

# Luther and the Liberation of the Laity: Part I: The Liberation They Enjoy

(Some help for today's still largely oppressed majority in the church from Martin Luther's Commentary on I Peter)

Edward H. Schroeder

[The Miller Lectures, Valparaiso University, Oct. 23-24, 1984]

This lectureship is in honor of the Rev. Jacob Miller, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Ft. Wayne and one of the prime movers 60 years ago for the Lutherans' acquisition of this university. His Lutheran denomination which at that time—and perhaps even now—viewed Christian work, i.e., church work, to be the work done by theologically trained professionals in church-work vocations. Thus Pastor Jake Miller and those associated with him were themselves at work for the liberation of the laity of the LCMS. The Lutheran Laymen's League founded also around that time was a pioneering movement to integrate the laity into church-work. But Valparaiso University was a more risky venture by Lutherans of that time to conscientize (as we now say) the church for its world-work. This is the world whereunto 99.1% of the church are commissioned every Sunday with the liturgy's closing words: Go in peace; serve the Lord. (Where? Not in church, but in the world). That's where *Gottesdienst*, Serving-the-Lord, happens. I do not know how conscious Pastor Miller and his associates were of this fundamental Christian insight that

church-work is world-work, or else it isn't Christ's church at all that is doing it. But these Valpo pioneers couldn't have been far from it, given what they did: hustling up church people to support a university for church folks who were not going into "church-work."

Whether they knew it or not (they must have) they had their biggest supporter in the Reformer from whom their denominational nametag came, Martin Luther. Then as now Christians needed help in being liberated for their vocations. At that time late medieval theology had made it fundamental that there were two kinds of Christians—those who had taken a second vow (beyond Baptism) for full-time religious work in the religious orders and/or the ordered (ordained) priesthood, and those who had only one vow, "the merely baptized." The former did the church work, the others did the world's work, but its godliness was never assured, and almost always suspect.

Today is not the 16th century, of course, but on this agenda, the quantum leap is still in the future. E.g., in the Roman communion in the USA, the leading laity voice for sanctifying Christians in world-work complains bitterly in its last issue that the American Bishops Conference, so enlightened in other respects, makes pronouncements still about "including" the laity in the work of the apostolate, i.e., in the work that the priests do. As though to make all Christians para-priests, with the full-fledged priest as the model of what a full-time Christian is, were such a great leap forward.

There is a danger that in taking a pro-laity position, one necessarily assumes an anti-clerical stance. The fact that many of the V.U. saints of 60 years ago were indeed clergy gives the lie to that. But clericalism is its antithesis—the notion that what is church is mostly what the ordained do. Thus you in the audience this evening might do well to practice the hermeneutics

of suspicion on my lectures here these days, for I am myself ordained (15 years ago during Reformation week at the Chapel of the Resurrection)! So if the issue is the liberation of the laity, Beware! I'm most likely to be an oppressor.

These lectures are based on my reading of Luther's printed work on St. Peter's first epistle. This work of Luther was a sermon series that he delivered in the last half of 1522 to his Wittenberg congregation as he preached his way verse-by-verse through all five chapters of the letter. What I present is my construct from his preaching. You need to remember that most of the good lines are from the apostle himself and Luther had no qualms about stealing them, though usually giving credit. Thus I am really drawing on two preachers as I make my presentation.

Luther liked 1 Peter. It was always mentioned when someone asked him about the best books in the NT. "A truly golden epistle," he says in these sermons. "One of the noblest books in the NT...the genuine and pure Gospel..." So much is this so that he recommends using 1 Peter as a yardstick "to determine concerning all books and doctrines what is and what is not the Gospel."

I caption this first lecture The Liberation the Laity Enjoy. (I previously toyed with the ironic twist in the title: the Freedom of the Merely Baptized, for the down-grading of the godly work of the laity in the medieval church was paralleled with a put-down of the sacrament of Baptism. And maybe it is not too much better many places in the church today. And that irony of the western church's put-down of the merely baptized is one Luther relishes as he preaches through first Peter. And you can imagine what he does when he finds the apostle Peter contradicting flat-out words and actions of the then-current occupant of the chair of St. Peter in Rome.)

