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### Luther's Social Ethics in Contrast to Rome's Asceticism

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CONCORDIA SEMINARY

LUTHER'S SOCIAL ETHICS  
IN CONTRAST TO ROME'S ASCETICISM

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE SEMINARY FACULTY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

DEPARTMENT OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

BY

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## LUTHER'S SOCIAL ETHICS IN CONTRAST TO ROME'S ASCETICISM

### Introduction:

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Rediscovered by Luther.

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## LUTHER'S SOCIAL ETHICS IN CONTRAST TO ROME'S ASCETICISM

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." Romans 1, 16.17) When Martin Luther, under the enlightening guidance of God's Holy Spirit, came to the true understanding of this Scripture passage, the germ of the Church's reformation became active. Though Luther had already in 1512 received his Doctor's title, he had at that time not yet come to the true knowledge and understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But when once this truth did become clear in his mind then all Scripture took on a new meaning for him. Luther delved further into the inspired Word. Bit by bit the scales fell from his eyes. And as he more and more saw the truth of the justification by faith, so he also saw more and more how the church of



Rome was veiling this truth.

"Luther brought back the pure doctrine of justification; that, above all, made him the Reformer of the Church."<sup>1</sup> By carrying out the implications of this Scriptural truth in its relation to the rest of Roman theology Luther once and for all broke the power of the Roman papacy. Other reformers had failed and Luther succeeded in his Reformation because he struck at the root of the problem and undermined the foundations upon which Rome's whole diabolical system of theology rested. Luther succeeded because he destroyed Rome's sacerdotalism and sacramentalism.

Luther broke the power of the first of these, sacerdotalism, in his "Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" of August 1520. Up until this time the Roman church had been able to guard herself against any attacks and reforms by what Luther terms as three walls which they had built about them. They are, "First, when pressed by the temporal power, they have made decrees and said that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the other hand, that the spiritual is above the temporal power. Second, when the attempt is made to reprove them out of the Scriptures, they raise the objection that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to no one except the pope. Third, if threatened with a council, they

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1. Theo. Hoyer, "Through Justification unto Sanctification," Concordia Theological Monthly, XIII (February, 1942), p. 91.



answer with the fable that no one can call a council but  
the pope.<sup>2</sup>"

Against the first of these protective walls of Rome Luther maintained the Scriptural teaching of the universal priesthood of believers, (1 Pet. 2, 9; Rev. 5, 10). There is no essential distinction between the clergy and the laity. All are priests and the clergy have their office only by virtue of the fact that it is delegated to them by their fellow-Christians. Correctly speaking, the clergy are therefore the servants of the laity. And since temporal power has also been ordained by God, the priests, as well as the laymen, <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ subject to it in the secular realm.

Against the second wall Luther maintained the principle of 'sola Scriptura,' that the pope has no authority to super-impose his interpretation upon Scriptures and to make that interpretation binding on the consciences of the people. On the contrary, every Christian is to understand and judge such essential knowledge of Scripture as he needs for himself and for his salvation.

The third wall, Luther contends, is unscriptural. Every Christian is in accordance with Matthew 18, 15 held responsible for the welfare of his brother. If, as in the case of the pope, he is a ruler, fails to heed such correction, and makes it impossible for his brethren to cor-

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2. "Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," Luther's Works, Holman edition, II, p. 65.



rect him, then his brethren must of necessity invoke the authority of others.

Through the doctrine of justification by faith Luther's views on all theology and life were changed. In the light of this doctrine he began to understand "that the deciding factor was not man's relation to the church, as Rome would have it, but rather his personal relation to God." <sup>3</sup> If this new conception was to be applied to Christian faith, it also had to be applied to Christian life which flows from faith. Luther did apply this new conception to the field of life, of ethics, and he thus began to deviate very distinctly from the views of his mother church.

Luther was rapidly moving forward. In October of the same year, 1520, he published the letter which proved to be the destruction of Rome's sacerdotalism. This letter was entitled "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church." Here Luther in clarion tones proclaims the individual's liberation. According to Roman theology the individual's salvation was inextricably bound to the church's sacramental system. Roman dogma taught that there is no salvation outside of their validly administered sacraments. In this teaching Rome found the basis of its tremendous power, for the pope could by means of excommunication or by means of the interdict, during which period of time no sacraments

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3. Reu-Buehring, Christian Ethics, p. 39.



were administered, thus close the doors of heaven to any individual or to all the inhabitants of any given district. But Luther had again found the truth of justification by faith.

Overagainst the tyranny of Rome's sacramental system Luther stressed the necessity of personal faith. When as a result the people now realized that they no longer need depend on the church for eternal salvation, but that salvation depended upon their personal relation to God through faith, then the power of the interdict and of Rome was broken. So great was Luther's insistence upon this liberty of the individual that he wrote, "Therefore I say: Neither pope nor bishop nor any other man has the right to impose a single syllable of law upon a Christian man without his consent; and if he does, it is done in the spirit of tyranny. Therefore the prayers, fasts, donations, and whatever else the pope decrees and demands in all of his decretals, as numerous as they are iniquitous, he demands and decrees without any right whatever; and he sins against the liberty of the Church whenever he attempts any such thing."<sup>4</sup>

(Also) in October of 1520 Luther penned his third great letter, "On the Freedom of the Christian Man." In this letter addressed to pope Leo X we have a treatise which in itself comprises a summary of the Christian life. The great truth of justification by faith was here applied to the

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4.

"The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," Luther's Works, Holman edition, p. 233.



practical implications of daily life, in other words, Luther here sets forth the Scriptural ethics of a Christian, of a justified man. Two short statements in this letter set forth the sum and substance of this ethics; they are:

"A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone."<sup>5</sup> There is perhaps no better comment on this letter than that made by MacKinnon, "In Luther the outraged moral sense of all Christendom gave the ultimatum: reform itself or take the consequences of revolt and schism. It sets forth his cardinal doctrine of justification by faith as alike an emancipation, through faith, of the individual Christian from the bondage of external works, and a limitation of this freedom in virtue of the obligation of individual self-discipline and service for others. It reminds us that the fierce controversialist could also be the saint and the influence he wielded was due to the saint as well as the controversialist."<sup>6</sup>

Luther was a pathfinder in the field of ethics, because when he again discovered the Scriptural doctrine of justification it meant necessarily that he had also rediscovered and corrected the fundamental principles of ethics. The

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5. "On the Freedom of the Christian Man," Luther's Works, Holman edition, II, p. 312.

6. James MacKinnon, Luther and the Reformation, II, p. 263.



latter must flow from the former. And yet, really to understand or appreciate the significance of Luther's rediscovery, one must go back farther. It must be remembered that Luther was a man and that Luther lived among men. In other words it is this: behind Luther's teachings on social ethics are long stages of history and development. In order to understand Luther's social ethics one must look back into that history and development. A great part of that history is the history of Roman Catholicism for Luther was trained in the best traditions of this church. For this reason then the first part of this thesis is devoted to the study of the history, origins and development and the statement of Rome's theology and view of life.



## I.

Rome's theology and ascetic view of life finds its basis primarily in Neo-Platonic philosophy. This is true particularly of Rome's asceticism. Fundamentally Neo-Platonism is a revival of Platonism with the exception that it adds certain features which are not inherent in Plato's teachings. It was an attempt of Plotinus (3rd. century A.D.) to teach Plato to the Romans in a school which he himself had founded in Rome.

In essence Plotinus takes over into his teaching the Platonic doctrine of God. He, however, makes of this God a being, but a being that is so transcendent that it lies beyond the power of description. He is even reluctant to describe this God as existent for the very idea of existence is unworthy of this transcendent Being. Inherent in this God is a creative energy by means of which all the physical and spiritual world exists through emanations. Even as a cup of water overflows when you pour more water into it, he says, so this God emanates from his Being all creation, namely, the intelligence (nous), the soul, and the body, or more generally matter.

Somewhere in an intermediate state between intelligence and body is man, who with his soul partakes of the natures of both intelligence and body. Furthermore, this soul is the seat of the free-will, that is, it is subject to or can



be allured by both the intelligence and the body. Man must come to the realization that his soul is the result of emanation and that if he wishes his soul to rejoin the divinity from which it has emanated he must then avoid all allurements to the lower feelings and things of life. This is accomplished by resisting all allurements of matter. Man's goal is that his soul be so thoroughly purified from all that is base, that is matter, that his soul will ultimately be re-absorbed by divinity. This can be accomplished only by cultivating or absorbing oneself in the higher things of life, such as, art, love and philosophy. Of these philosophy is the highest. By cultivating these higher things, by means of a highly developed mysticism the soul of man can thus pierce the intelligence above. In this way the soul enters into the very heart of the transcendent Being to be reunited with it, the final object which all emanations hope to attain. Death does not directly transfer the soul into this perfected state. The process of purification which was begun in cultivating philosophy or the mystical element in life is continued until no individuality remains, until all the traces of matter have disappeared. It is in reality an attempt to produce by being and emotion the ultimate success, which is in the words of Plotinus, "The soul makes the flight from the alone to the alone."<sup>7</sup>

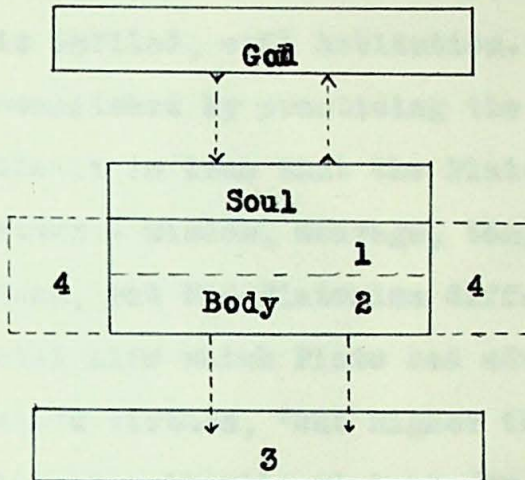
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7. Plotinus, "Enneads," quoted in T. V. Smith, Philosophers Speak for Themselves, p. 693.



