

Luther's Little Jewel

By J. De Jong

The year 1996 is another "Luther year," a year commemorating the great reformer's death in 1546. All over Germany many tours and commemorative events are being held to remember the reformer and his work. Of course, much of it is simply a ruse to promote tourism, and any actual confrontation with what Luther really stood for is not on the agenda for many people. Yet as we commemorate the reformation in the month of October, we do well to give attention to the life of the great reformer and his significance for the church to this very day.

One way to remember Luther is by a consideration of what has been called Luther's little jewel. After the Reformation began in 1517 Luther wrote a number of short tracts outlining the new position he and others in the reformational movement were defending. This was not really a new position, but a return to the order and calling of life as demanded by the Scriptures. Now the last of these tracts, called *The Freedom of the Christian Man* is known as Luther's little jewel. It is perhaps one of the most beautiful tracts Luther ever wrote – and he wrote a good deal of them. Even Luther himself – who was normally gruff and diffident with regard to his own work, spoke favourably of this little booklet. All the more reason for us to review its content, and draw our benefits from it.

Background

The booklet on the liberty of the Christian is one of three tracts written in 1520, the smallest of the three. George Rupp, a noted British scholar on Luther, says that this tract evokes the peace and rest of the certainty of the gospel. After the devouring fire of the *Address to the Christian Nobility* and the earthquake of the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* was ended, there followed the soft and still voice of the *Freedom of the Christian Man* – a voice kinder than anyone might have expected – the voice of Christ himself. Indeed, this was Luther's genius! He could show forth many moods and colours in his writing, and so he struck a cord in the hearts of the people. This brochure represents a simple and lucid statement of the practical side of the gospel: how to live the Christian life.

In some ways the tract represents a completion to and repetition of ideas which Luther published earlier in his *Sermon on Good Works*.¹ For those of a Calvinist persuasion this is a very important sermon of Luther's to read, since it shows Luther as a staunch defender of the life of new obedience. It was only later Lutherans that so radically severed gospel and law that there was no room for good works. The theme of the necessity of a life of obedience and good works dominates both the sermon and the tract on the liberty of the Christian. And the ideas presented here become Luther's bulwark of defense against the antinomian practices and attitudes of the enthusiasts who drifted into the waters of radicalism and Anabaptist thinking.

Luther wrote the tract as a last effort to defend his position over against the Roman church. By this time the division with Rome was almost complete. In fact, Luther saw no hope for a return. He had been threatened with excommunication, with the bull of excommunication published by Luther's opponent John Eck in September of 1520. Luther had consistently refused to recant unless he was proven wrong on the basis of the Word of God. The steady stream of reformatory language coming from Wittenberg finally led to the extreme anger of the curia. The well-known bull, called *Exsurge Domine*, represents an appeal to the Lord to destroy the foxes and the wild boar presently destroying the vineyard of the Lord.

However, one of the mediators sent by the pope to mediate in the dispute with the Germans, the papal nuncio Carl von Miltitz, was still trying to work for a reconciliation between Luther and Rome. The pope had more or less forgotten him, but he sought to placate Luther and was prepared to offer some concessions if Luther himself would remain silent, and be generally more agreeable in dealing with other monks and clerics. It was under his influence that this last tract was written. It is prefaced by a letter to the pope, Leo X, in which Luther not only defends his case, but urges the pope to renounce the wolves of Rome, and act as a true shepherd among the flock. Although we cannot gauge his motivations, Luther saw the pope as the only honourable



A radical document – Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation. In it, a scholar has said, "Luther laid the ax to the . . . ideas upon which the social, political, legal, and religious thought of the Western world had been developing for nearly a thousand years."

man in the midst of a den of thieves and robbers. Hence his tone is conciliatory, just as he had promised to Miltitz, and he speaks of Leo as the "most blessed father" and "pious Leo." At the same time, Luther holds to the fundamental rule which he maintained throughout the reformatory process: he would not recant anything he taught and maintained unless proven wrong by the testimony of Scripture.

Thus we have in this tract a last call to reformation. Yet at the same time the tract shows that the breach is imminent and cannot be avoided. The note of the triumph of the gospel rings through the entire booklet and its special note is joy: the joyful life of the Christian as he is redeemed by the blood of Christ through mere grace alone.



