

**To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation  
Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate  
Martin Luther  
1520**

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**DEDICATORY LETTER.**

To the respected and worthy  
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Licentiate in the Holy Scriptures and Canon of Wittenberg,

. . . The time for silence is gone and the time to speak has come, as we read in Ecclesiastes (iii. 7.) I have in conformity with our resolve put together some few points concerning the Reformation of the Christian Estate, with the intent of placing the same before the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, in case it may please God to help His Church by means of the laity, inasmuch as the clergy, whom this task rather befitted, have become quite careless. . . .

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To his most Serene and Mighty Imperial Majesty, and to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation.  
Dr. MARTINUS LUTHER.

The grace and might of God be with you, Most Serene Majesty! most gracious, well beloved gentlemen!

It is not out of mere arrogance and perversity that I, a single poor man, have taken upon me to address your lordships. The distress and misery that oppress all the Christian estates, more especially in Germany, have led not only myself, but every one else, to cry aloud and to ask for help, and have now forced me too, to cry out and to ask, if God would give His Spirit to any one, to reach a hand to His wretched people. . . .

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**I. The Three Walls of the Romanists.**

The Romanists [The Catholic Church] have, with great adroitness, drawn three walls round themselves, with which they have hitherto protected themselves, so that no one could reform them, whereby all Christendom has fallen terribly.

Firstly, if pressed by the temporal power, they have affirmed and maintained that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but on the contrary that the spiritual power is above the temporal.

Secondly, if it were proposed to admonish them with the Scriptures, they objected that no one may interpret the Scriptures but the Pope.

Thirdly, if they are threatened with a Council, they pretend that no one may call a Council but the Pope.

Thus they have secretly stolen our three rods, so that they may be unpunished, and entrenched themselves behind these three walls, to act with all wickedness and malice, as we now see. . . .

Now may God help us, and give us one of those trumpets, that overthrew the walls of Jericho, so that we may blow down these walls of straw and paper, and that we may set free our Christian rods, for the chastisement of sin, and expose the craft and deceit of the devil, so that we may amend ourselves by punishment and again obtain God's favour.

***The First Wall.***

Let us, in the first place, attack the first wall.

It has been devised, that the Pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the Spiritual Estate; Princes, lords, artificers and peasants, are the Temporal Estate; which is a very fine, hypocritical device. But let no one be made afraid by it; and that for this reason: That all Christians are truly of the Spiritual Estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone. As St. Paul says (1 Cor. xii.), we are all one body, though each member does its own work, to serve the others. This is because we have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith, these alone make Spiritual and Christian people.

As for the unction by a pope or a bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration, clothes differing from those of laymen—all this may make a hypocrite or an anointed puppet, but never a Christian, or a spiritual man. Thus we are all consecrated as priests by baptism, as St. Peter says: "Ye are a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter ii. 9); and in the book of Revelations: "and hast made us unto our God, kings and priests." (Rev. v. 10.) . . .

Since then the temporal power is baptized as we are, and has the same faith and gospel, we must allow it to be priest and bishop, and account its office an office that is proper and useful to the Christian community. . . .

It follows then, that between layman and priests, princes and bishops, or as they call it, between spiritual and temporal persons, the only real difference is one of office and function, and not of estate: for they are all of the same Spiritual Estate, true priests, bishops and Popes, though their functions are not the same: just as among priests and monks every man has not the same functions. And this St. Paul says (Rom. xii.; 1 Cor. xii.) and St. Peter (1 Peter ii.); “we being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.” Christ’s body is not double or twofold, one temporal, the other spiritual. He is one head, and he has one body.

We see then that just as those that we call spiritual, or priests, bishops or popes, do not differ from other Christians in any other or higher degree, but in that they are to be concerned with the word of God, and the sacraments—that being their work and office—in the same way the temporal authorities hold the sword and the rod in their hands to punish the wicked and to protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, every man has the office and function of his calling, and yet all alike are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man in his office must be useful and beneficial to the rest, that so many kinds of work may all be united into one community: just as the members of the body all serve one another.

Now see, what a Christian doctrine is this: that the temporal authority is not above the clergy, and may not punish it. This is, as if one were to say, the hand may not help, though the eye is in grievous suffering. Is it not unnatural, not to say unchristian, that one member may not help another, or guard it against harm? Nay, the nobler the member, the more the rest are bound to help it. Therefore I say: forasmuch as the temporal power has been ordained by God for the punishment of the bad, and the protection of the good, therefore we must let it do its duty throughout the whole Christian body, without respect of persons: whether it strike popes, bishops, priests, monks, or nuns. . . .

Therefore the temporal Christian power must exercise its office without let or hindrance, without considering whom it may strike, whether pope, or bishop, or priest: whoever is guilty let him suffer for it. Whatever the ecclesiastical law says in opposition to this, is merely the invention of Romanist arrogance. For this is what St. Paul says to all Christians: “Let every soul” (I presume including the Popes) “be subject unto the higher powers: for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.” (Rom. xiii. 1-4.) Also St. Peter: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake . . . for so is the will of God.” (1 Peter ii. 13, 15.) . . .