From the tenets of Neo-Platonism a very definite type of ethics was evolved. It can be well illustrated by diagram.<sup>8</sup>

The Neo-Platonic concept of man:



1. Conflict between spiri- and material= concupiscence.
2. The interests of the body are carnal, sensuous.
3. Philosophy, science, pleasure, sin.
4. Donum super additum (gratia infusa) enables the body to have spiritual interest.

According to the Neo-Platonic theory of Pantheistic emanations matter is evil and is the original fountain of evil. Because the soul seeks to rejoin its divine origin, it must at once seek to free itself from all that is not pure, and that necessarily implies that the soul must as much as possible free itself from the evil body into which it has been placed. "The human soul finds its purification only in separating itself from the material part with which here it stands in connection."<sup>9</sup>

Starting thus with the pluralistic or dualistic universe which they had conceived, the Neo-Platonists hoped to end in

8. F. E. Mayer, Comparative Symbolics, p. 16.

9. George P. Fischer, The Beginnings of Christianity, p. 179.



some sort of monism by visualizing the universal striving and ultimate reunion of the human souls with their divine origin. In order to achieve this goal they have devised their ascetic view of life. The human soul, which has been imprisoned in the human body, must seek to free itself from this defiled, evil habitation. This freeing of the soul is accomplished by practicing the virtues previously mentioned. While it is true that the Platonic concepts of the civil virtues - wisdom, courage, temperance and justice are retained, yet Neo-Platonism differs in that it disparages the social life which Plato had advocated. They have retained Plato's virtues, "but higher than these are placed the purifying or cathartic virtues, by which the soul emancipates itself from subjection to sense."<sup>10</sup> Consequently they maintained that a life apart from men, a life spent in solitude and contemplation, is the life of greater virtue. With such very definite ascetic tendencies it is only natural to find such assertions, "Asceticism was the natural offspring of a system in which all that is corporeal is evil."<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note the fanaticism with which some adhered to these doctrines. Some individuals were firmly convinced that all that is nature is evil and as a result went to the farthest extremes in an attempt to suppress nature. In these we can hardly fail to see the exact

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10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., p. 180.



prototype of later Roman Catholic ascetics. Such an account is the following: "A senator named Rogantianus, who had followed the teaching of Plotinus, acquired so intense a disgust for the things of this life, that he left all his property, refused to fulfil the duties of a praetor, abandoned his senatorial functions, and withdrew himself from every form of business and pleasure. Plotinus, instead of reproaching him, overwhelmed him with eulogy, selected him as his favorite disciple, and continually represented him as the model of a philosopher." <sup>12</sup> The transition from this to celibacy, monasticism, and like practices is not far distant, and if the teaching is consistently followed out, it is almost inevitable. The trend to more extreme forms of the suppression of natural things are already plainly evident in the pupils of Plotinus, Jamblichus, Porphyry and Proclus, as well as in later devotees of the Neo-Platonic school.

From the early beginnings of ascetic teaching in Neo-Platonic philosophy there is a continuous development. For its development in the Roman system of theology the tremendous influence of St. Augustine must be known. Augustine, born in Tagaste, Africa (354-430), spent his early life in the study of rhetoric and philosophy. <sup>13</sup> To counteract the influence of a youth spent in frivolous and sinful debauchery

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12. Wm. E. H. Lecky, History of European Morals, I, p. 350.

13. For Augustine's life see, Eugene Portalié, "St. Augustine," The Catholic Encyclopedia, II, pp. 84-104.



he had the blessings of a thorough and abiding training as given him by his devoted Christian mother Monica. When he returned to a semblance of sanity, he began with all earnestness to seek what he thought would be for him a satisfactory view or philosophy of life. After considerable time had been spent in fruitless search, he came upon Christianity. But even when he did find that for which he had been looking in the teachings of Christianity he could not yet divorce from his thinking certain philosophical concepts of Neo-Platonism. He had come too much under the influence of pagan philosophical thought, especially Manichaeism, not to suffer lasting effects from it. It is therefore very apparent that in Augustine there is an earnest attempt to fuse Neo-Platonic thought and Christian doctrine into a harmonious unit. Some authors have even gone so far as to claim that Augustine's return to Catholicism came as a result of some of the reading that he did in the writings of Plotinus in the year 385.<sup>14</sup> It is only natural then that St. Augustine was unable to fuse Neo-Platonic thought and Christian doctrine without sacrificing Scriptural concepts in the teachings of sin, grace,<sup>15</sup> and justification.

In concepts comparable to those of Neo-Platonism, Augustine maintains that the soul of man is and must again seek to approach its divine origin. For him too the soul

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14. Cf. Dom Cuthbert Butler, Western Mysticism, p. 23 and Wm. Ralph Inge, The Philosophy of Plotinus, I, p. 12.

15. Cf. Reinhold Seeberg, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, II, pp. 406; 550ff.



has been placed into a body which is in itself sinful. This corruptible body is supposedly pressing down the soul and hindering it from the highest of all virtues, that of contemplating God. "For Augustine, as for all true mystics, the indispensable condition of contemplation is such a purification of the soul as will render it fit for the ascent to the contemplation of God: a purification which is the result of a long process of self-denial and self-conquest, of mortification and the practice of virtue - in short, asceticism in the broad and full meaning of the word, viz.  
<sup>16</sup>  
 'training.'"

For the purposes outlined in this thesis it will be profitable to make comparisons between Plotinus and St. Augustine in their writings concerning the ethics, the highest virtues to be practiced in order that the soul might return to its divine origin. It is not to be inferred that Augustine was no more than a pagan philosopher. The clear statements he expressed concerning faith indicate that he was a sincere Christian. Many of the comparisons here made are made on the supposition that they are valid if his theology were at all times consistently carried out. On the basis of that supposition both advocate a work-righteous teaching that man is able by his own efforts in self-discipline and mortification to suppress the sinful body. Having done so, man in a sense is then able to attain the highest of all

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16. C. Butler, op. cit., p. 36.



virtues, that of contemplating God. In essence then, asceticism is to serve the purpose of weakening the body and in that way aids the soul in its return to God. Characteristic to philosophic thought, Augustine has also imagined various steps or grades in the process of contemplating God, each higher stage being more set apart from the things of this world, each stage being just a bit closer to the ideal of Plotinus, in which the soul makes the 'flight of the alone to the alone.' 16a

Augustine very definitely advocates an asocial, unworldly view of life. The fallacious assumption that this life is sinful naturally led to the 'contempt of the world' idea that can here be traced back to him. As a natural result he also then originated the idea of the double standard of ethics. He held that as this life is sinful and that as not all are able in the same measure to overcome, to suppress this life, that all are not able to attain the same level in a life of virtue, that, therefore, there should be one standard of morality or ethics for those of less ability and one standard for those of more ability. Augustine devised the higher set of ethics for the clergy because they, he felt, were better able to approach the ideal in reuniting their souls to God. Of them he demands that they devote their whole lives to the service of God, that they renounce everything worldly, in other words, that they subject every bit of their personality and individuality to absolute obedience to the organized church.

For the masses Augustine advocates the lower standard



of a more social, less virtuous ethics. To them he grants permission to marry, to cultivate an interest in culture, the arts, science, and the like. He contends that when the masses do cultivate these things they are doing something which is more or less sinful and which consequently does involve a certain minimum of guilt. Yet, he concedes, this must be permitted since they are unable to achieve the highest standard of morality. Although Augustine's entire set of ethics is unnatural, unworldly and unusual, yet it is not distinctive because it conforms very closely to the unnatural ascetic view of life that was extensively prevalent during the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>17</sup>

For the purposes of this thesis in tracing the development of ascetic ethics, St. Augustine is being used as a connecting link between Neo-Platonism and later Roman theology. It was through his influence that this aspect of Neo-Platonism was introduced into the Western Church, even as Origen (d. 254) had brought it into the Eastern Church. How the influence of Augustinian thought spread into later Roman theology can easily be traced. Already in his "De Civitate Dei" Augustine had asserted the supremacy of ecclesiastical authority over secular authority. When all of these ideas are woven together there evolves the basic pattern of Roman Catholic asceticism. Because this life is sinful in all

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17. On Augustine see R. Seeberg, op. cit., pp. 550-567; Augustus Neander, Lectures on the History of Christian Dogmas, I, pp. 345 - 351.



its aspects man must try to suppress it. Only naturally then the life of highest virtue is one apart from the world, one of self-purification, one of mortification, of works. In the final analysis man is unable completely to suppress this life as he should. Unable to do so, doubts then arise in the individual's mind, doubts finally as to the certainty of his salvation. The church has developed and maintains the idea of her authority over even secular authority and thus places herself in a position to exploit this doubt. When the church organizes its power to exploit this doubt, then indulgences, celibacy, monasticism and numerous other diabolical schemes are devised.

