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# Martin Luther and National Life

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“Had I desired to ferment trouble,” wrote Luther, “I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany. Yea, I could have started such a little game at Worms that the Emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? A mug’s game. I left it to the Word.”<sup>1</sup> Such restraint in the face of enormous social, political and religious problems has led some to think of the reformer as a heartless man, lacking in social conscience. Advocates of liberation theology, for example, would probably have deemed it their ‘Christian’ duty to help the exploited German peasants in the 1525 uprising and with a World Council of Churches grant to have supplied the peasants with weapons! But Luther belonged to a different breed altogether. He was essentially “a man of the Word, a preacher and professor of biblical theology with strict views about the need for parsons to mind their own business.”<sup>2</sup>

Clearly there is a wide divergence of opinion today within Christendom and amongst Evangelicals as to how believers and churches ought to respond in society to pressing practical issues such as war, nuclear weapons, injustice, corruption, immorality, pornography, racism, unemployment, euthanasia and abortion, etc. Many questions are being asked today concerning the role of the Christian in society and whether it is biblical for churches to do anything more than its distinctively spiritual ministry in order to curb the expressions of sin in society. In this article, therefore, I want to pinpoint then apply some of the more important biblical principles which Martin Luther both recognised and used as determinative in his own response to a contemporary situation which included problems of violence, the maintenance of law and order, corruption, social unrest, political opportunism, charismatic extremism as well as the problem of a persecuted Christian community.

## **Preliminary Observations**

Before I isolate these major principles in Luther’s writings, I want to make two preliminary observations:

A. As we should expect, there are inconsistencies as well as development in the writings of the reformer so that I do not want to rubber-stamp all

that Luther wrote or practised. My aim here is to ask, what were the big principles which influenced Luther's social ethics?

B. I believe Luther would be unhappy today with the way in which many professing Christians approach social issues. We tend to concentrate on the question, what can we do as individuals or churches to restrain sin? How can we obtain a more just society? Is there anything more we can do to influence the Government for good? If we are to discharge our God-given responsibilities and also face up to the awful realities of our contemporary situation, then, of course, we must ask such questions. Nevertheless, there is the subtle danger of a Pelagian, man-centred approach to social ethics on our part when we stress human activity and responsibility without an adequate biblical perspective. At this point, Luther reminds us that prayer is the most potent weapon we have but prayer must be used extensively, believingly and perseveringly even in our approach to social ethics. Again, rather than ask, what believers or churches can do to restrain sin or promote justice, Martin Luther begins with God. The reformer continually emphasises what God is already doing in society in confronting the devil, in restraining wicked people and in thwarting and over-ruling their evil deeds and designs. The duty of believers then, according to Luther, is to 'Co-operate' (an important and technical word for Luther) with God in what He is already doing in society rather than looking around for something novel and eye-catching to do. I intend to follow this Lutheran and biblical approach to social ethics by asking, **What is God Doing in Society?**

## **Providence**

Before we can answer this question, we need to remind ourselves of Luther's profound doctrine of Providence.

The God of the Bible and of Luther is the living God who rules over His creation, who is abundantly kind to all creatures and who directs human affairs. "His will cannot be resisted, changed or hindered,"<sup>3</sup> insists Luther and history is the outworking of the divine decrees. But we must also think in terms of the living devil. There are only two alternatives for man, he argues, either subjection to God or subjection to the devil. "Between the two," he adds, "man stands like an animal to be ridden. If God be the rider, the creature goes where God wills ... If Satan be the rider, he goes where Satan directs. Man cannot freely choose to leap to the side of one or the other of these riders or to seek one out. It is the riders themselves who contend to win and possess man."<sup>4</sup> Now it is against the devil, depraved sinners and all forms of sin that God uses two different but related forms of government, namely, the **Earthly** and the **Heavenly** or **Spiritual** in order to restrain wickedness, promote righteousness, love and external peace. The kingdom of God's "right hand" is that of the spiritual which makes sinners into Christians

whereas the kingdom of His “left hand”, the earthly, restrains the wicked so that “they have to keep the peace outwardly and be silent against their will.” These two kingdoms oppose sin in different ways.

### **Three Orders**

We reach the heart of Luther’s social ethic when we observe that in his later writings he speaks of **Three Orders** (‘offices’ or ‘hierarchies’) running through and expressing the earthly kingdom of God in society, namely, the home, the state and the church. Here again Satan fights God fiercely over these offices for while they are God-appointed, the people who fill these offices can belong to God or the devil. In his exposition of Psalm 101 in 1534-5, Luther states that “those who occupy and practice them are usually of the devil” and this affects the way in which the duties of these offices are fulfilled. According to Luther there can even be a Satanic transformation of these earthly offices yet, on the other hand, God can and frequently does renew and transform the offices in His common and saving grace. For these reasons the three orders never stand still and must not be approached in merely political or social terms.

