

Introduction

A YEAR AFTER MY ORDINATION AS A LUTHERAN PASTOR I TOOK A TRIP with two friends to Germany in order to “discover” Martin Luther. We traveled to his birthplace. We also made the obligatory stop at the Wartburg castle. However, I held on to the belief that it would be in the city of Wittenberg that I would finally make the connection to Luther that I had been longing to experience.

Our first stop in Wittenberg was at the castle church where we looked at the door where Luther presumably nailed his 95 theses (only to discover that it wasn’t the *real* door). We then went to the city church where we were able to ascend the pulpit that Luther would have preached from (only to discover that it wasn’t the *real* pulpit).

I was struck at how little the place moved me. I expected to find a deep connection to Luther but all I ended up with was a set of postcards printed with the artwork of Lucas Cranach that adorns the altar in the city church. As I was ready to leave the church—somewhat disappointed—a choir from an American Lutheran college arrived and began to sing.

I am not a person prone to tears, but when that choir began to sing the church became alive and full of meaning and the mystical connection to Luther for which I had been searching was finally made. My eyes and my heart welled up.

It was not the building or the history, but rather the people who made all the difference. Real voices singing real songs made the place real for me. I had not “discovered” Luther, but I did become more aware of his Reformation rooted not in places or history, but people.

I still have those postcards that I bought in the city church—they are perched on some books next to me as I write these words. One of the cards depicts a grand procession of vested clerics and monks attending to some sort of holy gathering. Behind them stands Luther, surrounded by other reformers. They are all farming. Once again I am reminded that Luther’s Reformation was not simply about places and history.

It was fundamentally about people and their relationships to one another; people and their relationship to God.

From these experiences—informed by thoughtful and extensive reading of Luther's writings—it has become apparent to me that one cannot depict Luther nor understand his evangelical theology and the Reformation movement it informed, without grasping the reality that Luther was interested in how Christianity impacts the daily lives of believers and the structures that govern their lives and attend to their faith.

Luther articulated a theology that had deep and profound implications for how believers comprehended the work of God in Christ. However, his thinking also had implications for how social order was to be determined and how political authority was to be understood in relation to sacred authority.

To put it simply, Luther's theological reformation was also a political reformation with implications for the structuring of the temporal world. In fact, perhaps the term reformation is not sufficient. Perhaps Luther's political thought was revolutionary.

Mainstream scholars have been reluctant to allow such claims to be made. As evidenced in well-known biographies of Luther, the Reformer is portrayed as politically conservative. He also tends to be portrayed as politically naive. The experts have spoken; Luther was not a political figure. He was a brilliant monk who was caught up in political realities in which he was not fundamentally interested.

I wish to present research that confronts the long-held assumptions about the political dimensions of Luther's thought. It is my intention to present the reader with a case study to make my point that Luther's articulation of evangelical theology at times functioned as a means of transforming the church and the world—or to use more modern language, church and state, and that Luther was fundamentally interested in the structures of the world.

For my case study I have chosen to examine Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as it was articulated in the 1520 treatise "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation." The fact that the political dimensions of "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" have been oft overlooked by scholars is self-evident. In the introduction to the English version of "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed" (1523), the editor claims that the treatise, "is the first

ethical defense of temporal government against the prevailing Roman Catholic concept that the church is the source of all earthly authority.”¹ Obviously the editor had overlooked “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” written three years earlier.

In “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” Luther attacks the notion of papal authority and calls on temporal authorities to reform the church. He challenges the ancient notion that the papacy has authority over temporal leaders. He then attaches himself to a tradition of German grievances against papal abuses in temporal matters by reiterating long-held complaints (*gravamina*) and proposes a reform program that will radically change the medieval understanding of the church and the secular order.

I will argue that Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is an example of how Luther engaged in a very real and robust attempt to reshape both the ecclesiastical and temporal structures of his day. Thus, the universal priesthood cannot be considered exclusively as a doctrine aimed at reforming the structures of the church, but must be considered as a part of the way Luther understood the need to change the structures of the temporal world as well. I will also argue that this reality has been silenced by scholars of the Reformation.

