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April 21, 2010

Luther Promises To Recant



Martin Luther

The mass is an evil thing, and God is displeased with it . . . it must be abolished . . . Yet Christian love should not employ harshness here nor force the matter. However, it should be preached and taught with tongue and pen that to hold mass in such a manner is sinful, and yet no one should be dragged away from it by the hair; for it should be left to God, and his Word should be allowed to work alone, without our interference? Why? Because is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force any one to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore, we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it. We have the right to speak, but not the power to act. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.

Now if I should rush in and abolish it by force, there are many who would be compelled to consent to it and yet not know where they stand, whether it is right or wrong . . . And this forcing and commanding results in a mere mockery, an external show, a fool's play, man-made ordinances, sham-saints, and hypocrites. For where the heart is not good, I care nothing at all for the works. We must first win the hearts of the people. . . Dear lords or pastors, abandon the mass, it is not right, you are sinning when you do this; I cannot refrain from telling you this. But I would not make it an ordinance for them, nor urge a general law. . . And if you should carry them out with such general laws, *then I will recant everything that I have written and preached and I will not support you.* . . . In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion.

Martin Luther, "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit," in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther 1520-1523*, vol. 2, Theodore, G. Tappert, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 239-241, emphasis supplied.


Questions

1. On what basis would Luther recant his writings and preaching? Why did he make this promise?
2. Given this early statement, why did both Calvinism and Lutheranism eventually use civil laws to force religious obedience?

Posted by Nicholas Miller on April 21, 2010 in [Church and Society](#), [Church History](#), [Quotable](#) | [Permalink](#)

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What a wonderful stand for liberty of conscience. Unfortunately the Reformation was born upon the shoulders of politics which is the power of man over another. Since doctrine was the fulcrum of political maneuver here it then became the instrument of political force. Since Luther's work depended on political support the work was then compromised and placed into the service of the political power that used his teaching for political strength. Although the protest of the princes was founded on a revelation of faith it was soon used for political maneuvering that led to the loss of the very revelation that sprang it to existence; forewarned by Luther's warning to recant.

Should religious liberty as we manifest it here in the US be dependent upon the Constitution? If so, then we are using a human instrument to enforce a divine revelation. The Constitution seeks to protect liberty of conscience in order that what began as a revelation from God would not be trampled upon by the ambitions of man. Liberty of conscience does not exist because we make a law that enforces it. It exists by the will of God. We either respect it when we allow Christ to do the work of faith or we destroy it when we attempt to do the work of God ourselves.

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [April 21, 2010 at 07:53 PM](#)

Nicely put thoughts, David. I think I here much of what you are saying, in that our religious liberty comes from God, and not from the government. But I'm wondering if there is any practical alternative to relying on the constitution and civil power to actually implement the protection of that liberty. In this world, we are rather dependent on human instruments, as fallible and imperfect as they may be, to enforce and protect rights even of divine basis and origination. We just need to keep in mind that they indeed are not the product of the state, to grant or withhold as it sees fit.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 21, 2010 at 10:15 PM](#)

"that to hold mass in such a manner is sinful",

This phrase caught my eye. What did he mean by 'in such a manner'? Is his concern with the mass, or with the manner in which he saw the mass being done?

Posted by: [Harlen Miller](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 02:21 PM](#)

Good question, Harlen. Luther did not object to the ceremony of the Lord's supper per se. Rather, he objected to the implementation of it as carried out by Catholics. This included limiting the laity to one kind (eating the bread) only, and the moment of blessing where transubstantiation was said to occur, and the elevation of the host as a sacred thing. Thus, he was against the Catholic version of the mass, but continued a Protestant version that removed the offending elements.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 02:42 PM](#)

Clearly, Luther had a vision for liberty of conscience that was ahead of its time. As David so eloquently stated, indeed, liberty of conscience is born from God who risked all of heaven so Adam and Eve may live in a free world.

However, that was before they rebelled. We now live on this side of eternity, a world in shameless and open rebellion against God's government and one that is hostile against godly principles. It is in this context that Jesus sets the example for the approach that Christians ought take when dealing with the abuse of political power. I am referring to Pilate's interrogation of Jesus. The Lord reminds Pilate that he is not to abuse his power and that he needed to respect his position as governor of Judea because, ultimately, his authority came from Caesar and not from himself.

Christians need to speak up to the leaders of this land and do so with conviction and Christian love. Whereas, we may not become involved in the splintered political process as some Christians do today, it is the duty of Christians to abide by the law of the land and present their valid arguments within the context of human law, while enlightening their minds with the truth of the Scriptures.