This teaching concerning the activity of the devil in society is far more relevant to social ethics than is usually acknowledged today. For example, one writer has recently provided impressive evidence that Karl Marx was a Satanist who sold himself to the devil and whose aim was the destruction of Christianity rather than concern for the proletariat. One third of the world’s population is now ruled by Marxist governments. Again, in Britain there are reliable reports of witches’ covens and Satanist groups which are seeking to destroy Christian marriages, undermine Christian families and churches. “Christians,” declares Luther, “know there are two kingdoms in the world, engaged in fierce mutual combat. One of these Satan rules ... in the other, which always opposes and battles with Satan’s kingdom, Christ rules.”<sup>5</sup> Do we recognise this conflict (cf. Ephesians 6:12)? Let us now look in more detail at Luther’s teaching concerning the three offices which express God’s earthly kingdom in society.

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### **The Home**

The foundational order, Luther insists, is the domestic one, namely, marriage, parenthood and the family unit.

Luther claims that marriage transforms and also supports the other orders and ought itself to be supported and encouraged by the ‘orders’ of the state and the church. He describes family life as a “school for character” for it is in the family where the child learns to respect authority and people, where he learns wisdom and how to make

decisions as well as appreciating the value of mercy. Luther rightly concludes that all these qualities and benefits reinforce the proper exercise of government and promote social harmony and justice. Our concern is that this basic office is being undermined in our contemporary society. A soaring divorce rate, the widespread practice of adultery and co-habitation with a staggering nine hundred thousand single-parent families recorded in Britain for 1981, large numbers of battered wives and children compel us to ask whether there is anything else we can do to influence or change this situation.

## The State

The second office acknowledged by Luther is the State, including the magistrates, government, Queen or President.

“Earthly government,” he writes, “is a glorious ordinance of God and a splendid gift of God,”<sup>6</sup> the Creator. The implications of this principle are far-reaching and we will now pinpoint them briefly:-

(a) This splendid office of secular rule should be accepted reverently, not reluctantly, the reformer argues, thankfully not complainingly for it is an office appointed by God.

(b) It is the duty of all citizens to obey the authorities and in this context Luther frequently refers to Romans chapter 13. “Obedience,” he affirms, “is the crown and honour of all virtue.” Filtering into Germany at this time were mercenaries from the cities of Italy who — alongside the selfish ruling princes, the preaching of extremists like Thomas Muntzer and the excitement aroused by astrological predictions which even attracted a theologian of the calibre of Melancthon — incited an already exploited peasant population to rise in rebellion in 1525. Luther was adamant. Man’s duty, whatever the grievance, is to be subject to the “higher powers” (Romans 13:1). As he had refused to spearhead national, political resistance to Rome in the early 1520’s so now again he refused to encourage or support the peasants in their rebellion. He then wrote his famous “**Against Murderous and Thieving Hordes of Peasants**” condemning the uprising in no uncertain way. On biblical grounds, Luther was convinced that rebellion against the civil rulers was sinful and also counter-productive in that it resulted in far greater evils. He concedes, however, that there are occasions when rulers exceed their authority and when it is necessary to obey God rather than men. In his treatise, “**Of Earthly Authority**”, for example, Luther remonstrates with the Roman Catholic rulers who forbade citizens to read Luther’s Bible and demanded that such Bibles be surrendered and burnt: “You are a tyrant and over-reach yourself and command where you have neither the right nor the power.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless these are rare exceptions to the rule and citizens must obey the civil rule wherever this is possible.

(c) In common grace, unbelievers have sufficient integrity, wisdom and

sense of justice to rule a country competently. “It is not necessary for the emperor to be a Christian to rule,” Luther boldly declares, “it is sufficient for the emperor to possess reason.”<sup>8</sup> He goes further by claiming that pagans are often far more skilled than believers in secular rule. This claim is at variance with the modern tendency amongst evangelicals to vote for an MP or President only because he professes to be a born-again believer. What Luther does allow, however, is that the believer should be the most socially conscious of all for love is in his heart and he is thus most free to serve. Furthermore, if God provides a nation with rulers who are both wise and Christian then this is for Luther an unusual but signal favour of God to that people.