My thesis for this evening is: the liberation of the (merely?)

baptized means: appropriating the biography of Jesus as the Christ into one's own biography, and thus moving toward an upbeat future with two passports in hand for out-kinging the world's kings and out-priesting her worldly priests.

## **A. Appropriating the Biography of Jesus as the Christ into One's Own Biography.**

It comes as no surprise to this audience, I am sure, that for both Luther and St. Peter liberation comes via Christ-connection, and that the initial Christ-connection most of us had biographically was in Baptism. Baptism is the great leveler. Peter's words are "born anew" (1:3). So the differences from previous parentage are passé. Determinative now is the quality of the new parent. "Thus in Baptism we Christians have all obtained the same sibling status. From this no saint has more than I and you. For I have been bought with just as high a price as he has been bought. God has spent just as much on me as He has spent on the greatest saint." (42f.)

And, of course, that price, to use the mercantile/economic metaphors which the Reformers so purposely exploited, is the costly grace of Jesus as the Christ. Luther enjoys Peter's choice of two OT pictures for the petrine Christology. One is the "stone" from Psalm 118 and Isaiah 8 and 28 which the builders rejected, but whom The builder rehabbed, therefore "chosen and precious" so that "whoever believes in this one will not be put to shame." The other is the "Suffering Servant" of II-Isaiah. Both are costly images—both in terms of what it cost the Christ-typos to carry out the assignment, and also in the dearness of the Father's affectionate valuing of that rejected stone and that suffering servant.

It is precisely those dear qualities that comprise the value of the biography of Jesus as the Christ. The cross is self-evidently costly. Yet not until the resurrection of Jesus is that biographical death valorized as a death that liberates from death, a death that finally lords it over death. If somewhere down here on our earth death is not itself dealt the death blow, then liberation-talk is hollow. Nothing short of that is good enough or new enough to qualify as Good News. Commenting on Peter's words (1:3) "...born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," Luther says: "When one wants to preach the Good News, one must treat only of the resurrection of Christ. Whoever does not preach this is no apostle. For this is the chief article of our faith." And then comes a characteristic slap at "the Epistle of James... no truly apostolic epistle, for it does not contain a single word about these things": "The greatest power of faith is bound up in this article of faith. For if there were no resurrection, we would have no consolation or hope, and everything else Christ did and suffered would be futile." (l2f.)

Yet one more element needs to come into the mix to get the liberation that is biographically resident in the Risen Christ over into the biographies of the folks who are definitely not death-proof. Actually it is a two-phased element. Phase one is the additional value-bestowing words "for you", and phase two is faith, which makes the preferred transfer a real transfer.

Therefore one must teach as follows; "Behold, Christ died for you! He took sin, death, and hell" upon Himself and submitted Himself. But nothing could subdue Him, for He was too strong; He rose from the dead, was completely victorious, and subjected everything to Himself. And He did all this in order that you might be free from it and lord over it. If you believe this, you have it.

*Glaubstu. Hastu.* If you believe this, you have it. That is one of Luther's favored epigrams for the power of faith. Faith's power comes not from faith itself being strong, but from what faith— even the weakest kind—latches on to. And even the weakest faith functions as a transfer mechanism, a mechanism for the transfer of assets, no less. When I was a student here—lo, these many years ago—I learned that faith in Luther's vocabulary signaled *fiducia* (=trust), and that was a great leap forward from my old view, that faith equals believing all those incredible things to be true that most everybody else does not believe. That was good news 37 years ago for this parochial Lutheranized adolescent. But it is even better than that—in Luther yet (although he stole it all from the Christian scriptures); Faith is *Christum habere* (another of his *bon mots*), having Christ. It is a proprietary operation. Ownership transfer. Like things on the pages of the financial section of the newspapers. Take-overs even! And that bilaterally. The less-than-wholesome balance sheet of sinners, even the merely baptized sinners, is taken over as his property by the Christ ("I'll sign for that,") and then the flipside as he holds out his personal biographical balance-sheet and says: For you. *Glaubstu, hastu.* Believe it. Trust my take-over offer, and it's yours. Luther notices the *sola fide* three times (1:5,7,9) in the paragraph where this verse stands in 1 Peter. *Glaubstu, hastu* is really Peter's apostolic epigram. Martin is passing it along. "He who believes in Christ and clings to the Word has Him with all His blessings, so that he becomes lord over sin, death, devil, and hell, and is sure of eternal life. This treasure is brought to our door and laid into our laps without our cooperation or merit, yes, unexpectedly and without our knowledge or thoughts." (29)