Now I imagine, the first paper wall is overthrown, inasmuch as the temporal power has become a member of the Christian body, and although its work relates to the body, yet does it belong to the spiritual estate. Therefore it must do its duty without let or hindrance upon all members of the whole body, to punish or urge, as guilt may deserve, or need may require, without respect of Pope, bishops or priests; let them threaten or excommunicate as they will. That is why a guilty priest is deprived of his priesthood before being given over to the secular arm; whereas this would not be right, if the secular sword had not authority over him already by divine ordinance.

Where there is sin, there remains no avoiding the punishment, as St. Gregory says: We are all equal, but guilt makes one subject to another. Now see, how they [the Romanists] deal with Christendom, depriving it of its freedom without any warrant from the Scriptures, out of their own wickedness, whereas God and the Apostles made them subject to the secular sword . . .

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### **III. Twenty-seven Articles respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate.**

Now though I am too lowly to submit articles that could serve for the reformation of these fearful evils, I will yet sing out my fool’s song, and will show, as well as my wit will allow, what might and should be done by the temporal authorities or by a General Council. . . .

4. Let it be decreed that no temporal matter shall be submitted to Rome, but all shall be left to the jurisdiction of the temporal authorities. This is part of their own canon law, though they do not obey it. For this should be the Pope’s office, that he, the most learned in the Scriptures, and the most holy, not in name only, but in fact, should rule in matters concerning the faith and the holy life of Christians; he should make primates and bishops attend to this, and should work and take thought with them to this end: as St. Paul teaches (1 Cor. vi.),

severely upbraiding those that occupy themselves with the things of this world. For all countries suffer unbearable damage by this practice of settling such matters at Rome, since it involves great expense; and besides this, the judges at Rome, not knowing the manners, laws and customs of other countries, frequently pervert the matter according to their own laws and their own opinions, thus causing injustice to all parties. Besides this, we should prohibit in all foundations the grievous extortion of the ecclesiastical judges; they should only be allowed to consider matters concerning faith and good morals; but matters concerning money, property, life and honour, should be left to the temporal judges. Therefore the temporal authorities should not permit excommunication or expulsion except in matters of faith and righteous living. It is only reasonable, that spiritual authorities should have power in spiritual matters; spiritual matters, however, are not money or matters relating to the body, but faith and good works.

9. The Pope should have no power over the Emperor, except to anoint and crown him at the altar, as a bishop crowns a king; nor should that devilish pomp be allowed, that the Emperor should kiss the Pope's feet, or sit at his feet, or, as it is said, hold his stirrup, or the reins of his mule, when he mounts to ride; much less should he pay homage to the Pope, or swear allegiance, as is impudently demanded by the Popes, as if they had a right to it. . . .

All these excessive, over-presumptuous and most wicked claims of the Pope are the invention of the Devil, with the object of bringing in Antichrist in due course, and to raise the Pope above God; as indeed many have done and are now doing. It is not meet that the Pope should exalt himself above temporal authority, except in spiritual matters, such as preaching and absolution; in other matters he should be subject to it, according to the teaching of St. Paul (Rom. xiii.), and St. Peter (1 Pet. iii.), as I have said above. . . .

It is also absurd and puerile for the Pope to boast for such blind, foolish reasons, in his decretal Pastoralis, that he is the rightful heir to the Empire, if the throne be vacant. Who gave it to him? Did Christ do so, when He said: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, but ye shall not do so"? (Luke xxii. 25, 26.) Did St. Peter bequeath it to him? It disgusts me that we have to read and teach such impudent, clumsy, foolish lies in the canon law, and moreover to take them for Christian doctrine, while in reality they are mere devilish lies. . . . Yet the Pope wishes to rule an Empire and to remain a Pope. This is the invention of the knaves that would fain become lords of the world in the Pope's name, and set up again the old Roman empire, as it was formerly, by means of the Pope and name of Christ, in its former condition.

27. Let this be enough about the faults of the spiritual Estate, though many more might be found, if the matter were properly considered: we must now consider the defects of the temporal Estates. In the first place, we require a general law and consent of the German nation against profusion and extravagance in dress, which is the cause of so much poverty among the nobles and the people . . .

It is similarly necessary to diminish the use of spices, which is one of the ships in which our gold is sent away from Germany. . . .

But without doubt the greatest misfortune of the Germans is buying on credit. . . .

Then there is the excess in eating and drinking, for which we Germans have an ill reputation in foreign countries, as our special vice . . . The temporal power should do something to prevent it . . .

Lastly, is it not a terrible thing that we Christians should maintain public brothels, though we all vow chastity in our baptism? . . .

In all, however, that I have said above, my object has been to show how much good temporal authority might do, and what should be the duty of all authorities, so that every man might learn what a terrible thing it is to rule and to have the chief place. What boots it though a ruler be in his own person as holy as St. Peter, if he be not diligent to help his subjects in these matters? His very authority will be his condemnation; for it is the duty of those in authority to seek the good of their subjects. . . .