Title page of On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. In the work, Luther not only attacked abuses of the sacraments, but totally redefined them. He called the book a “little song about Rome and the Romanists. If their ears are itching to hear it, I will sing and pitch it in the highest key!”

Content

Let me now turn briefly to the contents of the brochure. Luther sets out to defend two theses which form the basis on which the entire argument of the booklet turns: 1. the Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, and subject to none. And 2. the Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two propositions sound contradictory, as Luther knew and confessed. But then he proceeds to show how these two propositions are not really contradictory, but are based on Scripture, and make sense only in the light of the message of the gospel. He makes the following points to show this.

1. Luther starts with the inner man, and the way we are made according to the inner man. How do you receive true freedom, righteousness, life and every blessing with God on high? The answer is: only by *faith*. We are healed to life and good works only by the Word of God, as Psalm 119 says. Here Luther thinks particularly of the promises of the gospel as they are revealed in the Word of God. He says: the Word has laws and commands. But it also has gospel and promises, and they give life!

When one by faith accepts the promises of the gospel, then the yoke of the law is broken, and the law is ful-

filled! Christ is your righteousness, your life, your blessing! So through faith we share Christ *for* us, and Christ in us. This yields three blessings for the Christian. First, he may be justified before God, and may be assured of the Holy Spirit, who works sanctification. Second, he may live in honour to God with his whole life, and third, he may live in union with Christ.

It is especially in this last point, the union of Christ, that the tract reaches its climax. It speaks of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the believer. It is like a marriage. What takes place is a joyful exchange! Christ takes over the sins of the “poor harlot” and takes them to himself. He at the same time gives His blessings: righteousness and life to the believer.² Therefore with the gifts of Christ’s righteousness, the Christian is a free man. The Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. Christ is the only Master, and essentially there is no other Master besides Him. All earthly masters are subject to Him, and they all must be seen in the light of His rule.

2. Next Luther turns to the outer man, that is for him, life in the body as we share it today in an imperfect world. We are justified by God through Christ, and so free in Him. But we only have a small beginning of the new obedience. Our best works are strained with sin. We must daily contend with sin, the devil and the lust of our flesh. The body actually hinders the growth of the inner man. Therefore, says Luther, we are directed to works in order to please God, and to grow in faith. Works serve to train the body, and hold the mind in the love of God. We must not be idle as redeemed people, but must do works in order to resist sin, and apply ourselves to repentance. We must also do works for our neighbour’s benefit. We are not here on our own and we are not to live for our own benefit. We live for the well-being of our neighbour.

Here Luther extends the analogy of his first point. As Christ has joined in a joyful exchange with us, we are to join in a joyful exchange with our neighbour. We must “become a Christ” to the neighbour, especially helping those in need. Our life must be one of constant service.

Therefore, says Luther, the Christian is at the same time a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all. We need works to purify ourselves from sin, to discipline ourselves in the way of righteousness as members of Christ. Luther says:

The inner man who by faith is created in the image of God is both joyful and happy because Christ in whom so many benefits are conferred on him; and therefore it is his

new occupation to serve God joyfully and without thought of gain, in love that is not constrained.³

How do we serve God in a life of good works? We are to live for our neighbour. Faith makes us right with God; works keep us right with our neighbour. We do not live for ourselves, we live for our neighbour. So we must be to our neighbour what Christ is to us. We live to serve in order that we might inherit a blessing!

Luther introduces what he calls the middle course as the way for the Christian to follow. Some want to bind the conscience to all kinds of rules and regulations, as if they figure in obtaining righteousness with God. But this is a rejection of Christian freedom. Others despise all ceremonies, traditions and human laws, and actually see it as the duty of Christians to do so. Their freedom is one without any restraint. The apostle Paul takes a middle course. His conscience is free but he submits to ceremonies and traditions for the sake of the gospel, and only in the context of the gospel. We are all still bound by the needs of the bodily life. We must therefore observe due order and restraint, honour ceremonies and works, and also obey the civil authorities. Ceremonies are a temporary structure serving to assist the believer on the road to the kingdom of God. “When the structure is complete, the models and plans are laid aside.” So Luther also saw the end of ceremonies and works in the fulfilment of the Christian life.