Briefly, this is a part of the history of Roman Catholic theology that is essential to an understanding of its ascetic ethics. With its origins in Neo-Platonism it was developed by Augustine and through his influence brought into later Roman theology, and here this asceticism found its highest development. The next section of this thesis will indicate how and to what extent this asceticism was made a part of Roman dogma at the time of Luther.



## II.

Various streams of thought have carried over from St. Augustine's theology into later Roman dogma. It is of special importance to note that, "Augustine left standing in and along with his doctrine of grace, the element of merit, the element of gratia infusa and the hierarchical priestly element."<sup>18</sup> Of greatest importance, however, is the fact that his dualistic approach has very definitely been carried over into Roman theology.

In the doctrine of man, Rome teaches that man is created with a dual nature, spiritual and physical. "Nach griechischer Denkweise wird dann die geistige Natur des Menschen als die hoehere angesehen, sodasz dem Menschen vires superiores et inferiores eignen. Er war mit einem Dualismus erschaffen, sein Geist an sich<sup>19</sup> sterblich, sein Leib an sich sterblich, sein Geist zum Hoeheren, sein Leib zum Sinnlichen hinneigend." Because these two parts of the dual nature, the body and the soul, are kept in distinct spheres, all Roman theology is affected by this dualistic approach.

In consequence of this view they propound the doctrine of creationism. Since all that is material is carnal,

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18. Adolph Harnack, History of Dogma, VI, p. 275.  
 19. Wilh. Walther, Lehrbuch der Symbolik, p. 57.



is sensuous, the soul cannot consist of a material generation, as the view of traducianism requires. The bodies originate from the seed of Adam, but God Himself creates the individual soul and unites it in a union with the embryo. As to the relation of these two natures to each other, the Greeks had placed them in direct conflict and had then tried to elevate the spiritual over the natural. Roman theology never did free itself from this error.<sup>20</sup>

Rome, furthermore, proceeds to make a distinction between what is called 'Natur' and 'Uebernatur.'<sup>21</sup> It is well set forth by Walther, "Danach unterscheidet man nun an dem urspruenglichen Menschen die natuerliche und die uebernaturliche Ausgestaltung. Natur des nach Gottes Bilde erschaffenen Menschen ist es, mit Vernunft und freiem Willen ausgestattet, eine geistige Person zu sein. Dies ist unverlierbar, weil durch die Erschaffung bewirkt, geht also auch nicht durch den Suendenfall verloren."<sup>22</sup> Man, as he was constituted originally, included also the flesh, which is by its very essence the source of carnal desire, or concupiscence. Concupiscence is in reality only the natural conflict between the soul and the body.

But man also possessed a special endowment which he has by grace<sup>23</sup> (donum gratiae superadditum). By means of

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20. Ibid., p. 58.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 59.

23. Definition of grace as found in Roman Catechism, II, 2, 49, and quoted in Popular Symbolics, p. 169: "a divine quality inhering in the soul, as it were, a glory (cont'd. p. 20)



this endowed gift man was able to subdue the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit. Adam too, in the state of integrity, had concupiscence. Adam's fall, therefore, consisted in this that man thereby lost these supernatural gifts. He lost no concreated righteousness and holiness because he had had none. Not until after he was given the donum superadditum was he able to become righteous.

At this point Roman theologians had different opinions regarding the essence of original sin. According to the Scotists, who took a negative view, God gave man this grace to become holy only after man had merited it. According to the Thomists, for whom original sin is something positive, this sanctifying grace was given Adam immediately after his creation. When called upon to settle the difference, the Council of Trent avoided taking a stand by making the ambiguous statement that Adam in the fall lost the holiness and righteousness in which he had been constituted. Thus, instead of settling the issue, the controversy was veiled by using the word 'constituted' for 'created.'

Rome also makes a distinction between image and similitude. "Doch nur dem Geiste des Menschen gebuehrt die Bezeichnung einer imago Dei, der Leib ist nur ein vestigium Dei, wie es auch die uebrigen Geschhoepfe sind." <sup>24</sup> By image they mean that man, even as other creatures, resembles God

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and a light which removes all the stains from the soul and makes the soul itslef more beautiful and glorious."

24. W. Walther, op. cit., p. 59.



because he still possesses some of God's infinite qualities, though in a limited manner. These qualities are especially reason and free will, dominion over creation. Since man was originally constituted with these qualities, he cannot again lose them. But in order to attain the similitude of God man must be given certain supernatural powers, namely, sanctifying grace. By means of this sanctifying grace man is empowered to overcome the carnal, sensuous desires of the flesh.

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The practical implications of this teaching are these. The body and soul require different means, different forms of worship to achieve their ultimate goals, since, as in Neo-Platonism, the body and soul belong to different spheres. The soul can return directly <sup>to</sup> God from whom it has come directly. <sup>26</sup> The only obstacle preventing this return is the body into which the soul has been placed. Because the very essence of the body is material, the soul must free itself, the body must be overcome, and that is best done by weakening the body through asceticism. Further, because the soul can return directly to God without any means, it can, therefore, best approach God, its original source, by means of mysticism.

The body, however, is of material and therefore cannot return to God without means. Of itself the body is unable to receive the spiritual blessings until grace has been in-

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25. Cf. F. E. Mayer, op. cit., p. 17; W. Walther, op. cit., pp. 58-60

26. John Adam Moehler, Symbolism or Doctrinal Differences, p. 203ff.



fused, and that is accomplished by means of the sacraments. Man in his original state retains freedom of will.<sup>27</sup> Man can by means of this free will do a certain amount of works, which works will induce a more favorable attitude from God. Man may thus merit grace which will aid him in working out his own salvation. By virtue of the fact that he performs what is termed a meritum de congruo he may merit gratia infusa. From the viewpoint of God it is this, that man is by his receptive attitude deserving of God's greater interest. God's greater interest implies that He will through the sacraments extend more grace to man, will by His virtues, powers, and gifts in the sacraments infuse into man a certain quality, and that quality is grace. Thus man, even before justification, is able to do good works. "But after the infusion of supernatural grace man is able to do supernatural works which can justly claim a supernatural reward from God (meritum de condigno)."<sup>28</sup>

Christ's redemptive work is the chief merit that induces God to infuse this grace into man. In itself Christ's merit is not of enough intrinsic value to merit man's salvation. His work does, however, have value in that God has by an absolute decree declared it to be of sufficient value to redeem man. Though it is not the sole merit, yet it is the chief merit and there must be human merit pre-

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27. James MacKinnon, op. cit., pp. 51-79; F. E. Mayer, op. cit., p. 19.

28. Th. Engelder, W. Arndt, Th. Graebner, F. E. Mayer, Popular Symbolics, p. 168.



ceding and following the call. Through the merit which Christ's work has given to the sacraments man is given aid and strength by which, with a little divine help, he is enabled to merit salvation. Where man then fails or falls short he can depend on Christ.<sup>29.</sup>

As a part of its system or teaching of salvation Rome has evolved its sacramental system, a system which covers the entire life of the individual from birth until death. The number of sacraments was first set at seven by Peter Lombard (d. 1160).<sup>30</sup> According to Roman theology the individual's salvation is wholly dependent on the sacraments for it is through them that grace is infused into man. By means of the church's sacramental system it is able to dispense the grace of Christ to the individual, who receives the benefits regardless of whether he has faith or not because the sacraments work *ex opere operato*. The apparent disregard of faith is due to the fact that they conceive of faith as merely an outward performance of the works of the body rather than as an activity. Faith will merit justification to a certain extent only in that it is pleasing to God.

Rome's entire system of theology is well illustrated by the diagram found on the following page.<sup>31</sup>

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29. W. Walther, *op. cit.*, pp. 67. 68.

