

**Study Notes on *The Freedom of the Christian* by Martin Luther
(Luther Study Edition edited by Mark Tranvik, Fortress Press,
2008)**

**Lutheran Theological Seminary
“Topics in Luther’s Ethics”**

**Pretoria, South Africa
August 8-19, 2011**

For Further Reading and Study

Althaus, Paul. *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. Fortress, 1972.

Bayer, Oswald. *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*.
Eerdmans, 2008

Ebeling, Gerhard. *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*. Fortress, 1977
(especially see Chapter 9 “Person and Work,” pp.141-158 and Chapter 10
“Faith and Love” pp. 159-174)

Forde, Gerhard. “Luther’s Ethics” in *A More Radical Gospel*. Eerdmans, pp. 137-
155)

Iwand, Hans Joachim. *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther*. Wipf &
Stock, 2008)

Jüngel, Eberhard. *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther’s Significance for
Contemporary Theology*. Augsburg, 1988.

Kolb, Robert. *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*. Oxford, 2009 (especially
Chapter 10 “Faith Active in Love: Christian Living on the Foundation of God’s
Calling and Command,” pp. 172-196)

1. The tract is prefaced with a dedicatory letter to Pope Leo X. The appeal to Leo is both pastoral and polemical as Luther seeks show concern for Leo’s person while sharply criticizing the false teaching of the papacy. See Berndt Hamm, “Luther’s Freedom of a Christian and the Pope” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (Autumn 2007): 249-267.
 - At this point Luther can still refer to Leo as “most blessed father” (33) as he pleads with the Pope to convene a council to address the issues troubling the church.
 - Luther argues that his enemies have misrepresented him to the Pope.
 - Luther says “I have not criticized the bad morals of my opponents but rather their ungodly doctrine” (34). Luther notes that his denouncement of false teaching has been after the example of Christ, the Apostle Paul, and the prophets of the Old Testament.

- Flattering Leo as “Daniel in Babylon” (34) , a “lamb among wolves” and “Ezekiel among scorpions” (36), Luther suggests that the Pope is held captive by ungodly advisors, his curia as he sits on a throne that he would do well to abandon for the sake of his own soul.
 - John Eck is named as “a noted enemy of Christ, with an uncontrollable desire for worldly glory” (38) who was responsible for dragging Luther into a debate over the papacy unwittingly.
 - Luther appeals to Leo to let him make his case and reveal the true enemies of the church, men like the cardinals Cajetan and St. Sisto (39).
 - Eck is seen as a man of lies, deceptions and cunning tricks who confused and muddled the situation (40).
 - Luther sees this letter as reconciliatory, attempting to bring an end to conflict that has come upon the church. He notes that the Pope has the power to bring the controversy to an end. Yet to do so he was not the lead astray that those who claim to be loyal to him. The Pope must act quickly and definitively in this dangerous situation. Those who claim to be his friends are, in fact, his enemies. They are not on the side of truth. The letter concludes with a prayer for Leo.
2. In his “introduction” to the tract, Luther speaks of faith not as a theological virtue along with hope and love but as a trust which is experienced in the face of “trials and misfortune,” that is the affliction with he will later identify as *tentatio*. This sets the context for the paradox that Luther wishes to defend:

“A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything.

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all” (50)

Luther bases the paradox on several NT passages: I Corinthians 9:19; Romans 13:8; Galatians 4:4; and Philippians 2:6-7.

3. In the first major section of the tract Luther distinguishes between the dual natures of the human being as an “inner” and “outer” person.
- The “inner person” is the “new man.” This is the spiritual nature.
 - The “outer person” is the “old man.” This is the fleshly nature.
 - Luther bases this distinction on II Corinthians 4:16 and Galatians 5:17.
 - The soul’s freedom is not an external liberty (lack of political captivity, bodily illness, poverty and the like) but an endowment of the Word of God. See John 11:25 and Matthew 4:4. This is the “One thing and thing alone that leads to Christian life, righteousness, and freedom” (52).
4. The one thing needful for the soul’s freedom is the Word of God, that is, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here note Luther’s use of Psalm 119 especially. As Oswald Bayer points how this Psalm was a key text for Luther: “His (Luther’s) is neither blind nor empty. It is formed by praying the whole Psalter, which he calls

a 'mini-Bible' because it contains the Bible in a nutshell. However, Psalm 119 is especially important for him in shaping his experience. Luther repeats this psalm in his suffering and work, and in praying it he lives in the universal church, the community of saints" (Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 39; also see Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A contemporary Interpretation*, 32-37).