Lord over sin, over death, devil and hell? Free from death, liberated from it along with the other mega-nemeses that dog

human beings? What about all those tombstones with Christian inscriptions? Remember, freedom-from-death and death-avoidance are not synonyms. The Gospel's liberation from death is liberation from death having the last word. The hope is not to escape death, but to survive it. Our biographies exchanged for Christ's biography. In the constantly recurring references by Peter to suffering and death that accompany the biographies of the merely baptized (1:6ff., 2:12, 19, 3:9, 14-17, 4:1,4, 12-19, 5:6-10) Luther invokes another of his favored terms: "the holy cross," the holy cross which God lays on our backs. (Note again the parallel to Jesus' biography.) When St. Peter says: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings" (4:12), Luther remarks:

This is a way of speaking that is not common in our language...When faith begins, God does not forsake it; He lays the holy cross on our backs...to make faith powerful in us. The holy Gospel is a powerful Word. Therefore it cannot do its work without trials, and only the one who tastes it is aware that it has such power. Where suffering and the cross are found, there the Gospel can show and exercise its power. It is a Word of life. Therefore it must exercise all its power in death. In the absence of dying and death it can do nothing, and no one can become aware that it has such power and is stronger than sin and death...God lays a cross on all believers in order that they may taste and prove (to themselves) the power of God—the power which they have taken hold of through faith. (126f.)

The Greek word Peter uses for "sharing Christ's suffering" is *koinonia*, another term from the financial pages: share-holding, partnering. Says Luther *ad loc.* "Christ suffered. Therefore bear in mind that you, too, suffer and are tried. When you suffer

this way, you are in partnership with the Lord Christ. For if we want to live with Him, we must also die with Him.” (127) Is there no other option? Yes, there is: to suffer and die without Christ. But the Bad News about that is that it is Death, period! To die with Christ is Death, comma... The merely baptized do not escape death, they survive it. That is the core content of their liberation.

How does that impact on regular daily life? One aspect is radically re-focused fear as we shall track out tomorrow evening. Where Peter and Luther both show us how to keep fear focused only on God and have no fear whatsoever, though respect, for everything else. Does that sound hopelessly medieval, mythical, mystical? It need not be. It is as topical as America’s current culture with its celebration of death in nuclear megatonnage and its death-denial right in the face of it. Ernst Becker, where are you when we need you? In the 1st presidential debate this month both candidates were asked the “Born again” question. That “born again” question to each of them is still unanswered, I suggest, since the freedom which Peter predicates to this favored term of his, “born again,” is hard to find in the testimony we have been witnessing on the tube. Yet that is the place, says Peter, in the public life of the born again, where the liberation will show, if it is there at all. But I digress; that is tomorrow evening’s theme: the liberation they employ in their life-style and public profile.

## **B. Moving toward an Upbeat Future with Two Passports in Hand**

The term passports is admittedly anachronistic. But the picture fits. Peter’s first term to designate the addressees is “exiles,” later “aliens and exiles”: he commends a particular behavior to them “throughout the time of your exile.” The



meaning of this designation is still a subject of scholarly debate, e.g., in the very last number of the Religious Studies Review where it is the lead article. Initially Luther takes this term to refer to a particular sociological class on the Asia Minor peninsula (as does the current scholarly debate referred to above). But later he generalizes the exilic language to characterize all Christians, who as sojourners, guests, (even "refugees" ala TEV) are citizens of another country, currently residing away from home. But like Peter he too sees this exile not to be from a homeland to which they would someday return, but to a new homeland (occasioned by their new birth with new parenting and new peoplehood) up front in the future where they have yet to arrive.