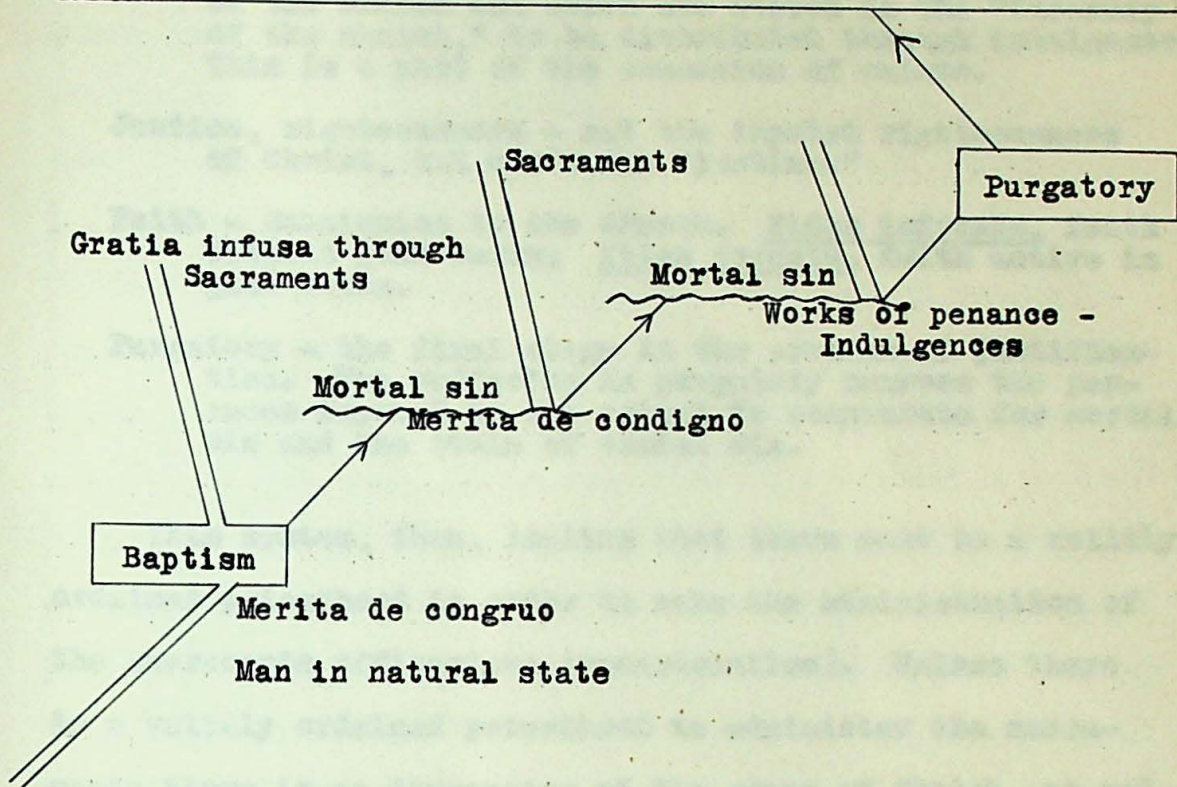
30. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

31. The diagram and definitions are given as found in F. E. Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 18.



Beatific Vision of God

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Definition of terms:

Meritum de congruo - a good work flowing from man's free will deserves a reward commensurate with the work performed, i. e., a finite reward.

Meritum de condigno - a good work which proceeds from gratia cooperans merits eternal life by right of dignity or worth.

Grace - Virtues, powers, gifts, bestowed through the sacraments. Grace is not God's gracious disposition toward man, but an infused quality in the baptized person, yes, also in the heathen, whereby man merits the beatific vision. Actual, habitual, justifying grace.

Mortal sin - A transgression in an important point, full knowledge of the implications, perfect consent of the will. "Grace" is lost through mortal sin, however, faith continues.

Christ's merit - He has merited 1) reconciliation or removal of man's eternal guilt; 2) entrance into heaven by a mystical union with Christ as the Second Adam; 3) graces which when infused enable man to merit salvation.



Works of supererogation - Works which exceed the demands of the church and which are stored in the "treasury of the church," to be distributed through indulgences. This is a part of the communion of saints.

Justice, righteousness - not the imputed righteousness of Christ, but man's own "justice."

Faith - Submission to the church. Fides informis, faith without good works; fides formata, faith active in good works.

Purgatory - the final stage in the process of justification. The suffering in purgatory removes the penances imposed by the priest to compensate for mortal sin and the stain of venial sin.

This system, then, implies that there must be a validly ordained priesthood in order to make the administration of the sacraments efficacious (sacerdotalism). Unless there is a validly ordained priesthood to administer the sacraments there is no dispensing of the grace of Christ, no salvation for the sinner. In the final analysis, it means that in order to obtain salvation the individual is forced to render <sup>obedience</sup> to the papal hierarchy.

Despite the contentions that Rome's sacramental system of *ex opere operato* gives more assurance than the doctrine of justification by faith alone, yet the practical implications are that it always creates doubts regarding the certainty of salvation. Though the sacraments do work *ex opere operato*, yet to be efficacious the priest must be validly ordained, he must have the right intention, he must properly administer the sacrament, the recipient must be worthily prepared for reception, and there dare be no obex



put in the way of the validity of the sacrament. Though grace was promised in the sacraments, especially in that of penance, yet the individual could never know definitely when his works of satisfaction were sufficient. If consistent with their theology, the Roman Catholic church must admit that salvation is ultimately dependent on the works and merits of the individual. In this doubt engendered by their theology Rome found its strength. From this doubt originated the many and varied works of meritoriousness by which the individual was to try<sup>to</sup> assure himself of the certainty of his salvation. If the church told the individual that a life of asceticism was a life of greater meritoriousness, and if that individual was at all concerned about his soul's salvation, then unhesitatingly he vowed himself to a life of asceticism. Actually, that did happen. From this theology of doubt there grew the tremendous institutions dedicated to ascetic living. Such institutions were not merely the figments of a highly imaginative and creative mind. They were, as has been shown, very definitely and directly based on the theology of the Roman church. It was against this pagan theology and the unnatural and vicious type of life which it fostered that Luther revolted. His views on social ethics will prove this fact beyond a doubt, and will prove at once that Luther's views were the only valid views, for they are Scriptural.



## III.

There is in Luther's background and early life nothing so particularly unusual that it would be indicative of his later life as a reformer. His family was a very common peasant family. The parents brought their children up in the very ordinary manner of that day. Being very strict Roman Catholics, the children were brought up in the best traditions of the church. Life was characterized by a sort of severity that was produced by the harsh realities of life. Luther grew up in the piety of that day - the fear of God, the commandments, and superstitions as they were either fostered or sanctioned by the church. Without a doubt he was made to realize the terror of sin in such a way that all his piety was a piety motivated by fear. He looked upon Christ as a stern judge who has won salvation for man, but still man must earn that salvation. The severity of all life only added to the realistic, the unattractive way of salvation that was presented to the people. In all sincerity and true devotion Luther's parents also taught him this distorted way for seeking the salvation of one's soul.

Luther received a good education. After elementary training, Luther, still shy and no more than an average student, went to Magdeburg. It was perhaps while attending school here that Luther first developed a leaning toward



monasticism. It is of significance that the teachers here were members of the Nullbrueder (Brethren of the Common Life), men who were good, consecrated teachers. It is also significant that the atmosphere of the entire city was of a strongly religious nature, likely because it was the seat of the archbishop and because there was located there a Franciscan monastery. After one year here at Magdeburg Luther went of Eisenach. There is no special significance attached to Martin's stay at Eisenach, except for the fact perhaps that while here he was taken into the home of Frau Cotta and thus came into contact with family life in higher, wealthier, more cultured society.

During the summer of 1501 Luther entered the university at Erfurt. It was a good university. It had been established by the local burghers and added the advantage of combining school life with ordinary life, that is, it helped to produce men like Martin Luther who were always interested in the problems of the common people with whom they associated. Though this university was closely connected to the church and though the city was the home of an Augustinian monastery, nevertheless there is no indication that the clergy in any way exerted a particular influence upon Luther while he was there.

In the university itself scholasticism was giving way to humanism, and though Luther himself became a personal friend <sup>of the humanists</sup> yet he himself never joined their circle. For the



first time there is any indication that certain men seem to influence Luther's thinking. Biel's teachings were given preference to those of Occam. Luther always disliked Aristotle. The influence of certain mystics is already here apparent, especially of such men as John of Wesel and John Tauler. But regardless of whatever changes had been taking place in Luther's religious life, it is important that in all his religious concepts he always kept Mt. Sinai in the background. For him God was always a stern and righteous judge who demanded a pious life of external good works. If there was any change it was this that men were beginning to question the method by which church arrived at truth in theology. There is a strong group of thinkers at this time who definitely assert that philosophical methods are not valid when applied in the field of theology. But whatever doubts such thinkers might have aroused in Luther's mind, it is definite that Luther at this time did not seriously question anything which the church told him.

Suddenly on July 17, 1505 Martin Luther renounced the world and entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt. It is only natural that one should ask why Luther should so suddenly give up his studies and a promising future to separate himself from the whole world and lock himself behind the doors of a monastery. Undoubtedly a number of factors contribute to effect this complete change. The fundamental reason prompting this action is the reason which Luther



himself often repeated, namely, that it is doubt that makes a monk. It was not that Luther misunderstood Roman theology. Because he believed what was told him by the church and because he was concerned very vitally about his soul's salvation, therefore he lived in constant doubt as to the certainty of his salvation. Because of this gnawing doubt Luther resolved to find assurance in the means which the church herself prescribed, that of an ascetic life.<sup>32</sup>

It might be well here to trace this development in Luther's life from a theological approach. It is well known that he always felt a deep consciousness of sin. This consciousness emphasized his own unworthiness and forced him to seek comfort. From Occam (d. 1347) he learned that man is able to love God, if by his own works or efforts (*meritum de congruo*) he is able to earn infused grace. When he has received this grace then he is able to perform such works (*meritum de condigno*) that God must reward. In an attempt to assure himself of the sufficiency of his works, Luther had now entered the monastery. For this same reason Luther chose an Augustinian monastery, the order which was noted for its strictness and the emphasis it placed on the meritoriousness of good works. Among many even this conception was popular, "that the entrance into the monastic order was a 'new baptism,' making one as pure again as when he first

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32. This material on Luther's life is as taken from my Class Notes in Reformation History, Theo. Hoyer; R. H. Fife, Young Luther; J. Koestlin, Martin Luther.



emerged from the baptismal waters." <sup>33</sup> Luther in all seriousness was intent upon deriving from his ascetic life in the monastery all that could possibly be obtained. "Thus he recalled that he had counted himself among the pious and just monks, and declares in 1533 that if any son of the cloister could have earned salvation from the monkish calling it would have been he." <sup>34</sup> This sincerity in his calling is further evidences by the fact that, "when on approaching the age of fifty he suffered in health, he ascribed it to the hardships of his life in the cloister." <sup>35</sup> There is no doubt that Luther firmly trusted in the meritorious of the ascetic life he lived in the monastery. But within a short while the comfort which he had received from human rationalization proved unsatisfactory and he would again feel the power of concupiscence in his personal life and would consequently despair of his soul's salvation. This despair was only heightened by the realization, according to Occam, that it is due only to God's absolute will that man receives infused grace. Man's state of grace depends upon predestination. This thought caused Luther to seek comfort in God's absolute will rather than in God's grace and to think in moments of despair that he had been predestinated not to receive grace.