In the first chapter of this work I will present my methodological approach to Luther and the examination of his universal priesthood. I contend that Luther’s universal priesthood has been inadequately examined due to a silence that has been created by contemporary scholars. Building on the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, I will explore the impact of how history is silenced by omissions. In the case of Luther, the oft-held assumption is that his theology did not specifically address issues of social justice and systemic change in the temporal realm. For most scholars Luther’s only contribution to the understanding of the political and temporal realm is to be found in his “doctrine” of the two governances. Certainly his doctrine of the universal priesthood is not considered to be evidence of Luther’s desire to reform the political as well as the ecclesiastical realms.

What is missing from this assessment of Luther, and its continuation by scholars of early modern history, is the hard evidence that Luther was not only engaged in attacking temporal structures but that his attack was seen as an obvious threat by the ultimate temporal es-

1. Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Hereafter cited as LW. LW 45:80.

tablishment, the church—impacted by claims of temporal authority made by the pope. By telling this story, which is in reality not all that controversial, one gives voice to a silenced aspect of Luther's life and the development of evangelical doctrine.

I will also point out the prophetic and revolutionary aspects of Luther's theology by utilizing definitions provided by Cornel West in his book *Prophesy Deliverance!* West defines prophesy as the act of identifying concrete evils. This comes about through a movement from abstract thought about God and God's will in the world into "concrete enactments of existential and political struggles with no human guarantee for ultimate victory."²

Luther's letter to the Christian nobility fits with West's understanding of prophetic utterance. Luther identifies a specific evil, the walls erected to protect the papacy from reform, and imagines a way to challenge those walls at their very foundations. Will his program work? Will emperor and prince alike take upon themselves the mantle of priest and reform the church? Who knows? What matters is that Luther imagined the possibilities and presented a framework for making that dream a reality.

Chapter two will contain a review of research conclusions on Luther's doctrine of the universal priesthood as presented by contemporary biographers and scholars. The first task is to challenge the long-standing assumption that Luther articulated his understanding of the universal priesthood as a doctrine related primarily to the office of ministry. Certainly this was a part of his understanding of the doctrine, but to assume that this is the foremost issue is to ignore the context of one of his most well-known treatises on the subject. In order to accomplish this task I will examine a variety of biographies and works which attempt to distill Luther's theology and tell the story of his life's work.

In the case of Luther's development of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, the facts are often presented in this way: after discovering the core of the gospel of justification by grace through faith alone, Luther applied that doctrine to the structures of the church and developed the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers for the sake of better defining the office of ministry and the nature of the church. This fact is correct, but insufficient. This view is presented almost exclusively in the conversations concerning the context behind Luther's decision

2. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 6.

to articulate a doctrine of the universal priesthood. My contention will be that Luther most certainly applied this doctrine to his understanding of the role of the temporal powers and thus intentionally used the doctrine as a way of visioning a new temporal structure.

In chapter three I will explore the ways in which Luther understood the universal priesthood throughout his career as a reformer. A study of a variety of texts is needed in order to place “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” in its proper theological and historical context. Luther oftentimes wrote of the doctrine within the context of simple ecclesiastical and sacramental reforms. Much of what is assumed about Luther’s understanding of the universal priesthood by biographers and theologians alike applies to some of what Luther wrote on the subject. Yet, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” when studied alongside Luther’s other writing on the universal priesthood, stands in stark contrast as a call to political action, with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as the most effective weapon for tearing down the now famous “three walls” protecting papal authority.

Chapter four contains my exploration of the social and political context of papal claims related to temporal authority. I will consider the development of the doctrine of papal authority as it related to secular and temporal authority from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. Such an examination is critical in order to understand more fully the issues with which Luther was dealing when he wrote “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation.”

The focus of chapter five will be an examination of the text “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” in light of the political context in which it was written. Whatever the reasons behind Luther’s decision to write his now famous address to the Christian nobility, it is clear from the text that Luther was aware of the history of doctrine that was utilized by the church to enforce adherence to papal authority in secular matters, especially in such documents as the “Donation of Constantine” and *Unam Sanctam*. Additionally, he was aware of, and in fact utilized, an already formulated set of protests which had become a rallying cry for the German people against the abuses of the pope as they were to be found in the traditions of the *gravamina*. What remains to be explored is how each of these factors was either attacked or utilized by Luther in “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation.” In the sixth and final chapter I will present my conclusions and consider a trajectory for future studies.