When Peter beseeches the "beloved...as aliens and exiles," Luther says:

This is what the apostle means when he says: "Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles." Since you are now one with Christ and wholly one cake, since His goods are your goods, since what harms you harms Him, and since He cares about everything you have, therefore you should tread in His footsteps and conduct yourselves as though you were no longer citizens in the world; for your possessions are now in heaven and not on earth. Even though you have lost all your temporal goods, you still have Christ, and He is worth more than all that. The devil is a prince of the world, and he rules it; his citizens are the people of the world. Therefore since you are not of the world, you must act like a stranger in an inn who does not have his possessions there but only takes food and gives his money for it. For here there is only a stopover where we cannot remain. We must proceed on our journey. Therefore we should use temporal goods for no other purpose than clothing and food. Then we depart for another land. We are citizens in heaven;

on earth we are pilgrims and guests.

One might deduce that Christians really carry only one passport in view of this citation about the devil's citizens and Christ's citizens. Here Luther is recalling Augustine's Two Cities in his City of God. But Luther steps back from this over-Augustinian model in most of the rest of his commentary, to preach that both the old and the new creation are God's property. The devil as usurper does, and then again does not, have the old creation in his portfolio. He is God's opposition, but he opposes God in both creations, both human communities. The exiles surely do not need that first passport for their own welfare. For the neighbor, the Christians do need the original passport, their authorized citizenship in the multiple interstices of the regular creation where God has placed them. And with that passport, they resume their creaturely given tasks and assignments in God's old creation.

Luther, of course, is taking his cue from Peter, "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution [for the sake of your second ("New") passport go back into the "old" places and go to work]...Live as free people, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor." (2:13, 16f.) Not all of these imperatives are inscribed in the same passport, but the second passport does support the first passport's ordinances for honoring. And it makes that "free" honoring, reserving "fear" to God alone. For you cannot freely honor the emperor, or your spouse, or your child, if you fear them. But I digress. That's tomorrow's agenda.

The exile moves toward a future homeland, with already now credentialed rights. It is a future that is upbeat, I said previously. Peter calls it "lively"—in clear contrast to the only other alternative, "deadly." His other language for

designating that future is “hope” and “inheritance.” In contrast to God’s reciprocity policy in the old creation’s management system (“punish those who do wrong and praise those who do right” 2:14), this new birthing business runs “By his great mercy...born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is unfading, kept in heaven [i.e., not upstairs, but up-front in the on-coming future] for you, who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:3-5). In technical language the eschatology and the soteriology are not yet realized, appropriated futurity. When the Christology is autobiographized (that’s an awful neologism!), when the biographies are exchanged, Christ’s and mine, in the only way that promissory notes are really exchanged, *sola fide*, then futures are also exchanged. For what I am is me and my future. Because Christ’s future is already public since its Easter Sunday exposure— Peter’s predicate for it is “imperishable”—so is the future of all the Christ-connected folks: They/we are “born to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading...kept...guarded...ready to be revealed in the last *kairos*” (1:4-5), the last time that historical time will have quality points beyond the tick-tock of the clock that measures the chronicle of our chronic chronologies.

So liberation for the baptized, the laity, God’s regular people, means: appropriating the biography of Jesus as the Christ into one’s own biography, and thus moving toward an upbeat future with two passports in hand, and assignments in both communities. Which brings us to the final strophe.

## **C. For out-kinging the world’s kings**

# and out-priesting her worldly priests.

The text for this final segment is the classic passage 2:9f.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

There is no support from Luther for the common notion of “universal priesthood” that many protestants (Lutherans included, Oy vey!) do with this passage. That is, to document that we do not need priests (=middle agents) to get to God, but that we can do that job on our own. Luther says: “No one should believe in God without employing means. Therefore we cannot deal with God on our own initiative, or we are all children of wrath. We must have someone else through whom we can come before God—someone to represent us and to reconcile us with God.” So you say: OK, I shall bring Christ, but who brings you to Christ, or Christ to you? Perhaps some in the audience will still remember what we learned in catechetical instruction: Third article of the Apostles Creed. What does this mean? “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” But the Holy Ghost (through human media) calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies me and the entire Christian church (i.e., no exception.)