Luther later came under the influence of Biel (d. 1495).

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33. R. H. Fife, op. cit., p. 89.

34. Luther's Works, Weimar edition, XXXIII, p. 574; XXXVIII, p. 143, as quoted in R. H. Fife, op. cit., p. 106.

35. R. H. Fife, op. cit., p. 104.



whose writings he found many quotations from St. Augustine. But here again Luther found little to comfort his troubled soul. Then a little later Luther found and published a work which was entitled "Deutsche Theologie." Now in contrast to what he had been learning, Luther learned from the mystics of a direct, a personal relation of the individual to God. Here too, he learned that man must be passive and permit God to work upon him, for man of himself can do nothing. Had it not been for Occam's influence he would in all probability concluded that God works immediately. But from Occam he remembered that God does not work without means, that the heart is cleansed through the Word, and through the influence of Staupitz, the prior, who stressed particularly the study of Scriptures, Luther was driven to a study of the Word of God. He had sought in vain for comfort. He had tried everything the church had prescribed. The church had prescribed and he had tried piety, works, tortures, self-denial. In the whole ascetic scheme which they advocated and praised so highly he found no satisfaction, no comfort. Regardless of what he tried, he found that his personal experiences did not agree, did not bear out what the church had taught him. Luther was always left in doubt. Luther's personal experiences convinced him that Roman theology must have erred and that, for him at least, their ascetic scheme of life had proved a failure. By God's grace Martin Luther turned to the inspired Word of God.

It is difficult to ascertain just when Luther, through



the inspired Word of God, came to a full knowledge of the way of salvation through justification by faith alone. Scholars have dated the enlightenment on the basis of Romans 1, 16. 17 quite differently. There is, however, sufficient evidence to warrant agreement with what Fife says, "The revolution must have been like other stages in soul development, the result of years of reflection. The interpretation of Paul's words, which he later recalled as having come to him in a flash, appears even in such sources as we possess to have ripened through a period of years, a period which began with the intense study of Augustine in preparing the marginal notes for the Lombard lectures in Erfurt, developed as necessity arose for working out the exegetical explanation of Psalms in 1513, and gained in significance as the young professor wrote out his lectures on the Epistle to the Romans and warmed to the struggle over indulgences."<sup>36</sup>

As has previously been indicated, it was the enlightenment on Romans 1, 17: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" that brought Luther to a true understanding of the central doctrine of Christianity, justification by faith. Even the Holy Scriptures had given him little comfort until he properly understood this passage.

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36. R. H. Fife, op. cit., p. 167.



He had always been troubled by the phrase "the righteousness of God," the *iustitia Dei*, which according to Roman theology is the essential righteousness of God. It is, they taught, that righteousness by which God demands fulfillment of His commands or else metes out damnation to those who do not render perfect obedience. For Luther it was a mystery that the Gospel, the last hope of the sinner, should also stress this righteousness of God. It gave him no hope, for he realized that he was unable to render the satisfaction which this righteousness demanded of him. But now he compared the two parts of this verse in Romans, using the second part as an explanation of the first part. He now realized that the verse did not speak of the essential righteousness of God but rather of the imputed righteousness which man has by faith. In his own words it is, *die Gerechtigkeit die vor Gott gilt*, the only righteousness which avails before God, the righteousness that Christ merited and which by faith is imputed to the individual believer. Luther now found the comfort for which he had been seeking. In the light of justification by faith he could now see the beauty and comfort of God's reconciliation to man through the mediation of Christ. Because he by faith accepted Christ as his Savior he now stood in an altogether new relation to God. Formerly he had been an enemy of this God who demanded perfect obedience of him. But now through the mediatory, the redemptive work of Christ he had been



made one with God. When all of the truth of justification became evident to him, he began to love the phrase "the righteousness of God" and all of Scripture as it now took on an entirely new meaning for him. For him Scripture now became the sole authority to which he looked for truth. This conviction became so strong that by the time he withstood Rome at the Diet of Worms, he vowed he could not and would not recant unless it were proved from Scripture that he had erred. It was thus that Luther again raised high the standard of the principle - Sola Scriptura.<sup>37</sup>

Luther's enlightenment on the doctrine of justification by faith at once threw a different light on the life which the regenerated man, the Christian lives before God and with men. The new view of social ethics which Luther now took was in direct conflict with that of Roman theology. Because Rome's ethics, as all of its theology, were dominated by philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle, Luther's conflict was from the very beginning a conflict with this philosophy.<sup>38</sup> Luther saw the big weakness and also error in scholastic and Roman theology, the error which lay in the supremacy of Aristotelian philosophy as brought in by Aquinas, who especially in ethics, stressed the philosophical angle more than the theological.<sup>39</sup> Aristotelian phil-

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37. My Class notes in Reformation History, Theo. Hoyer.

38. Reu-Bushring, op. cit., P. 37.

39. Chr. Ernst Luthardt, Die Ethik Luthers, p. 39.



osophy was Luther's chief enemy because it violated the principle of Sola Scriptura and displaced the Gospel. To the distinction of this mixture of philosophy and theology, Luther took the directly opposite view to Aristotelian philosophy. In all seriousness, for instance, in his letter to the nobles of Germany, Luther deploras the fact that the universities placed Aristotle so high and taught so little Christian faith.

Luther did appreciate the value of philosophy, but only in the sphere in which it has a right to operate. Philosophy, he contended, is able to teach logic and the like, and even how to live a fine outward life, but one dare not consider this teaching it does as Christian teaching. God has given a definite sphere to philosophy, the sphere of natural life, and to that sphere philosophy should confine itself. There is, of course, even in this natural life a system of ethics, for also the fallen man has a remnant of moral and religious knowledge, and also Scripture ascribes to fallen man a remnant of moral power, (Ro. 1, 19; 2, 14). This "natural morality is the compliance of the will of the natural man with the demands of the law written in man's heart in creation, to the end that this law may in some manner be realized in his conduct." <sup>40</sup> The failure of such philosophical ethics consists then in this, that it places the emphasis on law and works. The difference between

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40. Reu-Buehring, op. cit., p. 34.



natural and Christian ethics is the fact that natural ethics stresses the works while Christian ethics stresses the person. Philosophical ethics forgets entirely that no works can be good unless they are done by the right kind of person. Instead of God in natural ethics, man sets up himself, his own thinking and wishing as the basis and goal of his behavior. All such ethics lacks the essential of the relation to God. It has no absolute, but a relative, norm because it does not have God as the final foundation and highest goal of moral behavior and consideration. Regardless of any incidental similarities externally, this relation to God is the specific difference between natural and Christian ethics. Luther has put it thus, "Die Heiden und Unchristen tun dieselben Werke wie die Christen; aber sie tun es ohne Gottes Wort, das ist, sie glauben nicht dasz Gott ein Dienst und Gehorsam an solchen Werken geschieht."<sup>41</sup> Since ethics rests on a proper relation to God, natural ethics in all respects is unfounded, for the natural man has no proper relation to God. It was the basic error of Scholasticism, particularly of that of Scotus, that it believed that the natural man was capable of love to God.

Following the error of philosophical ethics, Rome's ethics is also a morality of works. By these works they

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41. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, IV, p. 301, as quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 18.



thought man could become good and earn eternal salvation. That their ethics appear slavish, legalistic and mercenary is only natural. Stressing the importance of external action, they disregard entirely the inner disposition of the person. This was the fundamental error against which Luther was forced to contend.

Luther's views with regard to ethics are entirely impossible to Rome's system of theology. On the basis of justification, Luther had shown, man is at once reconciled in the sight of God. In contrast to this direct and close relation of the sinner to God, Rome taught <sup>its</sup> their philosophical dualism. Because of this dualism, it will be remembered, they were forced to teach asceticism as a means by which man is supposedly able to raise himself into communion with God. The basic concepts of Luther and Rome are, therefore, directly opposite. That the applications of their principles to actual life should, therefore, also be in direct opposition is only natural. How directly opposite these views are in practical application will be very evident in the remainder of this thesis.

It was through Luther's work that the true understanding of Christian ethics was again set forth. This true understanding is well expressed in the definition of Reu, "Christian morality is the free and voluntary compliance of the will of regenerated man with the will of God as revealed in His written Word, exemplified by Christ, and witnessed inwardly by the Holy Spirit, to the end that



man may himself live in communion with God and also perform the duties of his God-given calling in society."<sup>42</sup>

From Luther man again learned that the true source and motive of Christian morality is the new spirit, the spirit of Christ who makes the justified sinner a new man from within. He again showed that only in Christian ethics, as he found them in the Holy Scriptures, there is a definite norm, a correct motive, ample power, and a proper goal for moral conduct.

