

## *Can We Learn From Luther's 'Ear'?*

In 1517, in his *Lectures on Hebrews*, Martin Luther said that the most important organ a Christian possesses is his ear:

God... requires only the ears... For if you ask a Christian what the work is by which he becomes worthy of the name 'Christian', he will be able to give absolutely no other answer than that it is hearing the word of God, that is, faith. Therefore the ears alone are the organs of a Christian.

I have been thinking about this. I can see where Luther was coming from. He was rightly reacting against Romanism – Romanism where, of course, the eye is all important. The Romanist has to watch a spectacle being played out before his eyes – the spectacle of the Mass. This is the business of 'the faithful'; this is their great concern. As long as they watch the spectacle, accepting the priest's performance, all is well.

Luther, of course, had come to realise that this is diabolical nonsense, and that the essential thing is to hear – to understand – the word of God, and believe; that is, trust Christ.

But his observation raises an important issue. A Christendom issue. No! Don't switch off! It concerns us all. It concerns you, now! The invention of Christendom by the Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius, in league with the bigwigs of the Church, 1700 years ago has had a devastating effect on the new covenant brought in by Christ. And we are all suffering from it to this day.

In particular, Christendom brought in the clergy/laity split, elevating the clergy above the laity. The priesthood of all believers became the priesthood of a few believers. The 'one another' statements of the new covenant (John 13:14,34; 15:12,17; Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 15:7,14; 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 5:13; 6:2; Eph. 4:2,32; Col. 3:13,16; 1 Thess. 4:9,18; 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 1:22; 5:14; 1 John 3:11,23; 4:7,11-12; 2 John 5, and so on), especially in the vital matter of teaching for edification, became 'one teaching all

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the rest', the 'whole-body ministry' (1 Cor. 12 & 14) being replaced by a 'one-man ministry'.

For the Romanist – he who has to watch, to see, to observe a spectacle – the great essential is to attend 'the house of God' where a priest will carry out the performance. After all, without the performance, there can be no watching; there is nothing to see.

But for the Reformed or the Evangelical, too often – almost invariably – the hearing of the word of God means 'attending church' – 'the house of God' – to listen to a minister deliver a monologue. The Christendom-Christian sits before and below the speaker to hear, to absorb (or, at least, to seem to absorb), what he is being told. The speaker needs a voice – but only he. Everybody else needs only an ear.

Let me stick with the Evangelicals.

All this means that believers have been robbed. Robbed? Yes, indeed! Scripture is plain: in the new covenant, Christ has established the priesthood of all believers empowered by the Spirit. I will not expand on this priesthood here, having done so already.<sup>1</sup> My present point is say that Christ did not set up a priesthood of mutes. He intended a priesthood of believers in which, and by which, believers would assemble to communicate with each other to their mutual edification. Just a sample of the scriptural passages which prove this:

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14).

[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds-and-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry [that is, to enable believers to carry out their mutual ministry], for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by

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<sup>1</sup> See my *The Priesthood of All Believers; The Pastor: Does He Exist?*

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craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:18-21).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16).

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up [that is, edify one another], just as you are doing (1 Thess. 5:11).

Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end... Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 3:13-14; 10:24-25).

It stands out a mile: the first believers certainly did not go to 'the house of God' to watch a priest go through his mystic routine. But neither did they confine themselves to submitting as silent listeners to monologues delivered from on high by a minister, presbyter, elder or whatever: call him what you will, such a man being a virtual priest, full stop!<sup>2</sup> No! The early believers met together to mutually encourage, teach and admonish one another. They did not do this by some kind of silent sign language: they actually spoke to each other. Wow! Of course, in addition able teachers would teach them with the intention of making every believer a profitable priest engaged in edifying the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). They certainly did not teach them so as to put a stop to mutual edification!

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<sup>2</sup> John Milton's 'new presbyter, old priest writ large' still stands.

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In short, the man in the pulpit is not meant to be the only voice in the *ekklēsia*. Indeed, his work is to train all the believers to fulfil their new-covenant ministry – not to make them increasingly dependent on his endless monologues delivered from on high.

Christendom, alas, has turned Christ's horizontal and mutual into a ministerial vertical and solo. And believers continue – like docile sheep – to go along with it. Even though it has signally failed.<sup>3</sup>

In the days of the old covenant, God commended those Jews who met to mutually encourage and teach each other:

Those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him (Mal. 3:16-18).

Fellow-believers: Will we continue to live at a poorer level than those old-covenant Jews? Why have we allowed the administrators of Christendom to rob us of our Christ-given birthright, so that, almost without exception, we have lost the principle and practice of mutual edification? Can we not learn from Luther's 'ear'? We can! But will we?

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Sowed Much, Reaped Little. Why?: The Sermon: The Gap between the Claim and the Result*.