly justify the need for pastoral clergy, but through the restraint of his earlier discussed arguments, we find his beliefs. Because Luther is writing with the Roman Catholic Church as his only opponent, he does not turn around and defend the need for clergy, as it is unnecessary. But Luther never claims that pastoral clergy is not needed. At least in the case of pastoral clergy, he is writing with the intent of reform rather than overhaul. He may have claimed that mass is not a work and may not be necessary. He still acknowledges its importance as a time to “meditate upon, and ponder these words, these promises of Christ,” and help “nourish, increase, and strengthen our faith.” And just after that says that “this should be done by the preachers of the gospel.”<sup>12</sup> He also claims anyone can

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9 Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 161.

10 Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 166.

11 Luther, “Christian Nobility,” 13.

12 Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 159.

interpret scripture, but he is still adamant that education on the gospel is vital. He says young Christians “perish miserably in our midst for want of gospel” and that “we ought to be giving them constant instruction and training.”<sup>13</sup> Though Luther may not think that priests have some spiritual quality that differentiates them from the laity, he still recognizes that they play an essential role in community and education. Luther is not calling to end pastoral clergy, simply to reform it.

Martin Luther reimagines the pastoral clergy as a role of leadership and education that teaches scripture and promotes faith. “Ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established,”<sup>14</sup> Luther says. Priests’ objective should be to help in building faith in Christ. What’s interesting is that Luther still thinks priests should set an example and have good works, “not that by them he may strive for righteousness, but that through them he may keep his body under control.”<sup>15</sup> This idea goes along with Luther’s argument that while good works will not help to achieve salvation, they are a product of good faith. And since priests should set an example of good faith, as a consequence, they should have good works as well. Luther also believes that mass should be simplified and stripped to its essentials. Priests should “put aside whatever has been added to its original simple institution.” We must “turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ,” as that is where lies “the whole substance of mass.”<sup>16</sup> Luther believes in stripping away the added ceremonies that do not directly relate to Christ and focusing wholly on the sacrament itself. Lastly, Luther believes pastoral clergy is vital for education in scripture. Luther claims it should not be the works of theologians that are taught. Instead, “the foremost reading for everybody – should be holy scripture.”<sup>17</sup> Luther believes that before anything else, it should be the scripture itself that is taught and preached. What Luther envisions is a stripped-down pastoral clergy; not one that has servants, but one that is a servant to God and exists to help guide others toward God through faith, one which is stripped to its necessities and gives education strictly in faith through scripture.

In conclusion, Martin Luther claims that we are all capable of performing the functions of priesthood, such as sacrament and interpretation of scripture. But despite his belief that priests have no spiritual power or laity, he still believes they play a critical role in education and the building of faith. Luther rejects the idea that in Christianity, clergy is needed. Some religions require a clergy, and spiritual practices must be performed by someone of a higher spiritual authority. Other religions do not require a clergy but still, in some sense, need a clergy. Luther’s claim is that Christianity does not spiritually require a clergy. Still, Luther acknowledges that pastoral clergy is needed because they play an essential role in Christian society. There is a community aspect to Christianity that Luther recognizes,

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13 Luther, “Christian Nobility,” 198.

14 Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” 292.

15 Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” 307.

16 Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 153.

17 Luther, “Christian Nobility,” 98.

that gathering for mass and taking the time to build faith is vital to Christianity as a practice. While there may be no difference in spiritual quality between a priest and a layman, Luther believed people still need someone who can lead, teach, and create a community within a Christian society.