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Luther On The Priesthood Of All Believers And The State

Nicholas Miller

Andrews University, nicholas@andrews.edu

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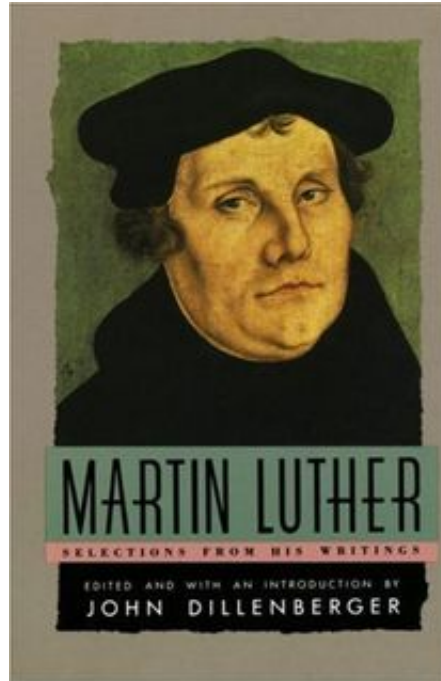
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July 21, 2010

Luther On The Priesthood Of All Believers And The State



To call popes, bishops, priests, monks, and nuns, the religious class, but princes, lords, artisans, and farm-workers the secular class, is a specious device invented by certain time-servers; . . . For all Christians whatsoever really and truly belong to the religious class, and there is no difference among them except insofar as they do different work The fact is that our baptism consecrates us all without exception, and makes us all priests. As St. Peter says, “You are a royal priesthood and a realm of priests,” [1 Pet. 2:9] and Revelation, “Thou hast made us priests and kings by Thy blood. [Rev. 5:9.] (Martin Luther, “An Appeal to the Ruling Class,” *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, 407-408)

Each and all of us are priests . . . why then should we not be entitled to taste or test, and to judge what is right or wrong in the faith? . . . ‘He that is spiritual judges all things and is judged by none,’ We ought to . . . test everything the Romanists do or leave undone. We ought to apply that understanding of the Scriptures which we possess as believers . . . Since God once spoke through an ass, why should He not come in our day and speak through a man of faith and even contradict the pope? (*Ibid*, 414)


The implications of this spiritual equality, and right of individual judgment, led on to the conclusion that the civil magistrate should stay out of spiritual matters. In his treatise *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed*, written just three years later, Luther unpacked the implications of his priesthood-of-believers doctrine for the civil state. He wrote:

Worldly government has laws which extend no farther than to life and property and what is external upon earth. For over the soul God can and will let no one rule but Himself. Therefore, where temporal power presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God’s government and only misleads and destroys the souls. (*Ibid*, 383)

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