
Martin Luther

Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation

(1520)

J.H. Robinson, ed.
Readings in European History (Boston: Ginn, 1906), 2:

The Romanists have, with great adroitness, drawn three walls round themselves, with which they have hitherto protected themselves, so that no one could reform them, whereby all Christendom has fallen terribly.

First, if pressed by the temporal power, they have affirmed and maintained that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the contrary, that the spiritual power is above the temporal.

Secondly, if it were proposed to admonish them with the Scriptures, they objected that no one may interpret the Scriptures but the Pope.

Thirdly, if they are threatened with a council, they pretend that no one may call a council but the Pope ...

Now may God help us, and give us one of those trumpets that overthrew the walls of Jericho, so that we may blow down these walls of straw and paper, and that we may set free our Christian rods for the chastisement of sin, and expose the craft and deceit of the devil, so that we may amend ourselves by punishment and again obtain God's favour.

Let us, in the first place, attack the first wall.

It has been devised that the Pope, bishops, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate; princes, lords, artificers, and peasants, are the temporal estate. This is an artful lie and hypocritical device, but let no one be made afraid by it, and that for this reason: that all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone. As St. Paul says (i Cor. xii), we are all one body, though each member does its own work, to serve the others, This is because we have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, Gospel, and faith, these alone make spiritual and Christian people.

As for the unction by a pope or a bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration, and clothes differing from those of laymen-all this may make a hypocrite or an anointed puppet, but never a Christian or a spiritual man. Thus we are all consecrated as, priests by baptism, as St. Peter says: 'Ye are a royal priesthood, a holy nation (i Pet. ii. 9); and in the book of Revelation: 'and hast made us unto our God (by Thy blood) kings and priests' (Rev. v. io). For, if we had not a higher consecration in us than pope or bishop can give, no priest could ever be made by the consecration of pope or bishop, nor could he say the mass or preach or absolve. Therefore the bishop's consecration is just as if in the name of the whole congregation he took one person out of the community; each member of which has equal power, and commanded him to exercise this power for the rest; in the same way as if ten brothers, co-heirs as king's sons, were to choose one from among them to rule over their inheritance, they would all of them still remain- kings and have equal power, although one is ordered to

govern. And to put the matter more plainly, if a little company of pious Christian laymen were taken prisoners and carried away to a desert, and had not among them a priest consecrated by a bishop, and were there to agree to elect one of them and were to order him to baptise, to celebrate the mass, to absolve and to preach, this man would as truly be a priest, as if all the bishops and all the popes had consecrated him. That is why, in cases of necessity, every man can baptise and absolve, which would not be possible if we were not all priests. This great grace and virtue of baptism and of the Christian estate they have quite destroyed and made us forget by their ecclesiastical law . . .

Since then the temporal power is baptized as we are, and has the same faith and Gospel, we must allow it to be priest and bishop, and account its office an office that is proper and useful to the Christian community. For whatever issues from baptism may boast that it has been consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although it does not beseech every one to exercise these offices. For, since we are all priests alike, no man may put himself forward or take upon himself without our consent and election, to do that which we have all alike power to do. For if a thing is common to all, no man may take it to himself without the wish and command of the community. And if it should happen that a man were appointed to one of these offices and deposed for abuses, he would be just what he was before. Therefore a priest should be nothing in Christendom but a functionary; as long as he holds his office, he has precedence of others; if he is deprived of it, he is a peasant or a citizen like the rest. Therefore a priest is verily no longer a priest after deposition. But now they have invented characteres indelibles, and pretend that a priest after deprivation still differs from a simple layman. They even imagine that a priest can never be anything but a priest-that is, that he become a layman. All this is nothing but mere ordinance of human invention.

It follows then, that between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, or, as they call it, between spiritual and temporal sons, the only real difference is one of office and function, and not of estate. . . .

. . . Therefore I say, Forasmuch as the temporal power has been ordained by God for the punishment of the bad and the protection of the good, we must let it do its duty throughout the whole Christian body, without respect of persons, whether it strike popes, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, or whoever it may be...

Whatever the ecclesiastical law has said in opposition to this is merely the invention of Romanist arrogance. . . .

Now, I imagine the first paper wall is overthrown, inasmuch the temporal power has become a member of the Christian body; although its work relates to the body, yet does it belong to the spiritual estate. . . .

The second wall is even more tottering and weak: that they end to be considered masters of the Scriptures. . . . If of our faith is right, 'I believe in the holy Christian church,' the Pope cannot alone be right; else we must say, 'I believe in the Pope of Rome,' and reduce the Christian Church to one man, which is a devilish and damnable heresy. Besides that, we are all priests, as I have said, and have all one faith, one Gospel, one Sacrament ; how then should we not have the power of discerning and judging what is right or wrong in matters of faith ? ...

The third wall falls of itself, as soon as the first two have fallen; for if the Pope acts contrary to the Scriptures, we are bound to stand by the Scriptures to punish and to constrain him, according to Christ's commandment . 'tell it unto the Church' (Matt. xviii. 15-17). . . . If then I am to accuse him before the Church, I must collect the Church together. . . . Therefore when need requires, and the Pope is a cause of offence to Christendom, in these cases whoever can best do so, as a faithful member of the whole body, must do what he can to procure a true free council. This no one can do so we as the temporal authorities, especially since they are fellow-Christians, fellow-priests. . . .