5. Luther develops his argument with references to Paul's letter to the Romans. Note particularly his use of Romans 1:1-6; 1:16-17; 10:4; 10:9. One cannot be justified by both faith and works: "It should be underlined that this faith cannot exist in connection with works. In other words, if you hold this faith and at the same time claim to be justified by works, whatever their character, you are missing the point" (54). Attempting to cling to Christ by faith while also putting your trust in your own works is "like limping with two different opinions" says Luther in a reference to I Kings 18:21 (54).
6. Luther then takes up Romans 3:10-12; 10:10 along with John 6:27-29. to make the point that "It is only possible for this faith to rule the inner person" (55).
7. Luther takes up the hermeneutical question. How is the Bible to be read? "You might wonder how faith alone, without the works of the law, can justify and confer so many great benefits when it appears that the Bible commands that we do a multitude of works, laws, and ceremonies" (57). Here Luther introduces the distinction between **command** and **promise** or law and gospel. Of the commands, Luther says they function to "teach us to know ourselves" (57). They show us what we ought to do but they do not give us the power to do it. The commands of God humble us bringing us to the point of Hosea 13:9 "Destruction is your own, O Israel. Your help is only in me" (58). God's commands are only fulfilled through trust in the promise, that is, faith in Christ alone.
8. Faith, according to Luther, has a threefold power:
 - Faith frees from the law. Faith alone justifies without works of the law. "This liberty of the Christian –in essence it is our faith" (60). Such liberty is only *in* Christ. "This freedom does not lead us to live lazy and wicked lives but makes the law and works unnecessary for salvation" (60).
 - Faith honors God. Faith honors God by trusting in Him alone, by ascribing to Him the honor of being truthful to His promise. When this is done God's name is hallowed. "So when the soul firmly trusts the promises of God, it regards God as truthful and righteous. Nothing greater than this can be said of God. It is the highest worship of God to ascribe to him truthfulness, righteousness, and whatever other qualities ought to be predicated of a power in whom one trusts" (62)
 - Faith unites the soul with Christ. Just as a groom is united with his bride by a solemn vow so "Christ and the soul become one flesh" (62). This is the great exchange where the property of the groom becomes that of his wife and vice versa. So Christ takes our sin and gives us His righteousness. Luther describes

faith as the wedding ring. Note Luther's use of imagery from both the Old and New Testaments – Hosea 2:19, Song of Solomon 2:16, and Ephesians 5:26-27.

9. Faith alone is the fulfillment of the first commandment. “Even if you were nothing but good works from the soles of your shoes to the top of your head, you would not be righteous, worship God, or fulfill the first commandment. For God cannot be worshipped rightly unless you ascribe to God that which is his due: the glory of truthfulness and all goodness; however this cannot be done by works but only by faith of the heart” (64).
10. Faith receives a double honor: priesthood and kingship.
 - Noting that in the OT, the firstborn son receives the double honor of priesthood and kingship prefiguring Christ who is now both Priest and King forever, Luther says that Christ imparts these honors to all who believe in Him (66). Commenting on this section of Luther's treatise, Eberhard Jüngel says “ In exercising his office Jesus Christ distinguishes himself from earthly royal and priestly officeholders by the very fact that he does *not* retain his kingdom and priesthood as reserved for him alone” (Jüngel,
 - This means that “every Christian by faith is exalted above all things. By virtue of the spiritual power provided in faith, a Christian is lord of all things and nothing is able to do him harm” (66). Luther references Romans 3:38 and I Corinthians 3:21-23. This kingship, like that of the Lord's, is not of this world. It is not an earthly power exempting him or her from suffering. It is a “power made perfect in weakness” (II Corinthians 12:9).
 - Christians are also priests made worthy to approach God in prayer and teach God's truth in the world. *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther's Significance for Contemporary Theology*, 71).
 - Both kingship and priesthood are acquired by faith not works.
11. Luther then turns to the outer person and takes up the challenge of those who see the Gospel as offensive because it elevates faith over works. Works are not necessary for salvation but they are necessary for the service of the neighbor. Hence Luther returns to the controlling paradox of the tract: “Insofar as a Christian is free, no works are necessary. Insofar as a Christian is a servant, all kinds of works are done” (71).
12. The inner person is free but because we also live in this world the outer person must remain under discipline so that the body is conformed to the Spirit and does not undermine the faith of the inner person. These bodily disciplines do not limit faith's freedom but in fact serve to guard that freedom so that the Christian does not become a slave to sin and thus forfeit the freedom in Christ. Here Luther cites Romans 7:22-23; I Corinthians 9:27; and Galatians 5:24. It is in the body that the Christian submits to serve the neighbor in love.