This is then a brief summary of Luther’s little jewel, or, as he himself called it: my best little book! I think it gives an accurate summary of what is required of us. Of course, you can find weaknesses in it, just as you can find weaknesses in any human book. Still it represents a remarkable and insightful summary of the teaching of the gospel with respect to the life of faith.

Some commentary

There are a few things one could criticize and comment on in Luther’s “little jewel.” For example, it is remarkable, that Luther ties the inner life to faith, and the outer life to works. It is also remarkable that Luther ties the inner life to God, and the outer life to the neighbour.⁴ We would normally tie the whole life, both inner and outer, to both faith and works – faith as the source, works as the fruit. And we would not see works in our life as focussed primarily on our relation to the neighbour. Later the reformation came to see that although there were two tables of the law, the life of works must be directed both to the glory of God and to

the well-being of the neighbour. The life of gratitude covers both tables of the law, and both aspects of life, the inner and outer! In fact this is probably what Luther meant, for he knew the summary of the law. Yet he operates with distinctions from a medieval background.⁵

Probably the most central weakness in the early Luther is that he did not see the all-encompassing significance of the *covenant* as the central element in the Christian's life, and the central notion through which it must be approached. Yet he did have an open eye for the promises of God! He was also conscious of the fact that we live under the obligations of God. But to adequately bring these together, and to present them in a holistic way – that remained for later reformers.

Nevertheless one can say: Luther gives valuable instruction still for the church today. He reproduces in a colourful way what the guidelines of Scripture are. In that sense, Luther is timeless, for he was a prophet of God. The gospel of God never changes. With Luther's little jewel at hand, we must say: every year is a Luther year, and one can only benefit from seeking to apply the principles of Scripture to the Christ-

ian life as he sets them forth. To be sure, he like others, needed the correction which the Lord gave through Calvin and other Reformers. But the foundation laid still stands, also through the work of God's servant Martin Luther: saved by grace alone, through faith!

"Works serve the neighbour and supply the proof that faith is living."
(Hy. 24: 6)

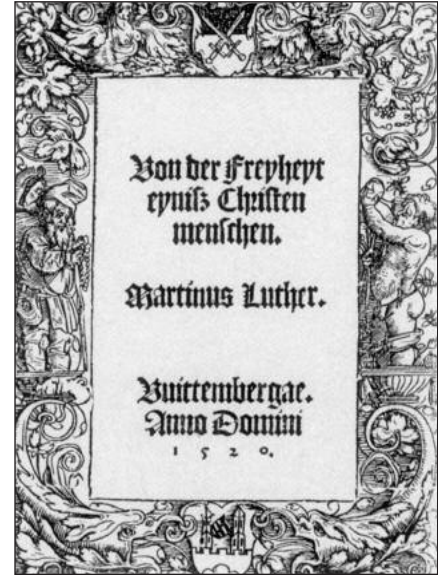
¹Many of the ideas also return in the so-called *Invocavit* sermons which Luther preached in Wittenberg in 1521, see *Luther's Works* 51, 67-100.

²The ideas here come from the nuptial mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux. The new element in Luther is that Christ does this without any preconditions and without previous actions by man, thus, by grace alone! See M. Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation*, 1483-1521, Translated by J.L. Schaaf, (E.T: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 408.

³*Luther's Works*, Vol 1, 359.

⁴Brecht notes that the distinction between inner and outer man comes from German mysticism. Luther basically identified the distinction of German mysticism with Pauline anthropology, see M. Brecht, 408.

⁵Luther makes the same distinction in his tract "On the Councils and the Churches" (1539), see *Luther's Works*, Vol. 41, 145-147. In this tract the "First Table of Moses"



Christian History

is used by the Holy Spirit to give new holy life in the soul, and to impart the three chief virtues of Christians: faith, hope and love. The second table, which Luther associates with the body, is used by the Spirit to work sanctification in the life of the believer. Speaking loosely, one might say that Luther ties the first table of the law to justification, and the second to sanctification.