(d) We have the important duty as citizens of guarding the office of secular rule. I want to elaborate this crucial point for I discern in Luther’s writings at least **six ways** in which the office of secular rule can be safeguarded. It is protected, **first of all**, through precept and example in the family. **Secondly**, by safeguarding the distinction between the spiritual and earthly realms. “The secular authorities,” complains Luther, “always seek in the name of the devil to teach and instruct Christ how He should conduct His church and His spiritual rule. Similarly, the false priests and sectaries, not in the name of God, always seek to teach and instruct people how they should conduct secular rule. Thus the devil is unrestrained on either side and has much to do ...” The vigorous preaching and teaching of the Word was regarded by Luther as the most effective way of avoiding confusion between these two realms. **Thirdly**, we guard the office of secular rule by appreciating its necessity for the well-being of people in society. The purpose of this office is the restraining of sin, the promotion of external peace and justice. If evil is not resisted by secular rule, remarks Luther, then three disastrous results will ensue, namely, social anarchy, freedom for the devil to work unhindered and, finally, the overthrow of God’s earthly kingdom. Enforcing the message of Romans 13, the reformer insists that the use of force in restraining sin and wickedness can never be removed because society cannot be christianised. We also guard this office, **fourthly**, by being prepared to suffer injustice. If believers attack their rulers, Luther adds, they must surrender the name of Christian. Fearing that some of the extremist peasant leaders were misinterpreting Israel’s release from captivity in Egypt under Moses, Luther argues that this was neither a revolt nor a pattern for rebellion. In his **Admonition to Peace (1525)** he assures the peasants that when conditions appear impossible to bear, God is still at work and will raise up a man to restore justice and peace. In the meantime, “the gospel teaches that Christians ought to endure and suffer wrong, and pray to God in all their necessities” but, Luther warns, “you are not willing to suffer and, like the heathen, force the rulers to conform to your impatient will.”<sup>9</sup> Such an attitude is often regarded

today as political conservatism and a hangover from medieval philosophy concerning the sanctity of the social order. However, we must say in reply that Luther was not opposed to change and, in fact, agreed with many of the grievances felt by the peasants. He even urged the Princes to make radical changes to benefit the peasants but, for Luther, the change must come about in God's way and time, not through lawlessness.

**Fifthly**, prayer is another means by which we can safeguard the office of secular rule. The only useful thing the exploited peasants could do, in Luther's opinion, was to pray to God that He should support the order He instituted on earth and establish greater justice in society. He challenges the peasants: "You adduce the children of Israel as an example, saying that God heard their cry and delivered them. Why then do you not follow the example ...? Call upon God yourselves and wait until He sends a Moses."<sup>10</sup> Do we take seriously the apostolic injunction in 1 Timothy 2:1-2? **Sixthly**, there is for Luther another way in which we can safeguard the office of secular rule. "Since a true Christian lives not for himself but for his neighbour and ... the sword is a very great benefit and necessary to the whole world to preserve peace ... to punish sin and prevent evil ... he serves, helps and does all he can to further the government ... he considers what is for the profit of others."<sup>11</sup> Instead of complaining about, and criticising, the inadequacies and corruption of local or national governments, individual believers should, as part of their vocation, serve and influence these rulers in positive ways. "Therefore," continues Luther, "if there is a lack of hangmen, soldiers, judges, rulers, etc. and you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the job so that necessary government may by no means be despised and become inefficient or perish."<sup>12</sup> In relation then to this office of secular rule, God's people have solemn responsibilities to fulfil.

## **The Church**

We turn briefly to the **Third Office** of which Luther speaks. **It is one of the distinctive features of Luther's ecclesiology that he regards the church as the third order within the earthly kingdom thus complementing the offices of Home and State.**

I do not intend to develop his ecclesiology here except to note that in reaction to the Roman Catholic domination of the state and the indifference of some sects to the state as well as his own distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church, the reformer over-reacted by making the church almost subject to the state and territorial as well as spiritual in character.

## **Two Major Principles**

My concern here is to ask, how, in Luther's view, were believers expected

to express their faith in society? I have already suggested and detailed some Lutheran answers to this question but in conclusion I want to draw attention to **Two Major Principles** which characterised the holy living of Luther and his people in the world.

The first major principle is that of **Co-operation**.

An unbeliever who fulfils his vocation faithfully is a co-worker with God even though he may be unaware of the fact. The believer, on the other hand, is free to serve God in love and in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Describing the inseparable relationship between faith and love, Luther maintains, “just as faith brings you blessedness and eternal life, so it also brings with it good works and is irresistible.”<sup>13</sup> Faith “is the moral living force” of love, it is “something living, busy, active and powerful and it is impossible that it should not unceasingly bring about good” and this good involves co-operation with God.

But what is the nature of this co-operation? How do believers co-operate with God? Luther’s answer is that we co-operate with God by fulfilling our callings responsibly in personal, domestic, social and church contexts. Luther’s social ethic then majors around these callings and offices for “such work is wellpleasing to God and brings forth true Christian fruits in temporal and bodily matters, as ruling a land or people, bringing up children, serving and working ... whether as a farmer, tailor, servant, soldier or carpenter ...”<sup>14</sup> etc.