Sinners need mediators – always. Christ-connection makes the connected ones mediators. So the priesthood is given with Christ-connection. Earlier Peter had said “And like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.” (2.5) Luther’s comment here is that this one

reference exposes the "lie" of "differentiating between spiritual and secular [people], as today one calls the priests the clergy and the other Christians the laity." There goes my lecture topic! The lay/clergy distinction is a lie.

"Now Christ is the High and Chief Priest anointed by God Himself. He also sacrificed His own body for us, which is the highest function of the priestly office. Then he prayed for us on the cross. In the third place, He also proclaimed the Gospel and taught all people to know God and Him Himself. These three offices He also gave to all of us. Consequently, ...all Christians have the authority, the command, and the obligation to preach, to come before God, to pray for one another, and to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God." (53f.)

This universalizes the Christian priesthood. And note which apostle is doing it, although other NT authors do likewise. Luther complains that the ordained "have monopolized this title." Of course, he acknowledges that

Some [priests] can be selected from the congregation who are appointed to preach in the congregation and to administer the sacraments. But we are all priests before God if we are Christians. For since we have been laid on the Stone who is the Chief Priest before God, we also have everything He has. It would please me very much if this word "priest" were used as commonly as the term "Christians" is applied to us. For priests, the baptized, and Christians are all one and the same.

The treatment of "kings" goes along the same line:

In like manner, you are not a king because you wear a golden crown and have many lands and people under you, but because you are a lord over all things, death, sin, and hell. If you believe in Christ you are a king just as He is

a King...not wear(ing) a golden crown. Nor...with great pomp and many horses. No, He is a King over all kings—a King who has power over all things and at whose feet everything must lie. Just as He is a Lord, so I too, am a lord. For what He has, that I, too, have.

The Christ-trusting exchangers out-king all kings by virtue of their connections. They out-priest the elitist and exclusivist priests also by their connections and by their qualitatively different action. When both priestcraft and kingcraft put on a razzle-dazzle show Luther notes that Peter “is a truly bold apostle. What everybody calls light he designates darkness.” (65) In the face of this “St. Peter orders us to close our eyes and see what the Gospel is.” (24) Close your eyes in order to see! The Gospel is primordially an acoustical phenomenon. Promises have to be heard in order to be trusted. If for the Greeks “seeing” is the primary medium of human existence, for the Hebrew (and the NT community) it is hearing. So in the face of pseudo-priests and pseudo-royalty, this royal priesthood,

says Peter, exercises the chief function of a priest, that is to proclaim the wonderful deed God has performed for you to bring you out of darkness into the light. And your preaching should be done in such a way that one brother proclaims the mighty deed of God to the other, how you have been delivered through Him from...death...and have been called to eternal life. Thus you should also teach other people how they, too, come into such light. (66)

I have a hunch that for many of you who have followed this presentation this evening, it all sounds quite churchy, and alien alright, but not alien as Peter used the term and Luther exegeted it. So all the more incumbent is it upon me (and Luther and Peter) to get more public with this in the second lecture: the Liberation They Employ. Yet the language of public discourse

is at the very least implicit in the theme statement for tonight. Priesting and kinging are public phenomena, so are the terms “alien, exile, refugee”, and so finally is the appropriated biography of the rejected stone and the suffering servant, the original and the copies, both rejected in the public arena, and both finally vindicated there. So the freedom that the merely baptized enjoy is:

appropriating the biography of Jesus as the Christ into one's own biography,  
and thus moving toward an upbeat future with two passports in hand  
for out-kinging the world's kings and out-priesting her worldly priests.

Tomorrow's theme statement, The Liberation They Employ, is:

Heading home  
On the heels of Jesus  
By way of the slums  
Your old neighborhood  
Unintimidated by the slumlords  
But also warmly respectful of them  
Pausing to explain  
(in case they should ask)  
Why you can be both  
And so can they.

[Luther\\_Liberation\\_I \(PDF\)](#)