Because Luther emphasized the importance of the individual's personal relation to God, the importance of a person being righteous before his works can be good, the question naturally arose: how does a person first become righteous? The customary answer which he gave was that faith makes a person righteous in that it justifies and is the only righteousness the individual possesses before God. This justification that avails before God applies to the person, not to the works, since it is the person who is declared just, judged, or condemned. Such availing justification is obtained only through faith, not by works. And when the person is declared justified by faith, he is at once thoroughly renewed and regenerated. Salvation is appropriated all at once. This rebirth does not only affect certain members of the person at a time, but it at once changes the entire life.

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42. Reu-Buehring, op. cit., p. 34.



Faith is the principle of Christian ethics because man's good works please God and are good in His sight only because we are righteous by faith. And from such faith it is only natural that Luther says, "Der Glaube macht fromm, aber die Werke beweisen denselbigen Glauben und Froemigkeit." <sup>43</sup> Faith by its very nature is hidden but it does manifest itself in works. Good works will always flow forth from faith. And if faith is great, so are the works, but otherwise not. And for that reason Luther emphasized the thought of Romans 14, 23: "For whatsoever is not of faith is sin" when he said, "Alles das nicht aus dem Glauben kommt ist Suende." <sup>44</sup>

Luther brought ethics, as he did all theology, back to the Gospel, to the truth of the justification of the sinner by faith alone. He never tired of restating the truth that the person is first and the works are second. The person is the primary consideration because it is the person whose faith is the personal assurance, given through the inspired Word of God, of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. It is accepting and possessing Christ as the personal Savior through whom forgiveness of sins is obtained. It is because Christ has taken upon Himself the sins of the individual person that makes that person new, regenerated in the sight of God. Thus the individual person is declared just and righteous because the righteousness of

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43. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XXII, p. 137, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 25.

44. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XIII, p. 327, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 25.



of God has been imputed to him personally. The change that takes place, the very fact that a person becomes a Christian, is something inward. From external appearances there is no difference between the believer and the unbeliever. But they are different in the heart. <sup>45</sup> The change takes place inwardly.

And since faith by its very nature is something inward, of necessity it cannot be bound to something external, to no external work or to no law which demands external works. The Christian is essentially free from works and the law, because the essence of a Christian does not consist in external works. Summarized it is that "christliche Freiheit, welche an kein Werk gebunden ist, sondern alle Werke gleich sind einem Christen, wie sie ihm vorkommen. - Denn ein christlich Wesen stehet nicht in aeuszerlichem Wandel, es wandelt auch den Menschen nicht nach dem aeuszerlichen Stand, sondern nach dem innerlichen, d.i. es gibt ein ander Herz, einen andern Mut, Willen, und Sinn, welcher eben die Werke tut, die ein anderer ohne solchen Mut und Willen tut. Denn ein Christ weisz, dasz es gar am Glauben liegt u.s.w. Wider diese Freiheit streitet der Papst und der geistliche Stand mit ihren Gesetzen und erwählten Kleidern, Speisen, Geboten, Staetten und Personen." <sup>46</sup>

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45. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XIII, p. 35  
quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 33.

46. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, X, p. 160 quoted  
in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 34.



In direct contrast to Rome, Luther taught that this is a spiritual freedom which the Christian possesses by virtue of his faith. The relation of the individual to Christ is that by faith he is united as in a spiritual marriage to the husband of the soul. By this union the Christian is made the possessor of all of Christ's merits. To the Christian nothing else matters but that he is the possessor of these merits by his faith. It is so clearly pointed out that this spiritual man is in need of nothing external. Fine clothing, fasting, ceremonies, wealth, education, and the like cannot affect the soul's profit or loss. The only thing that is needful to a Christian's good life and Christian liberty is the Gospel of Christ Jesus, and faith is the sole salutary and efficacious use of God's Word. Every Christian man is then made through faith in the Gospel a free king and a free priest. <sup>47</sup> All are equal and free.

Connected with the freedom from works is also the freedom from the law. To the Christian man his faith in the Christ of the Gospel is all he needs. Over the Christian the law exercises no authority, for "Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man," (1 Tim. 1, 9). The law demands works, the Gospel demands and works faith. Since the Christian through faith is freed from works, he is freed from the law. Since men do not become Christians through the law, but through faith in the Gospel, therefore

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47. Cf. Luthardt, op. cit., pp. 34ff.



the law is not essential to the new man. For the believer the law is non-essential because his inner self is his law.

The freedom of the Christian from the law is, however, not to be misunderstood. This freedom applies only insofar as a person is a new creature, for there is in every-<sup>48</sup>one still some of the old man and according to the old man he still needs the law. This freedom applies to the Christian's faith, heart and conscience, but according to<sup>49</sup> the old man the Christian is still under the law. And much as Luther's writings emphasizes the abiding freedom of the Christian from the law, even so much Luther also emphasizes the abiding significance of the law for the Christian as Christian. True, even for the Christian the law has its importance, since it is the revelation of the moral will of God. But for the Christian the demand of the law ends and the reality begins, namely, in his new being. And in that the Christian is free from the law as law. Martensen has clearly defined the way in which Luther uses the law, "Luther maintains that the law should be preached both to the unregenerate and the regenerated to the first in order that they be awakened and alarmed; to the last, that they fall not into a false peace and security. The Lutheran theology maintained sound doctrine by its representation of the triple use of the law. The

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48. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XVIII, p. 173, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 35.

49. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XIII, p. 118, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 35.



use of the law is, namely, in part external, social (usus politicus s. civilis), to keep order in human society; in part internal, disciplinary (usus elenchticus s. paedagogicus), to awaken the conviction of sin, alarm the conscience, and thus become a school master to bring men to Christ; and lastly, instructive (usus didacticus, normativus s. tertius), even for the regenerate."<sup>50</sup>

In the final analysis, the law of God resolves itself in love. "Wenn wir alle Gesetze ansehen im Mose, so gehen sie alle auf die Liebe."<sup>51</sup> From this law, as it is comprehended in love, there is no dispensation. But the fulfillment of it is made freely possible through the teaching of faith.

With the same certainty that a person with faith is justified, just so certainly a person with faith does perform good works. Luther says in his explanation of the Epistle to the Romans that faith is a living, active, dynamic thing that does not stop to ask whether there are good works to be done but is ever busy doing them.<sup>52</sup> Because the justified man is good, he of necessity must do good works. It cannot be otherwise, for his actions are free and spontaneous from grateful love toward his gracious God. The fear of punishment or the hope of reward play no part in the life of the justified person. And because

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50. H. Martensen, Christian Ethics, p. 440.

51. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XIV, p. 153, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 43.

52. Reu-Buehring, op. cit., p. 40.



he does all things freely out of love, his morality will not be a piecemeal morality, as that which Rome produces, but it will be a single, a growing unit in which the individual works may differ but not be separated.

As a result of intense study in the Holy Scriptures, in which he always related everything to the central doctrine of justification, Luther saw correctly what the relation of the individual is to his God. But he saw also the error of the Roman system and the terrible way in which they employed it to their own mercenary ends. As long as he was able and in which ever way he was able<sup>he</sup> proclaimed these Scriptural truths to burdened consciences.



## IV.

When Luther came to the true understanding of the doctrine of justification he saw that it does not only affect the relation of the sinner to God, but he saw that it also changes the relation of the individual to all his fellow men. The individual cannot come into this new relation to God without also experiencing a change of attitude toward his fellow men. In other words, justification must necessarily change the Christian's life. That is the relation of justification to Christian ethics. That Luther did not hesitate long and fear to draw the implications of justification by faith to the life of the Christian, to the field of ethics, is evidenced by his three monumental letters of the year 1520.

As previously indicated, Luther sets forth the fundamental principles of Christian ethics in his letter "On the Freedom of the Christian Man." On the basis of 1 Corinthians 9, 19: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more," and of Romans 13, 8: "Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law," on the basis of these two passages he set forth the two paradoxical statements:

"A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.



A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, sub-  
<sup>53</sup>  
 ject to everyone."

Throughout all of Luther's social ethics one dare not forget that his ethics "is the ethics of the justified man, justified and therefore made good by the grace of God for Christ's sake."  
<sup>54</sup> His emphasis is entirely on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, from which there must result an inner spirituality. Works are the results of faith—thus Luther takes care of ethics. The picture which Luther himself often uses is this, "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works; so it is always necessary that the person itself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says: A corrupt tree does not bring forth good fruit, and a good tree does not bring forth evil fruit. It is clear that the fruits do not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruits, but, on the contrary, the trees bear the fruits and the fruits grow on the trees. As it is necessary, therefore, that the trees must exist before their fruits, and the fruits do not make trees either good or corrupt, but rather as the trees are so are the fruits they bear; so the person of a man must needs first be good or wicked be-

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53. "On the Freedom of the Christian Man," Luther's Works, Holman edition, II, p. 312.

