

Volume 2: Chapter 2

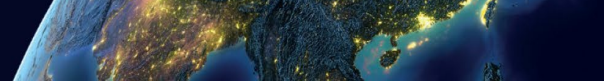
Source 2.1

Martin Luther's Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate

Martin Luther was a leading figure in the Protestant Reformation, which transformed Christianity in Western Europe in the mid-sixteenth century. The Catholic Church ordained Luther in 1507, and soon after he began to critique many of its practices and teachings. He wrote many texts, including his famous Ninety-Five Theses (1517) and an open letter to the German Christian nobility (1520). In 1520, Pope Leo X demanded that he renounce his ideas, and when he refused, Luther was excommunicated from the church. Luther's condemnations of the church leadership led to the permanent division of Christianity in Western Europe into Catholic and Protestant branches. Later on, Protestant sects grew and multiplied, causing immense theological and political change in the region and beyond.

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 -- viz., 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 I Corinthians 12:12, We are all one body, yet every member has its own work, where by it serves every other, all because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all alike Christians; 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,[4] but it never makes a Christian or "spiritual" man. Through baptism all of us are consecrated to the priesthood, as St. Peter says in I Peter 2:9, "Ye are a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom,"

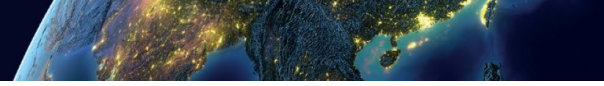


and the book of Revelation says, Rev. 5:10 "Thou hast made us by Thy blood to be priests and kings." For if we had no higher consecration than pope or bishop gives, the consecration by pope or bishop would never make a priest, nor might anyone either say mass or preach a sermon or give absolution. Therefore 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 for 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. . . .

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 . . .

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. 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. . . .

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. . . .

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 satellites 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 all the souls that would thereby be abandoned and it astray. . . .

Source: *Works of Martin Luther, Volume II*, translated by Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 1915): 65-72.

- How would you explain Luther's message to Christian nobles, articulated in this letter?
- According to Luther, what is the relationship between church leaders and ordinary Christians?
- How does Luther justify his points in this letter?