

A Sermon by Martin Luther on Why Children Should Be Sent to School (1530)

Abstract

Ignorance makes the devil's work easy, as Martin Luther (1483–1546) writes in this sermon. While the featured selection is limited to Luther's exhortation that educated people were needed to populate the clerical estate, the sermon also insists that education was necessary for people to serve the worldly estate as well. Princes and kings alone will not do, so the children (by which Luther means boys) of common people must also be educated.

Source

A Sermon on Why Children Should Be Sent to School

Dear friends, seeing as I do how the commoners are opposed to maintaining schools and do not send their children for instruction at all, thinking only of how they should provide for and feed themselves rather than of how unchristian these actions are that inflict murderous harm in the service of the devil, I feel compelled to warn you, since some people might still believe that there is a God in heaven and a hell that awaits the infidels and thus heed my warning (though all the world behaves as if there were neither a God in heaven nor a Satan in hell). I want to tell you the advantages and potential dangers in this piece.

I will begin with the spiritual or eternal uses and disadvantages and then proceed to the earthly or temporal. I sincerely hope that the faithful and those who call themselves Christians recognize that the clergy was installed by God, established and paid not with silver or gold but rather with the precious blood and bitter death of his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. For truly it is out of His wounds that our sacraments flow. . . He paid most dearly in order that such an office might be established for the entire world, to preach, to baptize, to release, to bind, to administer the sacraments, to comfort, to warn, to admonish with the Word of God, and all the rest that belongs to the office of ministry. . . I do not refer here, however, to the current clerical estate in convents and monastic institutions with their celibate nature. . .

There is little of a spiritual nature about them, except that they do not marry, which they do not need—they have something else instead. Otherwise it is all about outer, temporal, ephemeral splendor. They pay no attention to the Word and the task of preaching, but wherever the Word does not prevail, the clergy must be lacking. I refer especially to that estate which carries out the task of preaching and serves the Word and the sacraments, which conveys the Holy Spirit and blessedness as cannot be done with liturgical song and splendor; these are the offices of pastor, teacher, preacher, lector, priest (called chaplain), sexton, schoolmaster, and other such offices and individuals. Scripture truly exalts and praises this estate. Saint Paul calls them God's housekeepers and servants, bishops, doctors, prophets, and also God's messengers, who reconcile the world to God (2 Cor. 6). Joel calls them savior; David refers to them as kings and princes (Psalm 67). Haggai calls them angels, and Malachi (chap. 2[:7]) says: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." And Christ himself uses the term, not only in Matthew 11, where he calls John the Baptist an angel, but also through the entire Book of Revelation.

This is why those in antiquity sought to avoid this estate and hesitated to accept it. Due to its great honor and rank, they had to be forced and driven to do so, although there have [admittedly] been many over the course of

time who honored the office more through the recitation of the Mass than the preaching [of the Word]. This praise and glory have now become so extreme that they have set the office of priest and the clerical estate (to perform the sacrifice of the Mass) above that of Mary and the angels, because the angels and Mary cannot say the Mass, but a priest can.

And it was a glorious thing when a new priest said his first Mass. Blessed was the woman who bore a priest, for the Word and office of ministry were the highest, most exalted state. . .

In short, he would be called a priest who could say the Mass, regardless of whether or not he could preach on the Word at all or was an unlearned ass. This is the status of the clerical estate up to almost the present day.

It is certain and true that God himself instituted and founded the clerical estate with His own blood and death, and thus it can be assumed that He wants this estate to be revered and does not desire it to cease or disappear but rather to endure until the Last Day. For the Gospel and Christendom are to persist until the Last Days, as Christ says in the Gospel of Matthew: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." But by whom should it be preserved? Oxen and horses, dogs and swine will not do it; neither will wood nor stone. Mankind will have to do it, for this office was not commended to the oxen or the horses, but to us humans. Where else should new individuals for this office come from but from those who have children? If you do not raise your child for this purpose, and the other one does not either and so on, then no father and no mother will give him to our God. What will become of the office of the ministry and the clerical estate? The old men who hold these offices at the present will not live forever, but rather are dying daily, and there are no new ones in their place. What will God say about this in the end? Do you think He will be pleased that we so disdain the office that was a divine gift for his praise and glory and our salvation, a gift that cost so much, and ungratefully allow it to sink into oblivion?

He did not give you children and means for their sustenance only so that you might do as you please with them or raise them to strive for worldly splendor. Instead, you are commanded to raise them in service of the Lord or else be uprooted together with your children and everything else, for all is damned that you do for them, as the first commandment says: "For I ... am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." [Exod. 20:5]

But how will you strive to raise them to serve the Lord if the office of the preaching and the clerical estate have been brought down and destroyed? And you are to blame, you who could have done something about this state of things and preserved [these offices], if you had allowed your child to learn to read. For if you would have been able, and your child was capable or eager, but you did not do so and held it back. Are you listening? You are responsible for the damage done that destroys the clerical estate and means that neither God nor His Word remains present in the world. For it is your responsibility, but you do not fulfill it. Because you do not want to give your one child, and you would do the same with all of them, if all the children in the world were yours. It is because of you that service to God is simply diminishing.

It does not do any good to claim, "My neighbor sends his son to school, I do not need to," and so forth. For the neighbor could say the same, and all his neighbors, too. Where should God find people for His clerical offices among them? You have someone you could give, but you do not want to, and neither does your neighbor. And so things are going downhill, and it is your fault. Because you have defaced God and His institution and the office bought at such extreme expense and allowed its demise with such terrible ingratitude, you shall in turn be cursed and both your children and you yourself shall experience pure degradation and misery or be plagued in other ways such that you shall be damned with them not only on earth but for all eternity in Hell.

You should not miss this point, so that you learn that the children are not so wholly yours that you can give none of them to God. He wants to have a right to them as well, and indeed they are more His than yours.

Lest you think I speak too harshly, I want to outline both, the usefulness and risks in part (for who could possibly list them all?). You should then see for yourself that you are rightfully consigned to the devil in hell for all eternity if you find yourself lacking in this respect and do not improve. On the other hand, you should rejoice and be glad if you find yourself willing in this respect, if you feel yourself chosen by God to use your own belongings and effort to raise a son who will become a pious Christian pastor, preacher, or schoolmaster. In this you have raised a special servant for God, yes, as shown above, an angel of God, an upright bishop for God, a savior of many people, a king and prince in Christ's kingdom and a teacher to God's people, a light in the world. Who can list all the honors and virtues a proper, true pastor possesses before God? There is no more valuable treasure nor precious thing on earth and in this life than a loyal pastor or preacher.

[...]

Source of the modern German text: Franz Hofmann, ed., *Pädagogik und Reformation: Von Luther bis Paracelsus: Zeitgenössische Schriften und Dokumente*. 1st edition. Pädagogische Bibliothek. Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1983, pp. 89–91.

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