54. Reu-Buehring, op. cit., p. 36.



fore he does a good or a wicked work, and his works do not make him good or wicked, but he himself makes his works either good or wicked."<sup>55</sup>

The relation of the individual to his fellow man is one that flows naturally from the individual's relation to God. Faith brings man to God, and it is love that brings man to his neighbor. Through faith man lets God do good for him, through love he then does good to his neighbor. In Luther's own words, "A Christian does not live to himself, but to Christ and his neighbor, to Christ by faith, to his neighbor by love. By faith he is snatched above himself to God; by love he falls below himself to his neighbor, yet always dwelling in God and His love."<sup>56</sup>

And Berner comments well on these words when he says: "Thus the believer who knows himself a beneficiary of God's unbounded love becomes a sort of Christ to his neighbor. This principle becomes a moral necessity in relation to man. It is the seed thought of all Luther's social theories. The love of God to man inspires the love of man for man. This is Luther's powerful social principle. It is this moral direction as a pure necessity of Luther's religious ethic that constitutes a most formidable social principle."<sup>57</sup>

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55. "On the Freedom of the Christian Man," Luther's Works, Holman edition, II, p. 331.

56. Luther's Works, St. Louis edition, VII, p. 70.

57. Carl Walter Berner, "The Social Ethics of Martin Luther," Concordia Theological Monthly, XIV, p. 170.



Even as the duties of a Christian in the world are manifold, so manifold becomes the life of love from faith in virtues and works. All have their roots in faith, thus are unified and cannot be separated. It is true that the Christian's love belongs first and basically to God, but we love all else in Him. As an essential part of this love to God is included the love to the neighbor, and this love to the neighbor resolves itself into service to all men, despite the fact that the Christian is a free lord in bondage to no one.<sup>58</sup> The two-fold test of this love is, if the Christian can hate the neighbor's sin but have love for the sinner, and if he can love his enemies. With such a love that disregards who or what the person is, the Christian<sup>59</sup> fulfills the law, for love is the fulfillment of the law.

Luther also defined the spheres in which the actual expression of true Christian ethics are to be active. "It is one of the outstanding merits of the Lutheran Reformation that it restored the true appreciation of God's created world in general and with it of the earthly calling as a divine arrangement, in which the Christian is to live and prove his Christian life."<sup>60</sup> Luther correctly emphasizes that the true sphere of the Christian's activity is in the world, not apart from it. He goes even farther and shows

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58. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XXVII, 176; 195ff.; quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 54.

59. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, VIII, p. 53.54.57ff., quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 56.

60. Reu-Buehring, op. cit., p. 246.



the glory of the Christian's life in the world, saying, "A shoemaker, a smith, a laborer - each one has his trade, work, and office, and yet all are at the same time considered kings and priests, and each one ought to be useful and serviceable in his office and work to others. A poor servant maid has joy in her heart and can sing, I cook, I make the beds, I sweep the house. Who has bidden me? My master and my mistress have bidden me. But who has given them such authority over me? God has done this. Ah, then so it must be true that I do not only serve them but God in heaven. How then can I be more blest? It is just the very same as if I were cooking for God Himself in heaven." 61

The Christian performs good works out of the love which faith has produced. But his works are also made good by virtue of the fact that God has willed and commanded them. No other consideration makes any difference except the obedience of the doer overagainst the divine will. And this will of God also includes in its sphere the call, the God-ordained place which is given to a man in this world and the accompanying duties of such a place. Nothing which is against this calling is ethically right, and everything which is in conformity with it is holy. This latter distinction was the big contribution which Luther made in the field of social ethics. It is revolutionary against Roman Catholic ethics, which had taught the importance of external

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61. Theoder von Haering, The Ethics of the Christian Life, p. 213.



works and the like almost to the exclusion of the spiritual.

Luther also indicates, as has previously been shown in this thesis, that Rome's error can be traced to ancient heathen philosophy. In essence, especially the idea of the dual morality, had come from ancient ethics and in Roman theology had merely been put into new terminology, with the aristocracy of the old philosophy becoming the Roman Catholic clerical hierarchy of the church. The error in this ethics, Luthardt indicates, "besteht in der dinglichen, sachlichen Fassung des Christentums, und daher in dem wirklichen Character der Sittlichkeit." <sup>62</sup> The final consequence was a complete renouncement of the earthly sphere and the withdrawal from it as much as possible. For them everything in the earthly sphere became identified with sin. This was the teaching of Rome concerning social ethics at Luther's time.

In order to combat the false conceptions of Rome, Luther had to show that if, as taught by Rome, all that pertains to nature is sinful, then marriage, the possession of wealth, making use of this world's goods, government and war service, barter and trade, commerce and industry, all are sinful. Then properly only that way of life can be properly called ethical which renounces all these things. Rome advocated just such renouncement. And when the example of Christ's life was cited as proof for such renouncement, Luther replied, "It is not necessary to do and to suffer

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62. Luthardt, op. cit., p. 73.



all that Christ has done and borne; otherwise we too would have to walk on the sea, and work all the miracles which He wrought; then, too, we must abjure matrimony, renounce worldly rule, forsake the field and the plow, and all else that He has given up. For whatever He desired that we should do or suffer, He not merely did and suffered Himself, but also declared by His Word that we should imitate. Therefore we hold no example as binding, not even the example of Christ, unless it agrees with the word of God, which expounds to us what we shall follow and what we should not follow." <sup>63</sup>

In contrast to Rome's whole false conception of social ethics Luther emphasized the truths of Galatians 3, 28 and 2 Corinthians 5, 17, that race, culture and sex have no bearing on the justified man's relation to his God. He further insisted that all nature and all natural orders constitute a part of God's creation. On the basis of clear passages taken from the writings of Paul, who was forced to combat the same error, (1 Tim. 4, 2-4; Col. 2, 16-18; Gal. 5, ; 1 Cor. 3, 23) he again heralded the truth of evangelical freedom. Especially the conditions under which Luther lived forced him to apply this principle of evangelical freedom. He held forth the divine sanction of things natural, with special reference to the earthly calling and to the state in its relation to the church and the kingdom

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63. Luther's Works, Walch edition, XI, 253, quoted in H. Martensen, op. cit., p. 294.



of God. Beyond a doubt the earthly calling is the God-given sphere of activity within which the Christian is to show forth his faith.

Further to combat the false conceptions of Rome, Luther was forced to make the proper distinction between the spiritual and earthly kingdoms and the distinction of the Christian being a member of the kingdom of Christ as a believer and at the same time being a member of the earthly kingdom as a man. In the first place he emphasized that neither kingdom has any jurisdiction over the other. Christianity does not aim to change the externals or take the individual out of his earthly calling. Christianity is interested only in the inner, the personal condition of the heart. And though the Christian naturally takes his new heart into the life of his earthly calling, yet it is not Christianity's aim to regulate this external life. The whole question resolves itself into a double proposition. First, each of these two kingdoms should stay in its own sphere, even as Christ gave<sup>64</sup> His law only for Christians, not for others, nor should<sup>65</sup> the worldly power try to dictate to the inner life. The second is that the worldly sphere, in which the Christian lives because of his earthly calling and in which he should be active, is not in itself sinful, but is right and in

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64. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XXII, 70. 68, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 82.

65. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XXII, 82ff., quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 82.



accordance with God's institution. It might be added that these spheres were altogether confused by the people at Luther's time because of false Roman Catholic teaching, the conceptions of monasticism, celibacy, and the like.

In direct opposition to Rome's holy orders, Luther emphasized the holiness of such orders as marriage, the family, government, and the arts and skills. In themselves they are not wrong and life in them may be morally good as well as morally evil. To prove this point Reu aptly quotes from Luther, "It is possible that a peasant and his plowing are more acceptable to God than a nun and her chastity.

When a poor servant maid sweeps the house and does it because God commanded her, she does a better work and renders God a greater service than did Anthony in the desert." 67

Many of the false conceptions of Rome on this particular point are due to their misinterpretation of such important passages as Matthew 19, 12, 21 and 1 Corinthians 7, 7 not making the proper distinction between what are the commandments of God and what are merely evangelical counsels. The final result can only be, and it was very definitely true in the system Rome had built up about its asceticism, that the opinions of men are placed above the commandments of God.

Rome's asceticism falsely placed the emphasis, in the final analysis, on the exerting of all one's efforts only

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66. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, X, 241, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 83.

67. Reu-Buehring, op. cit., p. 44.



in his own behalf. All ascetic practices that they had evolved were exclusively for the benefit of the person performing the works. It was Luther who again brought forth the Scriptural truth that if the individual is in the correct relation to his God, then only naturally he is also in correct relation to man. Instead of the self-love of asceticism, Luther insisted, man is to have love for his neighbor. In his social ethics the ideal of achieving the common good becomes a hallowed principle. "Whatever activity in life has no element of contributing for the common good has no justification for existence. A person who robs society of the benefit of his work by being idle is living on the sweat and blood of others. To find honest joy in work because it is God's order is a mark of a Christian in the midst of a world where work is generally regarded as a necessary evil. A Christian would work even if he <sup>had</sup> more than he needed. A man cannot have God without the desire to do His will. Human work is the channel by which God achieves His will. Thus God's command to work unites with man's desire to work. The daily inspiration of the Christian man in striving to be faithful to his calling is produced by the conviction that one's work accomplishes God's honor and his neighbor's welfare."

If this principle is followed out, then it must lead to an acceptance of the world as the opposite of monastic

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68. Berner, op. cit., p. 172



seclusion from the world. Christian love of God and of man demonstrates itself in the spirit of mutual service within the world. Such a concept was practically foreign to the world of Luther's day. People's burdened consciences were eased. Now they could take an active part in this earthly calling without thereby involving even a minimum of sinful guilt. The practical expression of Luther's revolutionary social ethics in his day can be illustrated in but a few areas of human interest, and of human activity.