- “We must also understand that these works that these works serve the purpose of disciplining the body and purifying it of all evil desires. The focus should be on these desires and the best means of purging them. Since by faith the soul is made pure and enabled to love God, it wants all things – the body in particular – to join in loving and praising God. Thus we cannot be idle. The needs of the body compel us to do many good works in order to bring it under control. Nevertheless, it must always be kept in mind that these works do not justify a person before God. Rather, by yielding wholly to God, one does these works out of a spirit of spontaneous love, seeking nothing other than to serve God and yield to him in all earthly labors” (73)
- Luther says we should consider the works of the Christian as we would those of Adam in paradise before the fall into sin. Adam’s work was instituted by God (Genesis 2:15) and were done to please God not to obtain righteousness.

13. Good works do not make a good person but a good person does good works.

- A good tree produces good fruit (75)
- “A Christian has no need of any law in order to be saved, since through faith we are free from every law. Thus all the acts of a Christian are done spontaneously, out of a sense of pure liberty” (75).
- Before God works do not make a person either good or evil
- “One must look away from works and focus rather on the person and ask how one is justified and saved by faith, not by works or law but by the word of God (that is, the promise of grace). In this way the glory remains God’s alone, who saves us not by deeds of righteousness that we have done but according to his mercy, which was given to us by grace when we have trusted God’s word” (77)
- Good works in and of themselves are not condemned only the false teaching that they bestow righteousness before God.

14. Good works are done by the Christian for the sake of the neighbor.

- Citing Romans 14:7-8, Luther says “The reason we discipline our bodies is to serve our neighbor genuinely and freely” (79)
- The Christian works to have something to give to the neighbor (Ephesians 5:28). He looks out for the interest of others (Philippians 2:1-4; Luther mistakenly gives the reference as Ephesians 2:1-4). Christ’s life of humility and service is the example of the Christian’s life of service to the neighbor.
- Faith gives the Christian all things that Christ has (Galatians) and now the Christian gives himself to the neighbor just as Christ gave Himself for him. We are to be Christ to the neighbor: “Each of us should become a Christ to the other. And as we are Christs to one another, the result is that Christ fills us all and we become truly a Christian community” (84)
- Luther gives examples of such good works, citing Mary and the Apostle Paul.

15. Just as Christ “put on” our sin and acted for us, so we are to “put on” the neighbor and do good to him.
- Here Luther in effect invokes the “Golden Rule.” He says “we should act toward him or her as if we were in the neighbor’s place” (88)
 - “The good we receive from Christ flows from us toward those who have need of it” (88)
16. Luther summarizes his argument in what well might be considered the key to the whole tract: “In conclusion, as Christians we do not live in ourselves but in Christ and the neighbor. Otherwise, we are not Christian. As Christians we live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith we are caught up beyond ourselves into God, Likewise, through love we descend beneath ourselves through love to serve our neighbor” (88-89)
17. Luther reminds his readers once again that there are two kinds of freedom. One is a worldly freedom, the other a spiritual freedom. These two are as different as heaven and earth 89).
18. In “A Final Clarification,” Luther makes several salient points lest his teaching on Christian freedom be abused.
- Christian freedom is not the license to follow fleshly passions or worldly desires.
 - Luther offers what he calls a “middle way” based on Romans 14:3.
 - Christian freedom recognizes that human ceremonies do not save but despising ceremonies just not justify either. While “inflexible and obstinate ceremonialist must be opposed” (91) but the Christian will also have care for the “simple-minded and ignorant” who are weak in faith (Romans 14:1)
 - Luther is concerned with the instruction of the conscience. Note Bayer: “Christian or evangelical freedom is that freedom through which the conscience is free of works – not in the sense that none take place but in the sense that one does not rely on any of them” (Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 289).

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. How does Luther's dedicatory letter to Pope Leo help us understanding *The Freedom of a Christian*?
2. How does Luther describe the duality of the Christian's existence as both free and slave?
3. What does Luther mean by the "inner person"?
4. How does the Word of God establish the "inner person"?
5. What does Luther mean when he says "It should be underlined that this faith cannot exist in connection with works"(54)?
6. How does Luther distinguish between "command" and "promise" in reading the Holy Scriptures?
7. What is the "the threefold power of faith" (59ff)?
8. How does faith honor God?
9. Describe "priesthood and kingship" according to Luther. How are these exercised by Christians?
10. What does Luther mean by the "outer person"?
11. What is the place of discipline in the life of the Christian?
12. How does Luther distinguish "person" from "works"?
13. How does Christian freedom serve the neighbor?
14. What does it mean that the Christian lives outside of self in Christ and the neighbor (88)?

-Prof. John T. Pless
Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, IN USA