Yet the question remains, is there something additional we should be doing? What happens, for example, when the ‘offices’ are corrupted by evil men and even by Satan? Here again we must ‘co-operate’ with God. For example, we should inform, encourage and support rulers as they endeavour to maintain and apply the laws of the realm. Believers should also pray more for unbelievers that they will be able to use their offices more consistently to restrain sin. Again, the ‘works’ of the believer are used by God to enter daily into earthly situations in order to influence and change them as He pleases. But what happens when all this fails to effect a change? Should we pick up our banners (or ETs or Sword and Trowels) and start demonstrating or withholding our taxes? Certainly not, replies Luther. We should expect God to deal with the corruption more directly and radically by ordaining temporal judgments such as drought, rebellion or even war as divine punishments. To the princes at the time of the peasants’ rebellion, Luther wrote, “it is not the peasants merely who have set themselves against you but God Himself ...”<sup>15</sup>

Another aspect of co-operation is love for one’s neighbour. Several Lutheran scholars like Bainton, Ebeling, Rupp and Wingren emphasise the centrality of the neighbour in Luther’s ethics for the law, the offices, the vocations and the gospel are all directed beneficially and downwards

towards the neighbour. We see the centrality of this principle in the reformer's description of a Christian — the person who receives the gospel in his heart and is surprised to find he then has love for his neighbour. According to Luther, this love finds joy in people and in meeting the desperate material needs of our neighbours. Love also involves obedience to the law of God, truthfulness, fairness, kindness, etc. Another description he gives of the Christian is of someone who receives from above and then gives out below so that the Christian “becomes as it were a vessel or tube through which the stream of divine goodness flows unceasingly into others ...”<sup>16</sup> Denying that our works have any meritorious value before God, Luther stresses that we must love our neighbour for the neighbour's sake just as a road leads to an insignificant little house and goes no further. But Luther warns of a carnality which makes even believers “pick and choose not only the persons it loves, but even the qualities it loves in them and thus it only loves its neighbour ... because he is learned, rich, merry, attractive and it dislikes or despises whatever is commended under another label, the unlearned, the fools and the sinners ...”<sup>17</sup> Is the wide rift between the church and sections of society such as the working class due in some measure to a selective loving and concern on our part? Another example of co-operation with God for Luther is applicatory preaching. Preaching in Wittenberg on the parable of the king who cancelled his servant's debt (8 November 1528), Luther says in conclusion, “you want to be Christians while still practising usury, robbing and stealing. How do people who are so sunk in sins expect to receive forgiveness ... but my sermon is for crushed hearts who feel their sins and have no peace.”<sup>18</sup>

The second major principle which governed Luther's social ethic was **Prayer**.

He insists, first of all, that there must be regular praying and rebukes Christians for rushing to their earthly tasks and vocation without first praying to God. The result of such prayerlessness is that God is “barred” from their labour. He believed that God alone sustains, renews and transforms the ‘offices’ He appointed in society and He alone can make them effective against sin and Satan. Prayer is the door through which God the creator and lord enters creatively into the home, the factory, the community, the school or the government etc. so prayerlessness means there will be little blessing upon vocations and little, if any, improvement in society. “Through prayer,” he adds, “we commend everything that is in good order, bring into order what is in disorder, bear what cannot be bettered, triumph over misfortune and hold fast to what is good.” However, there are times and situations when, according to Luther, all human ways are ‘blocked’ and no help or relief is found by ordinary prayer and daily obedience. In such a time of need and necessity,



believers have no choice but to resort to more earnest and importunate prayer. Here Luther had in mind situations such as apostasy, war, gross injustice and persecution. Through prayer, God revolutionises the home, society and the church. He distinguished between God working through creaturely means and “God’s arm”<sup>20</sup> working directly and powerfully in situations when man is utterly helpless. “Faith”, Luther insists, “is always constrained to prayer. It must walk in desperation and in many groanings, saying, Lord, Thou wilt do that which is good.”<sup>21</sup> In his exposition of Jonah,<sup>22</sup> the reformer is convinced that God will answer the prayers of the helpless: “Look up to God ... to the Lord ... He will not leave you unanswered.”

Here then are the responsibilities of believers in the world. We must ‘co-operate’ with God in what He is doing in society and pray fervently for the Lord’s gracious intervention in the life of our nation and church. The need of the hour is not for marches or demonstrations or strikes or even despair but for believers and churches who know and honour God and who will use prayerfully the spiritual weapons entrusted to us by the living God.

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