Luther understood this concept, as can be seen above, but he could not completely divorce this understanding from his theology because he lived in a society that was entrenched in deriving social policy from their biased understanding of Scripture. Nevertheless, it is clear that just because our kingdom is not of this world, God is not asking us to remain neutral on matters of the liberty of conscience and leave it all to our personal faith.

On the contrary, our faith, if it is genuine faith, must be accompanied by our works. If we are to fit in the society of the coming heavenly age, we must take a stand even in the midst of opposition and ridicule here in this world of rebellion. We must move from the realm of

good ideas to doing good and leaving a godly legacy in our godless society. We must act in kindness and compassion even in the midst of violence. And finally, we must be willing to recant our support of the government when government has overstepped their boundaries. We have no command from Scripture that compels to remain neutral while exercising our faith.

Posted by: [Victor Reyes-Prieto](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 05:02 PM](#)

Dr. Miller I am interested in a discussion of the second question.

Posted by: [Victor Reyes-Prieto](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 05:03 PM](#)

Your points are well stated, Victor, and I can see that you have not been only listening, but also thinking in our church/state class. As to the second question of why Luther, Calvin and other reformers moved away from this early commitment to toleration, this involves various historical factors, including the Peasant's revolt of 1525, that caused Luther to emphasize the ruler's role in suppressing heresy that exhibited itself as civil sedition, the fact that the Anabaptists were often viewed as seditious, and Calvin and Melancton's more traditional view of church and state. But I will discuss this question a bit more on my Friday post.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 07:46 PM](#)

Nick, you indeed captured my thoughts in only a few sentences. How is it I find so many able to say in a few words what takes me so many? I need to work on that.

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 08:58 PM](#)

"But I'm wondering if there is any practical alternative to relying on the constitution and civil power to actually implement the protection of that liberty."

Perhaps we do Nick. The constitution was born of a society where liberty of conscience displaced the earlier intolerance of colonial local law. In practical terms it is not the constitution or civil power that protects liberty of conscience or religion but the society that continues to reinforce the pre-contractual solidarity of such a principle. If this consciousness is lost then liberty is not far behind.

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 09:29 PM](#)

Well, no, I think I have to disagree with you a bit, David. It IS actually the legal system and civil power that in "practical terms" protects liberty of conscience. But this legal system can only retain popular legitimacy as it reflects the values of society. Thus, you are indeed correct that societal consciousness of these values is vital, and in the end, even determinative of whether that legal system will practically protect freedom.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 22, 2010 at 10:07 PM](#)

It seems to me that in order to answer the first question, we should examine whether Luther is speaking to individuals forcing others to follow the formers' conscience as well as the state making laws attempting the same, or just the state doing so. I think he is addressing both in general, but the ellipses are not helpful in respect to the italicized portions. Thus when Luther stated, "And if you should carry them out with such general laws," I am not sure what he refers to when he says "them". Is he referring to ordinances, ordinances and general laws (both alternatives would be redundant), or to some other antecedent like intentions or convictions, etc.? Did they subsequently outlaw the Mass by civil means and on what basis; the Bible, theology, or the Mass being an agent of political turmoil created by priests, etc.?

Posted by: [Matt McMearty](#) | [April 26, 2010 at 03:51 PM](#)

I believe the "them" refers to the convictions that the mass is wrong and sinful. It would not make sense to say "carry out ordinances and laws by general laws." They did not at that time, after Luther's objections, outlaw the mass through civil law or ordinance. This changed a view years later, by 1524 or 1525, when Luther decided that the Mass was actually a form of public blasphemy, and as such, it could be outlawed. But this was clearly a change of position that marks his move towards his later, less tolerant views.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 26, 2010 at 09:19 PM](#)

This raises the interesting subject of blasphemy laws in the context of religious liberty. Muslim countries are arguing the religious liberty means freedom from blasphemy, while western countries hold that religious liberty entails the freedom to blaspheme. In Luther's case, he was clearly labeling religious devotion he did not approve of, blasphemy. But what about those who blaspheme merely to provoke or ridicule? Should they be protected under the umbrella of religious liberty?

(This is tangential, I know, but I figured why not throw it out there.)

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [April 26, 2010 at 11:02 PM](#)

Blasphemy laws are still on the books in England, though have not been enforced for many years. Though an atheist was recently convicted under hate and harassment speech laws for leaving anti-religious materials in an airport chapel. Hate speech is the new

blasphemy in the west. Drives Muslims crazy. It is okay to "hate" and blaspheme God in the west, but should you "hate" or criticize human equality, including differing sexual views, then you can be prosecuted. Muslims are right in that we are employing a double standard here. In my view, neither forms of speech should be subject to public regulation, short of incitement to violence.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 27, 2010 at 09:32 AM](#)

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