Rome's contention that evangelical freedom leads to license is false, as has been shown. It is impossible for such license to manifest itself because the very fact that a Christian is a Christian places him under the law of love, the most compelling law possible for him. This law demands that the Christian's life be a life of service, not to himself in ascetic practices, but to others, through his social relations. The Christian's life can be such a blessing to others, as Luther again revealed, only because the Christian's calling and all of the consequent social relations exist by the will and sanction of God. These social relations are, therefore, to be elevated and regarded as holy because God Himself has made them so and keeps them so with his blessings.

Thus, for instance, Luther showed that the estate of matrimony is holy in God's sight. Rome had built up the 'holiness' of the celibacy on the 'contempt of the world'



idea and St. Augustine's double standard of morality. For them marriage, because it belonged to the earthly sphere, was to be relegated to the lower standard of morality. The common people were permitted to marry even though they thereby did involve a minimum of guilt. Luther fought the Roman conception of marriage from two aspects, first, on the basis of natural order, and secondly, from the authority of God's institution. <sup>69</sup> He encouraged the youth to marriage and not to avoid it or to try to escape it, showing that marriage serves the kingdom of God in the heart <sup>70</sup> and also serves the welfare of the neighbor.

Using the sanctity of the marriage estate as a basis, Luther proceeded to show all of the implications it involves. Thus he showed the false ideas behind all monasticism, its false holiness and sanctity. In contrast Luther emphasized the holiness and blessings of a social life. Parents in fulfilling all of their obligations as parents were even to educate their children to positions <sup>71</sup> in the world.

Luther's views are clearly indicated in his explanation of the wedding at Cana, "Wo der Herr Christus hinkommt, da musz ja freilich eine rechte und froeliche Hoch-

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69. Luthardt, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

70. *Luther's Works*, Erlangen edition, VI, 462, quoted in Luthardt, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

71. Cf. *Luther's Works*, St. Louis edition, X, 416-459.



zeit sein. Wenn Christus da gewesen waere, als einer ein Meench oder Nonne worden waere, behuete Gott, wie haette das muessen auf allen Ecken und Predigtstuehlen ausgeschrien werden. Ja, dazu in allen Buechern haette es mit roter Presilge und gueldenen Buchstaben muessen geschrieben und in allen Kirchen gemahlet werden. Aber nun es stehet geschrieben, wie Christus, Gottes Sohn, zur Hochzeit gangen sei, haelt man es fuer ein schlecht Ding oder Werk. - Moenche ekelt das eheliche Leben, dasz sie solches nicht allein fuer ein unehrliches Leben halten, sondern auch vorgeben, dasz dadurch heilige Werke und Uebungen verhindert werden; denn darum hat der Pabst den Seinen den ehelosen Stand aufgelegt und geboten. Dazu ist solch ehelich Leben also gemein in der Welt; darum hat es solch nichts Scheinbares an ihm und wird sonderlich von denjenigen verachtet, so die Allerheiligsten sein wollen, - Nein, es ist den Eheleuten eine grosze Ehre, dasz Ehristus fuer sie sorget, will demnach bei ihnen zur Hochzeit und im Ehestande sein, sie tsoesten und nicht verhungern oder verdursten oder zu Schanden werden lassen, sondern will ihnen so viel verschaffen, dasz sie sollen satt werden. Und ehe sie sollten Not leiden, will er ihnen aus Wasser Wein machen, das heiszt, aus Truesal Freude und Lust schaffen und sie in keinem Wege verlassen."

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72. Luther, Ein Golden Abe vom Heiligen Ehestand, p. 30.



From marriage many other institutions must necessarily grow. The family itself must first come into consideration. Luther has considered it particularly from the point of view of the relation of the parents toward their children and the relation of the children to their parents.<sup>73</sup> Again the contrast to the asceticism of Rome is very apparent. The sanctity of family ties had been disregarded and violated by celibacy and monasticism. Instead of honoring the blessings which God bestows on and through the family, Rome had taught that obedience to the church's institutions was superior to the obligations of the family. What Luther did, therefore, was to reestablish the sanctity and inviolability<sup>1</sup> of the family as an institution of God.

Under the topic of education in a broader sense Luther treats of all the obligations of the family as a unit in society.<sup>74</sup> He emphasized that all of these spheres are spheres of natural life. Here the Gospel has no jurisdiction, but only common sense and understanding can establish right and justice. In these spheres the laws are to be established by the people and the Gospel should not change<sup>75</sup> it. The Christian too lives in these spheres, but only as a temporary guest and consequently he should not permit his activity in them to interfere with the treasure of sal-

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73. Luther, The Large Catechism, The Fourth Commandment, in the Concordia Triglotta, pp. 611-631.

74. Luther's Works, St. Louis edition, X, 416-459.

75. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, VI, 97, quoted in Luthardt, op. cit., p. 94.



vation which he has in heart by faith. But the Christian dare not think that these institutions are profane merely because they are not ruled by the Gospel. They do have God's institution, order and will and He is present in them.<sup>76</sup> In them He uses His creatures as His tools.

The Roman church had made some of this natural life seem profane, put it under the Gospel and then falsely termed some spiritual and some worldly. The truth is that even as God is active in the Word and Sacraments so too he is active through His creatures in the world. Moreover, the worldly sphere and Gospel serve each other, "jenes indem es Friede haelt unter den Leuten, ohne welchen man night koennte predigen; dieses indem es lehret und die Leute zum Gehorsam des Schwerts haelt und bezeugt, dasz das Schwert Gottes Ordnung und Regiment sei, darum es zu fuerchten und zu ehren sei, ohne welche Furcht und Ehre das Schwert gar ein unseliges, elendes Regiment waere."<sup>77</sup>

It is the parents' duty through education to train their children to be good rulers, professional men and citizens. By consecrated social life the Christian thus brings honor to God and blessings to men for generations to come. Of all professions for which a child can be trained, Luther holds, none is so high as that of the public ministry.<sup>78</sup> That is

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76. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XI, 109, quoted in Luthardt, p. 95.

77. Luther's Works, Erlangen edition, XLIII, 148, quoted in Luthardt, pp. cit., p. 95.

78. Luther's Works, St. Louis edition, 430.



true because the preacher confirms and supports the government, customs, honor, peace, and the like. Though these are the smallest part of the pastor's duties and often perhaps only by-products, yet they are more than any lawyer, monk, or heathen sophist can do. <sup>79</sup> Temporal peace, which is the greatest blessing earth can have and from which all other blessings flow, is really the result of a correct and good ministry that alone can successfully eradicate hatred and war. To achieve all these blessings it devolves upon the parents first to have the right view of life themselves and then to impart to their children this same attitude through education.

Not by an ascetic, but by a social life, the individual thus serves both God and man. The individual owes it to God to help maintain law and order in the world and this can only be done through educating children properly and training them to a good social life. "Denn im Predigtamt tut's Christus fast ganz durch seinen Geist; aber im weltlichen Reich musz man aus der Vernunft, daher die Rechte auch gekommen sind, handeln; denn Gott hat der Vernunft unterworfen solch zeitlich Regiment und leiblich Wesen, Gen. 2,19, und nicht den Heiligen Geist vom Himmel dazu gesandt; darum ist's auch schwerer, weil es die Gewissen nicht regieren <sup>80</sup> kann, und musz, so zu rechnen, im Finsternen handeln." In striking contrast to Rome's unnatural asceticism, Luther

79. Ibid.

80. Luther's Works, St. Louis edition, I, 444.



says one is not to despise any office, but is to honor all offices and works of God as taught in Psalms 111, 31 and 104, 24.<sup>81</sup>

Adequately to trace all of these offices and callings is a task worthy of treatment in a thesis of extended length.

The examples which have here been adduced serve merely as illustrations and proofs of Luther's principles. From the examples cited it is evident that Luther carried out the full implications of the doctrine of justification with regard to the life of the Christian with other men. Luthardt has well summarized the contribution which Luther has made to social ethics. With his words we close: "So erschlieszt sich ihm die weite reiche Gottes welt von dem Mittelpunkte aus in welchem er seine Stellung genommen. Er hat das so vielfach verschobene Verhaeltnisz zur Welt wieder richtig gestellt, weil er das richtige Verhaeltnisz zu Gott wiedergewonnen hat in seiner Lehre von der Glaubensgerechtigkeit. Er hat die Gesundheit des christlichen Lebens wieder gerettet, weil er die Gesundheit der christlichen Lehre wiedergewonnen hat. Aus der Wurzel des Glaubensgerechtigkeit erwaechst ihm die ganze christliche Lehre wie das Leben des Christen. Sie ist ein Prinzip der Ethik wie der Dogmatik. Mit dieser Lehre hat er den persoenlichen und innerlichen Charakter des Christentums wieder festgestellt, gegenueber der Veraeuszerlichung desselben in sachliches Tun und dingliches Wesen. Diese Erkenntnisz des Wesens des Christen-

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81. Luther's Works, St. Louis edition, X, 448.



tums ist die Angel aller richtigen sittlichen Erkenntnisz <sup>82</sup>  
 und die Voraussetzung aller gesunden Theologischen Ethik."

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82. Luthardt, op. cit., p. 144.



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