

Luther to Melanchthon

(Segment)

Translated by

Erika Bullmann Flores

Jesus.

Of course, you can only know and absolve those sins which have been confessed to you; sins which have not been confessed to you, you neither need to know nor can you absolve them. That is reaching too high, dear gentlemen."<sup>1</sup>

You cannot convince me that the same is true for the vows made by priests and monks. For I am very concerned about the fact that the order of priesthood was instituted by God as a free one. Not so that of the monks who chose their position voluntarily, even though I have almost come to the conclusion that those who have entered into that state at an age prior to their manhood, or are currently at that stage, may secede with a clear conscience. I am hesitant, however, with a judgment about those who have been in this state for a long time and have grown old in it.

2. By the way, St. Paul very freely speaks about the priests

---

<sup>1</sup>These words might refer to the first eight theses of Carlstadt's debate on July 19, dealing with sin and repentance. The next eight theses dealt with the Holy Supper, which the following is possibly referring to. All together there were 24 theses. Compare Jäger, Carlstadt, p. 202.

(1.Tim: 4, ff), that devils have forbidden them to marry; and St. Paul's voice is the voice of the divine majesty. Therefore, I do not doubt that they must depend on him to such a degree that even though they agreed to this interdiction of the devil at the time, now--having realized with whom they made their contract--they can cheerfully break this contract.

3. This interdiction by the devil, which is clearly shown by God's Word, urges and compels me to sanction the actions of the Bishop of Kemberg.<sup>2</sup> For God does not lie nor deceive when He says that this is an interdiction from the devil. If a contract has been made with the devil it must not endure since it was made in godless error against God and was damned and repudiated by God. For He says very clearly (1. Tim. 4:1 Vulg.) that those spirits are in error who are the originators of the interdictions.

4. Why do you hesitate to join this divine judgment against the gates of hell? That is not how it was with the oath of the children of Israel which they gave to the Gibeons. They had it in their laws that they must offer peace or accept peace offered to them, and accept into their midst proselytes and those who adhered to their customs. All this took place. Nothing happened there against the Lord or by the advise of spirits. For even though in the beginning they murmured, later on they approved.

5. In addition, consider that the state of being unmarried is only a human statute and can be readily lifted. Therefore any

---

<sup>2</sup>The marriage of the Prior of Kemberg, Bartholomew Bernhardt von Feldkirch.

Christian can do this. I would make this statement even if the interdiction had not come from a devil, but from a devout person. However, because there is no such statement by God concerning the monks, I am therefore not certain that I should make the same pronouncement concerning them. For I would not dare to presume, neither advice another to do so. Would God that we could do this, though, in order to prevent someone from becoming a monk, or leaving his order during the years of his virility. For we are to avoid vexations if there is no relevant scriptural passage available to us, even when dealing with things which are permitted.

6. Good old Carlstadt is also citing St. Paul (1 Tim.5:9-11)<sup>3</sup>, to let go of the younger widows and select 60-year-olds, wish to God this could be demonstrated. Quite easily someone might say that the Apostle referred to the future, while in reference to the past (V.12) they are condemned because they have broken their first troth. Therefore this expression has come to naught and cannot be a dependable basis for the conscience. For that is what we are searching for. Moreover, this reasoning that it is better to be married than to burn with vain desire (1 Cor.7:9), or to prevent the sins of immorality (1 Cor.7:2), by entering into marriage while committing the sin of the broken troth<sup>4</sup>, that is nothing but common-sense. We want the scripture

---

<sup>3</sup>In his Von Gelübden, Jäger, Carlstadt, p. 195

<sup>4</sup>Carlstadt says: "It is true, one does wrong when one breaks a vow." Jäger, 1c., page 195

and the witness of God's will. Who knows if the one who is very enthusiastic today will still be so tomorrow?

7. I would not have allowed marriage for priests for the sole reason of "burning" had not St. Paul called this interdiction devilish and hypocritical, condemned by God. Even without the burning he urged that this unmarried status be cast aside simply for the fear of God. However, it is necessary to discuss these things more thoroughly. For I too would love to come to the aid of the monks and nuns. I very much pity these wretched human beings, these young men and girls who suffer defilement and burning.

8. Concerning the two elements of the Holy Supper I will not give an example, but give testimony with Christ's words. Carlstadt does not show that those who have received only one element have sinned, or not sinned. I am concerned that Christ did not command either one of the two, just as He does not command baptism if the tyrant or the world withhold the water. So also the violence of persecution separates men and women, which God forbids to separate, neither do they agree to be separated. Therefore, neither do godfearing hearts agree that they should be robbed of one of the elements. However, those who do agree and approve: who can deny that these are not Christians but Papists who are sinning.

9. There HE does not demand it, and here the tyrant oppresses, I therefore cannot agree that those who receive only one element are sinning. For who can exert power to take

something when the tyrant is not willing? Therefore it is only common-sense which observes here that Christ's institution is not adhered to. Scripture makes no definition by which we could declare this act a sin. It is Christ's institution, given in freedom, which cannot be incarcerated as a whole or in part.

10. It happened to Donatus, the martyr, where several people could not participate because the cup broke or the wine was spilled. What if this happens and there is no other wine available? There are other similar situations. In short, because Scripture does not speak of sin here, I therefore say there is no sin involved.

11. I am quite pleased, though, that you are re-establishing Christ's method. For it was just that which I planned to take up with you first of all upon my return to you. For now we recognize this tyranny and can oppose it, in order not to be forced to receive only one of the elements.

12. From here on I will no longer conduct private mass. Rather we should pray God to give us more of His Spirit. For I am expecting that the Lord will soon ravish Germany--which she deserves because of her unbelief, godlessness and hate of the Gospel. However, we shall be blamed for this chastisement, as we are made out to be heretics who have provoked God to this action. We shall be scorned by the people and disdained by the nation. Those, however, will make excuses for their sins, through which He will manifest that the hard-hearted do not become godly neither by mercy nor wrath. Let it happen, let the will of the

Lord be done. Amen!

13. If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong<sup>5</sup>, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this live is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins?

Pray hard for you are quite a sinner.

Written on the day of Peter, the Apostle<sup>6</sup> (August 1) 1521.

---

<sup>5</sup>Indisputably this is Luther's meaning, using the words: *pecca fortiter*, for which a Christian needs no further proof. The Papists, however, turned this into a reproof against Luther.

<sup>6</sup>Not written on the day of Peter and Paul, as Veesenmeyer, Luthers Briefsammlung, p. 158, for this letter makes reference to the debate of July 19.